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Exploring the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle: A longitudinal study. Interim report No. 2

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[Project website link](#)

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Overview

This report is the second of a series of reports from a 4-year longitudinal study exploring the implementation, enactment and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle in post-primary schools in Ireland. The study employs a mixed-methods, multi-dimensional research design that aims to capture the views of teachers, principals, students, parents and wider educational stakeholders. This second interim report draws primarily on the research data collected from the twelve case study schools in the Spring of 2022. This data is complemented by the data set from the first phase of the teacher surveys which includes the remaining survey responses not collected at the time of the completion of the *Introductory Report*. The case studies not only present views of students and parents for the first time, but they also include in-depth one-to-one interviews with teachers and thus provides an additional layer of insight with respect to the teacher voice presented via the teacher survey data reported previously. As a study that aims to capture participants' experiences and viewpoints of the curriculum changes, this report presents the most significant issues highlighted by participants. The insights emerging at this stage of the study not only resonate with many of the themes presented in the previous report, but also raise new perspectives and provide new insights. It is important to bear in mind that the themes presented in this interim report reflect the perspectives and experiences at this juncture in this longitudinal study. It must also be highlighted that schools were visited as they were readjusting to a post-Covid environment. This needs to be taken into consideration when reflecting on the perspectives captured at this stage of the study.

Curriculum change is a complex and multifaceted process and achieving 'deep' change, impacting at the level of practice and beliefs and values, takes significant time and effort to achieve. Altering peoples' perspectives and practices is a highly personal and emotive process. As a result, curriculum changes are often 'recreated' rather than 'implemented' into schools. A school's culture and wider socio-political, cultural, and philosophical contexts also impact and inform how curriculum change is received and implemented. Revised curricula are filtered and refracted through these existing cultural perspectives, thus informing how changes are perceived and received. Curriculum change also highlights the importance of

voice within the curriculum change process. It is important to remember however, that no single voice exists, and stakeholders bring multiple perspectives and experiences of this curriculum change. These insights guide the presentation of the perspectives from schools in this interim report. This report aims to present the voice, perspectives and stories of teachers, students, and parents recognising the multiple and equally valid perspectives that are presented. It also recognises that people construct their own personal understanding of change and that such perspectives need to be authentically presented and not seen through pre-exiting frames of reference. The study also recognises the importance of context and how it influences the perspectives of research participants.

The perspectives from schools are presented in three parts. The first part presents the teachers' perspectives on the change, drawing on in-depth teacher interviews across the 12 case-study sites, as well as teacher survey data from the wider sample of 100 schools. Students' perspectives on the curriculum change, drawing on student survey data, focus group discussion data and examples of students' creative posters are presented in the second part. The final part provides the parental perspective, drawing on interview data from the case study schools.

Teachers' perspectives

The majority of teachers believed there was a need for curricular change at Junior Cycle. Four main purposes associated with the Framework for Junior Cycle were identified. This included making schools and classrooms more inclusive; an increased focus on skills development; a decreased emphasis on summative examinations; and adopting more student-centred pedagogical approaches. When asked to comment on the Framework for Junior Cycle teachers tended to talk about issues of direct relevance and concern for them rather than commenting on the broad breadth of changes set out in the Framework. Areas discussed frequently included the CBAs, SLARS, the Assessment Task, assessment of the common level specifications, Learning Outcomes and Wellbeing.

Teachers believed CBAs supported student engagement, enjoyment, motivation and skills development. Teachers perceived that the efforts students put into work associated with the CBAs should contribute more significantly to terminal assessment beyond what is already

provided for by the Assessment Task. They also raised concerns about the number of CBAs students had to complete in a short period of time and the time taken for their completion. Difficulties associated with CBAs were viewed to contribute to both student stress and difficulties in management of the work. On balance, the teacher data suggests that CBAs were perceived as being somewhat distinct from normal classroom teaching. Teachers raised concerns about the clarity and shared understanding of the descriptors associated with the CBA evaluation and the capacity of students to produce work that would meet the (perceived) high expectations associated with the higher-level descriptors, with potential negative effects on student motivation and wellbeing. The Assessment Task was, on balance, not considered a valid measurement of student effort and learning.

Teachers valued Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings where they shared examples of work and engaged in professional discussions to support judgement. On balance, these SLAR meetings were seen to promote consistency and fairness in judgement. Concerns remained however about the national standardisation of teacher assessment between schools.

Assessment of the common level specifications emerged as a concern as the common level exam papers were perceived as too challenging for some students and too easy for others. Teachers noted that some students lacked the literacy level required to engage fully with exam questions, particularly related to comprehension questions and the limited space to provide answers. The exam was perceived to offer limited choice to students and concerns were raised about the capacity of a single two-hour exam to offer sufficient scope for students to demonstrate their learning.

The majority of teachers perceived Learning Outcomes (LOs) to be clearly communicated, achievable and a good representation of the knowledge, skills and values within each subject. Views were more mixed in relation to the broadness of LOs. While some teachers appreciated the freedom and choice LOs afforded, others expressed concern about clarity relating to the depth to which they needed to be explored. Tentative data also indicates that there is significant variation in this regard across subjects.

The grading bands associated with the terminal exam were perceived to be too broad with respect to the 'merit' band. Some concerns were raised about the difficulty in securing a 'distinction'.

The introduction of Wellbeing was welcomed as formally enabling conversations and planning although this was seen to have reduced class periods in other subjects, which was a concern for some. The majority of teachers indicated that they were applying the Wellbeing indicators in teaching and noted that the Wellbeing guidelines were being used in a whole-school approach. These teachers perceived that Wellbeing was contributing to student development.

Some schools designed their own Short Courses (SCs) based on teacher interest/expertise, student interests and local contexts. On the whole, these teachers found the experience of designing SCs enjoyable and believed learning was meaningful and relevant for students.

The inclusion of Level 1 and 2 Learning Programmes was welcomed, particularly in relation to the range of ways student learning could be demonstrated through Priority Learning Units (PLUs). Some concerns were expressed about teachers' understanding of the Level 2 Learning Programmes, progression routes, the lack of suitable textbooks and support for developing suitable forms of assessment.

Widespread engagement with Professional Development (PD) support was evident from teacher survey responses, especially with the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT). Opportunities to share and discuss practice were welcomed, with some concerns expressed about the composition of school clusters. Resources and practical examples, including online resources, were considered very supportive, although they were noted as lacking at the start of the change. Subject Associations were also highlighted as supportive, especially in making sense of LOs and being subject-focused. Concerns were raised about the clarity of focus of some aspects of PD and views were mixed in relation to the extent to which the PD responded to teachers' questions and concerns, particularly in the early stages of the change. Some gaps were highlighted, particularly in relation to PD for all teachers on Level 1 and 2 Learning Programmes.

School leadership was identified as a key dimension for enactment and school management were perceived to be supportive of the Framework, discussing it at staff meetings and supporting teacher use of professional time. Collaborative relationships between teachers were highlighted as a significant support. Investment in digital technologies has been a useful enabler for the Framework.

Teachers reported three main barriers to change: time, resources and the scale of the changes. Teachers' capacity to find time to engage fully with the changes, to plan, to develop resources was a core concern. Teachers in some schools felt that a lack of resources and supportive digital technology within the school impacted on their capacity to enact the changes. The amount of change introduced, the language of the changes and understanding of what the changes were about were a barrier for some.

Across the schools, teachers identified ways in which the changes impacted on their practice with two main themes evident. Firstly, teachers felt that they now implement more student-centred and student-led pedagogical approaches and a wider range of assessments methods. Secondly, teachers felt that they had more freedom to be creative and introduce new, engaging, and fun activities or topics within their classroom. Some teachers felt that the changes had minimum impact on their practice. These teachers felt that they were either already engaging in such practices, they lacked the time to implement such changes into their practice or the continued presence of the state examination impacted on their capacity in this regard.

Teachers identified three main (related) ways in which students learning was impacted by the changes. Firstly, teachers felt that students had greater voice, responsibility, and ownership of their learning. Secondly, students were deemed to learn and interact more with their peers. Finally, classrooms were considered to be more fun and engaging for students. The majority of teachers reported satisfaction with their work in Junior Cycle, believed they were making a significant educational difference in the lives of their students.

Most teachers felt that the changes increased their level of collaboration with other teachers, creating more positive and supportive relationships with their colleagues. A number of

teachers also spoke about the increased workload they had experienced as a result of the changes.

Teachers in the majority of schools felt that, while the Framework supports transition from primary school, a gap existed between the Junior and Senior Cycle. These teachers felt that the workload, expectations of students and the amount of writing in the Leaving Certificate examination, in comparison to the Junior Cycle, was the cause of this gap. However, differing views existed on this issue and may reflect differences at a subject level. For example, some teachers believed that such a gap has always existed between Junior and Senior Cycle while others questioned whether the impact of Covid was the reason for the perceived gap. Others felt that the focus on Key Skills in the Framework for Junior Cycle supported students at Senior Cycle.

According to the teachers, the Covid pandemic and related school closures impacted on teachers and students in five main ways. Firstly, teachers explained how group work, as well as trips and engagement with the local community were suspended during this period. Some felt that online teaching and learning was not suitable for their students, with students finding it difficult to connect and stay engaged in an online forum. Teachers felt that the pandemic and school closures reduced and hindered their own engagement and understanding of the Framework for Junior Cycle. Some teachers also feared that students had extensive gaps in their knowledge because of school closures and that students lacked motivation to study and learn as a result of the State examinations being cancelled.

Students' perspectives

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the student survey and focus group discussion data. In terms of teaching and learning, students favoured engaged, collaborative, creative, and active learning experiences which offered a balance between individual and group work. They valued choice in their learning, and they appreciated when stimulus variation was introduced to support their engagement. They disliked didactic approaches, and most were averse to the practice of notetaking and methods of learning that were passive and teacher-centred.

A significant number believed that their learning needs and interests were met during their Junior Cycle, particularly during its early years. A substantial majority also believed they were supported in their transition to post-primary school.

Assessment and performance were to the forefront of the vast majority of students' minds as they navigated everyday life at school. While many students deemed exams/tests to be a suitable form of assessment, large summative exams were a source of stress for many students and most viewed them as not adequately assessing their 'full potential'. Students called for more choice and less pressure in exams, and they deemed grading bands to be too broad. Students had a preference overall for continuous assessment and, in this vein, they were aware of the positive aspects enabled by the CBAs. They enjoyed inquiry-based learning, the development of research and presentation skills, and groupwork/teamwork which they believed CBAs helped to support. However, the students believed that CBAs did not deliver many of the benefits that continuous assessment promises. Students saw CBAs as largely disconnected from summative exams and this induced a sense of futility and frustration for them, because students were predominantly concerned with their grades in exams. Students appeared to see CBA work as 'extra' and thus putting pressure on the perceived core priority of study and exams. Moreover, the perceived lack of credit attached to CBAs in the overall scheme of their Junior Cycle caused frustration for these students. Homework was a source of negativity too. Some did not see 'the point' of homework, particularly at stressful times when they had a lot of CBAs at once and/or were studying for exams.

Students across the schools reported experiencing significant stress with regard to their everyday workloads and struggled to balance homework, CBAs and study for tests and exams. This appeared to have a negative impact, in some cases, on the rapport and relationships between teacher and student, with many students resenting the 'pressure' they experienced in this regard.

The stress experienced in managing everyday workloads, combined with the pervasiveness of academic pressure, induced most of the participating students to adopt mechanisms and strategies for coping. For most, this involved on-going surveillance and evaluations about whether specific content and learning activities were 'relevant' in order to be successful in

exams. Some students were acutely aware of 'playing the game' as they attempted to learn-off answers and make strategic decisions about what to memorise.

The adoption of a strategic and disciplined academic focus was also very strong across the majority of case study schools. Students believed that, in order to be successful at Junior Cycle, they must: engage in early and sustained academic engagement, engage in diligent notetaking, build a repository of notes for study, ensure adequate preparation for any forthcoming tests and place a strategic focus on homework.

Parents' perspectives

Parents valued a broad educational experience that developed important life skills for students and that valued students' social development, their sense of belonging and enjoyment of school. Their experiences of their child's transition to post-primary school varied with some reporting positive experiences and supports from the school while others were critical of the supports provided. Restrictions caused by the Covid pandemic impacted on students' transition to post-primary schools in many instances.

Parents were very supportive of the introduction of the CBAs and cited many benefits for their children, however they expressed disappointment that the students' work was not, as they perceived it, afforded sufficient importance in the context of the overall assessment of Junior Cycle. It appears that some parents lacked clarity on the assessment of Junior Cycle assuming that continuous assessment was employed, and that CBA work was more heavily weighted in the context of the overall assessment of Junior Cycle.

Parents' views on the nature and extent of reporting from schools were mixed. Some praised the reporting practices employed by the school whereas others were critical of the reporting and expressed a need for more timely reports that, not only reported on academic progress, but also reported on their child's social development and how they were 'fitting in' to school. According to almost all parents, the Covid pandemic had a significant impact on their child's education. It was believed that this impacted on their transition to post-primary school, their levels of motivation, their social development, mental health and impeded their learning.

Insights to date: Culture, Coherence & Covid

Reflecting on the research data collected at this stage of the study, there is evidence that many changes appear to be taking place within schools. Teachers' practice appears to have changed in several ways. They reported providing greater feedback to their students, particularly more formative feedback, and had implemented project-based learning through the introduction of CBAs resulting in more cross-curricular linkages in their teaching. The teachers also indicated that they were collaborating more with colleagues and had more professional conversations with colleagues. From a student perspective, a significant number believed that their learning needs and interests were met during their Junior Cycle, especially during its early years. A substantial majority also believed they were supported in their transition to post-primary school. Students also favoured student-centred learning experiences such as groupwork, active learning and inquiry-based 'real-life' learning. The CBAs were viewed positively in this regard as they facilitated this type of learning. Parents valued the shift towards an emphasis on skills and valued the project-based learning that was introduced as part of the students' CBA work.

While this provides an indication of the range of changes, there is also evidence that wider contextual factors have shaped teachers', students' and parents' experiences of the Framework for Junior Cycle and tempered and refracted elements of the changes.

Final examinations appear to remain a central concern and this emphasis appears to refract enactment of the changes. This suggests that untangling Junior Cycle from this wider culture of examination preparation and assessment remains a challenge, particularly in the context of the existing Leaving Certificate. To some extent, this wider assessment culture therefore becomes a lens through which Junior Cycle changes are viewed.

Teachers' and students' experiences of the curriculum would indicate that there is a level of incoherence in its actualisation, and this was most acutely felt in relation to assessment practices. This curricular misalignment appears to be a result of the use of summative external assessment to assess subject specifications that employ learning outcomes that provide scope for teachers' interpretation and enactment.

As with the previous introductory report, the impact of Covid was again evident in the data from this phase. The level of engagement and process with the curriculum changes were deemed to have been delayed due to the Covid pandemic. At a school level, it restricted opportunities for innovative practices and hampered teachers' engagement with the curriculum changes. Its impact on inhibiting the curriculum changes needs to be taken into consideration when considering the perspectives presented.

The planned second iteration of the online teacher survey, school principal interviews and second school case study visits will explore the emerging issues further.

Introduction

This interim report is the second of a series of reports from a longitudinal study exploring the implementation, enactment and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle in post-primary schools in Ireland. As a wide range of actors including schools, principals, parents, students and stakeholders are tasked with implementing the Framework for Junior Cycle, this study explores their beliefs, perspectives and experiences. Teachers are at the heart of the change and, as professionals, make sense of the written curriculum and supporting resources to enact the curriculum through the complexity of classroom activity and collaboratively constructed, evolving understandings of the Framework. The study therefore focuses on teacher enactment, that is, how they make sense of the Framework in designing a Junior Cycle programme that is appropriate for their context. The study is not evaluating the roll-out of the curriculum. It aims to capture the opportunities and challenges presented by the Framework for Junior Cycle by enabling schools, teachers, students and parents to tell their stories of engagement with this curriculum change. The preceding *Introductory Report* (McGarr et al, 2022) presented initial research insights from the first phase of school principal interviews, teacher surveys and interviews with stakeholder groups. This second interim report draws primarily on the data from the school case studies conducted in the Spring of 2022. In these case studies the views of students, teachers, school principals and parents were captured. The perspectives presented in this interim report need to be acknowledged in the context of the longitudinal nature of this study.

The report is set out in four main sections. The first outlines the research design and methodology. This is followed by a brief review of literature highlighting the complexity of curriculum change and how this informs the presentation of the data. The perspectives from the case studies schools are then described. The teacher case study data is supported, where relevant, by teacher survey data from the national sample of teachers in 100 schools. The subsequent section discusses some of the key issues that are emerging from the study to date. The final concluding section sets out the research plan for the next phase of the study.

Section 1: Overview of the research design and data collected to date

This report presents emerging insights from the research instruments employed in the study up to Autumn 2022, however, this section will firstly provide an outline of the overall study design spanning the four years of the project. It will explain the purpose of each dimension of the study and then outline the data collected to date which forms the basis of this second report.

Overall study design

This is a mixed-methods, multi-dimensional research study that aims to capture the views of teachers, principals, students, parents and wider educational stakeholders on the Framework for Junior Cycle and its enactment. The study employs a range of different research tools, including online interviews, face-to-face interviews, surveys and focus group discussions. The study is also longitudinal in nature as it aims to capture the experiences of schools over time using a range of research instruments employed at key stages over the duration of the 4-year study. There are three dimensions to the research study:

Dimension One: interviews with stakeholder bodies

This dimension, which is now complete and reported on in the *Introductory Report*, involved interviews with representatives of relevant stakeholder bodies and agencies. These once-off interviews conducted in the first year of the study aimed to capture the views of the wider group of educational stakeholders. The interviews explored the participants' understandings of the curriculum changes, their perspectives on its implementation, outcomes and impact.

Dimension Two: School principal interviews and teacher surveys

This dimension involves online interviews with up to 100 school principals spread across years 2, 3, and 4 of the study. The views of school principals are being sought as, being in positions of leadership, they have a unique perspective on the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle and can provide an overview of their schools' experiences in implementing the changes. The interview consists of both open-ended questions and closed ranking and rating questions exploring the principals' understandings of the curriculum changes, their

perspectives on its implementation and enactment within their school and its outcomes and impact on their students, teachers and the school in general. Aspects of this dimension were included in the *Introductory Report,* and interviews are ongoing. Additional data from this dimension will be reported in future reports.

This dimension of the study also involves an online (anonymous) teacher survey of up to 100 schools in year 2 and again in year 3. The purpose of this survey is to capture teachers' views of the changes in a wide range of schools. The teacher survey was developed by reviewing existing curriculum survey instruments in other countries and the academic literature on curriculum change to address four research questions, namely:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the purpose of the Framework for Junior Cycle?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of the role of the teacher in enacting the Framework for Junior Cycle?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of the role of the student in engaging with the Framework for Junior Cycle?
4. What are teachers' perceptions of the core factors that support or hinder the enactment of the Framework for Junior Cycle?

"Perceptions" includes factors relating to beliefs, understandings and practical enactment. All subject associations were invited to contribute perspectives in the survey design which were considered in generating survey items. The design team was focused on ensuring that all items were neutrally expressed (not leading) and on providing teachers with a comprehensive opportunity to express their experience and opinions of enacting the Framework for Junior Cycle. The majority of items use a Likert scale alongside a small number of open-ended items (including Covid challenges). This extensive design process led to the first draft of the teacher survey under the following sections:

1. Curriculum Planning
2. Autonomy and participation in curriculum change
3. Teaching
4. Supporting Student Engagement and Learning
5. Assessment and Reporting
6. Professional Development (PD)

Within section 3 of the survey, each specification has a separate set of items with some common items across all specifications. The first draft then underwent piloting including:

1. **Field testing:** teachers in three schools completed the survey to gauge the time for completion and to gather written feedback relating to the clarity of items and to identify if any items needed to be added.

2. **Expert Reviews**: four curriculum experts reviewed the draft in advance of meetings to offer feedback and suggest changes.

3. **Cognitive interviews:** four teachers with a variety of views about the Framework for Junior Cycle participated in interviews where they talked aloud through each item, explaining what they thought it was measuring. They also offered feedback on item clarity, neutrality, comprehensiveness and whether the survey allowed them to truly express their opinions of the Framework.

Following modifications based on piloting, the survey was distributed via the online Qualtrix survey platform which facilitates completion on any device (i.e., mobile phone, tablet or PC). The design team will make the survey and (anonymised) results openly available, following FAIR principles: Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability and Reusability. This will allow interested parties to fully track the analysis offered by the survey design team in publications. Aspects of this dimension were included in the *introductory report* and are also utilised in this report.

Dimension Three: School case studies

This dimension involves in-depth case studies in 12 schools selected from the initial sample of Dimension 2 schools. This includes 10 post-primary schools, 1 Special School and 1 Youthreach Centre. Schools are visited in year 2 and year 4. The first phase of these site visits, conducted in Spring 2022, involved the following forms of data collection:

1. **Teacher interviews:** teachers from a variety of subject areas, including SNA's where applicable, were invited to be interviewed. The interview explored teachers' views of aspects of the curriculum changes; their views on what supported and hindered their enactment of this curriculum change; the impact the changes had on their practice, their workload, their relationships with other teachers, student learning and school culture.

2. **Student Surveys:** students in first, second and third year, where available, were invited to complete an individual survey on their views and experiences of aspects of Junior Cycle. The survey explored, amongst other things, students' experiences of teaching, learning and assessment; student voice; experiences of short courses; and Wellbeing. The student survey comprised of 56 items focusing on the following areas:

   > Section A: About You
   > Section B: Your Needs and Interests
   > Section C: Your Learning Experiences
   > Section D: Assessment
   > Section E: Your Wellbeing
   > Section F: Your Voice
   > Section G: Other/Concluding Comments

3. **Student Focus group discussions**: in-depth focus group discussions were conducted with a sample of students in first, second and third year. Students were firstly invited to complete an individual 'creative poster' responding to the prompt, '*my experiences of Junior Cycle*'. A reflection on each student's poster led to a focus group discussion. This explored what the students found effective at Junior Cycle, the aspects they did not enjoy or find ineffective and the changes they would like to see occur at Junior Cycle.

4. **Principal interview:** principals (or their representative) in each school were invited to take part in an interview. This interview explored the school context and background, the schools' previous experience with curriculum changes and the dimensions of the school context that supported (or challenged) the enactment of the Framework for Junior Cycle.

5. **Deputy principal (or other leader) interviews:** key leaders in the school, those with specific posts of responsibility related to Junior Cycle and/or deputy principals were invited to take part in an interview. These interviews explored leaders' views of aspects of the curriculum changes and what supported or hindered the enactment of the changes in the school.

6. **Parent/Guardian[1] interviews:** parents with children in Junior Cycle in the case study schools were invited to take part in an interview either online or face-to-face during the school visit. Parent interviews explored parental hopes and expectations for their child's learning in Junior Cycle, their views and experiences of their child's transition from primary to post-primary, assessment at Junior Cycle, reporting at Junior Cycle and the impact of Covid on their and their child's experience of Junior Cycle.

The student survey and focus group discussion were piloted in a DEIS mixed post-primary school, with students being provided with an opportunity to comment on the clarity of the questions, the language of the questions and any issues or concerns they had with the question. A member of the research team also engaged with representatives from the Irish Second-Level Students Union (ISSU), who provided feedback on the student survey and focus group discussion questions. A literacy expert, who has extensive experience and understanding of the Framework for Junior Cycle also reviewed the student research instruments. The teacher interview schedule was piloted with an experienced teacher, with twenty years' experience. The parent interview schedule was piloted with two parents, who provided feedback on the nature and structure of the interview questions. The research instruments were revised to reflect the differing perspectives and comments. The case studies aim to answer the following research questions:

1. What are case study schools' perceptions on the purpose of the Framework for Junior Cycle?

2. What are case study schools' views and experiences of the differing dimensions of the Framework for Junior Cycle?

3. What are case study schools' perspectives on the implementation /enactment of the Framework for Junior Cycle (supports/barriers)?

4. What are case study schools' perceptions on the outcomes and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle?

5. What changes in school culture and organisation, if any, have occurred due to the Framework for Junior Cycle?

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[1] The term parent is used from hereon

The overall study design is captured in Figure 1 below and the timeline for the implementation of each dimension of the study over the 4 years is mapped out in Figure 2
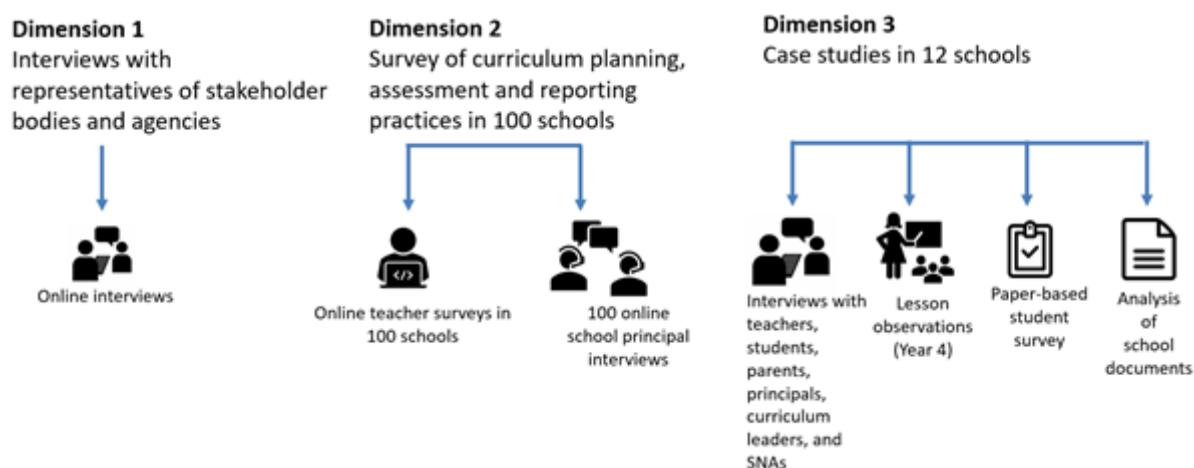
Figure 1. Summary of study dimension components.
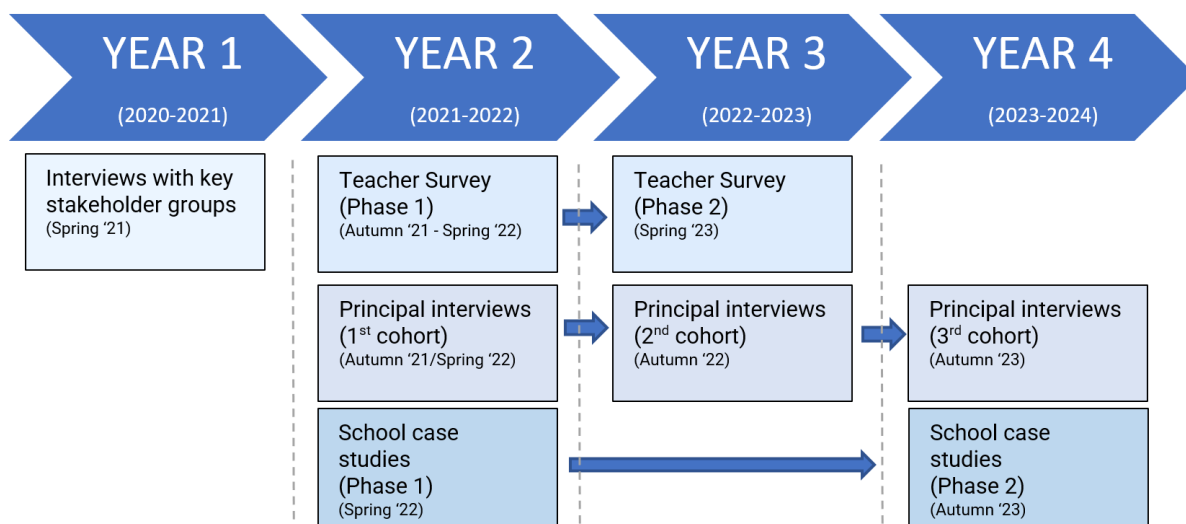
Figure 2. Longitudinal research design.

Sampling of schools

The teachers and principals participating in the second dimension of the study were drawn from a stratified random sample of 100 schools containing a representative proportion of different school types (i.e., Community Schools, Voluntary Secondary Schools (including Educate Together Schools), Education and Training Board (ETB) schools); single-sex and co-

educational; rural and urban; and Irish-medium schools. Youthreach Centres and Special Schools were also included. The 12 schools selected for the case studies in Q1 & Q2 of 2022 also includes schools from a wide range of settings including school type, co-educational and single sex, a range of school sizes, DEIS status and rural/urban locations. Both of these samples are now briefly considered.

Sampling process

Recognised post-primary schools, Special Schools and Youthreach centres are included in the sample of 100 schools. The numbers of each were determined based on student numbers, as outlined below:

Type of setting	Student numbers	% Nationally	% Project Sample
Post-Primary schools	379183[2]	96%	96%
Special Schools	8351[3]	2%	2%
Youthreach centres	6000[4]	2%	2%
Total number	393534	100%	100% (n=100)

Table 1: Number of students in each setting

Sample of Post-Primary schools

The sample of post-primary schools was identified using the national list of schools as provided on education.ie. (Post-primary schools 2020-2021 list). This includes the list of all post-primary schools for 2020-2021, based on returns. This file has 730 post-primary schools listed. The national sample of schools was firstly categorised by school type, followed by gender, DEIS status, school size and region ensuring the sample of 100 schools was representative of the national sample. More detail on this sampling approach is available in the *Introductory Report* of 2022 (available here).

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[2] statistical-bulletin-enrolments-september-2020-preliminary-results.pdf (education.ie)
[3] Education | The National Disability Authority (nda.ie)
[4] Youthreach - Department of Education and Skills

Case Study sample

The sample of 100 schools, as outlined above, was categorised according to school type, size, location, gender and DEIS status. Ten post-primary schools were randomly selected to ensure a spread across these five categories, as reflected below:

- **School type:** voluntary secondary (n=4), Community and Comprehensive (n=3), ETB (n=3)
- **Gender:** co-educational (n=7), all boys (n=1), all girls (n=2)
- **School size:** large (n=1), medium (n=5), small (n=4)
- **Location:** urban (n=6), rural (n=4)
- **DEIS status:** schools that have 'DEIS' status (n=4).

Schools were invited to participate as case study schools. If a school declined, the school was replaced by a similar school in the same category drawn from the sample of 100 schools. This process continued until 10 post-primary schools had agreed to participate in this dimension of the study.

The Youthreach Centre had previously participated in dimension 2a and 2b and also participated in the case study dimension. The research team engaged with the National Association Boards of Management in Special Education (NAMBSE) to identify a Special School, with the organisation putting a call out to its members inviting them to participate. The first school to respond to this invite was selected as the Special School case study.

Core ethical principles guiding the study

All research tools and study documentation including participant consent forms and research information sheets were submitted to the University of Limerick's ethics committee prior to commencement of the study for approval. The study was approved by the ethics committee at the end of the 2020 (reference no. 2020_11_26_EHS (ER)). Specific ethical approval was sought for the research instruments for use in the Special School (reference no. 2022_06_26_EHS). Research tools subsequently designed in line with the ongoing nature of the study were also submitted and approved for use. All participants were provided with information in relation to the study and consent was sought for participation which is completely voluntary. Participants from all dimensions of the study were assured of

anonymity in the reporting of the data and protocols have been adopted to ensure this anonymity throughout this report.

The research team work *with* rather than *on* schools, seeking to give voice to participants, and acknowledging the significance of context, showing due sensitivity in inviting schools to participate and in how the research is conducted. Recognising the multiple demands on schools, the study strives to work in collaboration with participating schools and therefore a level of flexibility has been required as the research project has unfolded.

Data forming the focus of this report.

The data collected as of the end of September 2022 forms the basis of this second interim report. This includes student, teacher, school principal and parent perspectives from the 12 case study schools collected throughout 2022. An invitation to complete the survey was sent to the 100 schools of the sample resulting in 1375 teacher survey responses from 76 schools.

Case Study data collection

The schools were visited between March-June 2022. The Special School was visited in September 2022, to allow further development and adaptation of the research instruments to meet the needs of the students in this context. The team of researchers visited the schools and conducted, where possible, surveys with students in first, second and third year (n=1830), focus group discussions with students in Junior Cycle (n=213), interviews with volunteer teachers across a range of subject areas (n=73), interviews with principals and members of the senior management team (n=20) and interviews with parents (n=30).

Students from 1st year to 3rd year participated in this research. Students either completed the survey on their phone, having scanned a QR code that brought them to the survey on Qualtrics, or else they completed the survey on a school computer, using a link circulated via the principal/teacher. The survey took approximately 20 minutes for students to complete and was anonymous. Students (n=1830) who completed the survey ranged in age from 11 to 16 years. The gender breakdown was: Male (39.2%), Female (57.1%), 'Non-binary/3rd Gender' (2.1%) and 'Prefer not to say' (1.5%). Students were from a range of schools including

Community Schools (31.0%), ETB schools (18.6%) and Secondary Schools (50.3%) with 19.8% of respondents in a DEIS school.

The student workshops extended to approximately 45-90 minutes per year group. Consenting students were selected at random while ensuring a mix of gender, where relevant. All activities were led by the project researchers and audio recorded to ensure authentic representation of student voice.

It is important to note that participation in all aspects of the research was voluntary, with teachers, students, parents and management being invited by the research team to take part in an interview/focus group discussion. While the researchers endeavoured to interview teachers from a range of subject areas within each school, the subject area of those who volunteered for interview couldn't be controlled. The researchers interviewed all and any teacher who expressed an interest in taking part in an interview. Teachers' subject areas included: Business Studies; Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE); Wood Technology; English; Gaeilge; Geography; History; Home Economics, ICT; Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes; Literacy; Mathematics; Modern Foreign languages; Music; Religious Education (RE); Physical Education (PE); Science; Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE); Special Education Needs (SEN); Visual Arts and Wellbeing. The teacher interviews and student focus group discussions were semi-structured in nature and while the researcher had a set of guiding questions, participants determined the focus and nature of the points raised. This facilitated the researchers in accessing the points of central significance to the participants.

Parents are a particularly challenging cohort to gain access to when conducting research (Mac an Ghaill et al., 2004; McCormack, 2010). Parents across ten Case Study sites volunteered for interview. It wasn't possible, despite numerous attempts, to identify willing parents in two of the sites. In some sites, numerous parents volunteered for interview, while in others only one or two parents came forward. Within contexts where a number of parents volunteered, the research team interviewed up to five parents to counter the low numbers volunteering in other case study sites. In total, 30 parents were interviewed across 10 case study sites.

Teacher survey data collection

After consenting to participate in the study, all participating schools (n=100) were sent a teacher information sheet in relation to the study as well as a link to the online teacher survey. This link was distributed to the teachers in each site by school management. The majority of survey respondents were female (71%), in full time employment (91%) and working in a voluntary Secondary School (35%). The majority had either less than 10 years' experience (35%) or 10-19 years' experience (30%) and were aged between 40-49 (30%) or 30-39 (28%). Teachers identified a range of main subject specifications with more English (14%), Mathematics (12%), Science (10%), and Gaeilge (10%) teachers responding to the survey.

Analysis of data

Quantitative data was analysed using the statistical research software packages, Qualtrics and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). At this point, consistent with the longitudinal methodology of the research study and the purpose of this report to illustrate diversity of perspectives, the majority of statistical analysis is descriptive in nature.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and read by members of the research team for familiarisation. This data was analysed using an inductive approach to thematic analysis (Lewis, 2009), where themes were generated, at school level, by means of bottom-up coding, enabling openness to new codes emerging from the data (Lewins, 2008). Using Braun and Clarke's (2012) steps for thematic analysis the transcripts were studied, and codes were identified. Cross-checking and confirmation of these codes was undertaken across research team members to increase validity. These codes were then synthesised into macro-level themes to present the overarching issues, allowing for the voice of participants to emerge (Bryman, 2012) and ensuring that themes were sufficiently supported by the data. In order to capture the nature of each case study site, this process firstly took place at school level. Reoccurring themes from interviews/focus groups in each individual case study school were firstly identified. An individual case study report, reflecting these reoccurring themes, was completed for each school. The researchers then identified themes that were reoccurring across a number of case study sites.

Section 2: The complexity of curriculum change

Curriculum change is a complex and multifaceted process (Davis, 2003; Handal & Herrington 2003; Lynch et al., 2017). Achieving 'deep' change, impacting at the level of practice and beliefs and values, takes significant time and effort to achieve, and therefore can frequently remain elusive (Fullan, 2016). This is reflected in comments by Woodrow Wilson, for example, that '*it is easier to move cemeteries than to change the curriculum*' (Van Damme, 2001, p. 423).

While numerous studies have identified various aspects that need to be considered when altering curriculum, the central role of the teacher in the successful implementation of curriculum change is acknowledged (Goodson 2001). As noted by Fullan (2007, p. 129) '*educational change depends on what teachers do and think – it's as simple and complex as that*'. Altering peoples' perspectives and practices is a highly personal and emotive process (Goodson, 2001). People, as thinking beings, attach different meaning to change, resulting in diverging understandings between the proposed intent of a change and what is implemented in practice (Tubulawa, 1998). As a result, curriculum changes are 'recreated' rather than 'implemented' into schools, resulting in '*apparent slippage between conception and practice*' (Mac Donald, 2003, 141).

Deep change, impacting as it does at the level of beliefs and values, is a slow process (Levin, 2007). This requires ongoing and sustained engagement, communication, reflection, and enactment, wherein all relevant stakeholders are encouraged to make sense of the changes, to consider what it means for their practice and to develop a shared understanding of the meaning of the change (Fullan, 2016).

Context also matters (Cornbleth, 1990; Gleeson, 2010). A school's culture and wider socio-political, cultural, and philosophical contexts impact and inform how curriculum change is received and implemented (Hinde, 2004; Karseth, 2006; Gleeson et al., 2001). As Kincheloe (1997, 10) argues, 'no truth exists beyond culture'. Revised curricula are filtered and refracted through these existing cultural perspectives, thus informing how changes are perceived and received.

The extensive published literature on curriculum change also highlights the importance of voice within the curriculum change process. It is important to remember however, that no single teacher, student, or parent voice exists (Cook-Sather, 2006, 367), rather these stakeholders bring multiple perspectives and experiences of a curriculum change.

These insights from the literature guide the reporting of the teachers', students' and parents' perspectives as set out in section 3. It views curriculum change as an incremental process and aims to present the voice, perspectives and stories of teachers, students, and parents recognising the multiple and equally valid perspectives that are presented. It also recognises that stakeholders construct their own personal understanding of change and that such perspectives need to be authentically presented and not seen through pre-exiting frames of reference. The study also recognises the impact of context in influencing participants' experiences of, and responses to, change.

Section 3: Perspectives from Schools

This section is presented in three main parts. Part 1 presents the teachers' perspectives on the curriculum change, drawing on in-depth teacher interviews across the 12 case-study sites, as well as teacher survey data from the wider sample of 100 schools. Part 2 outlines students' perspectives drawing on student survey data, focus group discussion data and examples of students' creative posters from the case study schools. Part 3 provides the parental perspective, drawing on parental data from the case study schools.

Part 1: Teachers' perspectives on the curriculum change

Teacher interviews in the 12 case study sites (n=73) explored teachers' views on the purpose and rationale for the changes, their views on various aspects of the Framework for Junior Cycle, the supports and barriers to teachers enacting the changes, as well as any perceived impact of the changes. The main perspectives emerging from the thematic analysis are presented in this part of the report. Teacher survey data, drawing on survey responses from the wider cohort of 100 schools, is also included where relevant. Where multiple themes emerged within a section, these are presented in order of occurrence, i.e., the themes most common across case study schools are presented first.

Purpose, rationale and need for change

The teacher survey indicated mixed views in relation to the need for change of the previous, Junior Certificate programme, with 70% of teachers believing there was a need for reform to some extent, to a considerable extent and to a great extent, as outlined in Figure 3.

Overall, to what extent do you believe that there was a need for reform of the previous curriculum (the Junior Certificate)?

Category	Percentage
Not at all 1	9%
To a minor extent 2	21%
To some extent 3	33%
To a considerable extent 4	20%
To a great extent 5	17%
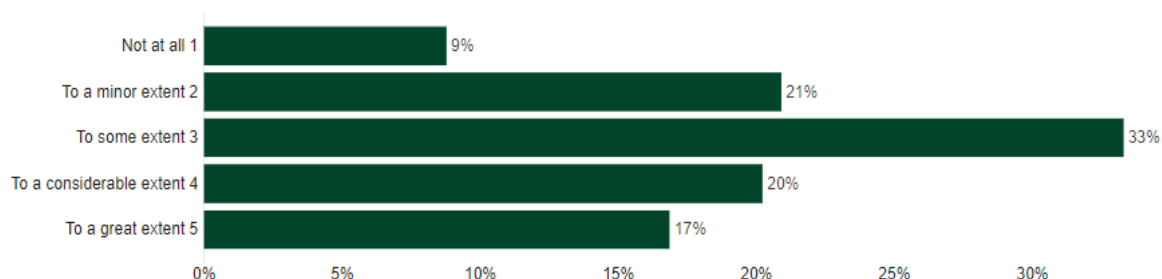
Figure 3. Teacher views on the need for curricular change.

Across the 12 case study sites, teachers identified a number of purposes and rationales for the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle. Four main purposes to the changes emerged. Firstly, teachers believed the changes were aiming to make schools and classrooms more inclusive. Some teachers perceived the changes as attempting to create more inclusive classrooms and include all students in their learning, for example, '*to make the Junior Cycle more accessible to all students'* (School 5). Some felt that the Framework for Junior Cycle enabled a wider range of students to show their strengths and talents through, for example, casting, '*a big net and hoping to catch students that were on the periphery and bring them in. I think it was time to rethink how we were learning and how we were assessing'* (School 3).

When discussing the focus on inclusion, specific mention was made, at times, to Level 1, Level 2 Learning Programmes, and to students with Special Education Needs (SEN). Teachers in School 9 and in the Special School, for example, saw the changes as attempting to:

> *Make the Junior Cycle more inclusive. So, more students can experience success. So, it can be tailored to meet the need of the student, rather than everybody needs to know this, at this level ... students [taking the Level 1 or 2 Learning Programme] do feel a lot more included in the class* (School 9)

> *When they brought in Level 1 and Level 2, it made it much more inclusive. It allowed all students access to it, which was really needed at that point. There is access to everybody to the Junior Cycle, which is lovely to see* (Special School)

Secondly, many teachers believed that the changes aimed to place a greater focus on skills, supporting students to develop relevant skills for life, work, and education. Teachers, for

example, viewed the changes as being, *'much more skills based'* (School 7) and, *'cultivating these skills amongst the student body'* (School 9). A focus on Key Skills was deemed to support students to adapt to differing situations throughout their lives and for schools to '*change with the times'* (School 9).

Thirdly, many saw the changes as supporting teachers, schools, and students to place less focus and emphasis on summative examinations. These teachers, for example, saw the changes as supporting teachers and students to, *'move away from teaching to the exam',* and the related predictability that brought (Youthreach). Teachers in School 1, for example, expressed similar views: *'I see what they were trying to do. I think they were trying to take some of the pressure off'* (teacher 2) and, *'I guess the idea was that they did not want everything based on the end of year exam'* (teacher 5).

Fourthly, teachers felt that the changes aimed to alter approaches to teaching and learning, supporting greater integration of student-centred pedagogical approaches. Teachers in School 4, for example, saw the changes as improving, *'the learning experience for students and make it more active, and I suppose, more enjoyable'* (School 4).

Views on various dimensions of the Framework for Junior Cycle

Through the use of an open-ended question in the interview, teachers were asked to give their views on the Framework for Junior Cycle. The responses focused on issues of immediate concern to teachers, reflecting the subjective nature of change. These included CBAs, SLARS, the assessment task, the common level nature of the Framework, Learning Outcomes and Wellbeing. Key Skills or Short Courses did not emerge as a key area for comment or concern for case study teachers but were explored within the teacher survey. Teachers' main views in this regard are explored within this section.

Classroom Based Assessments (including descriptors, SLARS and Assessment tasks)

Teachers expressed mixed views regarding Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs), with the majority identifying positive dimensions and contributions of the CBAs, as well as some related concerns. Three main positive dimensions of CBAs emerged from the teacher data. Firstly, teachers across a number of schools believed that CBAs supported student

engagement and enjoyment, with students being motivated when they could select the topic for their CBA. For example:

If they are interested in something, they will work well on it (Special School)

They get to pick something they are interested in. Some of them get so excited. They enjoy it and they want to do it. They get to be hand- on. The room is like a bomb hit it … they love it. They get something out of it (School 2)

This was also reflected in the teacher survey data as evident from the response in Figure 4 where 70% of teachers reported that at least 'to some extent' students valued the opportunity to engage in a topic of their own choosing as part of the CBAs.

Did students value the opportunity to engage in a topic of their own choosing as part of the CBA learning and assessment experience?

Not at all 1	11%
To a minor extent 2	20%
To some extent 3	34%
To a considerable extent 4	25%
To a great extent 5	11%
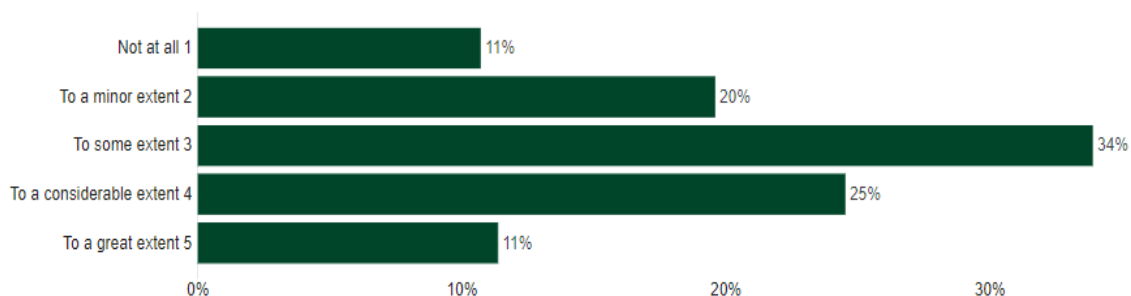
Figure 4. Students valuing opportunities to engage in a topic of their choosing.

Secondly, some felt that CBAs enabled students, who may not always achieve and succeed academically, to do well and to show their strengths as, '*different students get to excel in the CBA*' (School 7). The following excerpt portrays this further:

I would be honest and say I was sceptical about the CBAs initially…tied up with the industrial action and teachers assessing their own student wasn't a great start. When I did it as a mainstream teacher, I found that it was quite manageable and good for the students, but what I have seen in the last few years are that the CBAs are brilliant for students who struggle academically. It gives them an opportunity to work on something that they have a little bit of ownership and choice of. They can work at it to their level … the actual experience of doing the CBA for those students …it's great for their confidence, great for their ability. They really seem to enjoy them (School 1)

This was considered particularly important in schools that offer a Level 2 Learning Programme, as students on the Level 2 Learning Programme complete CBAs with their peers and have the same descriptors included on their profile of achievement:

> *I think they are brilliant … you would see kids who normally wouldn't be achieving in their tests and then they would put on excellent CBAs. What that does for that child is just brilliant. The confidence it gives to that child is brilliant … Mainstream teachers may feel that its eating into their class time, and maybe a lot of work goes into it, but when I see it going down on the profile of achievement for some of the kids who wouldn't have sat any level 3 exam, but they did it [CBAs] with their peers* (School 7)

Thirdly, some teachers felt that CBAs supported students to develop skills, such as research and communication skills and to develop their capacity to work independently, for example, '*You are able to see that students are developing independent research skills. There is more collaboration and communication. They are getting up and presenting, which the old Junior Cycle never gave students an opportunity to do…they are able to express themselves*' (School 10).

Five main concerns were raised regarding CBAs, with strong consistency emerging across case study sites in this regard. The main concern related to the lack of percentage marks attached to CBAs. Teachers who had assessment tasks in their subjects felt that the 10% allocated for the Assessment Task was not sufficient to motivate students to engage with the CBAs and it did not reflect the amount of work students (and teachers) put into them. A number of teachers felt that students were not motivated to complete CBAs to a high standard, as they weren't getting percentages for the work. A common suggestion across schools was for CBAs to be worth more percentage to alleviate these concerns. These views are reflected in the various excerpts below:

> *The CBA is, for all intent and purposes, worthless. It has lost its value and I know that was a union issue at the time. It was a silly negotiation that we couldn't have seen, but should have seen. We should have seen that that wouldn't work out. You take any student who wants to achieve and is keen to do well, they get an exceptional in the CBA and they hardly notice it at the end of that report, or you take the weak student who could bring up their result with their ability to communicate and can't make that happen either. It makes the CBA, not quite redundant, but close* (School 2)

> *I hear it from other parents, 'don't be putting so much work into those, they are worth nothing' … why is it worth it to kill themselves to get above expectations…there is a huge amount of work in CBA1 … student feedback to me is that they are so disappointed they aren't going to be getting this mark in their Junior Cycle* (School 3)

> *Give them marks for the CBA and not the assessment task … I know the assessment task is based on the CBA2 for most subjects, but maybe let them do CBA2 and give them the 10% for that* (School 7)

Secondly, the number of CBAs students complete, within a short time frame, was a concern for many teachers. These teachers felt that students became overloaded with the number of CBAs and *'OD'* on CBAs (School 3) and were, *'tired of the CBA thing'* (School 4). Some questioned whether two CBAs were, *'too many within the time frame that they [the students] have?'* (School 1). Some suggested that one CBA could be sufficient within each subject area. This suggestion is reflected in the excerpt below:

> *I feel they should have either CBA1 or CBA2, either in 2nd year or 3rd year and do an assessment task on one of them. I just don't think you have time. No matter the goodwill of the Junior Cycle coordinator setting the dates for the CBAs. No matter how much she wants to spread them out they're still going to overlap. Kids are getting overwhelmed. One of the key skills and priorities of the Junior Cycle is their wellbeing and it's ironic to think that they're not looking after their wellbeing when they see the levels of stress in third year…They need to seriously look at it. It should be one or the other* (School 5)

Thirdly, some teachers expressed concern regarding the amount of time CBAs took. The issue of time allocated to CBAs was exacerbated within contexts where subject areas/specifications had a large amount of content. This resulted in teachers being concerned about the time spent on CBAs, which could have been spent covering additional content:

> *With the two CBAs you are losing six weeks teaching time and there is no real recognition for the work they put into it, and we are struggling to claw that time back* (School 2)

> *My only issue with it is that the course wasn't shortened. It's very hectic. You kind of have to rush it [the CBA] and its pity because its worthy* (School 3)

The teacher survey revealed mixed views about the management of the completion of CBAs. On balance, CBA1 was seen to be slightly easier to manage to completion than CBA2. In relation to whether teachers believed that the CBA was an effective learning experience, both CBAs were reported as having similar educational benefit (Figure 5).

Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs): To what extent...
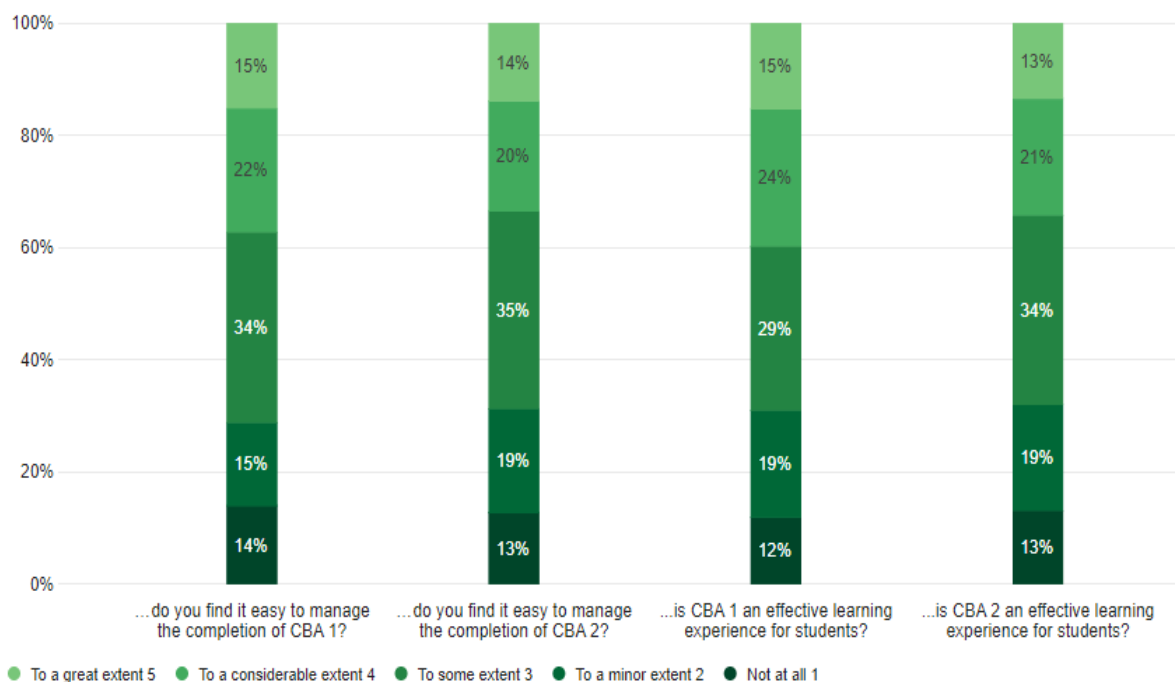
Figure 5. Teachers' views on aspects of CBAs.

It appears that, at times, CBAs were considered and conducted as something separate and different to normal classroom practice. Some teachers in the case study schools, for example, explained how teaching and learning is '*so different*' (School 5) during the CBAs or is, '*the only time that children are focusing on for example, oral work*' (School 5). Similarly, a teacher in School 10 saw CBAs as, '*good because it allows the student to veer off the path of the syllabus*', while a teacher in School 2 liked CBAs as it supports students, '*to get away from the book … there was a big change in the classroom dynamic*' (School 2). Some students in school 6, after completing a CBA in a modern foreign language class asked, as described by their teacher, '*can we go back to doing proper [language] again*' …'*they see the CBA as a box ticking exercise. There is nothing natural about it*' (School 6). This was also reflected in the teacher survey (Figure 6) where there was a diversity of perceptions as to whether CBAs were stand-alone events, or part and parcel of normal teaching.

Do you see CBAs as stand-alone events, separate from normal teaching?
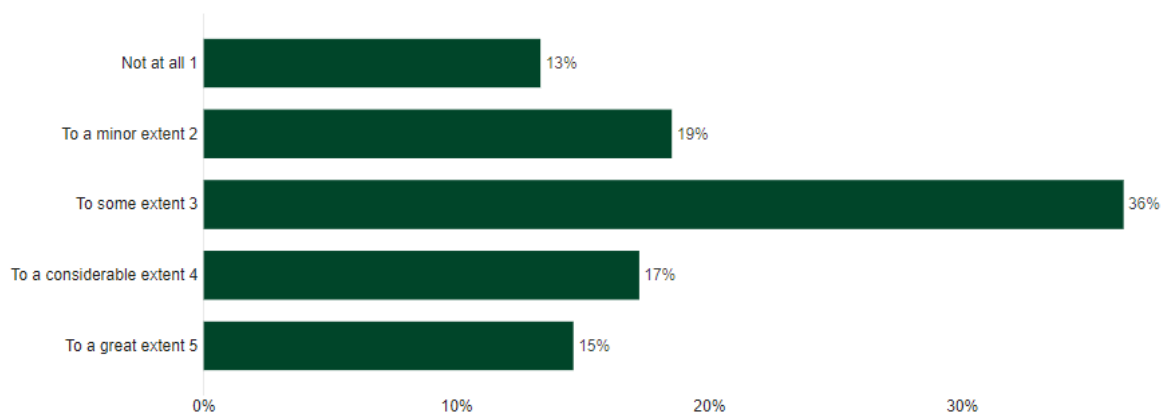
Figure 6. Do you see CBAs as stand-alone events, separate from normal teaching?

Fourthly, CBAs were, at least initially, experienced as a stressor. Stress emerged for two main reasons. Firstly, some teachers, again at least initially, felt they over emphasised the scale of work attached to the CBA. Teachers, for example, explained how when they first engaged with CBAs, they had students, '*doing a PhD, rather than a CBA*' (School 2) and realised '*they were going too big*' (School 2). This was also evident in the following exchange with a member of the senior management team in School 1:

> **Interviewee:** *CBAs is the piece that is not fitting……there is still a sense of heightened anxiety about CBAs……The CBA piece just needs to come down a level, in that it is projects….we ran the Home Economics exams here over 4 days, not a tear was dropped, not a panic attack was had and that was for 50%…I would have more issues in second year with no-stakes, apart from the descriptor …*
>
> **Researcher:** *what is causing this?*
>
> **Interviewee:** *it is possibly an unknown still on the teacher's part. Teachers are fearing it and aren't seeing it as just a project …*

As outlined above, the number of CBAs students complete within a short time was deemed to create stress for students. Some teachers noted a potential tension between the focus on Wellbeing with the Framework for Junior Cycle and teacher/student experience of CBAs. For example:

> *CBAs can be stressful … year 2, there is a lot of CBAs for the students … one of the backbones of the Junior Cycle reform was to alleviate stress … I don't really think they have hit the mark on that one. Year 2 is very stressful for the students* (School 9)

Finally, some teachers felt that students weren't always capable of completing some CBAs, as they were too challenging and difficult, and students did not always have the required skills. These teachers felt that students required a lot of guidance and support to complete the CBAs , for example,

> *I know college students who would struggle to do a CBA without guidance. The majority of students really do need a lot of help. I get the idea of trying to get them learning themselves early on to set them up for college, but I think more guidance from teachers on it would be better* (School 5)

Schools access to digital technologies, particularly laptops and computer rooms, emerged as an important factor in some schools' experiences and views of CBAs. This issue is considered further under the section '*Supports and Barriers to Enacting the Change'* below.

Some issues related to CBAs, specific to the Youthreach setting, emerged from the data and are now briefly outlined.

The continuous intake of students throughout the school year created an issue regarding the completion of CBAs in the Youthreach Centre. The Youthreach centre experienced a continuous intake of students, with students starting in the centre at any stage throughout the school year. A number of Youthreach teachers spoke about the challenges they experienced in having CBA work completed in other schools prior to the student's enrolment in the centre. In other cases, students may not have completed a CBA in their previous school, or if they did, no longer had access to the CBA. This created difficulties for teachers in aligning with the CBA requirements as the CBA requirements were considered to be adding a more formal structure to project work. Members of the management team, for example, explained how, '*when we are getting referrals from schools the material isn't coming across with them'* (Youthreach).

Deadlines, as set externally, were perceived as being considered 'very important' within the Framework (Youthreach). These deadlines did not always suit this context, with some teachers calling for greater flexibility regarding CBA deadlines to enable them to adapt to the continuous student intake within the centre. Teachers questioned, for example:

> *If a kid comes in from another school and doesn't have CBA1 done, should he be punished for not having a CBA1 done even if the date has passed?* (Youthreach)

> *Is there flexibility for us regarding the deadlines? Should our students be disadvantaged? Can I work around those deadlines?... Flexibility is key here* (Youthreach)

Some questioned whether the formal structure of CBAs, and the related grading, was an improvement on the project approach the centre has always used. The following excerpt outlines this view:

> *I don't know if CBAs are overly helpful. It's great to do a project. We do projects all the time. It's nothing new to what we could do. It's not this great new phenomenon that someone else has come up with. The problem is now that it's being put on a statement that someone is in line with, above or below expectations. It is being reported on or not being reported … If they don't get the project done, it's not the end of the world so why have this 'not achieved'* (Youthreach)

Descriptors for CBAs

One main theme emerged regarding teachers views and experiences of Descriptors. Some teachers questioned the level of clarity and understanding students, parents and, at times teachers, had regarding Descriptors. These teachers felt that students and parents continued to think in terms of percentages and grades. A teacher in School 6, for example, asked 'w*hat does it mean? It means nothing to the kids and nothing to the parents'.* This was echoed in the views of a teacher in School 10:

> *I don't think it is advertised widely enough as to what it means. If parents get that, I don't think they fully understand what in-line with expectations would mean and an employer doesn't understand that either. Students themselves don't know what it means.*

A number of minor sub-themes emerged regarding teachers views of descriptors. These weren't consistent across schools and only emerged from a small number of sites but are briefly presented below:

- The language of the descriptors was a concern for some teachers. Particular concerns were raised with the descriptor '*in line with expectations*.' The language of '*in line with expectations*' was perceived as negative, and '*as a bit flat'* (School 1) with members of the SMT suggesting that perhaps *'meeting expectations'* may be a more '*positive'* framing of the descriptor (School 1).

- The number of descriptors was a concern for some. The fact that there are four descriptors, with '*in line with expectations'* being the third, resulted in some students viewing this descriptor as being a 'pass' grade. For example, students on receiving in line with expectations for their CBA would say, '*"that's a D Miss". That is what they saw. It is the second lowest. There are two more grades above it, and they see themselves as being in the bottom 50%'* (School 1). This was supported by a teacher in School 8 who asked: '*I'm just wondering if there could be a fifth descriptor*'.

- Some raised questions regarding teacher decision making in categorising students' work. The views and perspectives differed here, but focused on difficulties teachers may experience in deciding what Descriptor applies to students' work. Some felt that it was very difficult for students to achieve an 'Exceptional' others found it difficult to determine the difference between '*In line with'* and '*Above expectations'*. While some schools felt that all students were getting '*In line with expectations'*. A small number of teachers in some schools indicated that they would avoid, where possible, giving students 'Y*et to meet expectations'* due to the impact on their motivation, for example, '*sometimes CBAs can be difficult and telling kids who have done their very best that they are yet to meet expectations, there has to be another way … if you are trying to create wellbeing'* (School 10).

- Some felt that the examples of CBAs provided were too high a standard, with teachers expressing surprise that these examples would only be awarded '*in line with expectations'*, for example, '*the standard of exemplars was very high'* (School 6).

Assessment Task

The majority of teachers across the case study schools had not experienced the Assessment Task, due to the revised arrangements for the completion of CBAs as a result of the Covid pandemic or because it was not a requirement as part of their subject. The small number of teachers who did, and who outlined issues related to the Assessment Task questioned how the Assessment Task related to the CBA, with some teachers struggling to see how the Assessment Task captured students' work in the CBA. Others raised concerns regarding the nature of the questions asked within the Assessment Task. For example, some felt that the

reflective nature of the questions and answers were unlike anything students would experience in other aspects of Junior Cycle. These views are reflected in the excerpts below:

> *The assessment task is marked by someone who has never seen the CBA. They could do a CBA, mess up the assessment task and be punished. The CBA should go with it. They have three weeks of work on this, and it isn't really fair* (School 2)

> *That assessment task definitely has to go … it is just meaningless. It is truly meaningless. In [school name] it is a big thing to get them to reflect on stuff, so they do have the language and ability to do it but it's just a pointless, easy 10%. That 10% should be on the CBAs or somewhere else. I don't think writing 2 full A4 pages on it, with teachers preparing them as we*ll (School 3)

The teacher survey indicates that many teachers did not believe that the Assessment Task was a valid representation of the work students completed through the CBAs (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Does the assessment task represent a valid assessment of the students' work through the CBAs?

Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings

Teachers were largely positive about Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings and, in general, viewed them as a positive contribution of the changes, for example, '*One of the good things to come out of the changes is the SLAR. I enjoy the SLAR … I think it's a very valuable thing. You are being held to account by your own colleagues, which is superb*' (School 2).

Teachers welcomed the opportunity to see samples of students' work from other class groups and to learn, engage and talk with colleagues about their practice. Teachers also welcomed

the support and back-up SLARS provided them in making objective judgements about students' work. These views are reflected in the excerpts below:

> *Very positive, very interesting to see where other people are at. We are generally in agreement as a department ... we talk a lot as a group. We have common exams…the SLAR is never contentious. Its good cause you aren't operating in a vacuum* (School 3)

> *It is nice to go into a meeting with a colleague who has an outside perspective … they don't get to know the kids the way I do … she is looking at it as a piece of work and … judgement is not clouded by the last 3 years* (School 10)

Two main concerns emerged regarding SLARS. Firstly, some teachers questioned the extent to which teacher decision making regarding CBAs was (or could be) standardised within and across schools. These interviewees felt that teachers within a school may differ regarding what standard they expect, while others questioned whether teachers in different schools would have different expectations. For example, a teacher (School 10) felt that it could be a, '*totally different ball game*' in other schools, and wondered, '*if schools compare … I don't think it's fair to say it's the same in every school*'. Similarly, teacher 1 (School 10) felt that '*is that the same nationally? ... more work should be produced nationally as to what each grade descriptor is. What school you go to shouldn't determine whether you are exceptional or in-line with expectations*' (School 10). This is further reflected within other schools, as outlined below:

> *How is assessment going to be fair. Assessment of the CBAs is now teacher based. We are going to have a SLAR and discuss it with another teacher. It's very individual, its very subjective. I am judging my students against my class. I am not judging my students against some other school … there needs to be some form of common standard, across schools* (School 6)

Secondly, teachers noted that while all teachers engage in the SLAR process, the ultimate decision still lies with the teacher. Therefore, '*the class teacher has the final say, regardless of whether there was a disagreement within the process*' (School 2).

The lack of SLAR meetings for teachers in Special Schools was a concern for teachers within this context, with some calling for more collaboration and support regarding the process of assessing students' learning:

We don't get the opportunity to do SLARS here and that would be really useful … It can be very isolating when you are on your own assessing (Special School)

The teacher survey supports that SLARs were perceived to have been quite useful in promoting consistency and fairness in judgement and assessment practices but less helpful in developing a shared understanding of national standards and expectations, as shown in Figure 8 below. This suggests that teachers found value in sharing assessment judgements within SLAR meetings but remain somewhat concerned that such judgements may not be consistent between schools.
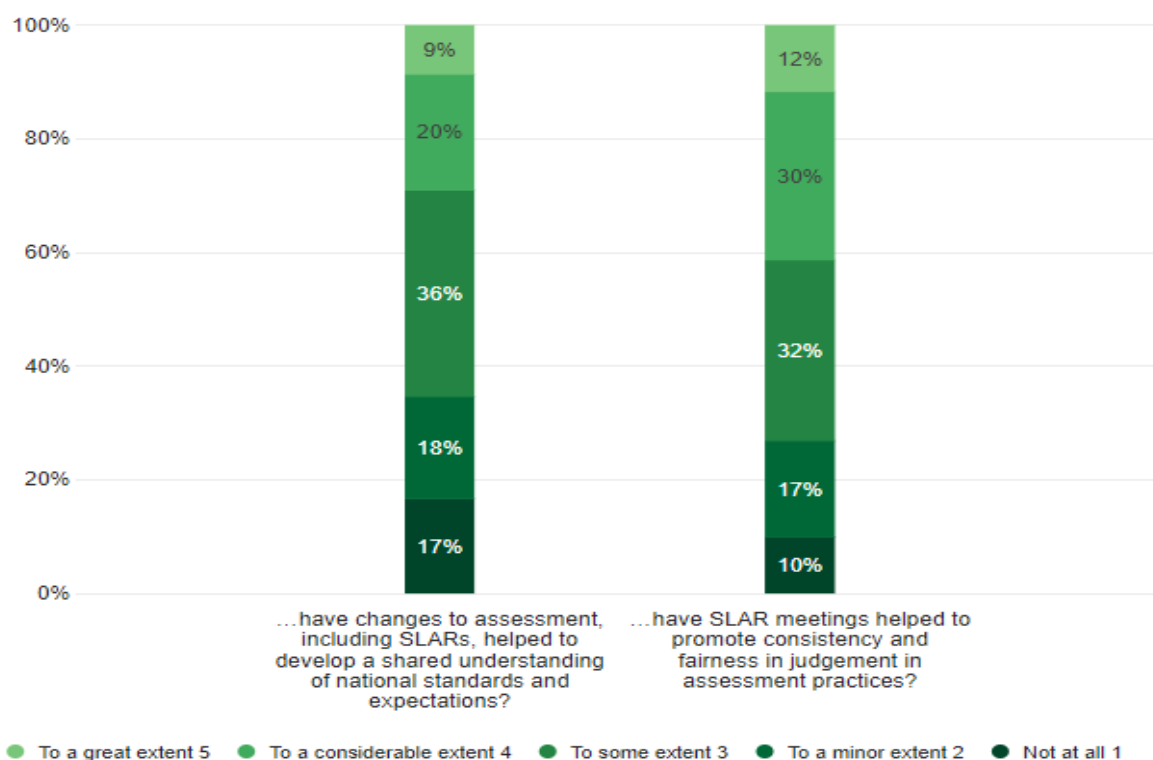
Figure 8. Teachers' views on SLAR meetings.

Assessment of the Common Level specifications

When teachers were asked their views on common level specifications, they focused on assessment related issues rather than pedagogical or classroom-based concerns. Four main concerns emerged.

Firstly, teachers felt that the *common level* examination papers were too challenging for some students, especially for those who would historically have completed the examination at Ordinary or Foundation Level. Some also believed that the common level papers were too easy for higher achieving students. These challenges are captured in the excerpts below:

> *The new Junior Cycle is definitely more positive on their learning. Its more positive for all students. I feel sometimes I have to challenge the really good ones probably more so. It's all down to me as a teacher, differentiation, making the questions a bit more challenging because they can get a bit bored maybe. At least with the Higher level and Ordinary level you knew where they were at but when its common level you have to read your students very well and you have to cater for all* (School 5)

> *I think the common level is geared towards the better student. The student who manages a bit better. The top students then aren't being challenged enough either. I know it was trying to strike a balance of both …. What I have experienced from being in the exam centre with them is that when they turn the exam over, there is a big sigh because they see a ream of something, like a real comprehension style question … You just knew it was way above them. You just knew, there was too much happening. It was too much written work, too much reading … there is a lot of reading in it, they struggle to get it finished. The common level doesn't suit all kids with SEN. It is that bit above them* (School 7)

Secondly, teachers raised concerns regarding the nature and language of the examination questions within the common level paper, with teachers suggesting that these questions required too high a level of literacy for some students to manage. Teachers in School 4, for example, felt that the examination papers were, '*too literacy heavy for some 'weaker' students*' and were, '*intimidating to look at for a child with literacy difficulties*' (School 4). Some expressed concern about the nature of the examination questions. These teachers raised three related concerns. Teachers questioned the use of comprehension type questions within many examination papers. This meant, from their perspective, students with high literacy levels could achieve a high grade within the exam even if they did not have the subject content knowledge. Some felt there was a lack of clarity on what the questions were asking students, what students were required to do and whether students were capable of answering these complex questions within a short exam time. Teachers questioned the short space students had to respond to these questions on the exam paper, which, they felt, did not enable students to show off their learning sufficiently. For example:

They will struggle because they don't know what is being required of them in those [examination] questions. They don't know what they are required to do. Whereas when they are asking a straightforward question it's more in line with their ability … I did not know what the question was asking of me. I couldn't decipher what the question was asking of the student. …Students would find it difficult to differentiate between explain and describe (School 1)

It is wishy washy. There are these comprehension questions where they read it and wouldn't have done it before … they are going 'why is there an English comprehension question? … you could get marks for your opinion in so many places. It is easier for them to do better, although it's harder to get up at the distinction (School 2)

There are problems with literacy … there is an issue with language in the questions. They are just not able … none of them are reading. We are expecting them to read questions now that take thought and consideration. They don't have the ability for that (School 6)

Thirdly, the lack of choice within the common level exam paper was a concern for some teachers. A teacher in the Youthreach centre, for example, explained how, '*we have sample papers that are terrible. There is a common paper. There is no choice, which is horrendous for our kids. There is too much reading. It's like a novel from start to finish. Our guys are going to give up halfway through … there definitely needs to be choice. Having no choice on a paper is just mad*' (Youthreach).

Fourthly, some were concerned about the fact that there was only one exam paper, which was two hours in length. These teachers were unsure whether this enabled students to showcase three years of learning within the examination setting. Some teachers were concerned that, '*you have to cover so much stuff and everything is squashed into one paper*' (School 9), resulting in students not having, '*time to really demonstrate their learning*' (ibid). This resulted in students struggling to, '*reach their potential in that exam setting due to the limited nature of that exam*' (School 9). This was supported by teachers in the Youthreach Centre who questioned, for example, '*if they needed 4 hours, would it kill anyone to let them stay that long*' (Youthreach).

Teacher survey data also indicated that in general teachers were less likely to believe that common level specifications enabled students to achieve to their highest possible level, as Figure 9 indicates.

Do you believe the provision of subjects and short courses at a common level (in most instances) has enabled students to "have the experience and aspiration to achieve to their highest possible level"?

Not at all 1	23%
To a minor extent 2	17%
To some extent 3	38%
To a considerable extent 4	17%
To a great extent 5	6%
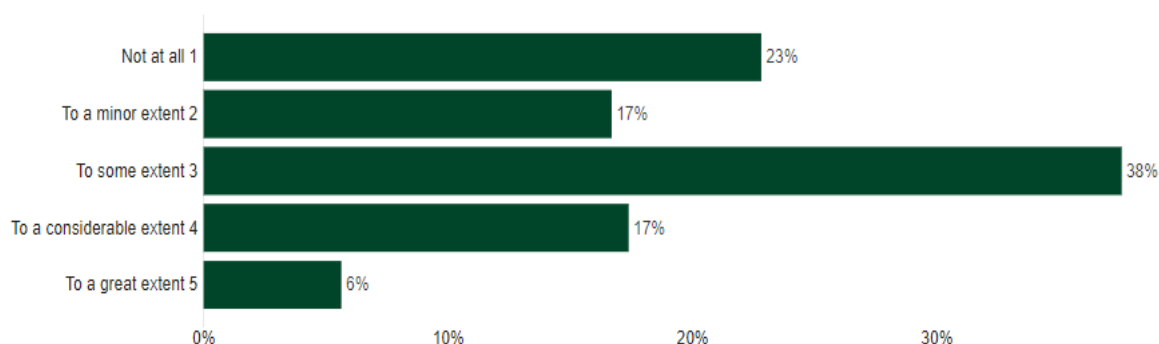
Figure 9. Teachers' views on the extent to which common level specifications enabled students to achieve to their highest possible level.

Learning Outcomes

Two main themes emerged regarding teachers' views and experiences of Learning Outcomes. Firstly, the perceived broadness of Learning Outcomes was raised by teachers, with teachers having different perspectives on this. Some viewed it as a positive, while others saw it negatively. While both emerged as a theme, more teachers across more sites raised concerns about the broadness of Learning Outcomes. These teachers found Learning Outcomes 'endless', 'vague' and were unsure to what depth they needed to be explored. For example:

> *It's kind of open-ended so that people can, you know, tailor depending on the equipment they have in their rooms, depending on certain situations, whether you visit the coast or whether you live near a mountain, whatever the case may be, but at the same time the vagueness leads to, 'when do I stop teaching a topic?' so this is a huge issue, … the old syllabus, you knew what you had to do, you knew the depth of treatment and I think that was much better* (School 4)

> *A little bit vague … and you don't know how deep you need to delve in. Some are a bit trickier than others* (Special School)

In comparison, others welcomed the freedom (and broadness) Learning Outcomes provided, as it enabled them to pursue areas of personal or student interest and respond to student's needs. For example, members of the Senior Management Team in the Special School viewed Learning Outcomes as, '*good that we have the flexibility to do as we see fit with the Learning Outcomes that are in place*', while other teachers in this context viewed the broadness as helpful, as it enabled them to, '*adapt to suit the needs of the individual students*' (Special

School). This was supported by teachers in School 9 who explained how Learning Outcomes enable them to include students taking the Level 1 or Level 2 Learning Programme within their classroom:

> *If you have a student who is doing L1P1 programme, they can still do what the whole class is doing but I can just suit the Learning Outcomes to what is written in that. But they don't feel that they are being excluded from the learning* (School 9)

Similarly, teachers in School 6 welcomed the freedom Learning Outcomes offered them to pursue different areas of interest and questioned, '*why not have 15 minutes talking about how a star is born … it's not just teaching to the exam. The new course is teaching them to love it*'.

The teacher survey indicates that in general teachers were positive about aspects of the Learning Outcomes, particularly in relation to the clarity of communication, the extent to which they are achievable and whether they were a good representation of the knowledge, skills and values within their subject (Figure 10).
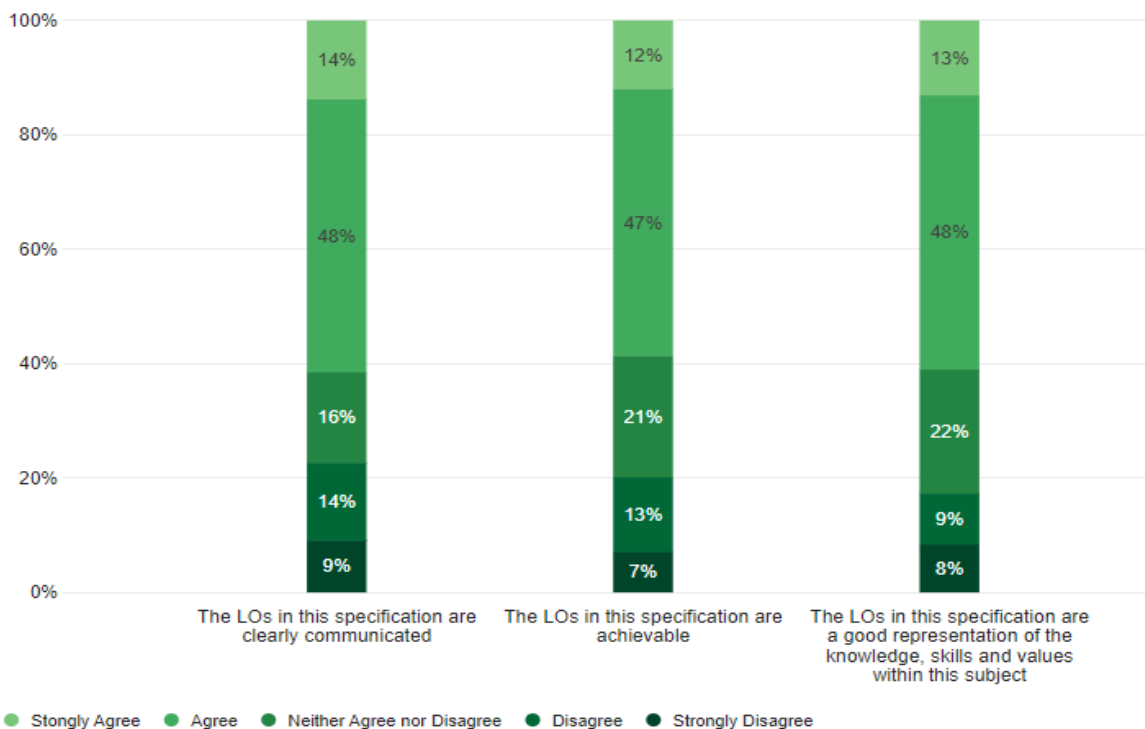
Figure 10. Teachers' views of Learning Outcomes.

Perceptions were more divided however when it came to the use of specifications to select topics to focus on and provide sufficient detail in order to select the appropriate depth of each topic, as shown in Figure 11.
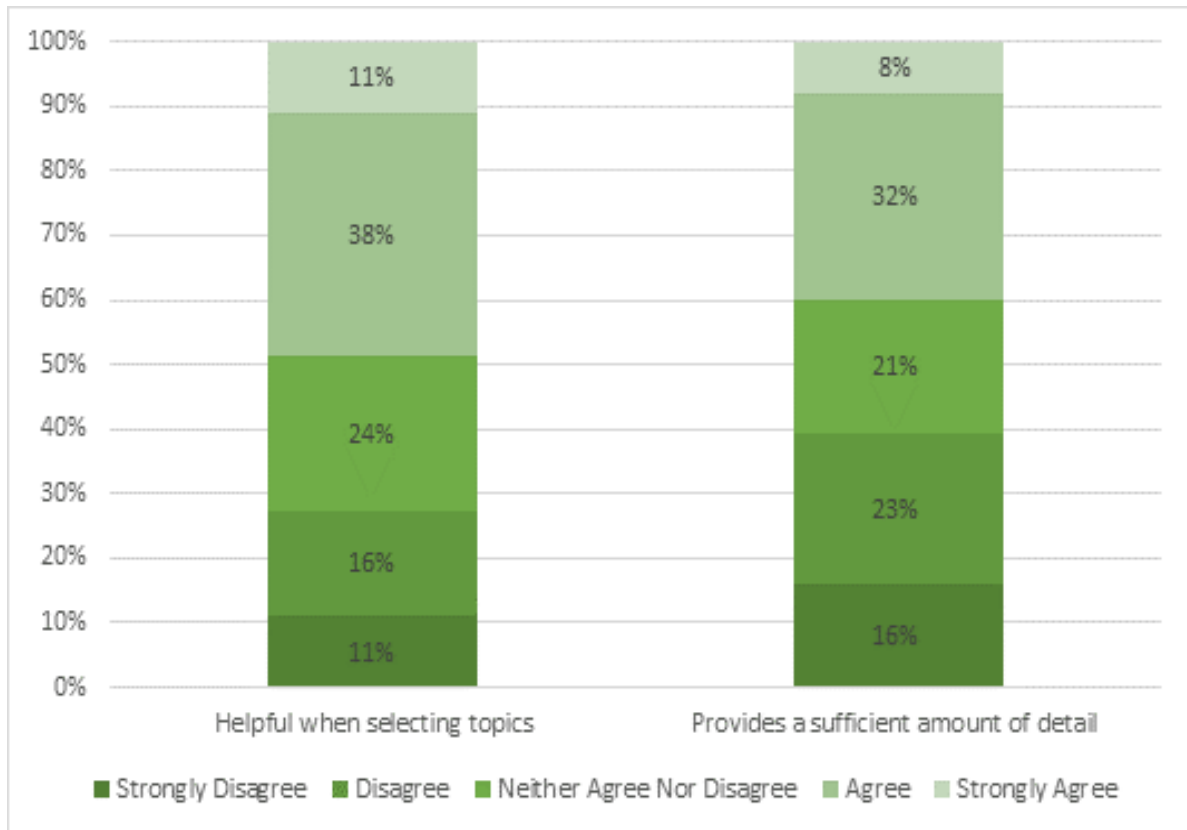
Figure 11. Teachers' views of specification guidance.

There is significant variation in perspectives in relation to the depth of each topic across subject areas. This is highlighted in Figure 12 for the subjects that included the most responses.

The specification provides a sufficient amount of detail so that you can select the appropriate depth of each topic.
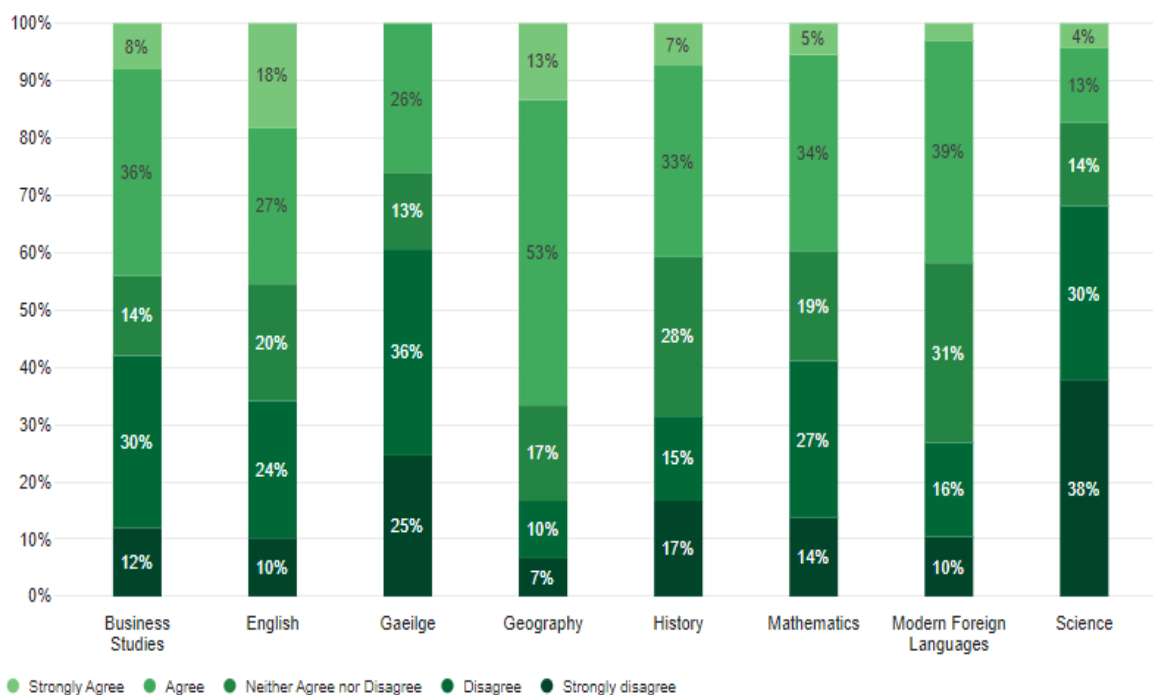
Figure 12. Subject variations in relation to perceptions about specification providing appropriate depth.

Finally, it appears as if in many of the case study contexts, textbooks, content, topics, and exam papers continue to guide aspects of teaching and learning and some teachers' engagement with Learning Outcomes. Teachers explained, for example, how '*the textbook does tend to influence the way you are teaching or the order of your teaching but there is more flow and freedom*' (School 3) and '*generally you follow the textbook. You follow the run of the textbook*' (School 9). Such a view is supported by teachers in a number of other school contexts, as reflected in the examples below:

It was overwhelming …. There is so much going on … some of the textbooks now have been great because they have linked them all. They have done a lot of the planning element for you. I found that really overwhelming (School 7)

I haven't done anything hugely different. They call it Learning Outcomes, but I will think, ok I have x covered, they can do this, this and this…when you are reading through those, they can be very aspirational, I am thinking what is the bottom line for our students. And they are Learning Outcomes: Can they do this this and this? I wouldn't

be 100% sure what the Learning Outcomes are supposed to be. I would look at the exam papers and this is what they needed and how can I get them to that (Youthreach)

The teacher survey reveals that the majority of teachers believed that the main textbook used aligned well with their specification, and that teachers used textbooks in both planning and teaching, as shown in Figure 13. This suggests that textbooks play an important role for teachers in translating the specifications into classroom practice, and that they may be used in determining the appropriate depth of each topic (Figures 11 and 12).
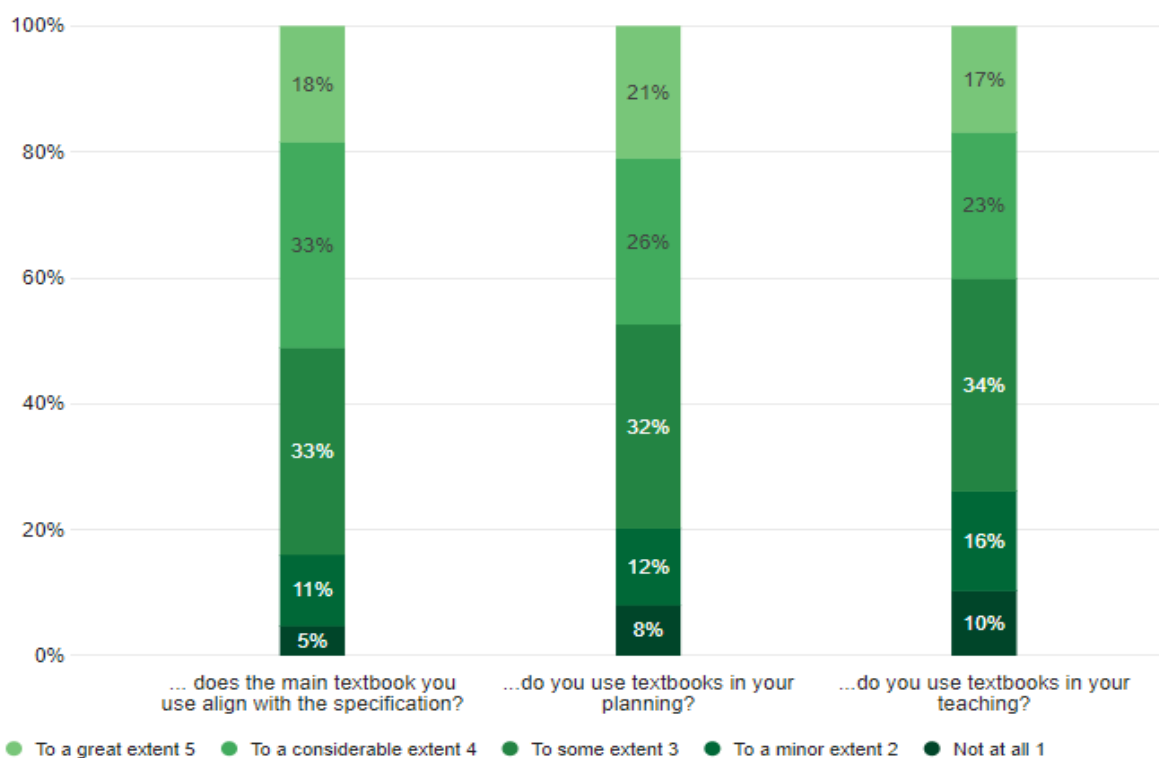
Figure 13. Teachers' views and use of textbooks.

The lack of textbooks available for the Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programme created a particular challenge for teachers in the Special School. This impacted their capacity to interpret Learning Outcomes and created additional workload developing resources, worksheets, and assessments for use in the classroom. One teacher, for example, explained how one of the 'challenges' they experienced was, *'interpreting the LO's. We don't have any textbooks here so even creating resources to children to help them learn the content'* (Special School), while a different interviewee explained that most teachers that teach on the Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes were experiencing a more demanding workload:

> *You have to make your own resources, its very time consuming …most teachers would prefer they have a textbook to follow a bit … textbook can be your back up, your go to … it keeps you kind of focused* (Special School)

Grading bands for final examinations

The main comment regarding grading bands related to the perceived broadness of the 'merit' band, with some teachers expressing concern regarding grouping students who achieved 55% with those who would achieve 70% and above. For example,

> *55-75 is a merit. Some people will get 55 and others will get 74 and I would put them into totally different categories. There is just a large margin there needs to be something in between that* (School 6)

> *Soul destroying [for higher achieving students] because they now see themselves with Johnny average who did not kill himself* (School 4)

Other less common themes related to the difficulty of achieving a distinction, the negative impact of a 'partially achieved' grade on student motivation and a perceived lack of understanding of the grading bands amongst students and parents. These were not as frequently raised as other issues and are therefore not elaborated on further. The second round of the teacher survey will include items to explore these issues further.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing, as a dimension of the Framework for Junior Cycle, wasn't raised by teachers in the majority of case study schools. A focus on Wellbeing was generally welcomed and viewed as a positive dimension of the Framework. Teachers in School 1, for example, expressed how such a focus was '*excellent … all excellent'*. Wellbeing was considered a core aspects and purpose of School 10, even prior to the introduction of Wellbeing hours as part of the Framework for Junior Cycle. However, the introduction of Wellbeing in the framework has '*formalised Wellbeing. Now we have are having conversations and planning for it'* (School 10). While the school has a core group of teachers that lead aspects of Wellbeing, all teachers are involved. Wellbeing is implemented across departments, with each department identifying what Wellbeing indicators they address through their planning. Decisions regarding approaches to Wellbeing are research-informed within School 10, drawing on the views and needs of students and parents.

Across the 12 sites, a small number of teachers noted the pressure the 400 hours of Wellbeing placed on their subject, due to a reduction in class periods per week. Often, this was perceived to be within contexts where specifications were not reduced. A teacher in School 3, for example, explained how, '*I don't have 5 periods a week now, I have 4 … because Wellbeing has come in*' (School 3). This was considered '*hugely problematic*' (School 3), particularly within contexts where teachers felt they had '*so much to cover*' (School 3). This was deemed to impact on teachers' capacity to engage fully and completely with their subject specification and student-centred pedagogical approaches, as reflected in the excerpts below:

> *Eight weeks of CBAs, and then you have students being taken out for these different things to do with Wellbeing. And that's all excellent. And it's brilliant. But we are missing time from class, and I don't know that the courses have compensated for that* (School 1)

> *The Wellbeing hours are great. It is just the extent of them. Whatever about needing them, it is cutting down everything else. They are getting all that stuff in other subjects. I really think it is curtailing what we can do as well* (School 2)

> *I feel I was a better teacher in the old system because of time and no other reason. I feel I can't spend the class broadening my pedagogical approach because I have to get this topic covered in this short time … in the classroom I'm not doing as much [as in the past]* (Teacher 5)

The teacher survey found that, on balance, teachers believed that Wellbeing supported student development, and they indicated that the Wellbeing guidelines and indicators were applied in their schools (Figure 14). Figure 15 points to a diversity in the mode of provision of PE, CSPE, SPHE which constitutes a significant element of Wellbeing provision with a substantial number of schools using the old Certificate syllabi for these three subjects. The "Don't know" option indicates teachers who were not aware of how these short courses were planned. Removing this category from the analysis indicates that the percentages of respondents using the old syllabi are 43% (CSPE and SPHE) and 45% (PE).

Wellbeing: To what extent....
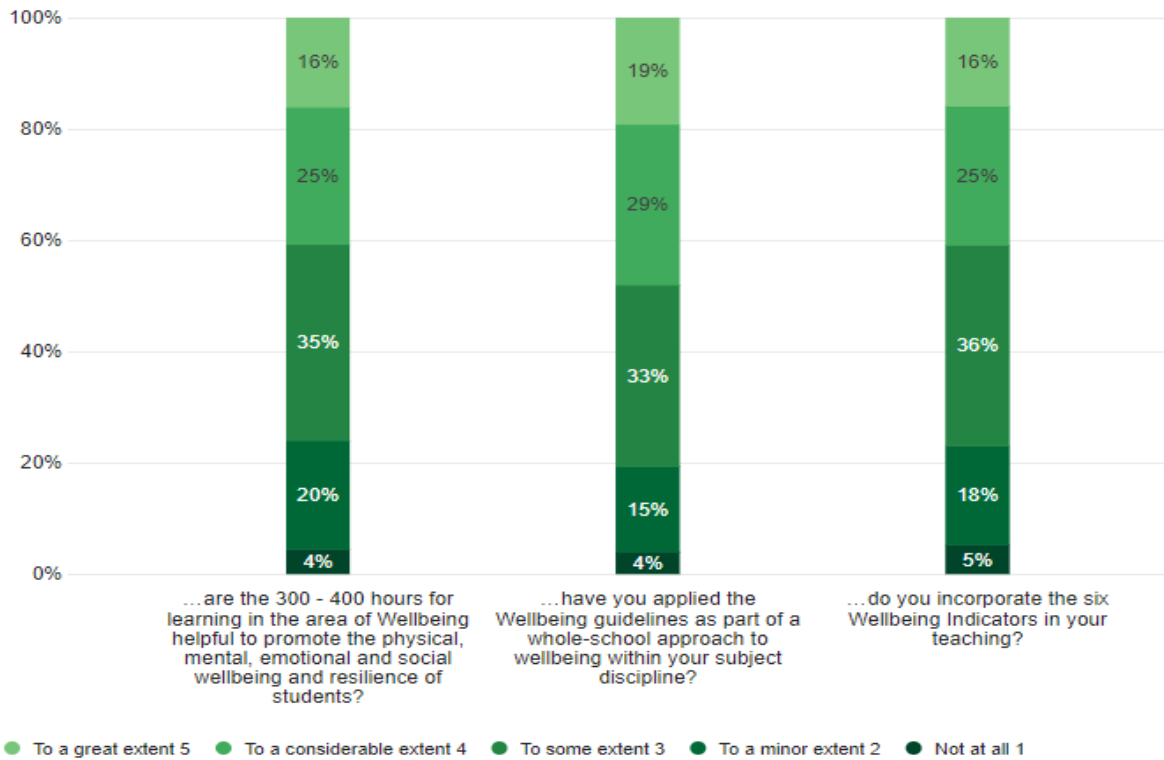
Figure 14. Teachers' views of Wellbeing and its enactment in schools.

Please indicate the option your school has used in planning for wellbeing with respect to the following subject:
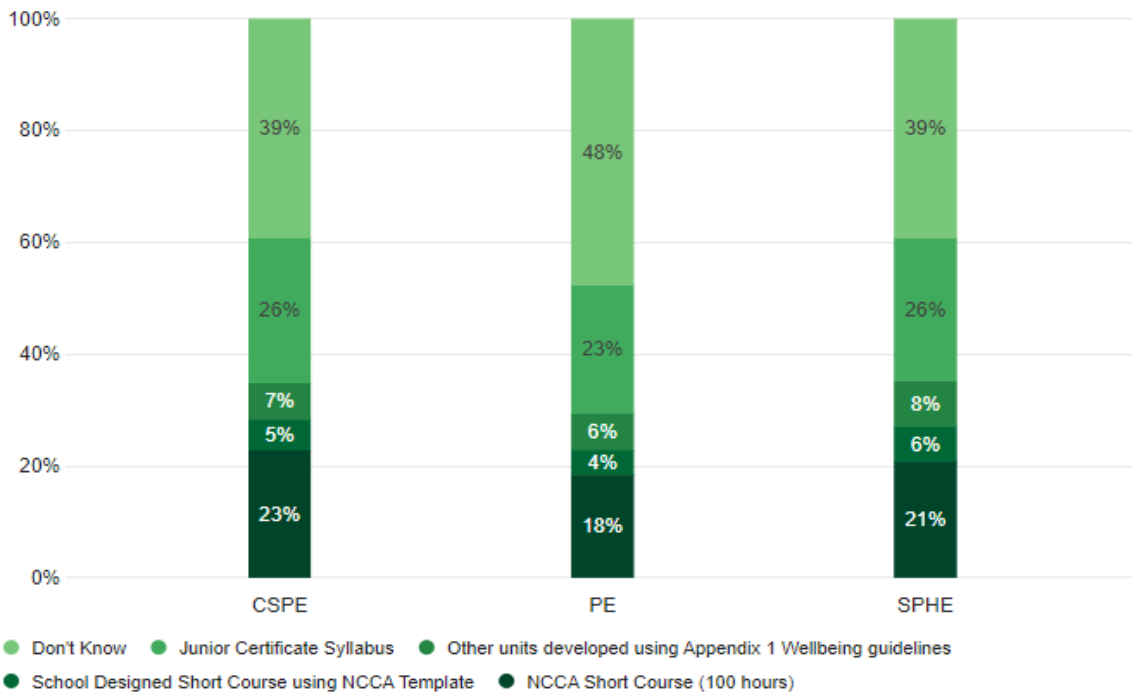
Figure 15. Provision of CSPE, PE and SPHE.

Short Courses

While school-designed Short Courses did not emerge as a major theme from the teacher interviews in the case study schools, 66% of teacher survey respondents completed items in this area (Figure 16). 34% of these respondents work in schools that have designed their own Short Courses. The basis for this design was predominantly teacher interest (45%) or expertise but 33% were based on students' interest and 8% on a local issue or context. Other examples of the basis for Short Course design included Wellbeing, student needs (management decision) and a mixture of teacher and student interests.
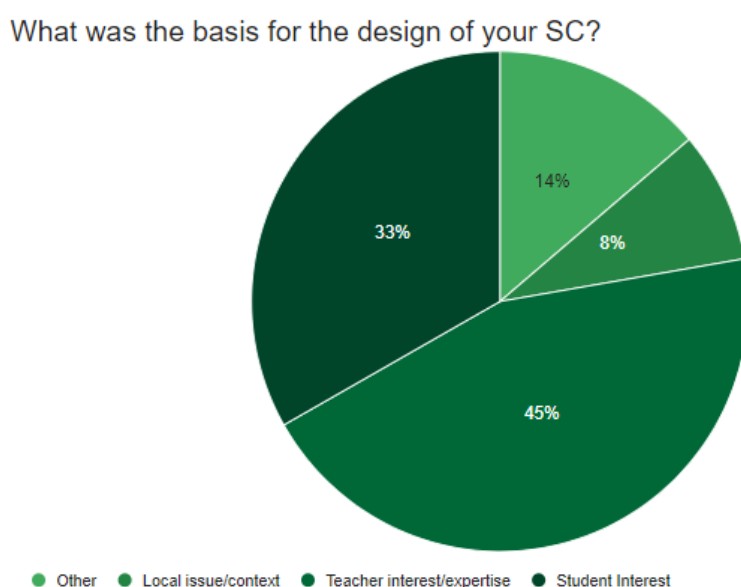
Figure 16. Basis for short course design.

The balance of teachers enjoyed the experience of designing Short Courses and they believed that a great majority of students found the associated learning meaningful and relevant. The majority of teachers used the NCCA Short Course assessment guidelines, part of the Junior cycle short course specification template (Figure 17).

To what extent...
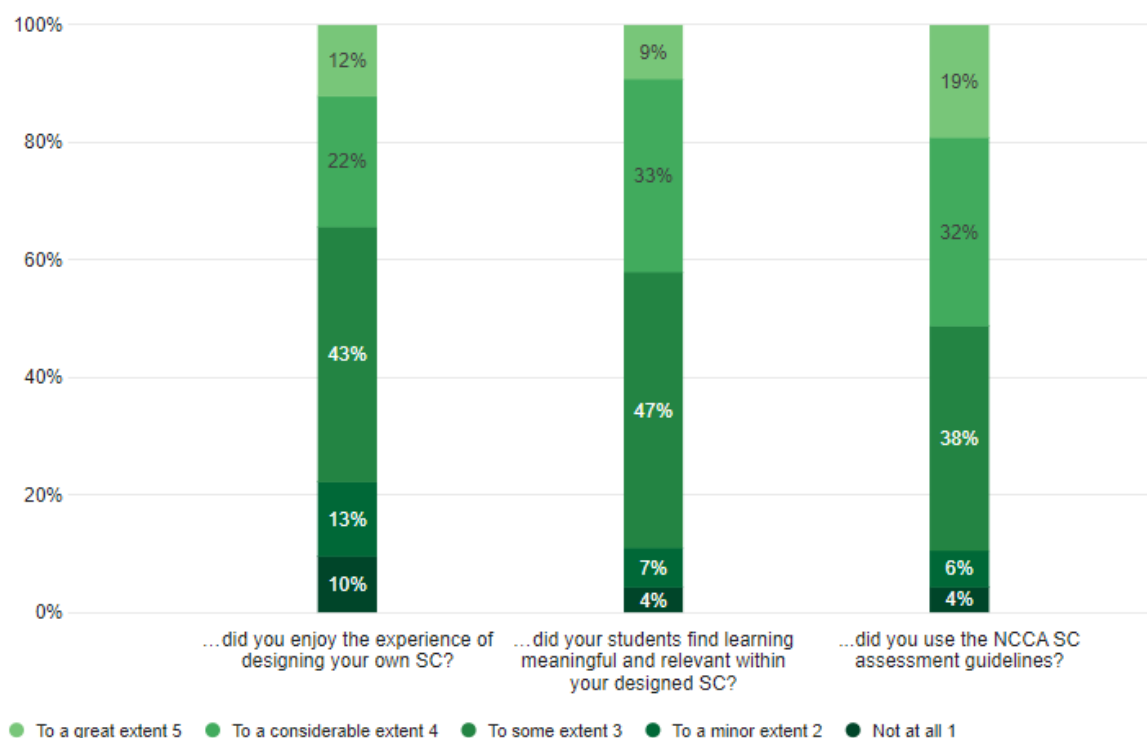
Figure 17. School-designed short course perspectives.

Views on the Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes

Five school sites offered the Framework for Junior Cycle at Level 1 and 2 (School 4, 6, 7, 10, Special School).

Teachers who taught in schools that offered the Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes were largely positive towards these programmes and welcomed their inclusion within the framework. As noted earlier in this section, many teachers saw the changes as aiming to support greater inclusion of all students, including those taking the Level 1 or Level 2 Learning Programmes, within the Framework for Junior Cycle. Teachers welcomed the opportunity CBAs provided to include students on the Level 2 Learning Programme within learning experiences involving students on the Level 3 programme. Teachers in the Special School welcomed the range of evidence they can provide to show students learning in the Priority Learning Units (PLUs) in the Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes. Teachers can provide '*photographic and visual evidence*' (Special School) and '*lots of recording*' (Special School), with another teacher welcoming '*the flexibility of that*' (Special School).

Concerns, where they existed, tended to focus on teachers understanding of Level 1 & 2 Learning Programmes, integration of students taking the Level 1 & 2 Learning Programmes into Level 3 classes, as well as links and progression for students on the Level 1 or 2 Learning Programmes. Schools experienced these differently and while there wasn't consistency across schools in this regard, the main concerns are outlined below:

- **Level of teacher understanding:** some SEN co-ordinators questioned the extent to which mainstream teachers understood the Level 2 Learning Programme and the data that needed to be collected to show evidence of learning: '*Not every teacher was up on the level 2 … it's just getting all teachers on board. Just making them realise that if they have level 2 students in the class, they are teaching level 2 and level 3 … I found it was loads of work on me because they did not have the training. It may have been touched on in a cluster day but just the idea of how a lot of the level 2 Learning Outcomes, you can hit on them in your class and collecting evidence for the child at the end*' (School 7)

- **Progression routes:** some teachers questioned where students, taking a Level 2 Learning Programme, can and should progress to once they have finished the Level 2 Learning Programme. Teacher in School 10, for example, felt that '*there doesn't seem to be an avenue for Level 2 learners once they finish the Junior Cycle. Do they go to TY and to LCA, which is a Level 4, so they are jumping 2 levels. There doesn't tend to be any continuity for Level 2 learners*' (School 10)

- **Support with assessment:** Teachers in the Special School noted how they develop their own assessments for the Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes, with some calling for greater support in this regard. Suggested supports related to formal assessments the teacher could use in their practice and further Continuous Professional Development (CPD) supports. For example: *It's me creating my own assessment, it would be nice to have access to formal assessments … more training and guidance on assessing students' work … I would, for myself, welcome more formal CPD* (Special School).

Supports and Barriers to Enacting the Changes

An aspect of the teacher interview explored teachers' views and experiences regarding what supported them to enact the changes, and what barriers hindered this enactment. A range of differing supports and barriers emerged across the case study schools.

Continuous Professional Development

Teachers indicated that they engaged with or participated in many professional development supports as detailed in Figure 18. It is evident that the majority of teachers engaged with JCT support to at least some extent and the majority to a great extent. NCCA and State Examination Committee (SEC) materials were also widely consulted.
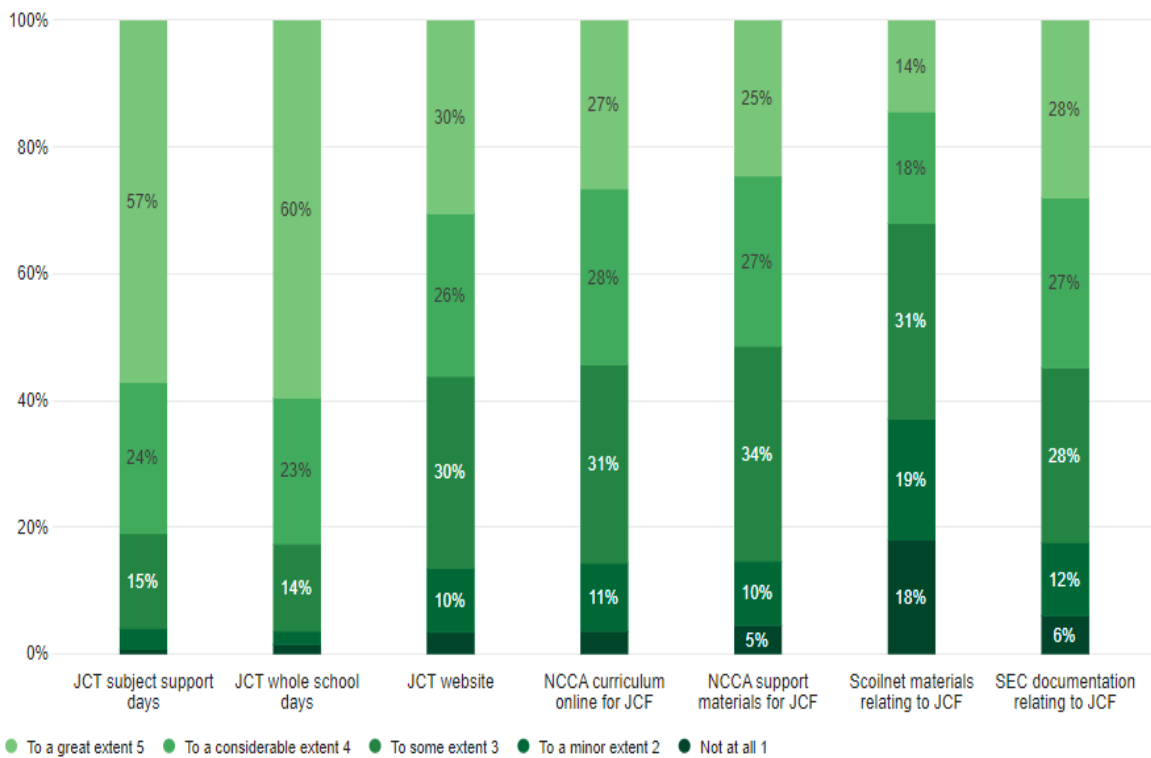
Figure 18. Teachers' engagement with professional development supports.

Teachers in the case study sites had differing experiences of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and how effective they found this provision in supporting them to enact the changes. Three main positive dimensions and approaches to CPD emerged from the data.

Firstly, teachers welcomed the opportunity to share and discuss practice with other teachers either within their school or with other schools. Teachers in School 7, for example, felt that

'*cluster days were great'.* Similarly, teachers in School 5 explained how it's helpful to, '*talk with teachers in other schools'.* The extracts below portray the benefits of teachers speaking and learning from each other:

> *It's talking to everyone else ... seeing what other people are doing. It's that interaction. It's that sharing cause people don't know if they are on the right track or not. There is stuff so broad that people don't know if they should cover this or not…when you get talking to people, you are like 'oh we are right' or 'we are wrong'…when you are stuck with the same people every day it is nice when you get out and hear other people* (School 2)

> *We get to see a little bit more of what other teachers are doing in their space, their curriculum, their role in the school and that's nice to see because that improves everyone's knowledge across the board* (School 10)

Teachers in some DEIS schools and within the Youthreach setting called for schools to be grouped with similar schools in cluster days as they sometimes felt that the schools they were grouped with had very different experiences, issues and student cohorts. This meant, from their perspective, that issues or discussions weren't always relatable. This was reflected in School 10, for example:

> *We were in with schools who were maybe at the higher end. They were talking about students who could come in, log into the computer, get up his OneDrive with no problem. I might be going in and the student mightn't be able to write, and you are trying to get them to get something down on a poster or a PowerPoint … what I would say is maybe DEIS schools, or bands together or schools at a different level, inner city schools or whatever* (School 10)

Similarly, within the Youthreach settings, some teachers felt that the schools they engaged with on cluster days were very different and therefore, '*you weren't comparing like with like'* (Youthreach). This resulted in situations where teachers had '*a different reality'* to those in the centre (Youthreach).

Secondly, teachers welcomed CPD that provided resources and practical examples. Teachers also found online resources available through the JCT website or through social media supportive. Having a direct contact with members of JCT was a helpful resource for some, for example, '*I have her [subject lead in JCT] number at this stage. I can text her if I am trying out something'* (School 2). Having a teacher in the school who was an associate with JCT was

regarded as a support. This was *'a great help'*, as 'if we had any questions, we could go to them' (School 1). These teachers would support with, '*lunch time meetings, meetings after school ...* [they] *would have been available and would have come in for mini clinics*' (School 1). In some instance, this person was perceived as a positive advocate for the changes within the school.

Thirdly, teachers found subject specific CPD and engagement with Subject Associations helpful for their professional development. For example, a teacher in School 7 explained how Subject Associations supported them to make sense of Learning Outcomes: '*The Learning Outcomes, you have to try and unbox them and find out what they mean. Subject associations were really helpful for what is or isn't on the course'*. Others found subject specific CPD, offered by JCT, helpful and more focused than whole school days:

> *Subject specific training days were really helpful … meeting the other [subject] teachers, getting down to the nitty gritty of how we were going to make this work in the classroom … some samples of work you might do, that was actually useful* (School 3)

Finally, some found CPD that occurred within the school context, either provided by the JCT or by the school itself, helpful.

The teacher survey indicates that subject specific CPD provided by the JCT was considered to support practical approaches for teaching, assessment and associated planning coherent with specifications to at least some extent. Opportunities for professional collaboration and judgement were provided and some support was provided to establish collaborative practices in clusters/regions. This involved some engagement with school contexts and there were some changes and developments in teachers' understandings of their subjects (see Figure 19).

To what extent did the subject-specific CPD provided by the JCT...
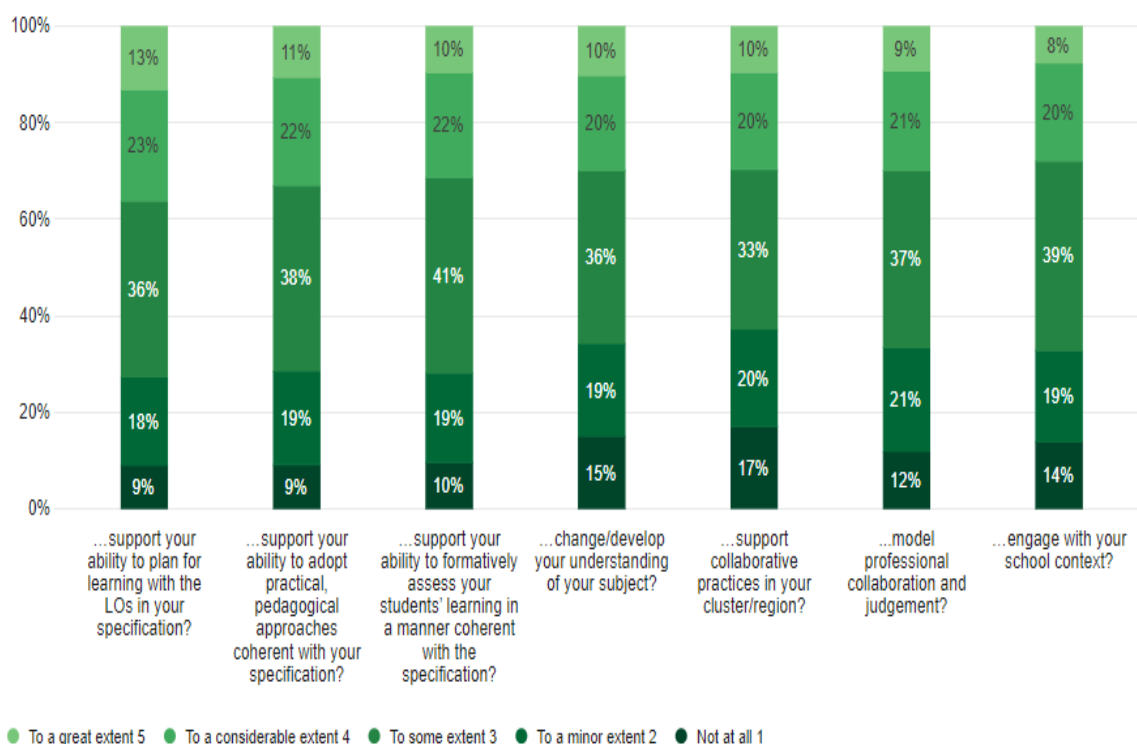
Figure 19. Teachers' views on subject specific CPD provision.

Whole-school CPD provided by the JCT supported understanding of the framework and modelled practice and professional collaboration in the context of teachers' schools at least to some extent (Figure 20).

To what extent did the Whole School CPD provided by the JCT...
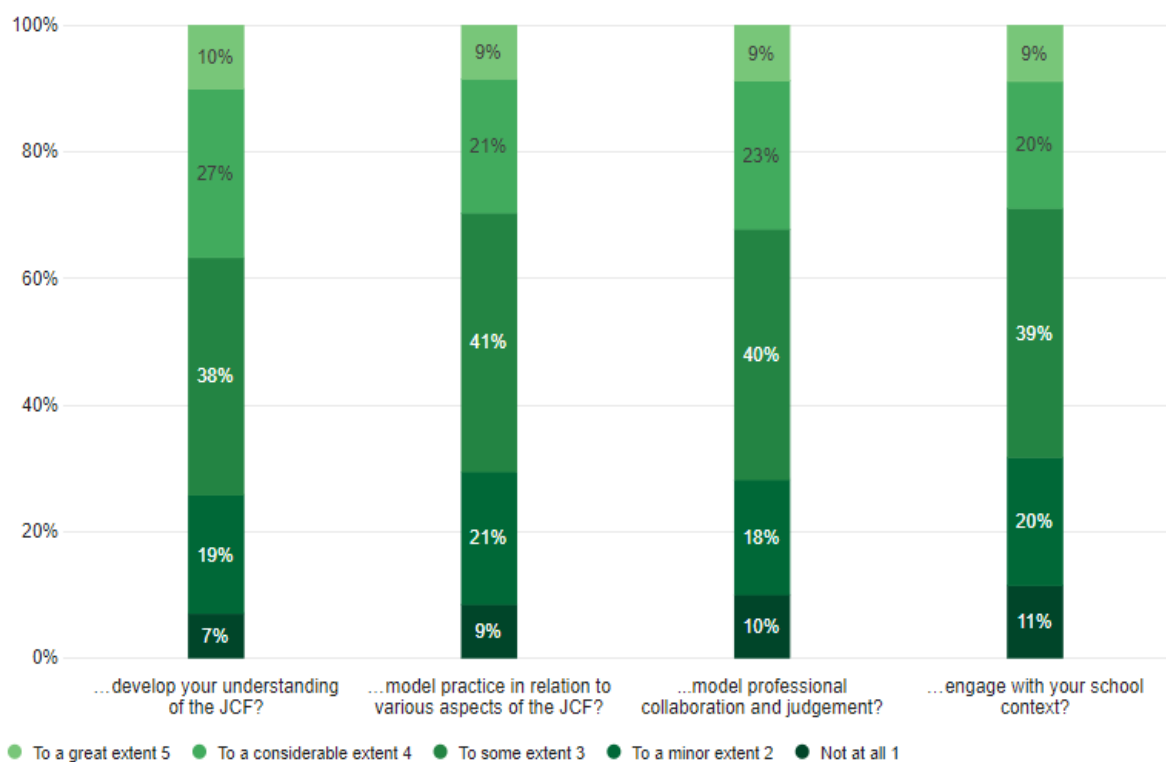
Figure 20. Teachers' views on whole-school CPD.

Overall, the CPD provided by JCT was considered to strongly emphasise individual responsibility for professional development and promote professional dialogue and sharing of experiences. This supported some changes in practice and professional autonomy and agency (Figure 21).

Overall, to what extent did the CPD provided by the JCT…
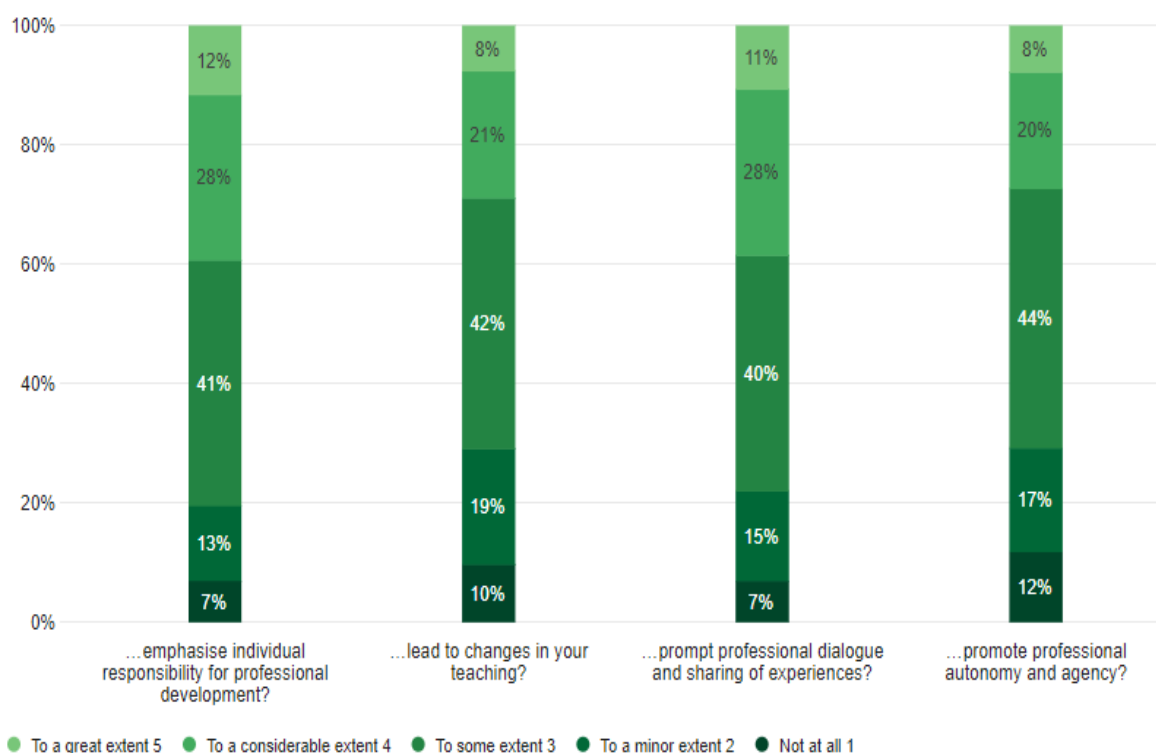
Figure 21. Teachers' overall views on CPD provided by the JCT.

Three main critiques of CPD provision emerged from the case study data and are, at times, supported by the teacher survey data.

Firstly, teachers raised concerns regarding issues of clarity and focus of the CPD. This theme included a number of issues. Some felt that CPD sessions could, at times, lack a clear focus. Others felt that, '*the sands were shifting … the foundations weren't rock solid'* (School 1) in the early stages, as the purpose and the specifics of the changes altered. This impacted on teachers' understanding and clarity of the Framework. Many raised concerns regarding facilitators perceived inability to answer specific questions during CPD sessions. This frequently related to assessment issues. Teachers in School 6, for example, felt that teachers were, '*not allowed to ask any questions'* during CPD sessions (School 6), while teachers in School 7 felt that facilitators of CPD sessions, '*were unfamiliar with the course and we had to just go in and see what we could do ourselves … it was frustrating at the start. We were there to be trained and they did not have the answers'* (School 7).

This was reflected in the teacher survey where teachers indicated that some of their questions and concerns were responded to, but a substantial number indicated that this occurred only to a minor extent (22%) or not at all (15%) (Figure 22).

To what extent did the CPD provided by the JCT respond to your questions and concerns?

Response	Percentage
Not at all 1	15%
To a minor extent 2	22%
To some extent 3	36%
To a considerable extent 4	20%
To a great extent 5	8%
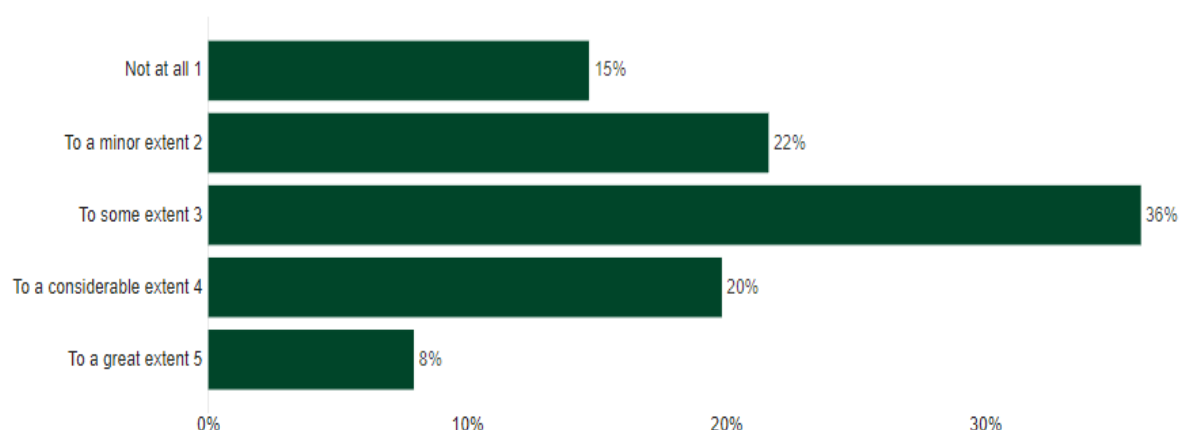
Figure 22. Teachers' views on the responsiveness of the CPD provided.

Secondly, teachers raised concerns regarding the provision of examples and resources (students' work, sample plans, examination papers) to support their understanding and development of the changes. Two related issues emerged here. Some felt sufficient examples/resources weren't available, especially in the early stages of introducing the changes. The lack of sample papers in the early years of the change was a particular concern for some as '*we did not know what the changes would be like*' (School 7). Others felt that examples of students' work were at too high a standard and did not reflect the reality of these teachers' classrooms. Teachers in the Youthreach setting, for example, felt that the examples '*could have gone to leaving certificate*' (Youthreach) and the students in the examples '*could nearly have read the news on RTE*' (Youthreach).

Thirdly, some identified gaps in CPD provision and felt there were areas that warranted further focus in CPD. For example, some called for specific CPD for SEN teachers and co-ordinators or for CPD on the Level 2 Learning Programme for all teachers. The SEN co-ordinator in School 10, for example, called for cluster days for SEN teachers, as this teacher had to go on cluster days for their original subject, which they no longer teach, '*there wasn't an option on a cluster day as an SEN teacher … I would have to go to a [subject] cluster day but I don't teach the subject anymore*'. While the SEN co-ordinator in School 7 sought

additional CPD for all teachers in relation to the Level 2 Learning Programme, so that all teachers in the school were aware of what is entailed in the programme, with this teacher asking, *'is it dealt with a subject level? Should all teachers have full training on Level 2?'*.

Teachers in the Special School raised a particular concern in relation to this subtheme. Some teachers in this setting called for more CPD for newly appointed teachers of Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes, particularly in relation to CBAs, and for opportunities to see examples of good practice on recording evidence of learning.

Some of the teachers' concerns raised about the CPD provision appear to relate to contextual and temporal matters beyond the control of CPD providers.

Supports

Four additional supports, beyond CPD, emerged from the data.

Firstly, teachers identified supportive leadership as a key dimension to enable them to enact the changes. Leaders who provided any additional supports teachers required, or who created a climate of trust, openness and care were noted by many. Some leaders ensured teachers realised that the changes were new to everyone, ensured teachers knew that they weren't alone in the process and did not feel afraid of making mistakes. For example:

> *Leadership and management were very understanding. I never felt there was pressure to nail this from day one. We were told 'look this is new, everyone in the whole country is going through this, everyone is in the same position, we will get there'* (School 9).

The teacher survey indicates that management were supportive of the Framework for Junior Cycle (Figure 23) and placed a significant focus on the use of teacher professional time to facilitate engagement with the Framework for Junior Cycle. This includes some discussion of the vision and mission of the Framework (Figure 24).

Overall reflect on how supportive you and others are of the JCF
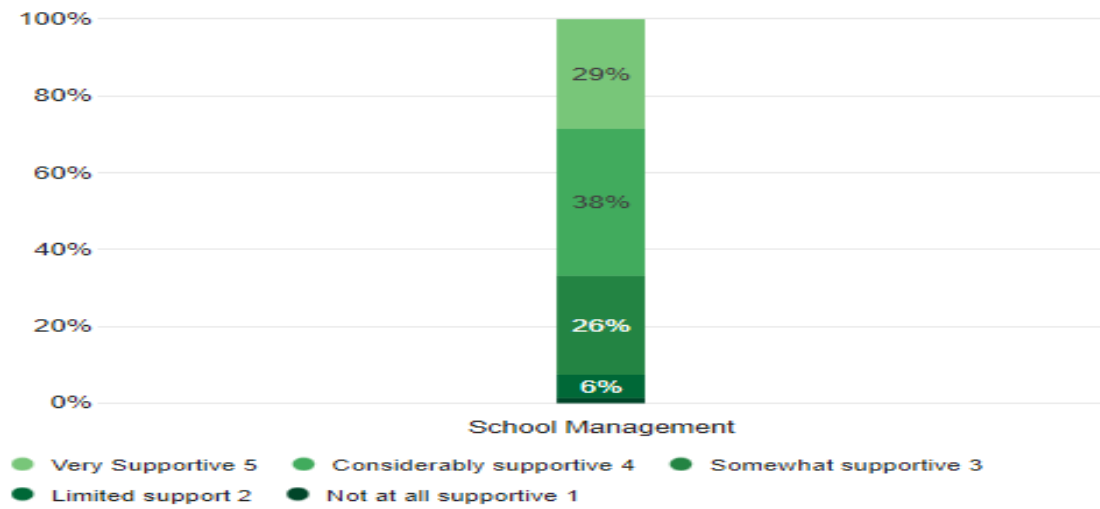
Figure 23. Teachers' views of school management support for the Framework for Junior Cycle

Since the introduction of the JCF to what extent...
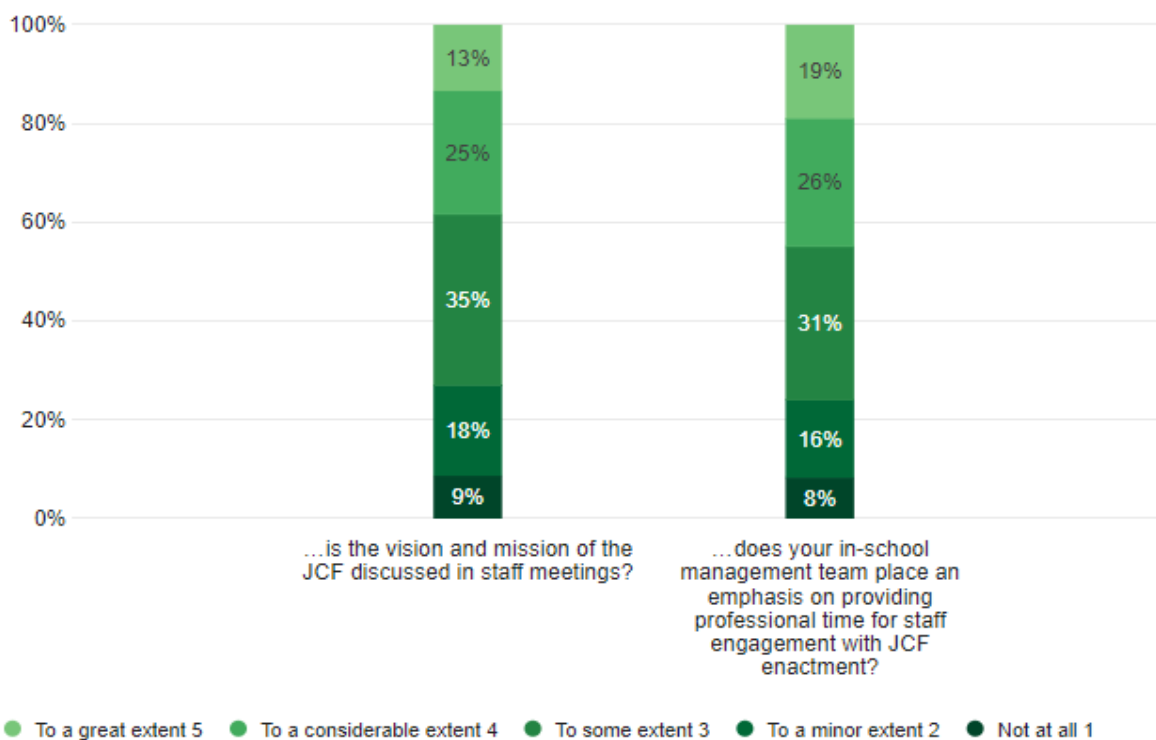
Figure 24. Teachers' views of school management support for professional engagement.

Secondly, teachers felt that collaborative relationships with other teachers, where they supported each other and shared their learning, was a key factor in enabling teachers to enact and understand the changes. In some contexts, a practice of team teaching was helpful in this regard. Teachers in the Youthreach setting, for example, felt they had, '*a community of practice here*', with staff, '*all supporting each other*'.

This is also reflected in the teacher survey where teachers routinely consulted with others in a manner that helped develop a shared understanding of the Framework. This often resulted in professional collaboration with other teachers which supported classroom initiatives (Figure 25).

Figure 25. Teachers' views of professional collaboration.

Thirdly, teachers in some contexts noted how access to, and investment in, supportive digital technologies, often in the form of laptops, enabled them to enact the changes, particularly CBAs. Access to these resources, specifically when technology was portable and could be used within a classroom setting, was an important enabler of change. In School 3, for example, the '*trolley full of laptops that you can bring to the classroom if you are doing a CBA*' (School 3), was considered particularly helpful. Similarly, the use of Chrome books in School 1 enabled

teachers and students to develop related skills from first year, supporting CBA-related work in later years:

> *From day 1 in first year students are able to work with digital media and are very creative as well, creating presentations, doing projects … from first years and right up … without the Chrome books, I don't think we would have as much success in the CBAs*

Some schools did not initially have access to such digital resources but recently purchased and gained access to laptops. A teacher in School 10, for example, explained how access to digital technologies was initially perceived as a barrier to enacting the changes as, in the early stages of implementation, there was '*only 1 computer room'* with all teachers '*trying to use it'*. The introduction of a 'Joey Trolley' was deemed supportive, particularly in terms of the implementations of CBAs:

> *It's amazing, because you can go on and book it for whatever time period you want … when it comes to CBAs, because you might have 2 CBAs going on at the one-time … a lot of the kids may not have access [to technology] at home. Being able to provide that for them … It was a massive addition to the school* (School 10)

Contexts that did not have these resources frequently identified access to digital technologies as a barrier, which is discussed in the next section.

Lastly, teacher (and student) buy-in and openness to the changes was viewed as a support by some. Others, as can be seen below, viewed this as a barrier. Teachers felt that a progressive and open school and teacher culture, which welcomed changes, supported their engagement and enactment of the changes. Teachers felt that '*believing in aspects of the framework' (School 9)* supported enactment. This was particularly true in contexts where schools had, prior to the launch of the Framework for Junior Cycle, given priority to Wellbeing, Literacy and Numeracy. While teachers in school 3, for example, felt that having, '*a very willing staff that embrace change' was* an important support.

Barriers to change

Teachers identified three main barriers to change.

Time was perceived as a core barrier to change. Teachers' capacity to find time to engage fully with the changes, to plan, to develop resources was a core concern. The increased workload on teachers was also noted and is discussed below in the *Impact* section of the report. Finding

time to plan for the new changes and to meet colleagues to advance changes was seen as an impediment. The workload associated with changes to planning and feedback added to this. The following teacher's comment reflects this change in focus:

> *The level of paperwork … there's so much preparation and planning and so much evaluation. It's cut down the teaching time, there are so many boxes to tick … it's just made it so labour-intensive that I just feel we're losing out on the middle bit which is the teaching and learning element because we're spending so much time in planning and evaluation* (School 4)

Time spent developing resources was a particular concern for teachers in the Special School. The fact that *'special schools don't get the hour of planning time'* available to mainstream schools was a concern for some, particularly within a context where there is *'no textbook'* available to teachers. This resulted in a situation where teachers spent significant time creating resources to support teaching and learning, *'I create a lot of worksheets myself … getting ideas for resources, time. Getting the time to go through the curriculum and see what they are looking for'*.

Secondly, teachers in some contexts felt that a lack of resources and supportive technology within the school impacted on their capacity to enact the changes. Booking and getting access to overcrowded computer rooms, lack of computers or lack of sufficient supportive resource material was a concern for some. Within such contexts, students did not always have access to computers or related resources at home:

> *Students don't have access to computers at home … they are relying on that hour or two a week to the computer room … students end up doing CBAs on their phones* (School 6)

> *There are three computer rooms in this school. They are constantly booked because the LCAs are using them all the time. So, you don't have access to technology, and you need computers to do the CBAs* (School 6)

> *We need more books, more access to libraries, better facilities* (School 7)

Thirdly, the amount of change introduced, the language of the changes and understanding what the changes were about was a barrier for some. Some felt that the level of new terminology was challenging and experienced by some as, *'a bit of a bombardment … and a*

whole new vocabulary that was merely a synonym for what we were already doing' (School 2).

Despite these reported barriers and challenges, it is noteworthy that the teacher survey revealed that teachers were, on the whole, very satisfied with their job focused on Junior Cycle and believed that they were making a significant educational difference in the lives of their students. They were also able to support colleagues who felt strain in relation to their Junior Cycle work, Figure 26.
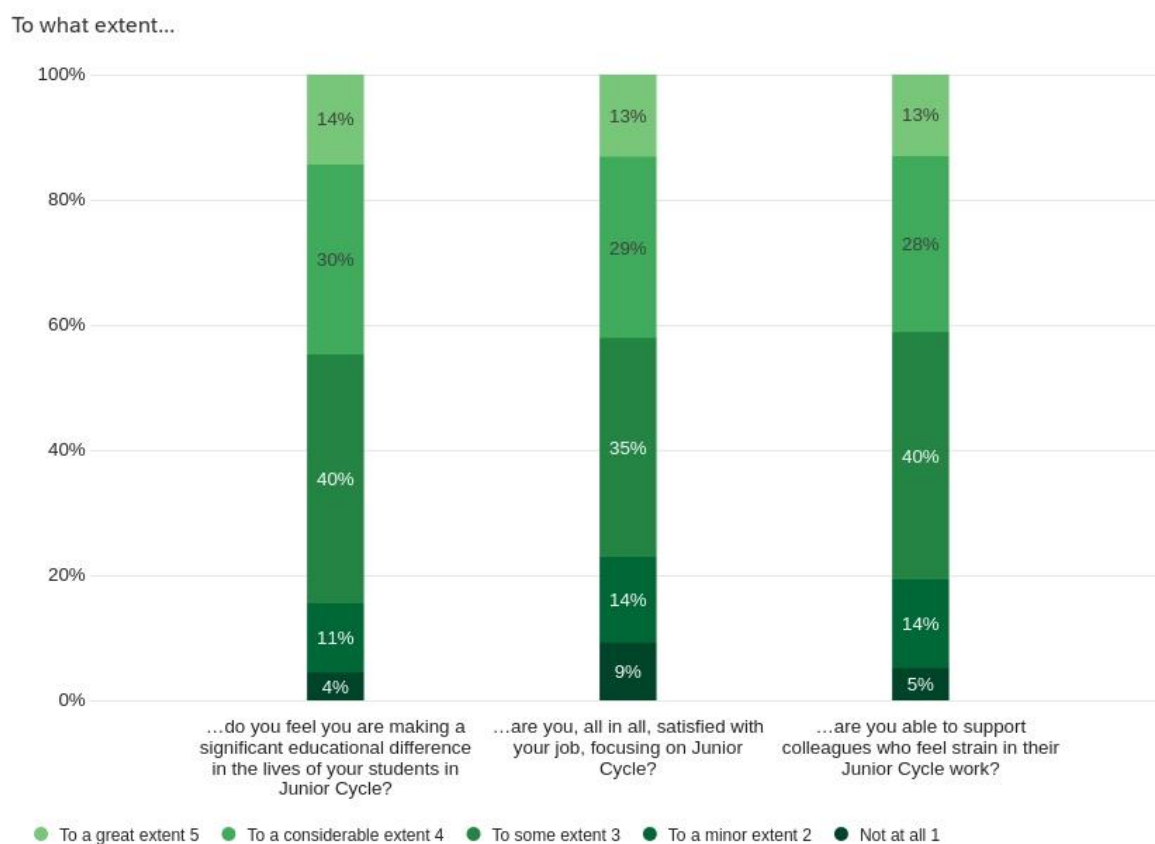
Figure 26. Overall teacher satisfaction with Junior Cycle.

Impact of the Changes

Impact on practice

Across the schools, teachers identified ways in which the changes impacted on their practice. Two main themes emerged. Firstly, teachers felt that they now implement more student-centred and student-led pedagogical approaches and a wider range of assessments methods.

Secondly, teachers felt that they had more freedom to be creative and introduce new, engaging, and fun activities or topics within their classroom:

> *Students definitely do more talking than me. It's definitely more about them than it is about me, and I think that's excellent* (School 1)

> *You have to let go, you let the students figure it out. They ask you, what do I do? And I say no. I go to the extent of walking away and they are like 'ha?'. I say, 'keep going'* (School 2)

> *A wider scope on the forms of assessment we use … offering choice at assessment time … the same assessment but give students the opportunity to have ownership* (School 9)

Teacher survey respondents recognised that the Framework for Junior Cycle provided room for innovation in teaching and that the way they taught has changed to at least some extent (Figure 27). That said, teachers identified that there was insufficient time for creative decision-making.
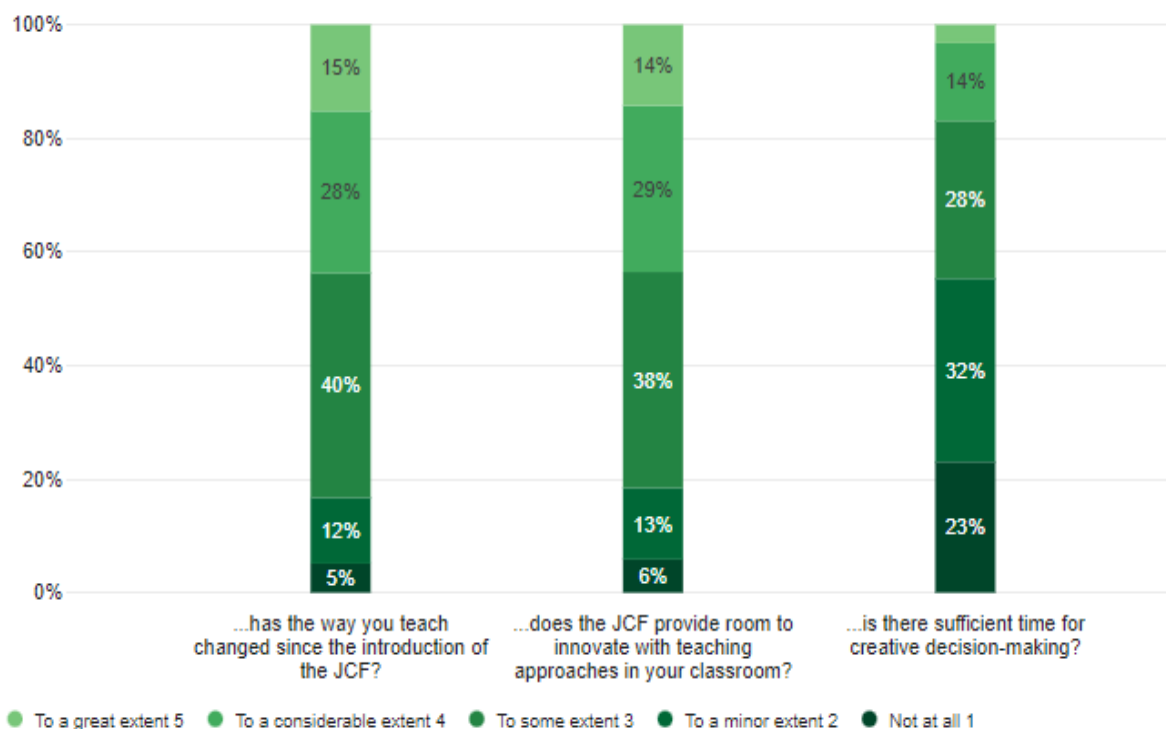
Figure 27. Teacher decision-making.

Some teachers felt that the changes had minimum impact on their practice. These teachers felt that they were either already engaging in such practices, they lacked the time to implement such changes into their practice or the continued presence of the state examination impacted on their capacity in this regard. There was a feeling in School 5, for example, that teachers engaged in a process of '*retrofitting' (School 5) w*ith only minor changes occurring to teachers practice, as further reflected below:

> *We simply cannot get the course covered. I know they will say it's not a course, it's about skills and Learning Outcomes. They still have to know information, like it or lump it … But I can't get through the thing … we have resources and don't have the time to use them* (School 2)

> *It's timing. Where am I going to get the time to fit it all in?...The way the course has gone now, I've really narrowed it down because it has to be reflective of the exam paper…because at the end of the day they're still doing an exam which is 90% in June so you have to prepare them for it. So when they say it not all about the exam. Well actually it is. You can have the elements and the groupwork and all in between that but I do very little of that I'm not going to lie to you. In third year I haven't time for that. I just don't have time* (School 5)

There was a feeling within the Youthreach centre that they were already engaging in or adopting many of the principles and approaches the Framework introduced. As a result, it was believed that the changes did not have a '*major impact'* on practice (Youthreach). Similarly, interviewees in the Youthreach setting felt that they would have always collaborated and would always have prioritised Wellbeing. As above, some felt that minimum changes occurred due to the continued existence of a summative exam, which they felt had changed little within the framework, for example, '*the changes did make us think, but has anything actually changed? Is it just lip service? The written exam hasn't changed. If they want them to be creative, but they give them no choice in the exam'* (Youthreach).

Impact on learning

Teachers identified three main (related) ways in which students' learning was impacted by the changes. Firstly, teachers felt that students had greater voice, responsibility, and ownership of their learning with students, '*owning their own learning a lot more'* (School 7). This was deemed to impact on students' level of confidence.

On balance, teachers believed that there was some space in Junior Cycle specifications for students to make significant decisions about teaching and learning (Figure 28). They also believed that students could take charge of their own learning and that significant opportunities were provided for students to demonstrate their learning. Teachers were less positive about the extent to which the Framework supported students in developing resilience.
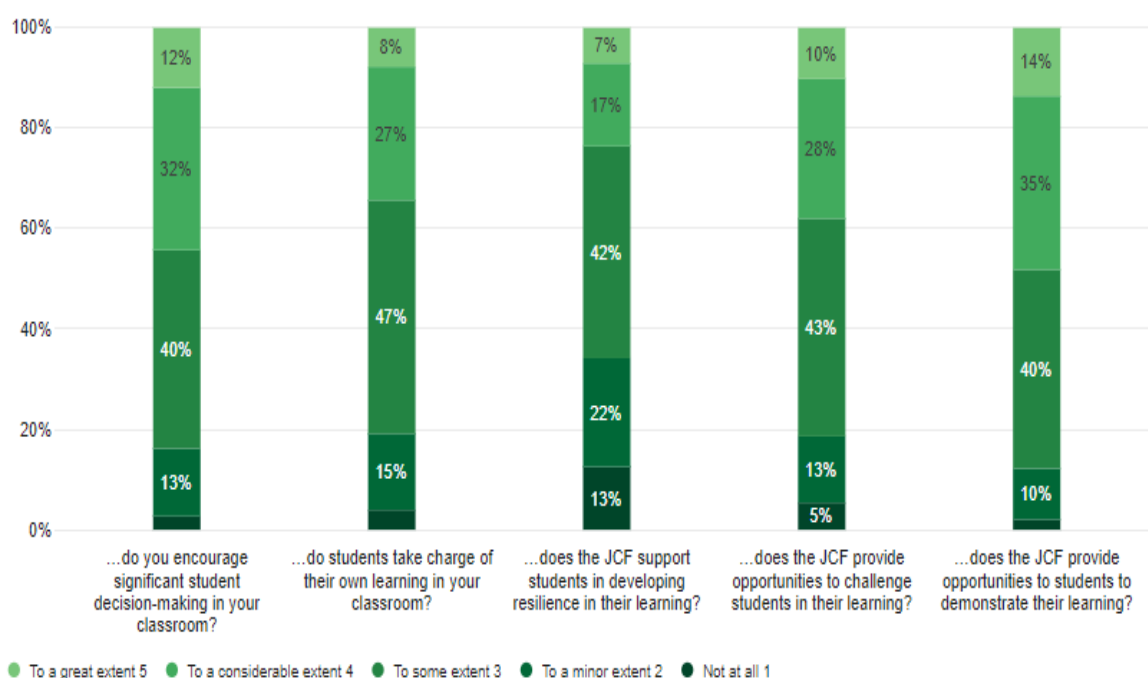
Figure 28. Student decision-making and responsibilities - Teachers' perspectives.

Secondly, students were deemed to learn and interact more with their peers. Finally, classrooms were considered to be more fun and engaging for students. These perspectives are reflected in the excerpts below:

> *I feel like the kids are more confident in their opinions, they can see that it's OK to share their opinions … they have developed into students that are used to giving their opinion* (School 1)

> *There's loads more going on in the classroom. I think I have had to rejig the way I think about learning as well because I think I'm coming from a place where we all learned things off by rote which was awful. I don't want to see that repeated but in relation to the Junior Cycle I feel I have to understand it a little bit more but they're learning loads.*

> *I'm really happy in that respect. I feel like they're really engaged in the class.* (School 5)

This is reflected in the emphasis survey respondents placed in their teaching on a range of student activities (Figure 29). It is interesting to note that there were a significant number of items that relate to peer learning and interaction. Teachers were also clearly placing an emphasis on supporting student decision-making and reflection. Relatively speaking there was less of an emphasis on students "developing good relationships and dealing with conflict" and "finding ways of dealing with setbacks and difficulties" which may relate to difficulties supporting student resilience.
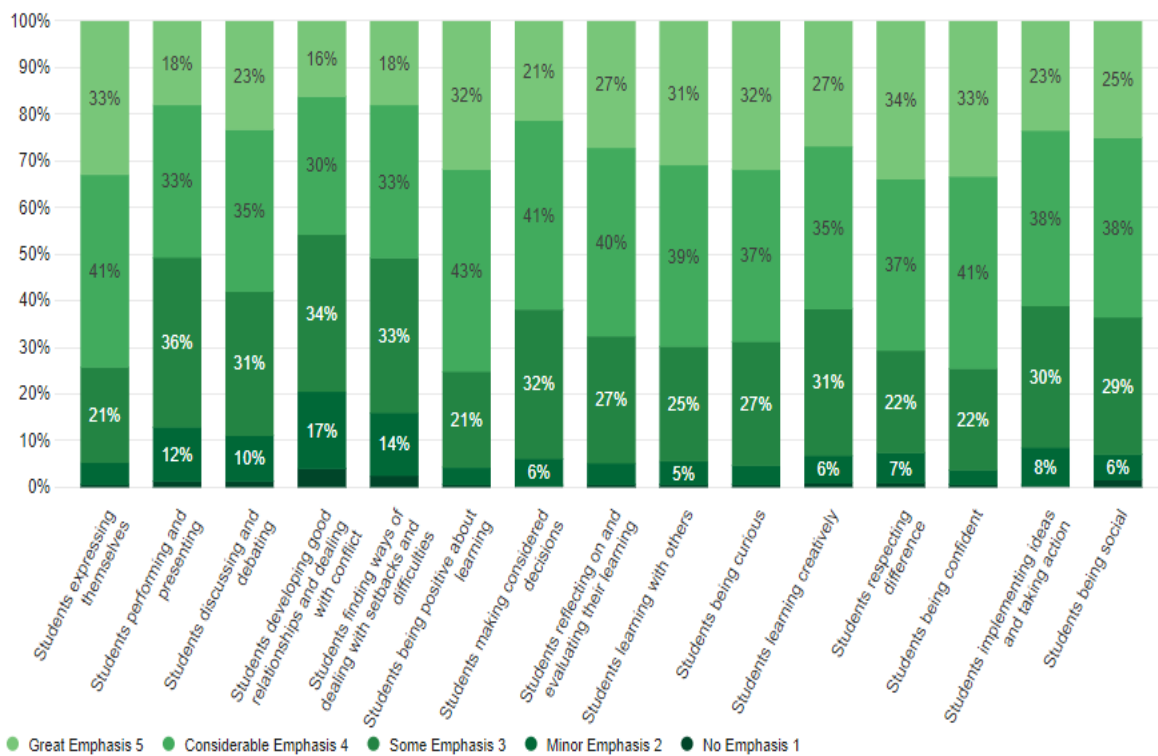
Figure 29. Aspects emphasised in teaching – Teachers' perspectives.

Impact on workload

A number of teachers spoke about the increased workload they have experienced as a result of the changes. While there was an acknowledgement that the Covid pandemic and related school closures impacted here, some teachers felt that, *'all of our workload has increased … with the allocation of planning time … nominal 40 mins a week … it was exceptionally more work than it was before'* (School 3). Some felt, or hoped, that this increased workload would

occur with any new change, and would decrease as and when they became more familiar with the Framework and had created the resources they needed to teach the Framework:

> *I definitely think workload is increasing and what I'm hoping is that it's an initial increase until we build the infrastructure … and we can adapt and refine it as we go* (School 8)

> *I did find it quite stressful, and naturally so as you are moving to a new curriculum … I had to completely rewrite my schemes of work, for example. And every time you did that, there was something else you needed to add* (School 9)

The teacher survey invited teachers to comment on changes in their time management and workload (Figure 30). This reflects the qualitative data and indicates perceptions of significant increases in workload.

Indicate the impact of the introduction of the JCF curriculum on your workload in the following areas:
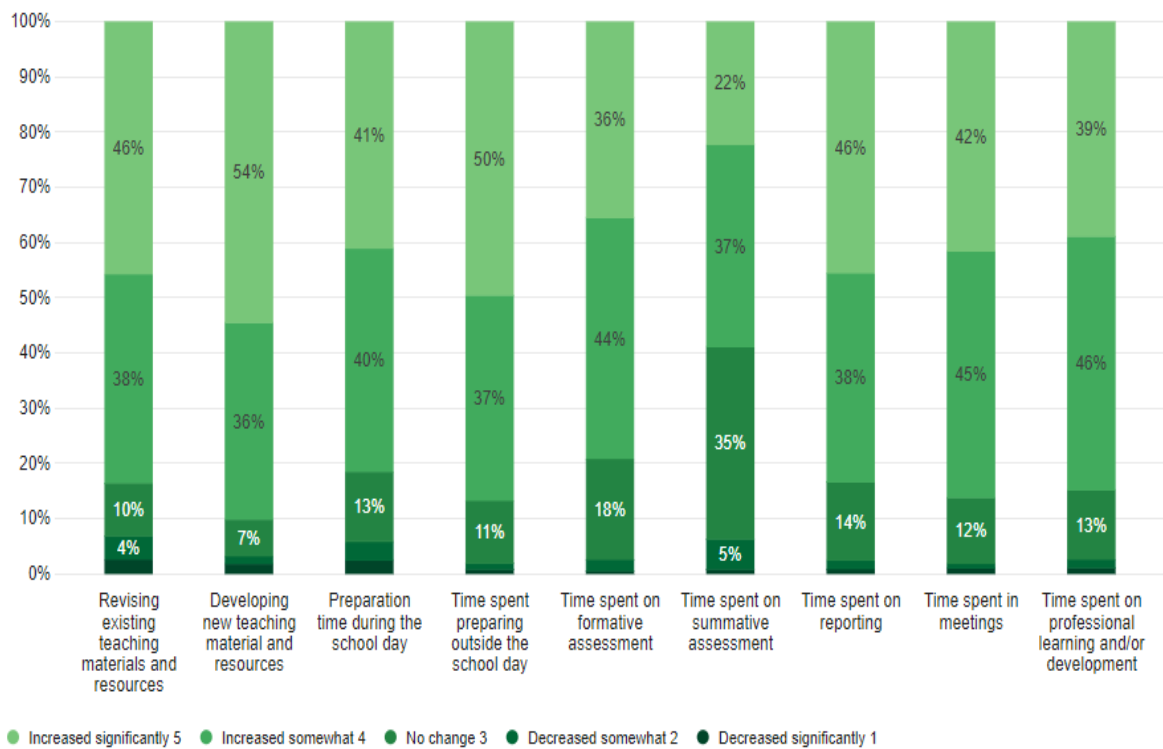
Figure 30. Changes in teacher workload following the Framework for Junior Cycle implementation.

Impact on planning

Planning was rarely an area teachers raised when discussing the impact of the changes. Those that did felt that the changes enabled them to make more links within and between subjects:

My planning has changed. It has pushed me to think more and differently about the course. Putting things together differently. I am thinking differently, I am coming up with new ideas (Youthreach)

[The changes enable me to] mention other subjects…I feel there is far more integration of other subjects into my subject (School 3)

The Learning Outcomes and some exam questions are fostering deeper thinking and making connections in a way that they did not before (School 5)

As discussed in more detail in the section on '*the impact of Covid'* below, some felt that they hadn't fully come to terms with aspects of planning yet, particularly due to the disruption caused by the pandemic and related school closures, for example, '*five years into it or more and some are only just starting planning … we would be further along if Covid did not happen'* (School 1).

Others felt that the changes had minimum impact on their planning, as reflected below:

It is basically the same syllabus. There hasn't been big changes … Its just worded differently, with a different structure. It's not that it's a completely new course. It's a different lay out, sequence of events or topics. It's still very similar to what we would have been doing before (School 10)

The textbook, as discussed previously, appears to play a dominant role in how teachers plan and structure their lessons.

Impact on teacher relationships

Most teachers felt that the changes increased their level of collaboration with other teachers, creating more positive and supportive relationships with their colleagues:

It makes me more aware of what others are doing in their classrooms. I might see a CBA that another teacher has done and think 'I would never have thought of that. I might put that in my bank for going forward. It's good for sharing work like that … Also, in the SLARS, hearing teachers explain why they have given a particular descriptor, opens your mind to how other colleagues are working (School 9)

Links between Junior and Senior Cycle

While differing views emerged in this regard, teachers in the majority of schools felt that a gap existed between the Junior and Senior Cycle. These teachers felt that the workload, expectations of students and the amount of writing in the Leaving Certificate examination

resulted in the Junior and Senior Cycle being, '*polls apart, two different worlds'* (School 10). The Framework for Junior Cycle was deemed to allow space for student-centred pedagogical approaches, whereas this wasn't perceived to be the case at Senior Cycle. For example:

> *One is lovely, and nice and based on skills. The other is based on content and ability. They don't match. I'm not saying either is right or wrong. But I don't think the culture that exists in Ireland around the Leaving Certificate is going to go anywhere … therefore I think it's unfair, therefore, that we are not preparing the students mentally well enough for what they are walking into in 5th year, and we talk about wellbeing. It's like I want to make Junior Cycle harder, and that is not what I mean but there has to be some connection between the two because otherwise you are into anxiety and stress levels in fifth year because 'I can't write 6 pages, how did this happen. I only ever had to write 6 lines* (School 10)

> *The Leaving Cert is really, really structured. You have the pressure of the points system. I can't be airy fairy, going off on little outings cause its time. Definitely for Leaving cert, the curriculum is massive. Its huge. You have to put your head down and tear into it. You don't have the time to be creative. It's nice that you can be creative in the Junior Cycle but that is restricted then when you come to Leaving Cert* (Youthreach)

While a number of teachers raised concerns around a potential gap between Junior and Senior Cycle, differing views existed on this issue and may reflect differences at subject level. Other teachers, for example, felt that such a gap always existed, for example, '*there always was a big jump' (*School 9) or some wondered whether any existing gaps were, '*Covid gaps rather than Junior Cycle gaps'* (School 2, SMT). Others felt that the focus on Key Skills in the Framework for Junior Cycle supported students at Senior Cycle:

> *Students are much better evaluators … students are much better at discussion questions and the evaluation questions. You can see an improvement in them as a result of the new Junior Cycle* (School 1)

Teachers in the Special School raised concerns regarding a potential gap between the Framework for Junior Cycle and the Senior Cycle programme offered in this context: Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). The school offers the Framework for Junior Cycle at Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3, as well as QQI modules and awards for those in senior years. Many teachers felt that the two programmes did not align with each other, deeming them to be '*totally different programmes'* (Special School). Some teachers felt that students doing L2LP's would find '*it a big jump'* (Special School) to engage with learning on the QQI modules and

courses. Teachers also felt that the Framework for Junior Cycle, or aspects of the Framework such as Wellbeing, should be continued on to the senior level while others felt that students would benefit from having the opportunity to engage in a Transition Year programme. These differing views are reflected below:

> *The Framework for Junior Cycle would be much better than what is currently available at Senior Cycle* (Special School)

> *[students] doing the L2LP … would benefit from a fourth year … they would really, really benefit from an extra year, a differentiated TY programme would be helpful* (Special School)

The teacher survey reflects this in that, while teachers felt that the Framework supported transition from primary to post-primary schools, many indicated that it provided poor support for transition to Senior Cycle, Figure 31.
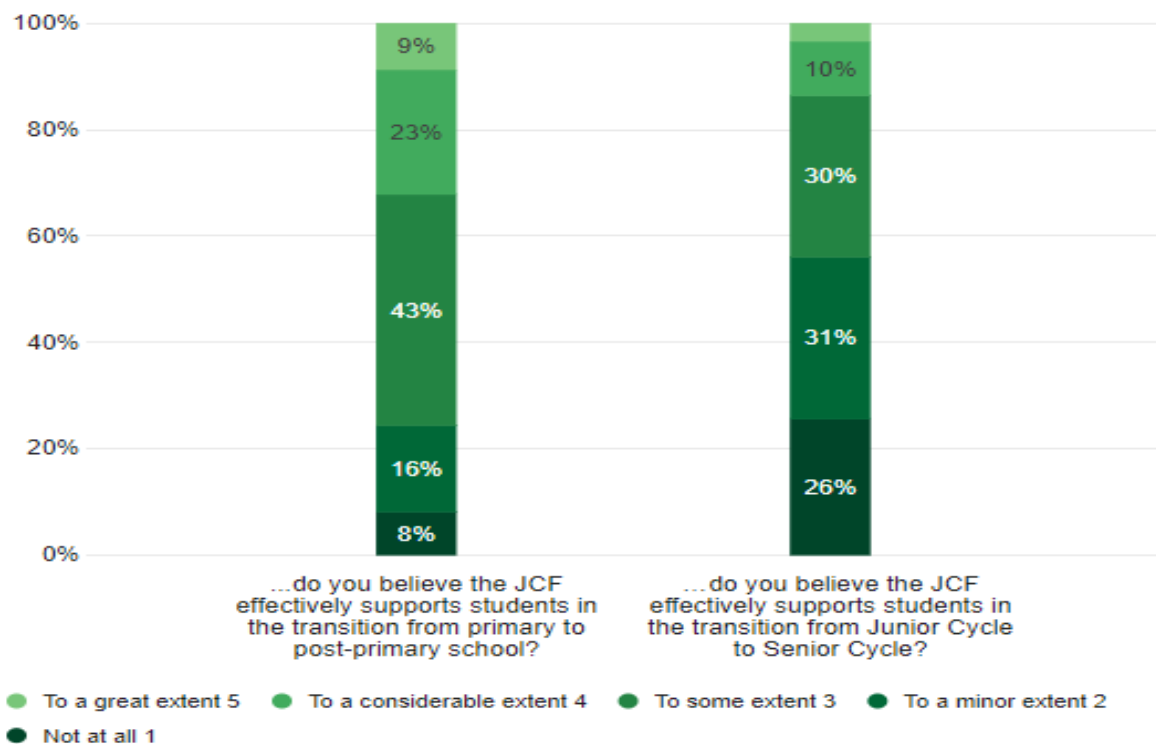
Figure 31. Teachers' views of transitions.

Impact of Covid

The Covid pandemic and related school closures impacted on teachers and students in five main ways. Firstly, teachers explained how group work, as well as trips and engagement with

the local community, were suspended during this period. As a result, teachers had to revert to more teacher led approaches: '*you kind of went back to basics of keeping them busy in class* (Special School) and, *'very little interaction, very little group work and pair work'* (School 5).

Secondly, some felt that online teaching and learning did not work for their students, with students finding it difficult to connect and stay engaged in an online forum, for example, '*It was very difficult. It was obviously down to the nature of the students we have … some students can give feedback, others can't … you can't say to the students go off and do that yourself. 90% of them aren't independent workers. They then had the worries of the world coming down on top of them'* (Special School).

Thirdly, teachers felt that the pandemic and school closures reduced and slowed their own engagement and understanding of the Framework for Junior Cycle:

> *We have taken 3 steps forward but 2 steps back with Covid. This isn't a time when the department of Education and the NCCA can walk away. This book isn't closed, by any means … you are probably going back to year 2 again. JCT have a job, that can't be wound down now. The defibrillator needs to be taken out on this* (School 6)

> *It's made the journey (of change) longer and it made getting to the place of confidence further away … this is my first year having CBA1 and CBA2 … it slowed it down a little bit. That can be frustrating as well cause I'm like 'really, I still haven't seen a state paper* (School 9)

The fact that some subjects hadn't completed a full cycle, including the State Examination, impacted here as some teachers felt that once they had completed all aspects of the Framework and had seen a final State examination paper, they could more clearly understand what the changes were about and what their views were on them. Teachers in the Youthreach setting, for example, felt that it was, 'very *hard to judge what is happening … we still haven't done a CBA2, we still haven't had an exam so it's very difficult to judge anything*' (Youthreach).

Fourthly, teachers feared that students had extensive gaps in their knowledge as a result of school closures, for example, *'we are a bit behind because of Covid. I do hope the gaps I see coming through are Covid gaps and not Junior Cycle gaps'* (School 2).

Finally, some felt that students lacked motivation to study and learn as a result of the State examinations being cancelled, *'students don't want to make efforts. People need a shakeup'* (School 6).

The views expressed by teachers in the case study schools was supported by open responses to the teacher surveys, as evidenced in the following teacher response:

> *The Covid period has caused huge damage in schools. Students have learned not to communicate, lost the practise of pair and group work, become increasingly introverted, lost confidence etc. The whole Covid experience has created a detachment. Students and teachers have experienced loss and tragedy during the pandemic. People are numb post-pandemic. Staffrooms have been split up, relationships damaged. It will take time to repair but it will repair. Schools will recover but it will take another academic year of normality to get back to where we were (teacher survey response)*

Part 1 summary: Teacher perspectives

The majority of teachers believed there was a need for curricular change at Junior Cycle. Four main purposes associated with the Framework for Junior Cycle were identified. This included making schools and classrooms more inclusive; an increased focus on skills development; a decreased emphasis on summative examinations; and adopting more student-centred pedagogical approaches.

When asked to comment on the Framework for Junior Cycle teachers tended to talk about issues of direct relevance and concern for them rather than commenting on the broad breadth of changes set out in the Framework for Junior Cycle. Areas discussed frequently included the CBAs, SLARS, the Assessment Task, common level specifications, Learning Outcomes and Wellbeing.

Teachers believed CBAs supported student engagement, enjoyment, motivation and skills development. Teachers perceived the percentages allocated from CBAs to students overall grade in state examinations to be too low. They also raised concerns about the number of CBAs students had to complete in a short period of time and the time taken for their completion. Difficulties associated with CBAs were viewed to contribute to both student stress and difficulties in management of the work. On balance, the teacher data suggests that CBAs were perceived as being somewhat distinct from normal classroom teaching.

Teachers raised concerns about the clarity and shared understanding of the descriptors associated with the CBA evaluation and the capacity of students to produce work that would meet the (perceived) high expectations associated with the higher-level descriptors, with potential negative effects on student motivation and wellbeing. The Assessment Task was, on balance, not considered a valid measurement of student effort and learning.

Teachers valued Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings where they shared examples of work and engaged in professional discussions to support judgement. On balance, these SLAR meetings were seen to promote consistency and fairness in judgement. Concerns remained however about the national standardisation of teacher assessment between schools.

Assessment of the common level specifications emerged as a concern as the common level exam papers were perceived as too challenging for some students and too easy for others. Teachers noted that some students lacked the literacy level required to engage fully with exam questions, particularly related to comprehension questions and the limited space to provide answers. The exam was perceived to offer limited choice to students and concerns were raised about the capacity of a single two-hour exam to offer sufficient scope for students to demonstrate their learning.

The majority of teachers perceived Learning Outcomes (LOs) to be clearly communicated, achievable and a good representation of the knowledge, skills and values within each subject. Views were more mixed in relation to the broadness of LOs. While some teachers appreciated the freedom and choice LOs afforded, others expressed concern about the depth to which they needed to be explored. Tentative data also indicates that there is significant variation in this regard across subjects.

The grading bands associated with the terminal exam were perceived to be too broad with respect to the 'merit' band. Some concerns were raised about the difficulty in securing a 'distinction'.

The introduction of Wellbeing was welcomed as formally enabling conversations and planning although this was seen to have reduced class periods in other subjects, which was a concern for some. The majority of teachers indicated that they were applying the Wellbeing indicators in teaching and noted that the Wellbeing guidelines were being used in a whole-school approach. These teachers perceived that Wellbeing was contributing to student development.

Some schools designed their own Short Courses (SCs) based on teacher interest/expertise, student interests and local contexts. On the whole, these teachers found the experience of designing SCs enjoyable.

The inclusion of Level 1 and 2 Learning Programmes was welcomed, in particular in relation to the range of ways student learning can be demonstrated through Priority Learning Units (PLUs). Some concerns were expressed about teachers' understanding of the Level 2 Learning Programmes, progression routes, the lack of suitable textbooks and support for developing suitable forms of assessment.

Widespread engagement with Professional Development (PD) support was evident from teacher survey responses, especially with the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT). Opportunities to share and discuss practice were welcomed, with some concerns expressed about the composition of school clusters. Resources and practical examples, including online resources, were considered very supportive, although they were noted as lacking at the start of the change. Subject Associations were also highlighted as supportive, especially in making sense of LOs and being subject-focused. Concerns were raised about the clarity of focus of some aspects of PD and views were mixed in relation to the extent to which the PD responded to teachers' questions and concerns, particularly in the early stages of the change. Some gaps were highlighted in particular in relation to PD for all teachers on Level 1 and 2 Learning Programmes.

School leadership was identified as a key dimension for enactment and school management were perceived to be supportive of the Framework, discussing it at staff meetings and supporting teacher use of professional time. Collaborative relationships between teachers were highlighted as a significant support. Investment in digital technologies has been a useful enabler for the Framework.

Teachers reported three main barriers to change: time, resources and the scale of the changes. Teachers' capacity to find time to engage fully with the changes, to plan, to develop resources was a core concern. Teachers in some schools felt that a lack of resources and supportive digital technology within the school impacted on their capacity to enact the changes. The amount of change introduced, the language of the changes and understanding of what the changes were about were a barrier for some. Despite barriers, the majority of teachers reported satisfaction with their work in Junior Cycle, believed they were making a significant educational difference in the lives of their students.

Across the schools, teachers identified ways in which the changes impacted on their practice with two main themes evident. Firstly, teachers felt that they now implement

more student-centred and student-led pedagogical approaches and a wider range of assessments methods. Secondly, teachers felt that they had more freedom to be creative and introduce new, engaging, and fun activities or topics within their classroom. Some teachers felt that the changes had minimum impact on their practice. These teachers felt that they were either already engaging in such practices, they lacked the time to implement such changes into their practice or the continued presence of the state examination impacted on their capacity in this regard.

Teachers identified three main (related) ways in which students learning was impacted by the changes. Firstly, teachers felt that students had greater voice, responsibility, and ownership of their learning. Secondly, students were deemed to learn and interact more with their peers. Finally, classrooms were considered to be more fun and engaging for students.

Most teachers felt that the changes increased their level of collaboration with other teachers, creating more positive and supportive relationships with their colleagues. A number of teachers also spoke about the increased workload they had experienced as a result of the changes.

Teachers in the majority of schools felt that a gap existed between the Junior and Senior Cycle. These teachers felt that the workload, expectations of students and the amount of writing in the Leaving Certificate examination, in comparison to the Junior Cycle, was the cause of this gap. However, differing views existed on this issue and may reflect differences at a subject level. For example, some teachers believed that such a gap has always existed between Junior and Senior Cycle while others questioned whether the impact of Covid was the reason for the perceived gap. Others felt that the focus on Key Skills in the Framework for Junior Cycle supported students at Senior Cycle.

According to the teachers, the Covid pandemic and related school closures impacted on teachers and students in five main ways. Firstly, teachers explained how group work, as well as trips and engagement with the local community were suspended during this period. Some felt that online teaching and learning was not suitable for their students, with students finding it difficult to connect and stay engaged in an online forum. Teachers felt that the pandemic and school closures reduced and hindered their own engagement and understanding of the Framework for Junior Cycle. Some teachers also feared that students had extensive gaps in their knowledge as a result of school closures and that students lacked motivation to study and learn as a result of the State examinations being cancelled.

Part 2: Student perspectives on the curriculum change

This section of the report provides an overview of students' experiences and perspectives on the Framework for Junior Cycle. The data draws on survey responses from 1,830 students as well as three focus-group discussions in each school.

Analysis of the focus-group discussion data identified seven emergent categories related to the experiences of Junior Cycle students in this study, as follows:

- Teaching and Learning: Methods and Content
- Subject Perspectives
- Short Courses, Key Skills, Learning Intentions and Success Criteria
- Homework
- Assessment
- Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs)
- Impact
- Student Voice and Choice

These themes are used to structure this section and student survey data is also drawn on to support these sections.

Teaching and Learning: Methods and Content

Junior Cycle transitions

Students in this study reported positively on the level of support provided to them by their schools as they made the transition from primary to post-primary school. As part of the survey, students were asked to rate their level of agreement, on a five-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with the statement *I was supported by this school in moving from primary to post primary school.* The results are presented in Figure 32.
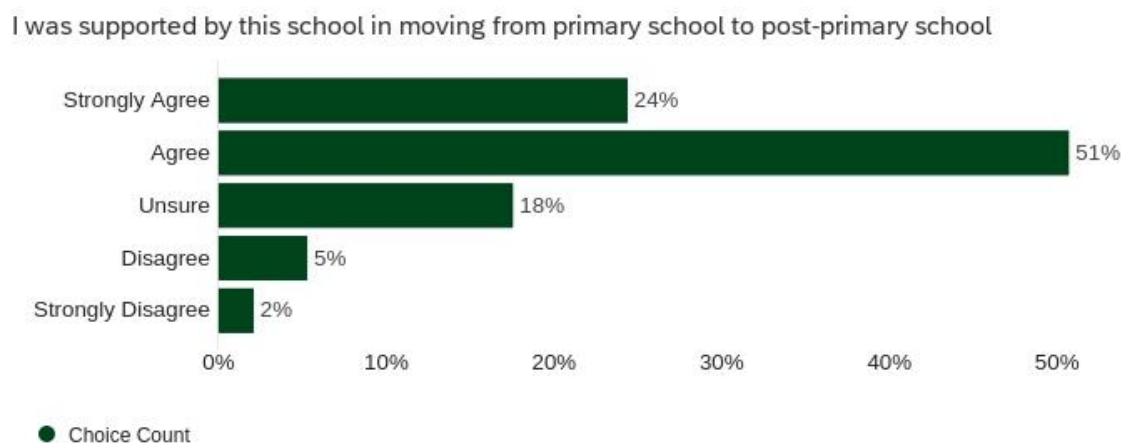
Figure 32. Students' level of agreement with the statement 'I was supported by this school in moving from primary to post primary school'.

Figure 32 shows that of the 1,823 students who offered a response to this question, three-quarters (*n* = 1,369) agreed with the statement, indicating that they felt supported by their post-primary school in this educational transition.

Students' positive views of the support provided to them during the transition from primary to post-primary school was emphasised by students in the focus group discussions who spoke of being 'eased in' to their programme of study by teachers in the school. For example;

> *I like how they ease you into it in the first year, like they don't overload you with homework at first, And I like that, it kind of eases into it (*School 7)

Figure 32 also shows that only 7.2% of students did not feel supported in their transition from primary to post-primary school. However, despite feeling supported in the transition, during the focus group discussions students across a range of schools also reported experiencing a sense of a lack of communication and coherence between primary and post-primary levels of education. Participants suggested that within some subjects, teachers held an overestimation of students' academic level as they transitioned into Junior Cycle explaining, '*I think they expect you to know a lot of information from primary school, but you actually don't'* (School 8). Students outlined that in many cases, teachers, *'just assume you know the basics'* (School 5).

Such assumption, according to students in this study, created '*a massive [academic] jump*', rendering it '*very hard to fully understand*' (Ibid) and engage effectively with elements of the content presented in first year of Junior Cycle. Students outlined for example;

> *They're not teaching you how to study. They're not showing you timetables, they're not doing any of that, really. So, you go in and you're just like, whoa, what is this! ... when I came into school, and I thought it was cool, I was excited to have a locker, all that stuff that you're usually excited for, but then the tests started rolling in and then I was like, I have to remember like, a few chapters from each subject and I'm just like, how am I supposed to do that? There's so many subjects and there's so many chapters from each subject and I was like panicking and like, I didn't know how to study, the primary schools didn't teach you how to study. There was no really class where you're like taught how to do that either. There's like SPHE, Wellbeing, there's no study. So um, I don't know, I kind of struggled in that department, because I was like, worrying, just like will I get this done? How am I supposed to lay out my timetable?* (School 3)

Participants outlined the need for more responsive approaches to supporting students' academic transition into Junior Cycle arguing, '*There has to be a lot more communication between, like, the primary school going in and the secondary school' (School 8).* Examples proposed included, '*make sure that everyone knows the basics from the ground up then just move from there*' (School 5) and others submitted that, '*they [teachers] can't just assume that you know things, they need to make sure everyone knows it before they move on*' (School 5).

Additionally, students also raised concerns regarding a perceived level of inconsistency between Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle programmes of study. Discussing what they advanced as a '*big divide*' between the curricula within post-primary education, students called for greater '*flow*' and coherence across the Junior and Senior Cycles, as detailed in the following commentary:

> *I just think that there's just like a bigger division between like the Junior Cycle and the Senior Cycle. Like you could do different subjects in Senior Cycle that you have no idea about and then you don't do them in Junior Cycle, I just think they should have like some correlation between them so that they like flow together* (School 7)

> *There has to be a lot more communication between, like, the primary school going in and the secondary school* (School 8)

Experiences of Teaching and Learning

When asked to rate the extent to which they did different activities in class, survey results indicate that students experienced a range of different pedagogies in their learning. While listening and individual work were the most frequent student learning experiences recorded, experiences of more student-centred approaches, were experienced frequently. The results are presented in Figure 33.
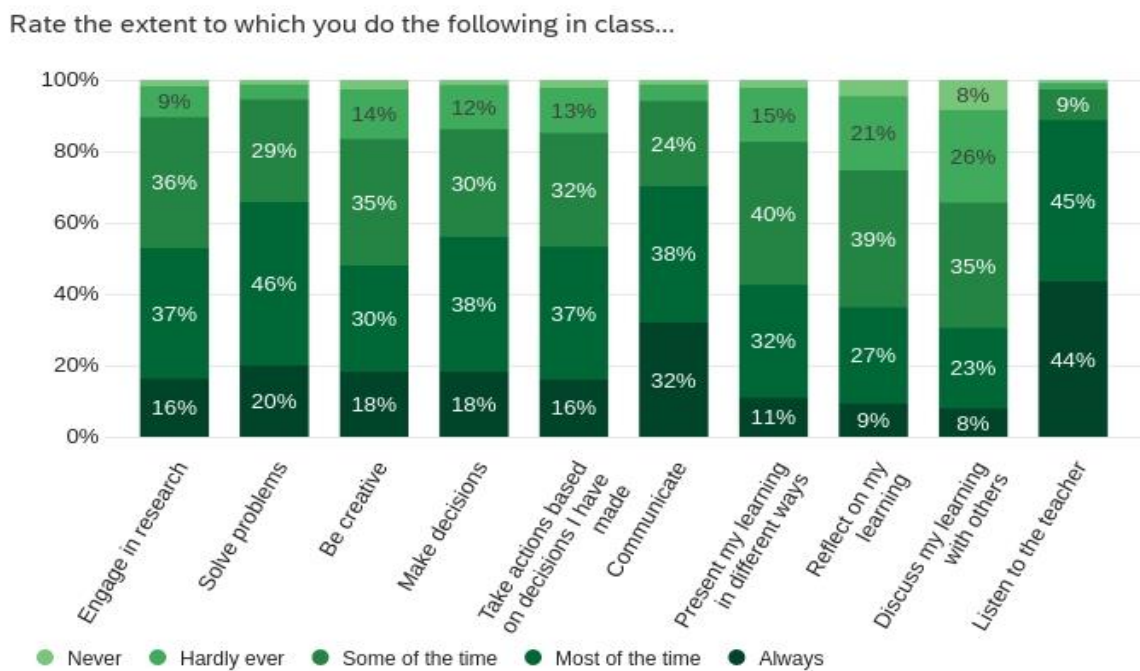
Figure 33. How regularly students engage in different learning experiences in Junior Cycle.

This finding was further reinforced when students were asked to identify the learning experience they engaged with the most over the course of Junior Cycle. In total 1,795 students responded to this question and the results are presented in Figure 34.

Top three learning experiences you experience the MOST at Junior Cycle.

Learning experience	Percentage
Solve problems	11%
Communicate	13%
Listen to the teacher	39%

● Percentage
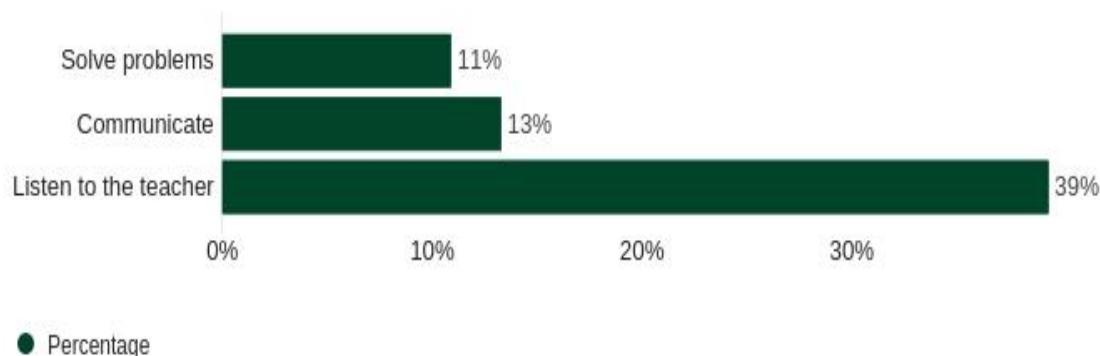
Figure 34. Top three Learning experience that students report engaging with the most.

The student survey also explored the ways in which students work in the classroom at Junior Cycle. In particular, a number of survey items investigated if students, at Junior Cycle, were more likely to work on an individual basis or with their peers. Figure 35 shows that almost two-thirds of students (61%) state that working on their own in the classroom is the type of schoolwork they engage with most frequently while 14% cited working in groups of three or more to be the most common type of learning they engage in.

What type of schoolwork do you engage with most frequently?

Type of schoolwork	Percentage
Work on my own	61%
Work with one classmate	25%
Work as part of a group (3 or ...	14%

● Percentage
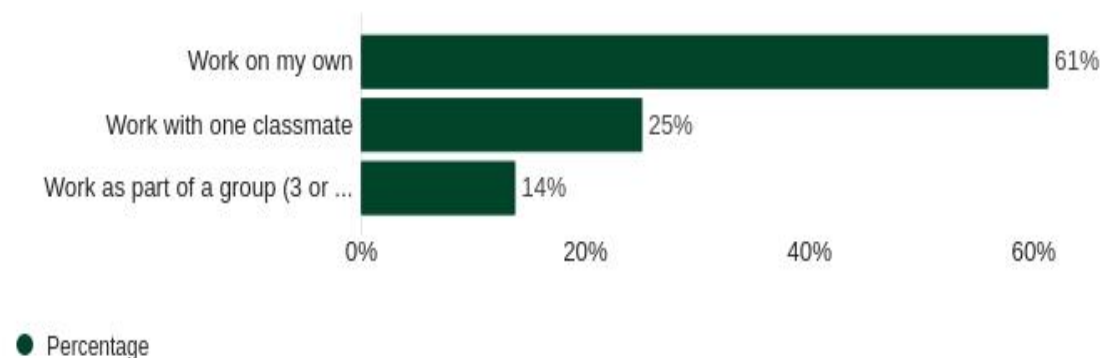
Figure 35. Type of schoolwork students engage with most frequently.

A follow up question asked students to quantify the duration of time spent working collaboratively and individually. 77.9% of students surveyed reported working on their own always or most of the time. The comparable figures for working with another classmate or in groups were 24.1% and 11.3% respectively. On the other hand, 37.0% reported never or

hardly ever working as a group of three or more while the corresponding proportions for working with one other classmate and working on their own were 11.8% and 1.3%, respectively (see Figure 36).

Rate the extent to which you do the following in class...
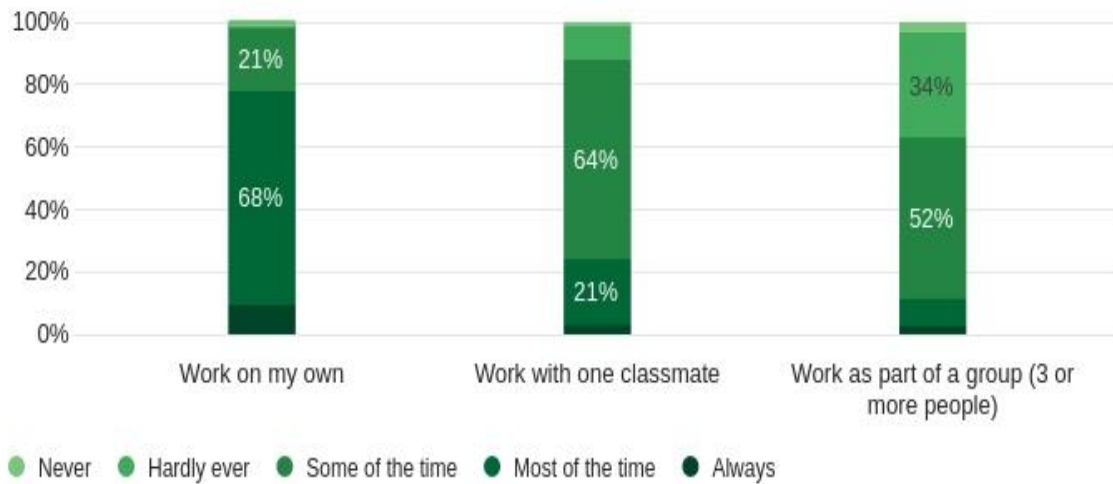
Figure 36. How often students engage in different learning experiences in the classroom.

Data from the student survey also appears to indicate that while individual work remains consistent across the three years of Junior Cycle, third year students are less likely to report paired and group work. The following tables provide detail of these responses.

	Year Group		
Work on my own	**1st Year (*n*)**	**2nd Year (*n*)**	**3rd Year (*n*)**
Always	8.8% (56)	8.9% (57)	11.1% (58)
Most of the time	68.7% (436)	67.1% (429)	69.5% (362)
Some of the time	20.9% (133)	22.8% (146)	18.0% (94)
Hardly ever	1.3% (8)	0.9% (6)	0.8% (4)
Never	0.3% (2)	0.2% (1)	0.6% (3)
Work with one classmate	**1st Year (*n*)**	**2nd Year (*n*)**	**3rd Year (*n*)**
Always	3.6% (23)	2.5% (16)	3.1% (16)
Most of the time	24.4% (155)	24.3% (155)	12.9% (67)
Some of the time	64.4% (409)	60.9% (389)	67.9% (354)
Hardly ever	6.6% (42)	11.6% (74)	14.0% (73)
Never	0.9% (6)	0.8% (5)	2.1% (11)
Work as part of a group (3+ people)	**1st Year (*n*)**	**2nd Year (*n*)**	**3rd Year (*n*)**
Always	1.9% (12)	4.2% (27)	1.5% (8)
Most of the time	12.1% (77)	8.5% (54)	4.6% (24)
Some of the time	57.0% (362)	49.2% (315)	48.3% (252)
Hardly ever	27.1% (172)	35.2% (225)	40.7% (212)
Never	1.9% (12)	2.8% (18)	4.8% (25)

Table 2: Students engagement with individual, pair or group work

Students were also asked the extent to which their learning needs and interests are met during Junior Cycle. Again, the data indicates that third-year students were less likely to strongly agree/agree with these statements, as outlined in table 3 below.

	Year Group		
My learning needs are met during my Junior Cycle experience	**1ˢᵗ Year (*n*)**	**2ⁿᵈ Year (*n*)**	**3ʳᵈ Year (*n*)**
Strongly agree	11.6% (75)	7.3% (47)	5.3% (28)
Agree	49.3% (319)	45.8% (296)	40.4% (214)
Unsure	34.3% (222)	33.0% (213)	32.1% (170)
Disagree	4.3% (28)	11.9% (77)	17.5% (93)
Strongly disagree	0.5% (3)	2.0% (13)	4.7% (25)
My interests are met during my Junior Cycle experience.	**1ˢᵗ Year (*n*)**	**2ⁿᵈ Year (*n*)**	**3ʳᵈ Year (*n*)**
Strongly agree	10.0% (65)	7.6% (49)	4.2% (22)
Agree	43.9% (284)	35.6% (230)	29.2% (155)
Unsure	35.1% (227)	30.0% (194)	30.8% (163)
Disagree	10.0% (65)	22.8% (147)	28.1% (149)
Strongly disagree	0.9% (6)	4.0% (26)	7.7% (41)

Table 3. Students' interests and learning needs

In the student focus group discussions students, across the large majority of case study schools, reported that listening, notetaking and memorisation typifies their engagement at this academic level. Many students described their experiences of, *'just sitting down listening to the teacher'* (School 6) frequently describing their learning experiences as, *'always like listening, taking notes'* (School 5). This approach was noted by students to underpin their Junior Cycle experience across a range of subjects. Students in this study explained that, in many of their classes, the majority of their time is spent '*taking down notes*' and outlined that in those classes *'all we do is take down notes'* (School 8). This approach was noted to be a pressing concern amongst students as demonstrated in the following participant commentary and the following creative poster example;

> *We just take down notes word for word from the textbook, it's really a waste of time… Yeah, you're trying to get it done so quickly. If there's like a huge slide, you're just trying to write it all down as quick as you can. You're not even reading it because you're going so quickly* (School 2)

> *It was always like listening, taking notes* (School 5)

They just tell you to take out your notes, and then you start writing then to the end. there's barely like even a pause during when you're taking down notes. There's no pause to even have a discussion about like the topic you're learning. It's just taking down the notes, you've taken down the notes, moving on (School 8)
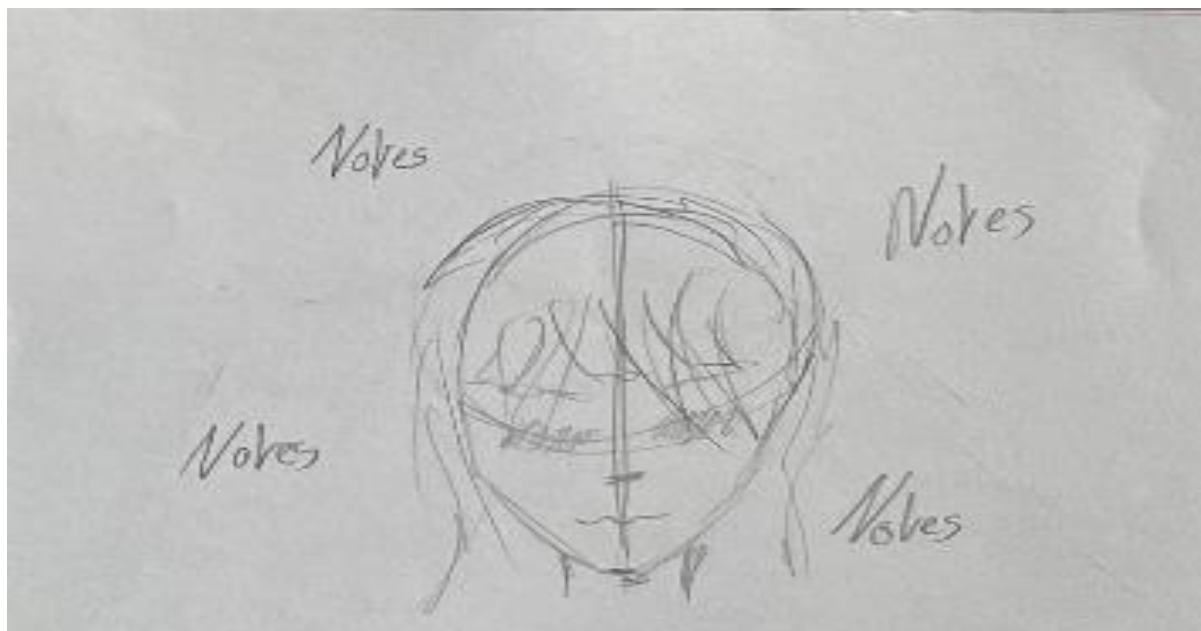
Figure 37. Example of student creative poster on note-taking.

Some participants of the student focus-group discussions also believed that this mode of learning was ineffective and didn't support their learning, as demonstrated in the below excerpts;

*I'm taking all these notes down, and it's just like a waste of my time. So, I don't need them ... I'm just like, why do I need to do this? So, I don't know, I just think it's like a waste of my time (*School 3)

You do the same thing over and over again. Like, you're gonna [going to] lose interest. And then your grades are going to go down because when you lose interest. You don't pay attention. And I feel like it takes a toll on your results (School 7)

[certain subjects] are entirely based on taking down notes. I mean, we literally don't do anything else. I feel like it's not really a helpful way of learning things. It's just writing. We're not really being taught anything. It's just words being put up on a board. And us putting it in our copy, never to be used again (School 8)

Memorisation was also noted by students to be a common strategy used within Junior Cycle. Many students suggested this was an unhelpful practice, as outlined in the following excerpts;

We're kind of taught to memorize and like, we had to write an essay for one of our exams, we were taught to memorize it, but not understand this. So, I didn't understand what I had written for one of the paragraphs, because my teacher just told me exactly what to write and just got me to memorise it. (School 3)

Having to learn off all the quotes is a bad thing because when you're sitting in an exam you just get all confused (School 4)

We're supposed to be like actively thinking ourselves and like, finding the answers and like not having to memorize things because that's not like not going to benefit from memorizing. (School 7)

Notably however, a small number of students outlined a positive disposition towards passive learning strategies such as, '*listening to the teacher explain*' (School 5) and, '*taking notes*' (School 5) citing, '*It'll help them a lot if they're preparing for a test' (School 4).* A preference for teachers who, '*Just teach courses that will actually be on the exam and don't detour off to some other random thing*' (School 5) was noted in some cases.

A Desire for Engaged, Collaborative, Creative, and Active Learning Experiences

While students in this study reported a dominance of teacher-centred approaches as part of their Junior Cycle experience, and in some cases, actively endorsed this approach as effective in supporting their performance in tests and exams, a large number of students across the case study schools also expressed a desire for more student-centred learning experiences.

Accordingly, groupwork emerged as a key theme in the student focus-groups where students reported a desire for a greater use of groupwork arguing that currently, beyond a limited number of subjects, '*you never work with other people*' (School 8) and explaining how, '*we really don't do anything with each other in any other classes*' (School 8). Outlining the reasons underpinning their desire for the increased use of groupwork at Junior Cycle, students noted '*I prefer communicating with people and talking*' and suggested it's, '*less stressful' (School 1).* Students noted also that when groupwork is used in the classroom, '*you get to talk to people and it's not just taking down notes' (School 2). Students also noted commended the role of groupwork opening up space for, 'multiple perspectives' where, 'you can help each other' (School 9).*
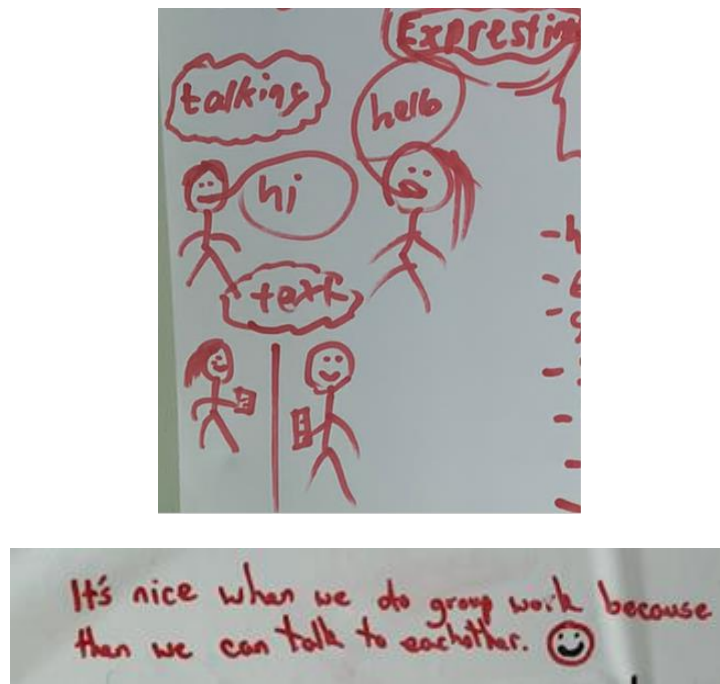
Figure 38. Example of student posters on the positive dimensions of group work

Additionally, as part of the survey, students were asked to list the one learning experience they would like to experience more of at Junior Cycle. In addition to a desire for increased peer collaboration, the data also indicates a strong desire amongst students for more opportunities to be creative, as demonstrated in Figure 39.

Select the one learning experiences you would like to experience MORE OF

Learning experience	Percentage
Engage in research	10%
Solve problems	8%
Be creative	28%
Make decisions	5%
Communicate	11%
Present my learning in different ...	9%
Reflect on my learning	6%
Discuss my learning with others	14%
Listen to the teacher	2%
Other (Please specify)	4%
Take actions based on decisions ...	3%

● Percentage
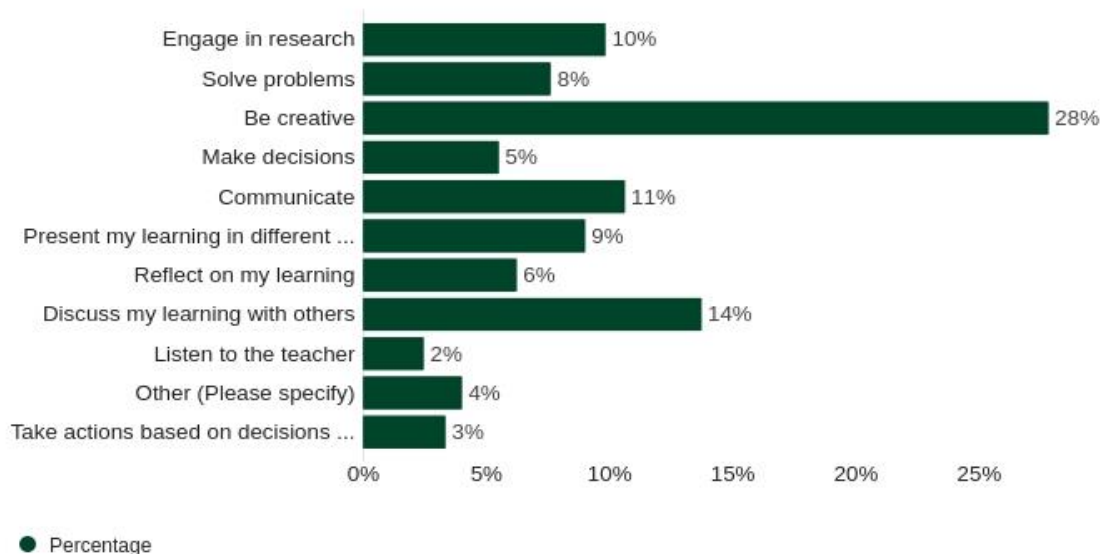
Figure 39. The learning experience students would like to experience more of.

Of the 1,801 students who offered a response to this question, 27.8% (*n* = 500) advanced that they would like to be given the opportunity to '*be creative'* in class, while a further 13.7% of students (*n* = 247) asserted that they would value the opportunity to '*discuss their learning with others'* more frequently.

Within the focus group discussions, many students noted stimulus variation as critical to their academic engagement and understanding. 'Stimulus variation' was referred to by students as the use of '*different sources of learning'* including '*textbook'*, '*video'*, '*PowerPoint'* and in particular '*interaction with the class'*. Providing an overview of the benefits of stimulus variation, students noted:

> *It's best whenever we have a mixture of taking notes, but then also talking about the subject in class … So, it isn't just constant note taking, because that's boring, and you don't really learn anything.* (School 8)

> *I kind of like the right variety and like, different, like ways of learning in different classes* (School 1)

Students also asserted a strong preference for active learning approaches within Junior Cycle. Participants outlined that an active approach to teaching and learning encourages student engagement as, '*you don't lose interest'* and offsets boredom within the classroom as students are, '*… not just sitting in classrooms the whole time. It changes what we're doing so*

you don't get bored'. They added that such an approach is more helpful to their learning than '*doing the same thing over and over and over again*' (School 7). Stressing their desire for more active learning approaches, students noted;

> *I feel like doing the activities and stuff really helps. I feel like that's much more helpful than just like having a sheet and just like learning stuff off. Actually learning by doing* (School 1)

> *Most of my positive experiences, like in school, were like where we were doing kind of interactive learning in groups, like group activities, or fun games, or like group discussions in class, or like debates or anything like that, because I find them like really beneficial, because I think when you're engaging, and communicating as a group or with your class, I think it stays in your brain, and you remember it because you're not bored, you're not falling asleep* (School 3)

> *I think interaction in general in class helps us engage with the learning. That helps me learn. Taking down notes can just get repetitive. Interactive learning is the best way to learn* (School 8)

Subject perspectives

Students identified particular subjects as supportive of their learning.   Within the student survey, participants were asked to list the subject that best supports their learning. A total of 1,730 students named the subject that they felt best supports their learning at Junior Cycle. Each of the twenty-one subjects on offer at Junior Cycle was cited by at least one student. The subjects that were studied by more than 1% of the sample were included in this analysis. Figure 40 represents these preferences as a proportion of the number of students who took the subject.
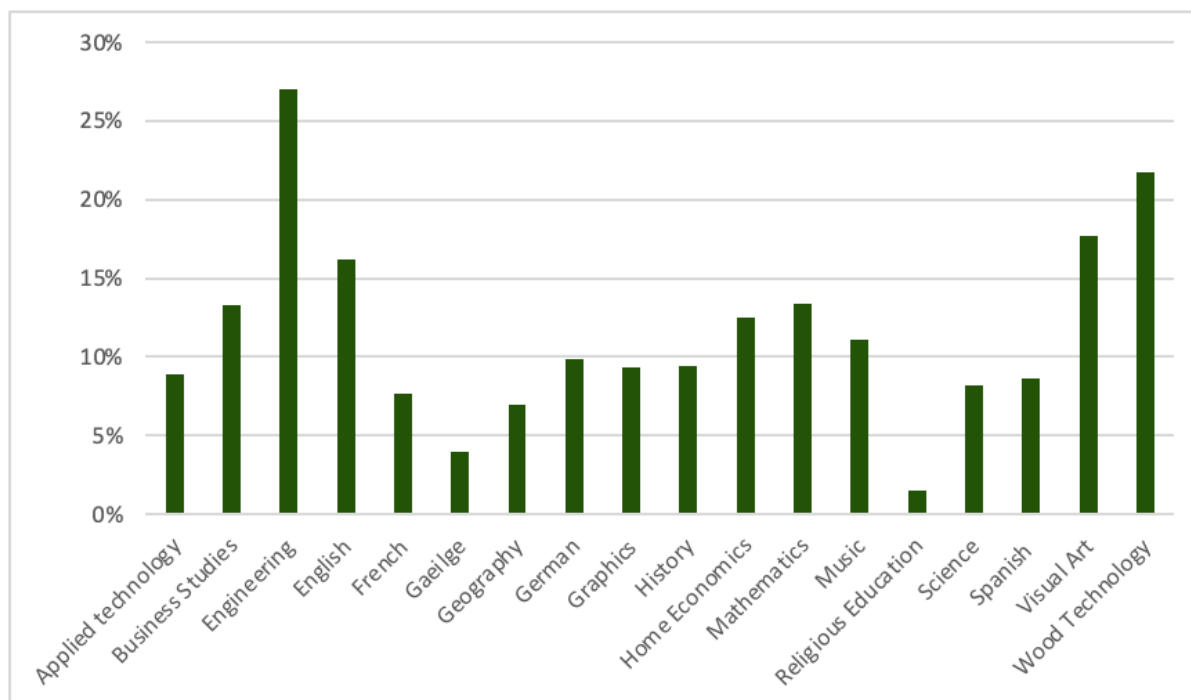
Figure 40. Number of students who selected a subject that best supports their learning expressed as a percentage of total number studying that subject.

Figure 40 shows that of those studying Engineering (*n* = 163), 27.0% (*n* = 44) cited this as the subject that bests support their learning while the comparable figures for Wood Technology and Visual Art are 21.8% and 17.7%, respectively. This is in comparison to 16.2% of those who study English selecting it as the subject that best supports their learning and 13.4% for those studying Mathematics. At 4.0% and 1.5% for Gaeilge and Religious Studies respectively, these subjects were deemed by students to be least effective in supporting their learning.

Focus-group participants also portrayed a preference for subjects that had practical dimension and supported the development of 'usable' skills or prepared the student for specific careers. Whether the subject was included for examination as part of Junior Cycle summative examinations also seemed to determine its value. In these interviews, the importance of 'developing skills' appropriate for a future career and/or 'everyday life' was stressed by students, who viewed these dimensions as '*interesting*' and '*beneficial to you a lot in later life'* (School 8). In many cases, the perceived value of an area of learning was determined by the above listed priorities. Accordingly, students frequently entered into group debate on the merits of areas of study based largely on their perceived levels of practical or career related relevance;

Like geography is very useful in general, because it will tie into a lot of work…there's very few jobs that religion can get to... it's not going to get you a job unless you want to be a priest or someone in the same position as that (School 5)

One subject that is very relevant to us in business because you learn how to pay taxes and all. (School 8)

Irish, it's really useless in essence in everyday life for most people unless you were to have a job in Irish which most people won't have … I find and also its lack of usability in comparison to stuff like maths and English, I just don't think it is warranted as being a core subject. (School 8)
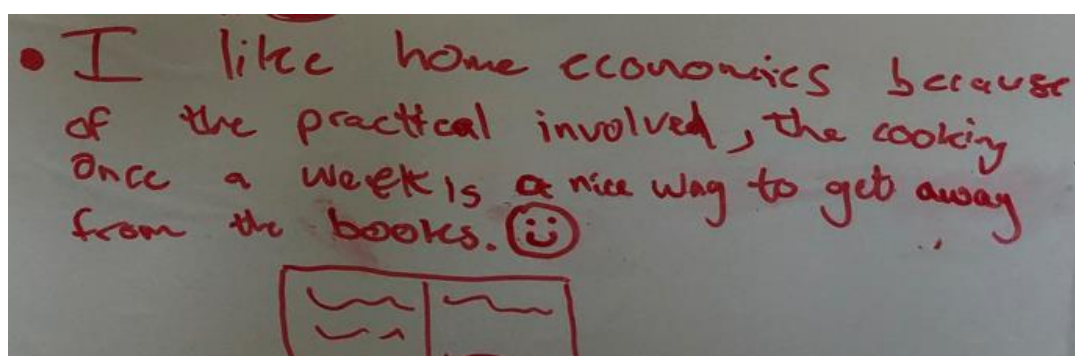
Figure 41. Example of student poster related to subjects

Students attending the Special School frequently noted subjects that were active, engaging and fun, but also subjects that created a link with home, as helpful for their learning. Students, for example, cook or garden at home and then enjoy cooking or gardening in school, or vice versa. For example, two students explained how:

I love cooking and I cook at home (Special School)

I used to do lots of gardening with my mam at home (Special School)

Additionally, students in many cases argued for a reduced focus on subjects that they believe do not demonstrate a real-world application or career-oriented dimension. These students proposed, for example, that such areas of learning should be optional or not included for Junior Cycle assessment, as evidenced in the following excerpts;

I think we should make some things optional... I mean, you have to keep like the main things like. You have to learn like Maths, English, because you kind of need those. But

> *like, I'm not sure how much in my life I'm gonna use French or how much I'm gonna like, use Irish because I don't think I've ever spoken Irish outside of school* (School 2)

Secondly, areas of learning that were included and seen to be relevant to the final summative examination were given priority. Students frequently discussed the inclusion or removal of areas of learning based on their status as part of Junior Cycle formal examinations, advancing for example;

> *In some chapters, there's a lot of irrelevant material that, instead of having loads of irrelevant material, we could just make them into like what we actually need and what is necessary for exams and tests* (School 1)

> *I'd rather do like more work on stuff that like is important, like English, Math, Science, Irish, so that we can actually get more work done in those subjects. That'll be helpful for like Junior Cert* (School 7)

> *Although the general basis of CBAs can help like your education and building skills, I think CBAs should try to focus on material that will be on the Junior Cert. and Leaving Cert (*School 8)

Students suggested that areas of study that were not assessed were largely redundant, arguing for example, *'CSPE...you don't have an exam on it. So, it doesn't really matter'* (School 5).

Short Courses, Key Skills, Learning Intentions and Success Criteria

Short Courses, Key Skills, Learning Intentions and Success Criteria are key components of the framework for Junior Cycle, but these concepts did not emerge as a prominent topic in the student focus group discussions. Of the few students who mentioned success criteria, there were differing experiences. One student reported a vague awareness of success criteria but explained that they, *'don't know exactly what they want'* (School 1) while another student reported being clear about and seeing the benefit of success criteria: *'I like the success criteria because even in projects it's very good for them to say you have to include this, this and this because then if you put that in, you're going to get like better marks'* (School 3).

While students, in the main, did not explicitly refer to these components when unprompted in the focus group discussions, they were investigated in the student survey. Firstly, in relation to the short courses, and reflecting the centrality of Wellbeing, the survey found that the most common short courses undertaken by students at Junior Cycle were Physical Education (89%),

Social, Personal and Health Education (82.8%) and Civic, Social and Political Education (81.1%). Other short courses offered to small cohorts of students or students on L2LP programmes included Chinese Language and Culture (0.5%), Philosophy (1.2%) and CSI: Exploring Forensic Science (1.3%).

The survey also explored students' feelings in relation to the short courses. Students were asked to rank, on a five-point Likert scale, their level of enjoyment of the short courses and their opinions of the content covered on the short courses. The results from this survey item are presented in Figure 42.

Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I enjoy the topic(s) of the short courses.	10%	40%	31%	15%	
I learn content in short courses not included in other subjects.	13%	48%	28%	9%	
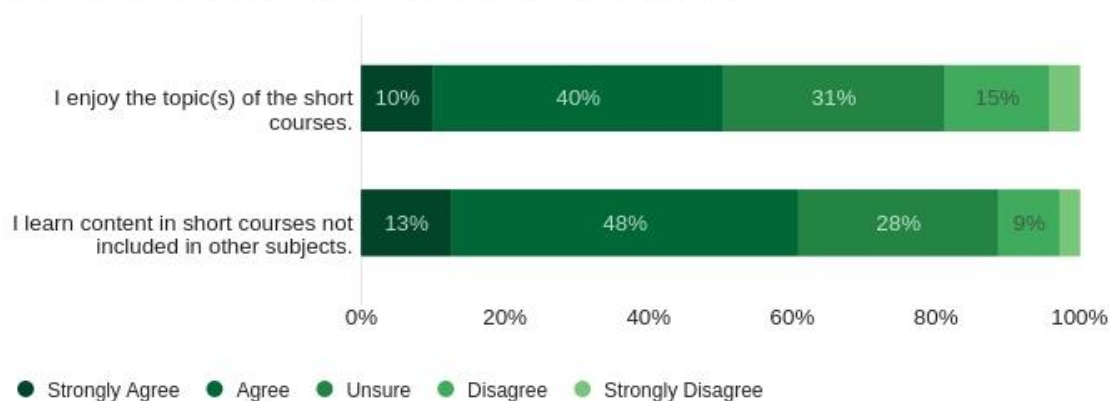
Figure 42. Students' level of agreement with statements regarding their perceptions of the short courses.

It is evident from Figure 42 that there is a mixed response among students in relation to their level of enjoyment of the short courses. 50.3% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed the topics of the short courses while the remaining students were unsure or disagreed. However, only 4.1% of students strongly disagreed with this statement. The majority of students (61.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that the content covered in the short courses differs from that covered in their other school subjects.

The concept of Key Skills and the focus on these at Junior Cycle was investigated in the student survey using three survey items. Firstly, students were asked if they spend time in class developing the Key Skills outlined in the framework for Junior Cycle. While students did not refer to Key Skills as part of the focus groups discussions, of the 1,796 students who offered an answer to this survey question, a substantial number (23.2%) said that Key Skills were

developed in class 'all of the time'. Only 7.3% of students stated that Key Skills were never developed during class time. The survey also sought to determine the Key Skills that were developed most and least at Junior Cycle. The Key Skills that students believed were developed the most were '*Managing Information and Thinking'*, with 23.6% of students reporting this to be the Key Skill developed most, followed by '*Managing Myself'* (20%) and '*Communicating'* (18.5%). Students were also asked what Key Skills they developed least. Twenty-four percent of students indicated that '*Being Creative'* was the Key Skill least developed.

Finally, Learning Intentions and Success Criteria and how these are utilised at Junior Cycle was also a core focus of the student survey. The terms Learning Intentions and Success Criteria were defined for students in the survey and they were then asked if Learning Intentions and Success Criteria are used by teachers to guide teaching and learning. The results are presented in Figure 43.

Use of learning intentions and success criteria

	All of my teachers	Some of my teachers	None of my teachers	Don't Know
My teachers use learning intentions to guide my learning.	18%	70%	5%	7%
My teachers use success criteria to guide my learning.	18%	62%	8%	13%
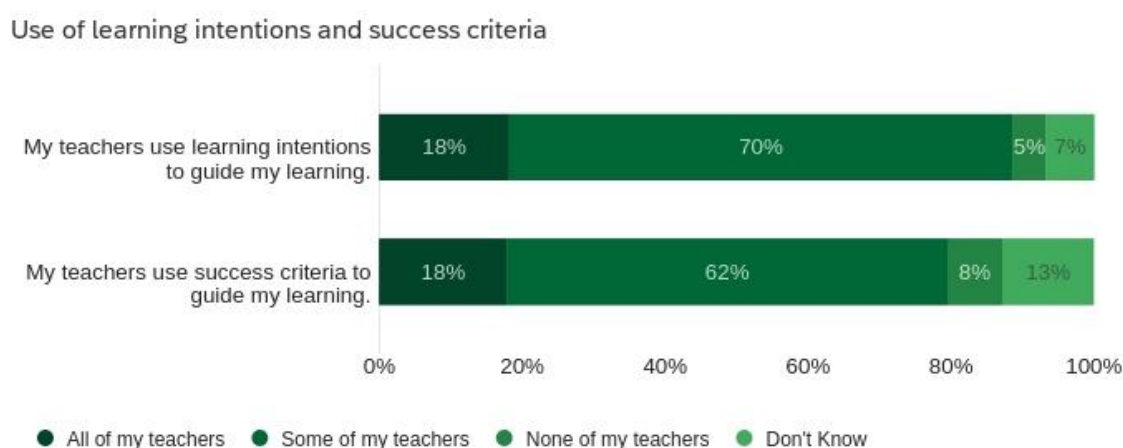
Figure 43. Use of learning intentions and success criteria to guide learning.

In both instances, students report that teachers use both Learning Intentions and Success Criteria to guide their learning. For example, 18.1% of students reported that all of their teachers used Learning Intentions to guide their learning while the corresponding figure for the use of Success Criteria was 17.8%. A much lower proportion of students reported no teachers use Learning Intentions (6.7%) or Success Criteria (7.6%) to guide learning. In addition to investigating whether or not the Learning Intentions and Success Criteria were used to guide learning the survey also sought to ascertain who decides on the Success Criteria

in a given class. Students were asked if decisions around Success Criteria were made by students in collaboration with the teacher or if the teacher was solely responsible for deciding on the Success Criteria. The results are outlined in Figure 44.

Who is responsible for deciding success criteria

	All of my teachers	Some of my teachers	None of my teachers	Don't Know
We agree success criteria as a class.	11%	37%	31%	21%
My teachers decide the success criteria.	29%	42%	6%	23%
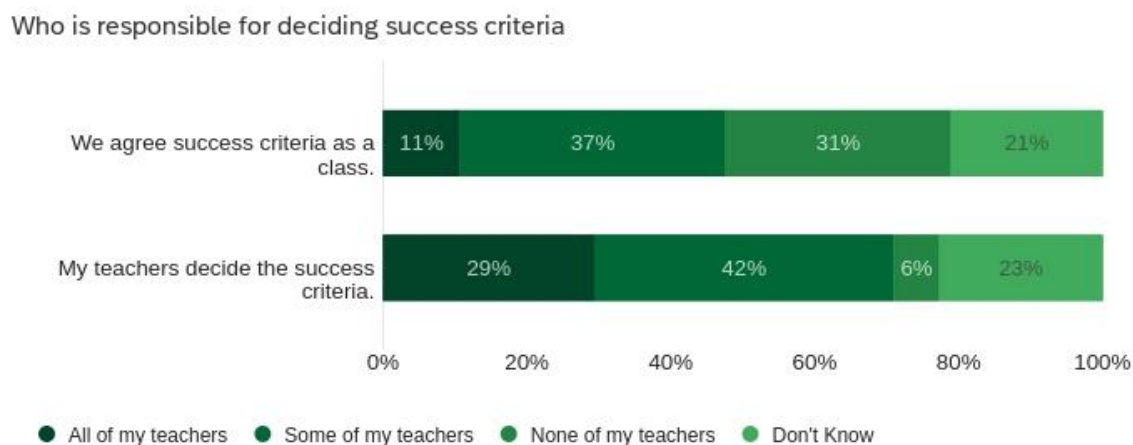
Figure 44. Students' perspectives on who is responsible for deciding on success criteria.

Thirty-two percent of students reported that none of their teachers allowed them the opportunity to agree on the Success Criteria as part of a joint endeavour. However, 36.9% did report that this happens in a proportion of their classes. On the other hand, 29.4% of students surveyed indicated that all their teachers took sole responsibility for deciding the Success Criteria that would guide the lessons.

Homework

Homework emerged as a dominant theme within the student focus group discussions. Students were critical of the volume of homework they are required to complete within Junior Cycle. This was seen to contribute to a sense of content overload underpinning students' experiences at Junior Cycle, as detailed later in this part. Students suggested that there is *'just too much homework'* (School 6) and argued that, *'I think we're in school for long enough that shouldn't have to go home and do homework again'* (School 5). Students described how they frequently spent a significant amount of time each evening completing their assigned homework, as reflected in the following quotes:

> *Homework, I feel is the biggest problem because, they're putting an awful lot of homework on us to get done in a little amount of time, we would be sitting there for hours* (School 4)

> *We're getting like piles and piles of homework, but also being expected to do like two or three hours of study per night* (School 1)

Students noted that the volume of homework prescribed frequently leaves little time for other extra-curricular activities in the evening time:

> *I think they should be encouraging people to go outside and things outside of school, when they go home. Like I don't think it should be school, and then just having to go home and just do loads of homework (School 3)*

> *Homework, sometimes you get a lot and we spend all night or hours doing it… the homework. The homework isn't good because you have no time after school. And in the winter, it's already dark. So you have no time for matches or anything (School 4).*

Additionally, some students did not always understand the point of homework prescribed and suggested that homework is often given '*just for the sake of it*', as outlined in the following excerpts;

> *I feel like they give us homework just for the sake of it. So yeah, they should also kind of take into account that like we have loads of other subjects at the same time, but also we have to study for exams and be go to after school things and sports like* (School 3)

> *Homework accounts for half of my energy wasted on random knowledge* (School 1)

Assessment

Exams and Tests

In this section, survey and focus group discussion data is drawn on to illustrate students' perspectives on, experiences of and recommendations in relation to summative exams and the provision of feedback. The survey investigated student perceptions of exams and tests by asking students to rate their level of agreement with the following two statements:

(a) I see connections between what I learn and in-class/end of year exams

(b) In-class/end of year exams are suitable ways of assessing my learning

The responses to these statements are presented in Figure 45.

Students perceptions of in-class and end of year exams

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I see connections between what I learn and in-class/end of year ...	17%	51%	20%	8%	
In-class/end of year exams are suitable ways of assessing my ...	12%	38%	25%	17%	8%

● Strongly Agree ● Agree ● Unsure ● Disagree ● Strongly Disagree
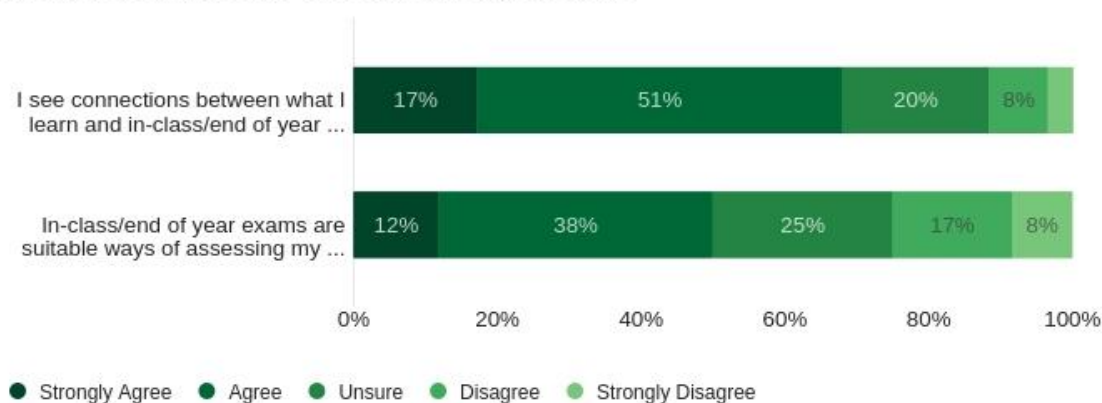
Figure 45. Students' perceptions of in-class and end of year exams.

Overall, half of the students surveyed (49.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that tests and exams are a suitable means to assess learning. 67.9% of students agreed or strongly agreed that there were connections evident between what they learned in class and what was assessed. At the same time, 27% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 27% of students were unsure about the suitability of tests and exams to assess their learning. The focus group discussions provide a more nuanced picture of these results.

Students in the focus group discussions across many schools pointed out several issues with the sustained emphasis on summative exams. From first year, students appeared to be very invested in exams and academic pressure was felt by students across all schools.

> *...The way they speak about exams, the way they put the pressure on you. Because the way they speak about exams, you'd swear it was the end of the world if you don't pass anything. Like, they've been doing that since like, first year and we were 12* (School 6)

Indeed, the following conversation between a group of students about their exam performance highlights the depth of investment on the part of students and teachers in the summative exams:

> *Student 1: But like once we got our results back, they [the teachers] weren't exactly happy with us. They seemed disappointed. But the mock exams are actually very difficult*
>
> *Student 2: I don't think the teachers were disappointed at us but just at themselves (School 10)*

Many students emphasised the stress of attempting to memorise vast amounts of content across all subjects over long periods of time. The volume of content was cited by many students: '*I feel like there's too much in it*' (School 7). Students spoke of the stress of this in relation to yearly exams: '*it's just stressful. Especially even summer exams, because it's like, the whole year of work to learn*' (School 1). Students also spoke about this in terms of mock and Junior Cycle exams:

> *The stress, well, coming up to mocks. You had so many topics. And, again, some subjects, you are going through 20 topics in a short period of time, and you just didn't pick up anything. So going over them topics yourself at home. And that's just for one subject and then you have to do it for seven more* (School 2)

Figure 46. Example of student poster related to memorisation.

Many students noted that summative exams mainly tested and prioritised their memorisation skills over other skills and competencies: '*We're supposed to be like actively thinking ourselves and like, finding the answers and like not having to memorize things because that's not like not going to benefit from memorizing.*' (School 7). Indeed, some students pointed this out with reference to how people learn in the 'real world':

> *Like I hate exams and think they're pointless because like in the real world, if you have a difficult problems, like you would read a book on it or use the internet and then research it. But in an exam, you have to Just remember it. So, like in an exam, why can't we use the textbook to like find the solution, to get the answer to it* (School 9)

Given the difficulties with summative exams, it is perhaps unsurprising that most students in the focus group discussions articulated the belief that summative exams don't capture their 'full potential':

> *I feel like when they're correcting the test, they're not seeing my full potential. I think that's the same with a lot of other people. There's not enough time or there's too many questions in the test and nobody's getting it done. So no one's actually showing what they know* (School 1)

> *exams are not properly representing our abilities. It's three years of work just decided by two-hour exam, and it doesn't properly represent what we could do. Whereas like, more gradual like exams, like after a certain topic, if you had an exam after that, then it would be still like, it would just reflect what you've learned better* (School 2)

> *… then for final exams and pre's and Christmas exams, for me, I don't know about others, but it doesn't really reflect my learning and like, the knowledge I have, and everything I know. The layout of sitting in the exams, writing everything you can remember, according to the question, it doesn't really work for everyone and it doesn't reflect how smart you are and like, how much information you know* (School 3)
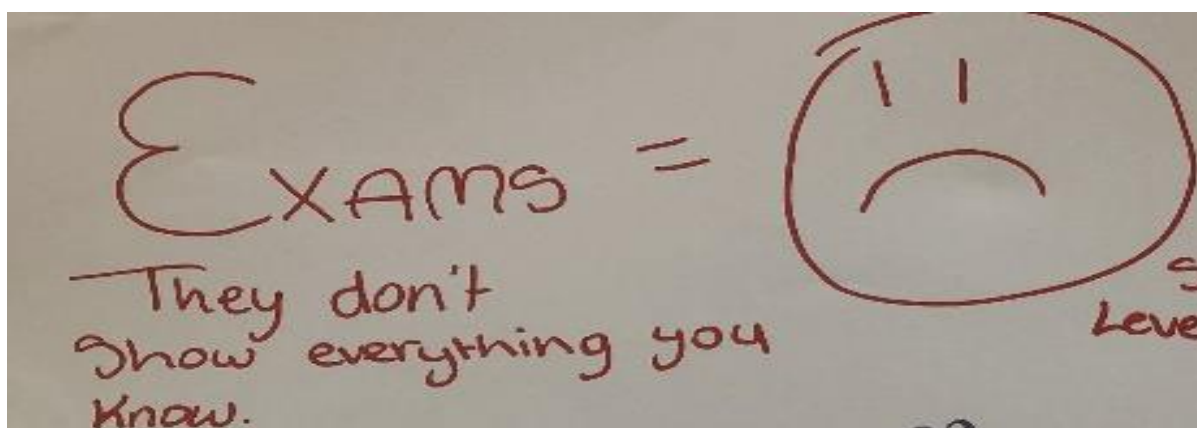
Figure 47. Example of student poster related to exams.

Students across the focus group discussions called for changes to the summative exam system. Discussing the potential to get 'good marks' in the exams, students in School 7, for example, expressed frustration with studying content which fails to be assessed in the final exams, as evidenced in the following comments:

> *Like you're trying to cram everything in trying to remember. You do certain chapters, and you never know what chapter is on the test or they never give you any clue what chapter or hint to study around. You could be studying something, and the completely opposite thing could come up* (School 7)

Students called for more options in exam questions: '*There just should be options to questions like it should be "answer three questions from part A"* t*hen you pick the 3 you think you'll get the most marks on so it can improve your grade*.'

Many students also advocated for a reduction in the volume of subject content to be studied for Junior Cycle final exams, asserting that this would be '*way more beneficial', 'less stressful'* and *'would make things easier for us ...'* (School 7). Students also suggested that a reduction in subject content would have a positive impact on student learning and exam performance: '*we would learn the most important things in greater detail*' (School 7). Many students suggested too that exams should be '*more spread out*' (School 10). Students in focus group discussions across schools also called for more help in how to efficiently manage their time because of the volume of content:

> *I also think that like they should focus in on studying in third year because like, there's so much material. Yeah, and I think like not just on how to study, but how like the timing too. I think they should help us manage our time and how long we should spend studying each subject, because some are more difficult than others (School 1)*

Many students expressed a sense of frustration with Junior Cycle summative examination grading bands and a particular concern was expressed regarding the 'merit' band. For example**:**

> *I agree with everyone that like the marking scheme we have at the moment, it's just very hard to be happy with your results, because you're comparing to someone who is getting a Merit as well as you, but they could get 55 when you could get 74. But you're still put in the same category as them, which is very frustrating because you feel like you're not doing well enough* (School 3)

> *Like 55 is a merit and so is 74. So, it's like I could put in my heart and soul into something but still get the same grade as someone who got 55 and didn't try* (School 8)

Given the many challenges outlined by students in the relation to summative exams, it is perhaps unsurprising that most students across the focus group discussions in schools called for more continuous assessment. For example, students advocating for continuous assessment said:

> *So, I don't like tests, because, some people are more practically smart instead of, you know, proper tests. They're better off doing stuff instead of just writing and writing and writing and memorizing. So instead of just doing tests, slowly build up marks throughout the year, instead of just doing a test and you have to study for a week, just to get it done I'd like to see just gradual exams … So, it's just slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly, and the get an overall grade* (School 4)

> *I would like if there wasn't just one big exam at the end. I'd like if there was kind of like one part each year or whatever. I think it's a lot to have to learn, three years of stuff in intense subjects* (School 7)

> *they should split it up so that all the tests aren't just three years of work crammed into one week* (School 8)

Some students suggested that exams at the end of each year might count towards their final Junior Cycle grade, arguing that, '*having one exam at the end of first second and third year as it would be less stress and to show you are consistent*.' (School 7). Indeed, some students suggested removing the summative Junior Cycle exam altogether in favour of regular and continuous assessment:

> *Maybe get rid of the big exam at the end of third year. I feel like it puts too much pressure on … You could do like exams during the year, and summer exams at the end of each year and get an average of them all for the final result* (School 9)

Overall, students confirmed the benefits of continuous assessment as: (a) it would '*show that you're consistent*' (b) result in '*less stress'* for students and (c) serve to '*narrow down what's going to be on the exam*' (School 7).

However, some students raised a concern about the potential impact of continuous assessment in terms of workload, stress and planning:

We had a teacher who was trying to give us a test. And we said, 'oh, we have 3 tests this week' and she said, 'Oh, you're allowed to have like up to two tests a day' or something … Continuous assessment is good, but the only reason I don't like it is because it's not planned. It's not thought out and if it's not thought out, it's more stress than it's worth. I'd rather do a huge block of exams at Christmas and summer, rather than having to do like three tests every single week (School 3)

Exam Feedback and Grading

Students were asked to outline the type of feedback they received most regularly over the course of Junior Cycle. Test scores occupied the largest portion. In total, 1779 students offered a response to this question and, as shown in Figure 48, over half the sample (51.2%) reported that test scores were the type of feedback received most frequently. 24.9% reported that written comments from teachers and 20.3% reported that oral comments from teachers were the most frequent types of feedback at Junior Cycle.
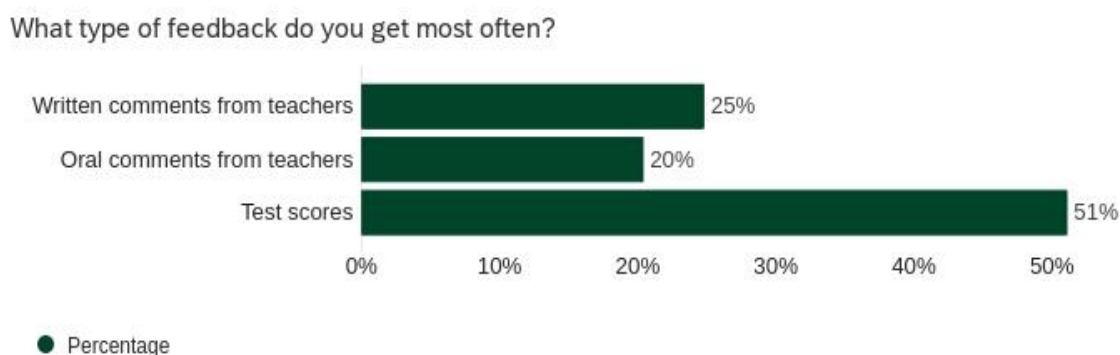
Figure 48. Type of feedback received most frequently.

When students were provided with a list of potential sources of feedback and asked what type of feedback, they received over the course of Junior Cycle it was evident that the three main types of feedback emerged again: test scores, oral comments from teachers and written comments from teachers (Figure 49). 81.2% of students reported receiving test scores, 69.1% of students reported receiving written comments from teachers while a further 55.9% reported receiving feedback in the form of oral comments from teachers. Significantly, many students also received written and oral feedback from classmates.
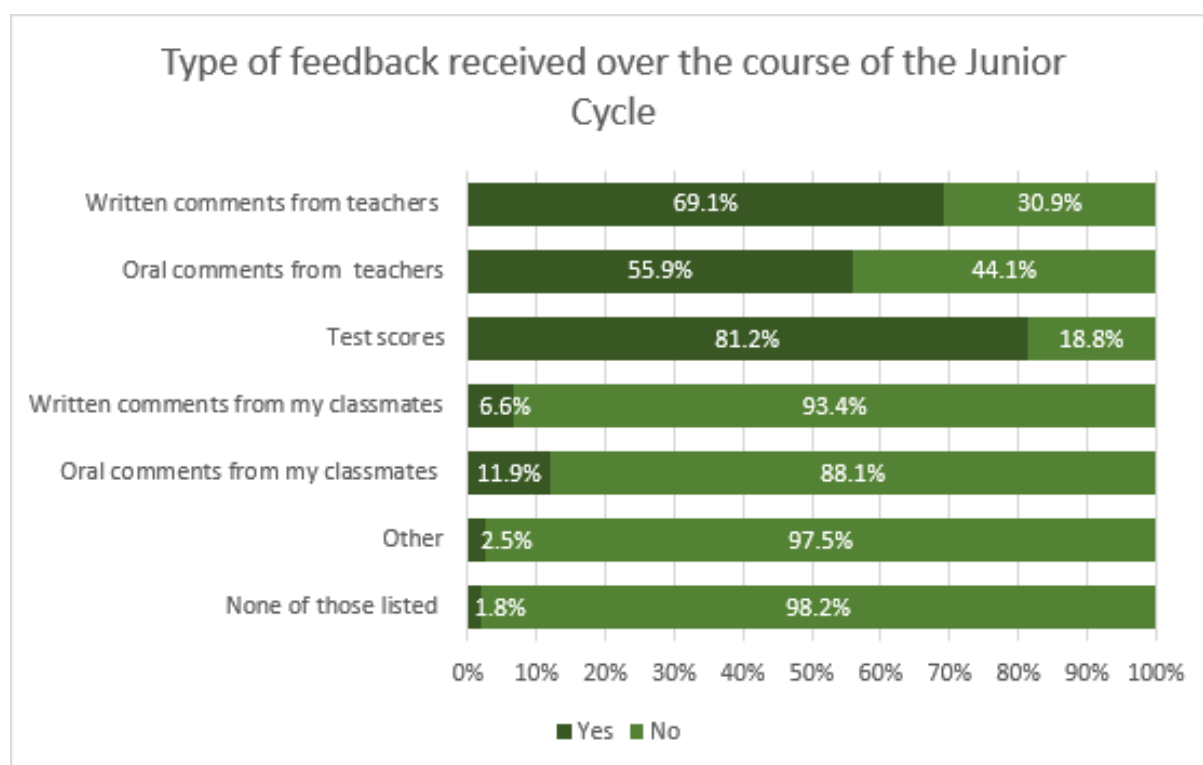
Figure 49. Type of feedback received over the course of Junior Cycle.

Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs)

Across the schools, most students were positive about the learning opportunities afforded by the CBAs, and noted several features of positive teaching, learning and assessment practices that were enabled by the CBA framework. However, the perceived negative dimensions of CBAs dominated conversations in focus group discussions. This section draws on focus group discussion data to outline and illustrate the positive and negative features of the CBAs from the students' perspectives.

Positive aspects of the CBAs

Many students talked about 'enjoying' the CBA,s: '*some of them were enjoyable and because it was like a different way to do work*' (2nd Year Student, School 1). Other students noted that some CBAs were fun: '*CBAs can be fun sometimes and its better than just answering questions from a book*' (School 8). Students particularly enjoyed how CBAs enabled more active and interactive learning, setting this in contrast with more didactic styles of learning:

> *you get asked more about your opinion, rather than actual facts and you're not like learning off dates and names and stuff. You're asked like, how do you think*

> *this affected this? And like it's more based on your opinion, rather than just being like, Oh, this happened on the 16th June 1996 or something* (School 1)

Many students liked how CBAs enabled them to work in groups more often:

> *we did a few CBAs as a group and I think as long as everyone gets involved everyone does their part, I think they're really good because in a workplace you'll probably be doing lots of projects as groups and I think that's good to learn how to do. I think it took some of the pressure off if you're doing it as a group, because you know, there's other people to help spread out the work and I also think it made it more enjoyable to complete a CBA, if you're doing it as a group, and it also meant you probably couldn't do it at home, which I think seems to be a recurring issue* (School 3)

Some students reflected positively on how the CBA introduced them to new topics they believed they would not otherwise learn about;

> *Sometimes they can be good because they can teach us like, like in Geography, like hurricanes, we wouldn't actually know about them but the CBAs allow us to research them and stuff* (School 2)

> *I've learned almost as much, just doing CBAs, than I have in the whole year … I think it's the fact that like, you want to do it. Like you get to choose what you do and you want to do it* (School 5)

Many students reported enjoying the independent learning that CBAs permitted *'independent learning, you get a bit more experience in that, which is kind of more used later in life that just listening to a teacher'* (School 9). Many also enjoyed the element of choice and control that the CBAs facilitated:

> *I think they gave a great sense of choice ... you got to choose whatever you wanted to do, you know, you weren't just given a question and then work upon that. Instead, you got to do what you want ... they just give the student a lot of choice and just a lot more independence rather than the teacher having to tell them everything and then they just recite it* (School 5)

Students commented positively on the project-based nature of their learning in CBAs: *'I think like doing projects, like CBAs and getting to do our own research is a good way to learn in class'* (School 1). In this way, the CBAs allowed them to do in-depth work on a specific topic that was of interest to them:

> *like subjects that allow you to go off and research things on your own, that allow you to kind of extend your knowledge … You can go into depth on things that you like and*

> *specialize in the thing that you know … Well CBAs were kind of fun. Like you got to research which was fun …* (School 2)

> *You get to choose some of my favourite projects … you choose what you want to learn. You get to do it on something you're interested in and not just follow what the teacher wants you to do* (Youthreach)

Students mentioned how CBAs required them to present their work to their peers. Most students could see that presenting their research and learning was a good skill and doing this regularly built their confidence: '*Although it was so scary and like we were all nervous, you do gain confidence from it. And especially when you do well in it, you gain a lot of confidence. And you say like, okay, I can stand up in front of my class, and I can do it*' (School 1). Though, many also acknowledged being anxious about presenting material outlining for example:

` *I hated the presentations, having to like present in front of everyone* (School 1)

> *I hate the presenting CBAs where you have to present it in front of the class. I don't think like anyone really likes it* (School 5)
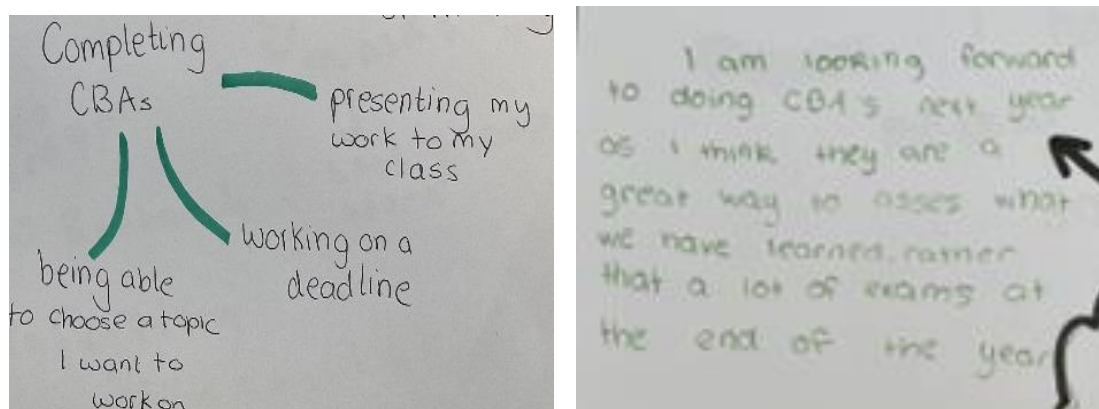
Figure 50. Examples of student posters on the benefits of CBAs.

Overall, whilst students articulated positive aspects to the CBAs, the negatives dominated conversations in most focus group discussions. The following section explores the more challenging aspects of the CBAs as experienced by the students who participated in the focus group discussions.

Negatives aspects of the CBAs

Most students talked about the difficulties in having too many CBAs scheduled at once: '*I like the CBAs. It's only whenever we had like five or six at the same time, that takes away from the enjoyment because then you have to cram everything. They're not of a high standard then because you have rushed them*' (School 8). This scheduling difficulty was a dominant theme in conversations about CBAs and many described this element as a particularly '*stressful process*' (School 6). The following conversation between one group of students illustrates the daily/weekly pressure that many students felt around CBAs:

> *Student 1: CBAs. For me, I hate them*
>
> *Student 2: I hate the time pressure*
>
> *Student 3: Yeah it all just builds up. It's all too much in one week*
>
> *Student 4: You'd be constantly worrying* (School 10)
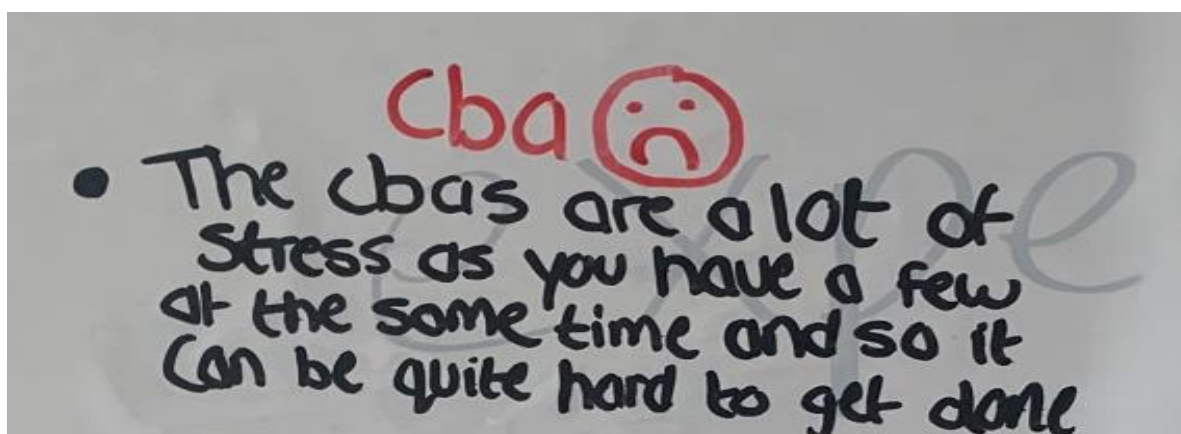
Figure 51. Student poster example of CBA related stress.

Some students noted how there wasn't always sufficient time to complete each CBA: '*we had five classes to finish our CBA and by the time people got in and knew about the CBA, there was only about three classes left and when you had all your topics picked, and it wasn't enough time to finish your project*' (School 10). The result of this squeezed time for completing some CBAs was that students found themselves doing CBA work as part of their homework in the evenings or at weekends, and many resented this because they believed they should take place within class time: '*they're called classroom-based assessment so why aren't they all done in class? ... I haven't done one CBA in school, ever*' (School 3). Ultimately, many students

called for better scheduling and longer timeframes for completing CBAs: '*… and if the CBAs had a longer timeframe and not having all the deadlines so close*' (School 10).
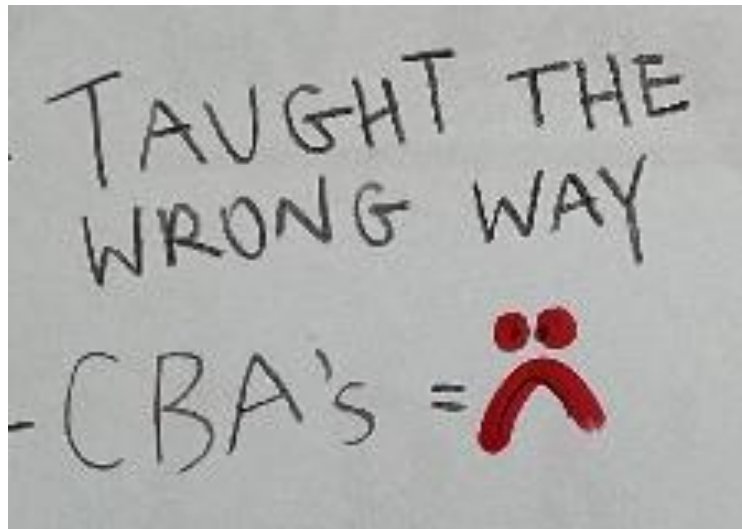
Figure 52. Student poster example of CBA.

Across the schools, students struggled to identify a connection between their work in CBAs and the summative examination:

> *I don't really like the CBAs. I don't really get the idea of them because like if the Junior Cert. is supposed to prepare you for the Leaving Cert, then like, I don't really get them* (School 4).

> *I don't think it's relevant to the Junior Cert and the information that you learn. It's not related to the information that you've learned in class (School 8)*

To many students, CBAs felt like extra unnecessary work separate to the real business of summative exams. For example, one student said: '*CBAs. Like, I feel like they didn't really go towards much, and that they would kind of just extra work being put on us*' (School 5) while another said: '*its' just basically like a word that goes in your report saying how well you did, but it doesn't affect your actual Junior Cert.*' (School 5). However, a minority of students saw the CBA as connected to summative exams:

> *Like it's not just the exam that's giving you kind of a grade or the structure, your CBA helps with those and goes towards it* (School 2)

> *If you were to get the 10%, even if you get 30% of your exam, that extra 10% will make it 40% (*Youthreach)

Overall, most students were dissatisfied with the grading and feedback system associated with CBAs. Many students advocated for the work in CBAs to contribute more substantially to their overall Junior Cycle grade:

> *... the fact that they're not even like a part of marking scheme. That's just a waste of time now, because they're not going towards anything you're just doing them for no reason. Whereas if they were still a part of the marking scheme, like I wouldn't mind them … Yeah, because you would put more into doing them if they were part of the marking scheme* (School 4)

> *We think CBAs should be worth more than 10% of your grade. We spent a lot of time doing them and we gather the information ourselves* (School 7)

> *You do so much work for them and they count for nothing* (School 8)
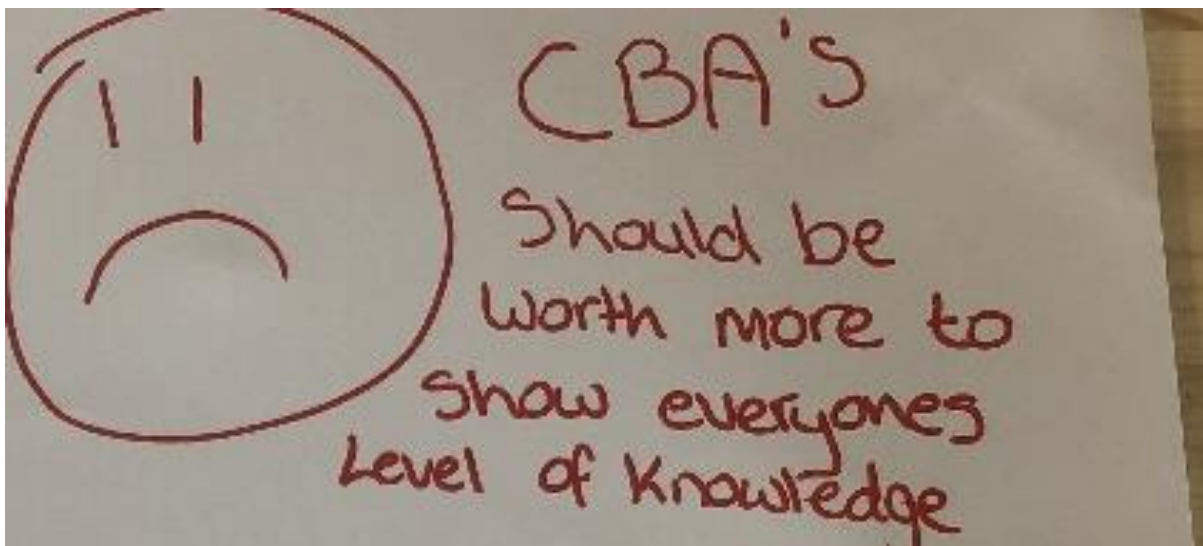
Figure 53. Student poster example of percentages allocated to CBAs.

Some students described liking the CBA marking grading scheme. For example:

> *I like the new marking scheme you know, like exceptional or above expectations and in line ... Like usually if you got your test back and you got like a C or something and you would think oh, that was a poor job, but then you look at it and it's like 'in line' or 'above expectation', you feel better about it* (School 2)

> *it is very handy when they have like, this is what an exceptional CBA has, this is what an above expectations CBA has* (School 3)

Impact

Stress

Stress was a very significant theme across the conversations in student focus group discussions. Stress was primarily associated with everyday workload in balancing homework, CBAs, CBA scheduling and attempting to memorise large amounts of content for summative exams.

Stress About Everyday Workload

Across the year groups, students reported feeling stressed and sometimes overwhelmed in relation to their everyday workload. The following images and quotes give a flavour of the kind of conversations around stress that very often dominated focus group discussions:

> *… so it feels like the work never ends. Like even on the weekends, we might finish our homework from that week, but we'll always have like a project, or like a test for the next week, or like just, there's always something to do and it's always like one on top of another and then we don't really have time for other activities outside of school, because they're always telling us like, we need to do sports, we need to do like music, we need to have other things, but like, we're all the tests and the TLAs and stuff, we can't and then sometimes, like it feels like we don't have enough time to study in tests. So, we don't do as well as we could do because like we're trying to fit the studying in with like, activities homework, and then last few days, we had like three or four CBAs and then it feels like we can't really relax, because there's always like, something to be thinking about that we need to do* (School 3)

> *it's six classes, six hours, just non-stop constant work, which is very tricky to do ...because there's just so much to take in and so much you have to take out of it with you* (School 5)

This is further reflected in the example from students' creative posters:
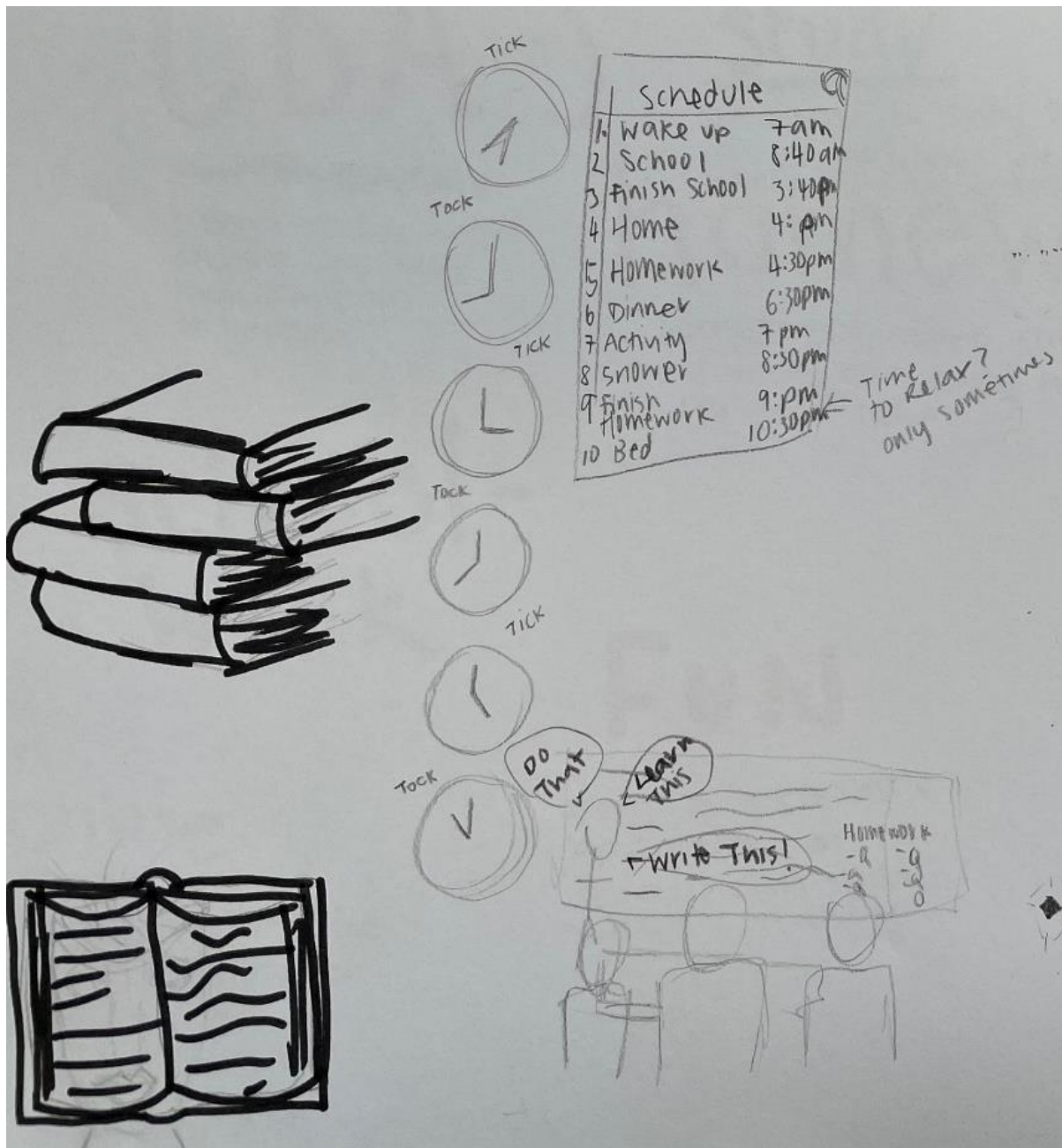
Figure 54. Student poster example about everyday workload.

Stress About Homework

Homework was a significant source of negativity and stress articulated across many of the focus group discussions. Students outlined the challenge of being expected to '*balance everything'* while getting, *'piles and piles of homework'* (School 1) and argued that the volume of homework prescribed leaves little time for anything else each evening. Students also called for less homework at the time of exams or for better alignment between the homework given and their impending tests/exams:

like homework and stuff. I think like the closer it gets to exams, like, they shouldn't be giving, like as much homework and give more time to like, study. Study should be a priority and also for studying, it would be helpful if teachers could give us a guide on what to study and what topics are important (School 1)

if you had an exam, they shouldn't be giving you homework on chapter 15 and having an exam on chapter 18. So, they just shouldn't be giving you homework on something else. Just give written homework based on the exam, or else just say go home and study this and don't give you any homework (School 3)
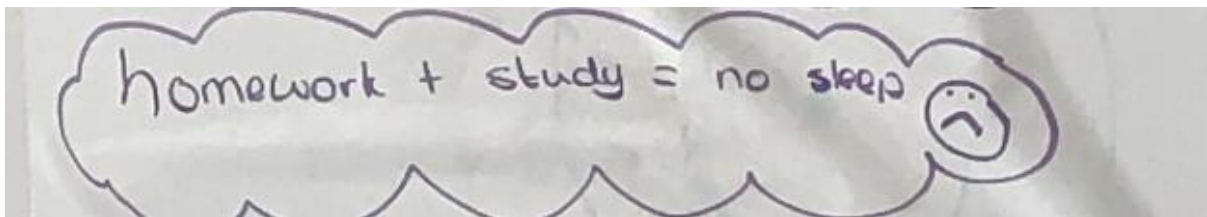
Figure 55. Student poster example on workload and homework.

CBA Scheduling Stress

As aforementioned in the assessment section, many students across the focus group discussions attributed a significant amount of stress to having too many CBAs at once. Many students called this a 'stressful' process and proposed that, '*There's just too many [CBAs]*' (School 6).

In second year, we had the CBAs, and I don't know if it was just me, but I found them unnecessarily stressful. Especially with the oral ones because I don't really like talking in front of people that much, like speeches. So I found them a bit stressful and overwhelming (School 5)
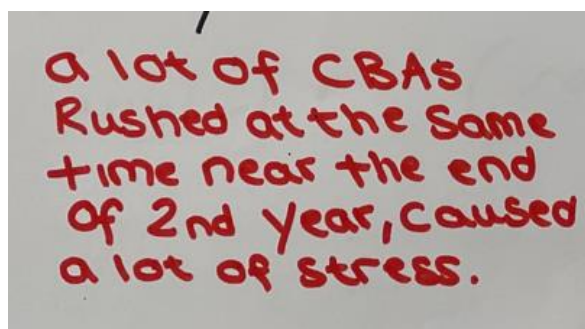
Figure 56. Student poster example of stress caused by CBA commitments.

Many students noted the stress associated with completing their CBAs to be compounded by the clustering of CBA deadlines. Students outlined for example;

> At *the moment we have, English, Maths and Science right now and then there'll be History, and CSPE right now as well* (School 7)

> *I like the CBAs. It's only whenever we had like five or six at the same time, that takes away from the enjoyment because then you have to cram everything. They're not of a high standard then because you have rushed them* (School 8)

> *CBAs that have to be done take a lot of time, especially, if you have to deal with a few at the same time, it can be a lot of pressure to get them done (School 4)*

Many students also added that third year was a particularly stressful time from a workload point of view and argued that CBAs should be more spread out across the three years:

> *I think CBAs are a good thing, but like, not in third year because it's gonna be a lot of added pressure, because third year is a big year as well and you have lots that like, takes your attention away from subjects that you want to want to keep on going* (School 7)

> *I think for the third year, we think this because we will already have the Junior Cert. to worry about as well as the mock exams. So, CBAs are just added stress and pressure to complete* (School 2)

> *I think CBAs are good, but I think when we have them in third year it's going to be a lot of work with homework and studying and a lot of my CBAs, we had to do them at home, because there's not enough time in class* (School 5)

Several students suggested there might be more organisation across subjects to support a better distribution of CBA assessments across the term:

> *like continuous assessment which could definitely be more well organized because I feel like some weeks we've no tests and like next week, we'd have like five so I feel*

like they could definitely organize them. Like, I think they could have maybe set up dates, like literally written down. So, I think then maybe they could compare or like whatever, but I just think that they should definitely have it more organized (School 3)

I feel like they could be spread out more, then each of them would be better individually, because you'd have more time to focus on it (School 8)

Exam Stress

Many students cited how large summative exams increased stress and put pressure on their mental health and wellbeing: '*I think that the exams can be like stressful and that can kind of mess with people's mental health*' (School 4).

As mentioned in the assessment section, the volume of content to be memorised for exams was a significant source of stress for students. The following quotes are illustrative of the kinds of conversations students had about the volume of subject content matter:

There's like so much content in each subject too, like we've got like 20 chapters in History, like 50 chapters in Geography and it's like that in every single subject, there's like 10 subjects and then you've got like at least 10 topics in every subject and it's just hard to like manage that as well as homework and study and extra-curricular activities (School 1)

I feel like there's too much in it … it just stresses you that you have to learn that much (School 7)

Many students argued that continuous assessment was a 'less stressful' model of assessment:

you're like sitting down in a test like a written test, you walk into class, you get your test handed to you and you just sit down. Those are kind of really stressful, whereas CBAs you have a lot of time to prepare in class (School 9)

When reflecting on the final Junior Cycle exam, some students noted how stressful it became in attempting to complete the prescribed coursework, noting how, because of the volume, they inevitably had to teach themselves some content at home as course work wasn't complete:

We just haven't completed like a lot of the courses and it's kind of expected for us to do that in our own time and it's hard to find that time especially when we're still getting homework and fitting study and sports and still go out with friends (School 5)

Many students also noted how the scheduling of exams, with many exams taking place at the same time, created stress:

> *When it comes to exams, like they feel quite stressful because like, they're all going on at the same time and that creates a negative kind of outlook on exams as a whole, like especially the Junior Cert. as well, like seems a bit stressful considering all the exams are done at once* (School 8)

Some students noted how teachers exacerbated their feelings of stress by putting pressure on them when it came to summative exams:

> *Student 1: I found that like near Christmas time in the summer exams, there was a lot more unnecessary stress around the exams, like say, if you're a [subject redacted] class, it'd be like the end of the world if you didn't get higher than a 90 in the test because, you know, it's how the teachers made us feel...*
>
> *Student 2: The year one teachers, they weren't as strict in terms of, you know, studying, and doing well in the exams. Obviously, they want to see you to do well, but it wasn't the main focus, the main focus was just understanding, but in year two, it's more or less like, 'Okay, you have to do well in the exams' and then sometimes it's just kind of a bit of fear mongering, because they're just like, 'Oh, if you don't want to do well, you don't go to college' and it's like, 'okay, I don't think Trinity College, if I do apply, are gonna look at my Christmas exams from second year* (School 6)

Indeed, some students pointed out that because of the volume of work overall, the teacher-student relationships suffered. They commented on the impact of a persistent '*work, work, work'* focus on the student teacher relationship (School 5). Indeed, some students reflected on the negative knock-on effect for their self-esteem and self-efficacy as a result of summative exams: '*I feel like we're lacking'* (School 10). The two creative poster excerpts below reflect these perspectives.
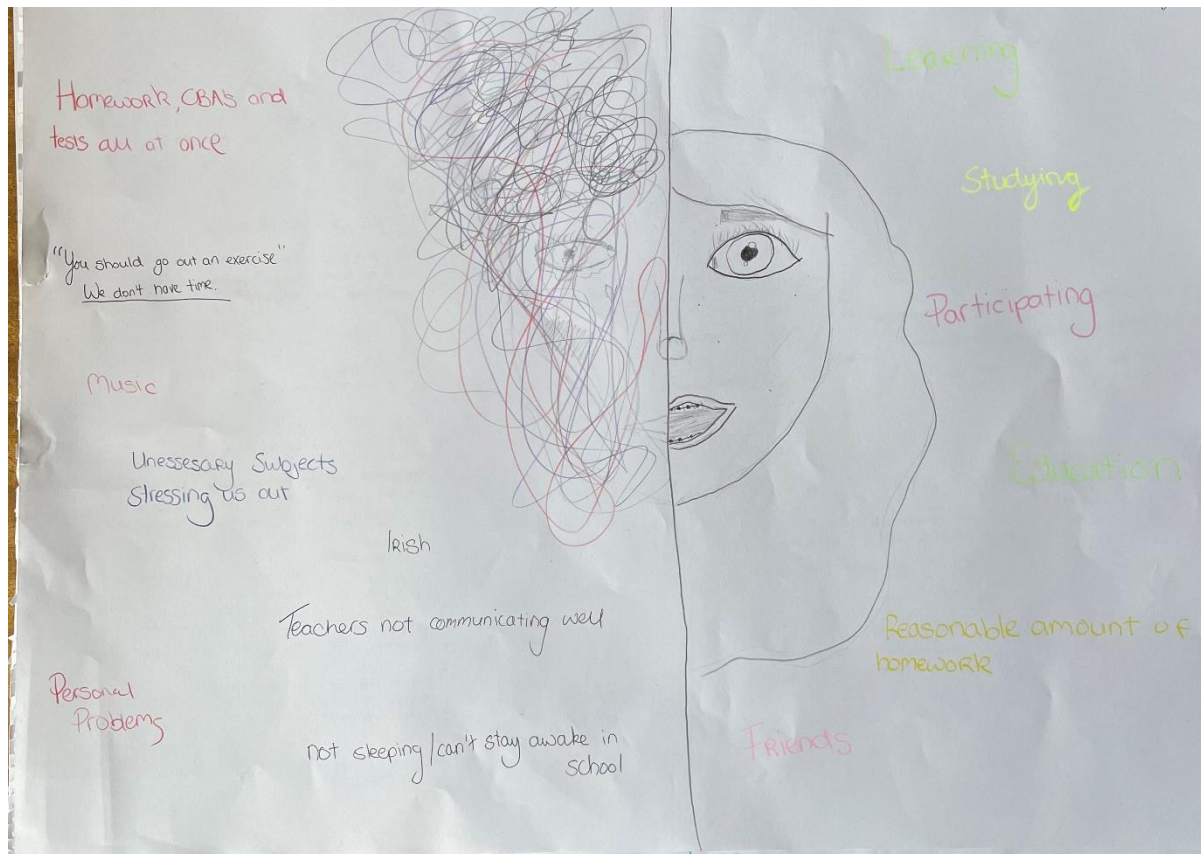
Figure 57. Student poster example of the effects of stress.

Wellbeing

The survey explored if students felt that their wellbeing was supported during Junior Cycle and the impact of any such support. Students were first asked if they engaged in a Wellbeing course as part of Junior Cycle. 1,763 students responded and 52.1% (n = 919) indicated that they had engaged in a Wellbeing programme while 19.2% (n = 338) had not. The remaining students were unsure whether or not they had engaged in such a programme. This demonstrates that over half the students surveyed believed that class time was dedicated specifically to address issues surrounding their wellbeing. Following on from this, students were then questioned on whether they felt that their wellbeing was supported in school in general. The responses to this survey item are summarised in Figure 58.

Percentage of agreement with 'My wellbeing is supported in my school'
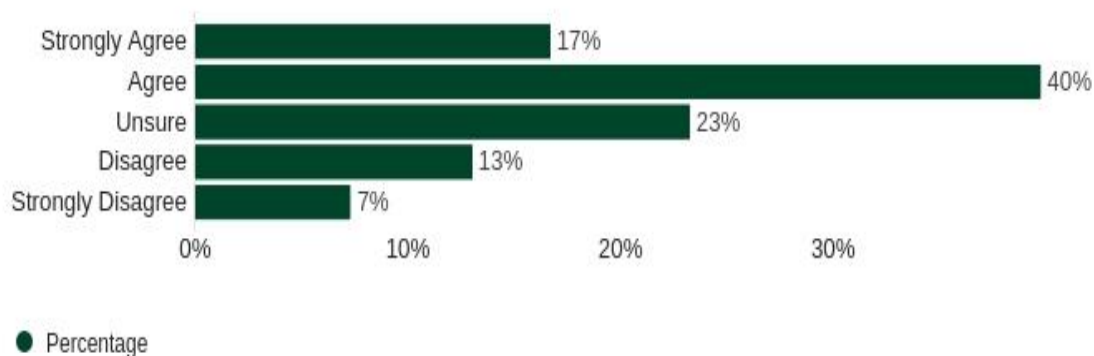
Figure 58. Students' level of agreement with the statement "My wellbeing is supported in my school".

In total, 56.3% (*n* = 993) of students agreed or strongly agreed that their wellbeing was supported in their school. However, approximately one in five students surveyed (*n* = 359) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea that their wellbeing was supported in school. Conversations amongst students in the focus group discussions helped provide clarity on this perceived lack of support.

Time for Wellbeing was a significant theme across conversations in focus group discussions. Several students noted that some teachers facilitated breaks in class that were very welcome. While some teachers were very caring about personal circumstances:

> *the way we go on walks in CSPE to take a break from work. It helps release stress which might be good for some students because if we stay on task for too long, it might be stressful for some students. So, if you go for a walk, it can release stress which is quite good* (School 4)

> *Some teachers will give a chance to students who don't get their work done for their own personal reason and like some students could like not do their homework because of their own personal reason and the teachers just think you don't want to do it without trying to ask why* (School 4)

However, overall, students reported that in balancing the various aspects of their everyday school workload, they didn't have enough 'free' or Wellbeing time:

> *I think it's hard for time management, to balance everything when we're getting like piles and piles of homework, but also being expected to do like two or three hours of study per night, but then they're also saying it's important for our*

> *wellbeing to get out and go outside and play football or whatever. It's very hard to get it all in and they're telling you to get an early night so you can be refreshed for the morning, but I just find this like very difficult to do* (School 1)

The Wellbeing programme and classes were mentioned by many students across the focus group discussions in the context of conversations about stress. Some students acknowledged that Wellbeing class helped them develop important skills for coping with stress: '*It helps us cope when we're stressed.*' (School 10). Many students talked about Wellbeing class as a welcome time out: '*I think Wellbeing is a really good class it's like a 40-minute class for us anyway, every week. And it's a good opportunity to just not have an exam to work towards or like CBAs*' (School 3). Indeed, some students talked about other subjects that weren't examined as being less stressful and a welcome break from the pressure;

> *Like we don't do [subject] as an exam subject. It's kind of relaxing as well and, like, I'm fine with being in religion coming up to exams, it kind of gives us a chance to relax instead of our brain going 100 miles per hour. So I kind of find that as helpful* (School 7)

However, conversely, many students acknowledged how, while they enjoyed Wellbeing class time, it inevitably became about work rather than relaxing, and therefore may not have had a positive impact on their wellbeing:

> *we do get a good bit of wellbeing but there's obviously more that we can be doing. We enjoy Wellbeing class a lot. Like we used to do like walks, but we don't really do walks anymore. Everything relates back to work somehow even in Wellbeing class and even SPHE. Like we watch a movie, but then we have to fill out a worksheet on it. Like its just never fully relaxed* (School 1)

While some noted the positive impact a focus on Wellbeing has on their mental health, many students talked about Wellbeing lessons within school as causing 'more stress': *'we don't really like Wellbeing class and we all agree, it nearly adds more stress. We just go and do an exercise in a book, like that doesn't help us'* (School 3).
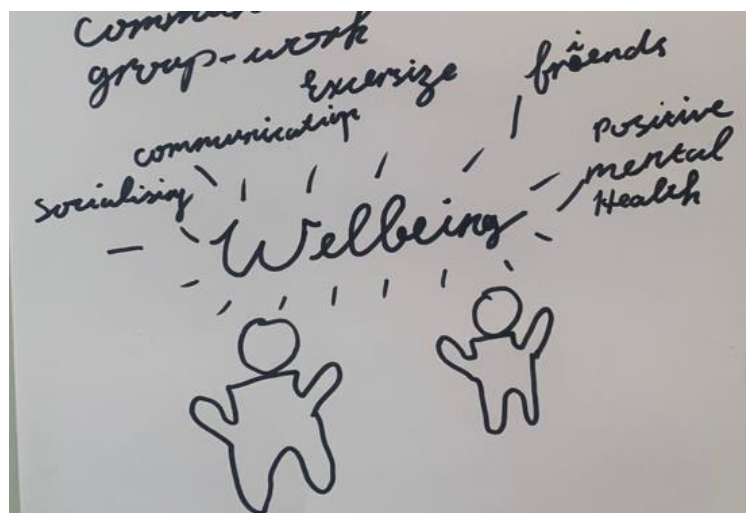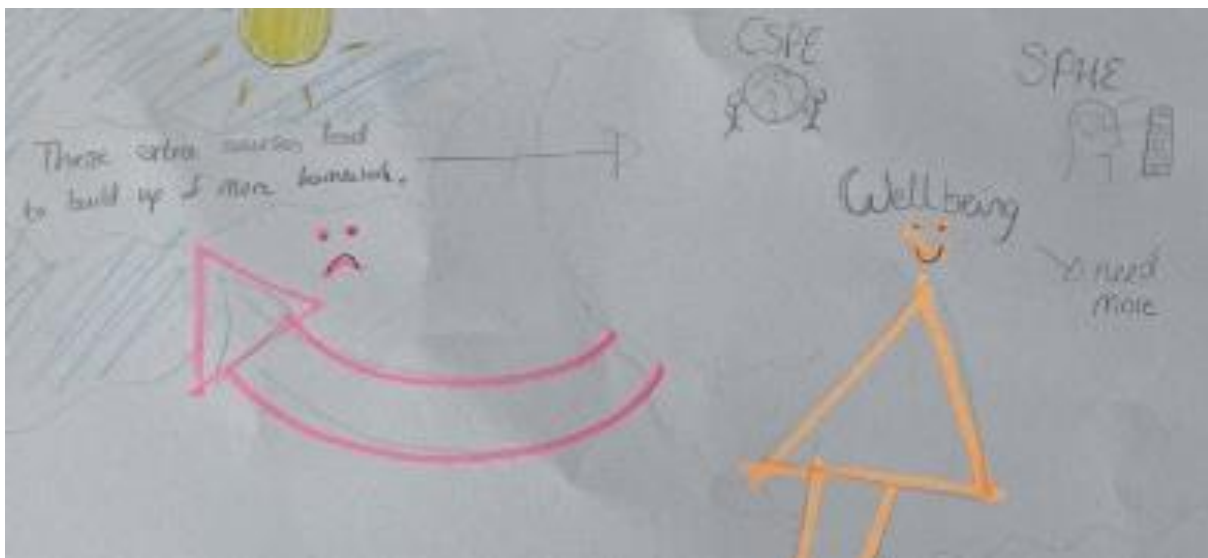
Figure 59. Examples of students creative posters on a) the impact of Wellbeing related classes on workload/homework and b) what aspects of school life support their wellbeing

Many students across the focus group discussions noted that Wellbeing class did not provide the right space for addressing their wellbeing issues: 't*hey're [Wellbeing classes] boring and we don't really talk about anything*' (School 4).

In reflecting on alternatives, some students noted that Wellbeing time could provide more Wellbeing opportunities such as going into the outdoors.

> *Like maybe if you could do a class outside? free time or just make it part of a class like Wellbeing for an example just because it's kind of the main one that they want you to get outside and get that time outside. Even if it's not planned or anything and you just kind of go 'oh we'll go outside today' or something like that* (School 2)

Many students also outlined the need for a more balanced approach to the completion of coursework across the three years of Junior Cycle**,** suggesting that much of the work is clustered within the latter stages of the programme*:*

> *The first and second year of school was more enjoyable, then third year was tough. It was more full-on. They didn't really ease us into third year. They kind of threw us into it. With first and second year being a lot more relaxed and then we go into third year and all of a sudden exams are in your face. It's a bit overwhelming to go straight into that. I'd say like spread the work out a bit more evenly and ease students into third year instead of making it all of a sudden a big deal* (School 5)

Impact on Motivation, Engagement and Philosophy of Learning

The survey results show that the vast majority of students are motivated to learn, as demonstrated in Figure 60.

Level of agree with the statement 'I am motivated to learn'
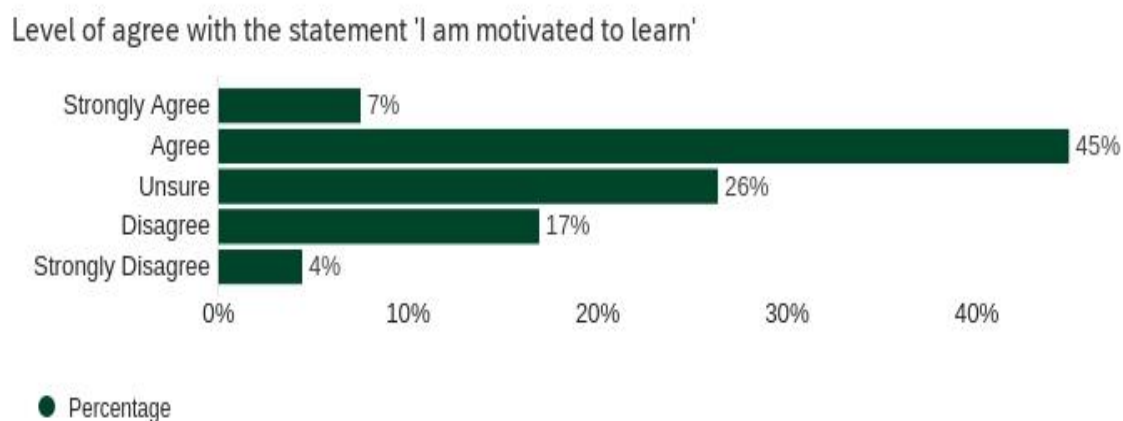
Figure 60. Students reported levels of motivation for learning.

While Figure 60 highlights that over half of the sample are motivated to learn, the focus group discussions indicate that while motivation was high, their motivation to learn became heavily characterised with a focus on examinations. Large amounts of content to be learned meant that they were acutely sensitised to the 'relevance' of their learning. The following quote is illustrative of this phenomenon:

> *like I feel like some of them are really unnecessary like, we did a religion CBA and it had to be on a person of faith. I did mine on like Sister Stan, she was a nun, but then like, there's nothing else about sister Stan on the coursework. So it's like I've done this project about her, but I'm not going to need to do anything else and in that time, I could have been learning about the topics that I need to know for like my Junior Cycle, and then for like, the tests* (School 3)

Many students noted too that teachers were equally pressurised by the overload in workload, with the result that they sometimes needed to 'rush through' content. Students noted this and found it difficult in many instances: '*I think we shouldn't move onto another topic until all students understand it, instead of rushing through stuff. When you're rushing too fast, you can barely understand the subject*' (School 10).

Large amounts of content to be memorised for exams had an impact too on how students thought about and approached tests and exams. Some students noted how they 'learn off'

answers to questions and acknowledged that this approach didn't require them to understand the content:

> *we just learn off answers and you kind of try to tailor them, tailor them to the question you have, but I don't know. It's just I don't actually know what I'm writing* (School 3)

> *this is what you have to learn, this is what you have to do to play the game in the exam and get your marks, which is fair enough, but I also don't think you're learning should just be based on this final exam and how you're going to get your marks at the end of the year. Like because I think the goal at the end of the year is to get so many marks by doing this thing. So we're not actually trying to learn, we're just trying to learn in a way that would actually get you marks* (School 3)

Student Choice and Voice

Choice in Subjects

The new Framework for Junior Cycle has an impact too on Student Voice and Choice. Some students commented positively on the choice of subjects:

> *we got a good choice of subjects to choose from like we got, we got to pick two subjects between Art, Tech Graph, Home Ec, Business, Music and then we either got French or German. So there was, I think anyway, there was a good selection that we could choose from* (School 3)

However, this wasn't the case across all schools and several students called for '*more choices of subjects'* (School 7). These differences of opinion reflects the local autonomy and capacity of schools to offer subjects. The following discussion between two first year students is illustrative of this:

> **Student 2:** *Because we don't have Technical Graphics or we don't have Woodwork. So, we don't have those options. Like that might be something we're really interested in. Like, because we're an all-girls school, we just don't get the option to do those subjects.*

> **Student 1:** *in fourth year, you get to do Woodwork.*

> **Student 2:** *that's in fourth year, I'm not gonna wait three years to do some Woodwork. You know, like, I'd rather just do it now* (School 1)
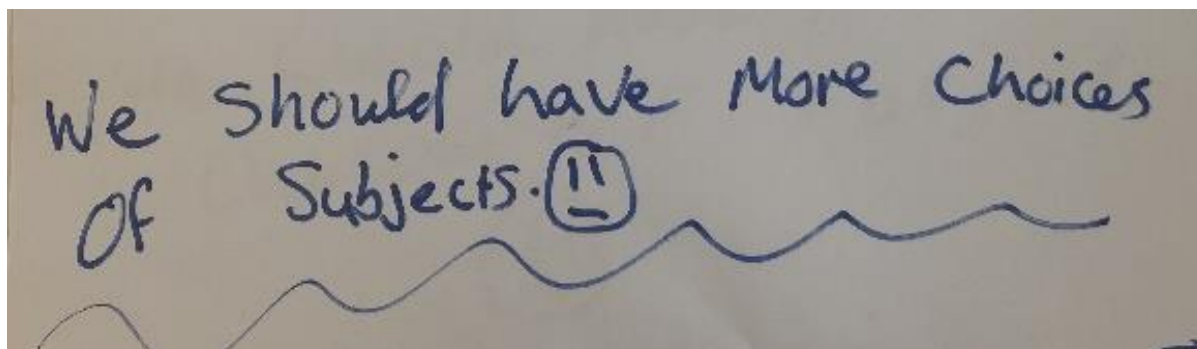
Figure 61. Example student creative poster on subject choice.

Some students pointed out that this meant that not only did they in some instances not have the option to study a subject that they would like; they sometimes had to choose subjects they didn't want to study:

> *Maths and Science are very important, but that's only if you're being a scientist, or if you're working in that department, you know, because during the Junior Cycle, you don't get a choice for any of that, you just have to do English, even if you don't want to be a poet or a movie writer* (School 5)

In this vein, some students also argued that certain subjects should be optional. Some students suggested that they would have liked an opportunity to try out or do 'tasters' in certain subjects before they committed to them, but this was not available to them. Linked to this, several students commented that they would have liked to have more knowledge about the implications for the future of choosing particular subjects and conversations about kind of career they might see themselves enjoying. The issue of subject choice emerged in several student focus group discussions. For some, this related to a desire for greater choice in the subjects they study. These differing views are reflected in the excerpts below:

> *Make some more subjects optional. Like CSPE or IT Or even Geography or History* (School 4)

> *all my other friends were like, who went to the other schools were trialling subjects. And they were like, oh, yeah, no, I was gonna do this before I went in, but then I tried it in school and actually didn't like it, but I didn't get that choice. So I chose the subject and I'm not the biggest fan of it, but then like, I don't want to have to move subjects. I don't want to be behind on the other subject because I'm actually like, pretty okay, like I get good test results in that subject. I don't hate it, but I think I would have rathered being able to try like other subjects* (School 3)

Trying to predict what you see yourself doing in the future to decide what subjects to do for the Leaving Cert. Trying to find subjects you're good at and then picking new subjects you haven't done yet … such a young age that can determine your whole future (School 2)

I think we should have had more options about like, what choice subjects we could pick when we we're in first year because I know in mixed schools, they have loads of like choice subjects you can choose from. So, I think we could like more options (School 1)

Choice in Content

In the student survey students were questioned on the extent to which they had choice in relation to the subjects they studied, the level at which they studied subjects and the short courses that they engaged with. The responses are presented in Figure 62.

The extent to which the following occur at Junior Cycle

	All of the time	Some of the time	None of the time
I decide what subjects I take	29%	61%	11%
I decide what short courses I take	10%	26%	64%
I decide what level to study my ...	41%	35%	24%
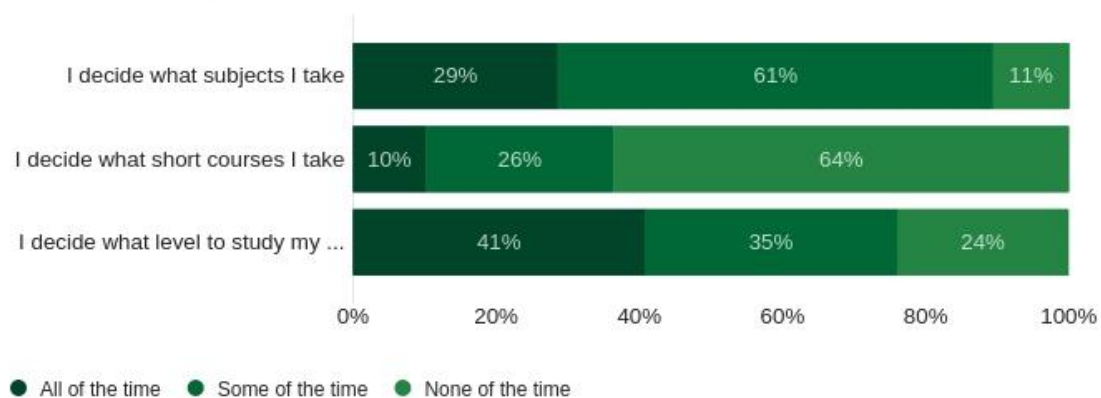
Figure 62. How regularly students have choice in the content they study at Junior Cycle.

A large proportion of students (40.7%) reported that they always had choice in relation to the level at which they studied the core subjects of Mathematics and English. However, not as many students reported always having choice in the subjects that they studied with 28.4% of students reporting always being the one to make this decision. When short courses were considered, 63.6% of students reported never having choice in relation to the short courses they study. These responses highlight that a large number of students felt they had little choice in the material they studied at Junior Cycle. However, and as touched upon in the

section on teaching and learning, students overall valued the idea of having some choice in what and how they learned: '*let the students have a say in what we're learning, and how we are gonna learn it?... maybe if we gotta say in how we learned it, maybe it might be more interesting*' (School 1). For example, the following student explained the way that their teacher gave them choices:

> *She interacts with us, like, she asks what we want to do, like, if we were to read a book, she would give us three choices and let us choose between which one we wanted to read… Yeah it kind of gives us a bit more responsibility. It's not like 'oh, this teacher is making us read this book, it like we chose to read this* (School 2)

Choice in Assessment

As discussed within the assessment section, students described enjoying having choice in the realm of assessment. Students pointed out how they enjoyed when they had choice in how to represent their learning, with Several students argued that they ought to have more choice within exam questions:

> *So having your own choice of like how to represent what you've learned. You can do Like a PowerPoint of stuff. That's what I found more exciting about it because you can represent it without the stress and it's kind of easier to do and easier to like actually remember what you were doing* (School 2)

> *yeah, it's not fair on students, to expect them to know absolutely everything on the course and then you can only answer what's on the page, and you're not given choices because you might have focused on this, thinking this will definitely come up on the exam, your teachers telling you this will come up and then something else comes up that you haven't studied as much and then then you're stuck* (School 3)

Many students across the schools commented positively on how CBAs brought a greater level of choice and control over their learning. For example, one student said:

> *I think they gave a great sense of choice...you got to choose whatever you wanted to do, you know, you weren't just given a question and then work upon that. Instead, you got to do what you want... they just give the student a lot of choice and just a lot more independence rather than the teacher having to tell them everything and then they just recite it* (School 5)

However, in contrast to this, several students argued that they should have more input on CBAs:

CBAs, they should get more student feedback on how they do it, because like, then if they do do that, then they can make it more effective on the students and their wellbeing (School 3)

I think CBAs are way too boring. They're all the same. Plain and boring. Always a PowerPoint and you always just search the information online, copy and paste. They could definitely be more fun. If we had more choice, we might do something that you're actually interested in (School 4)

Student Voice and Agency

In the survey, the issue of student voice and agency, was investigated by asking students, on a scale from 0 to 100, to rank who had the most say in classroom decisions. A score of zero meant the students had complete ownership over all classroom decisions, a score of 50 meant the decision-making process was shared equally between students and teacher while a score of 100 meant that the teacher had complete control over all classroom decisions. The results are presented in Figure 63.
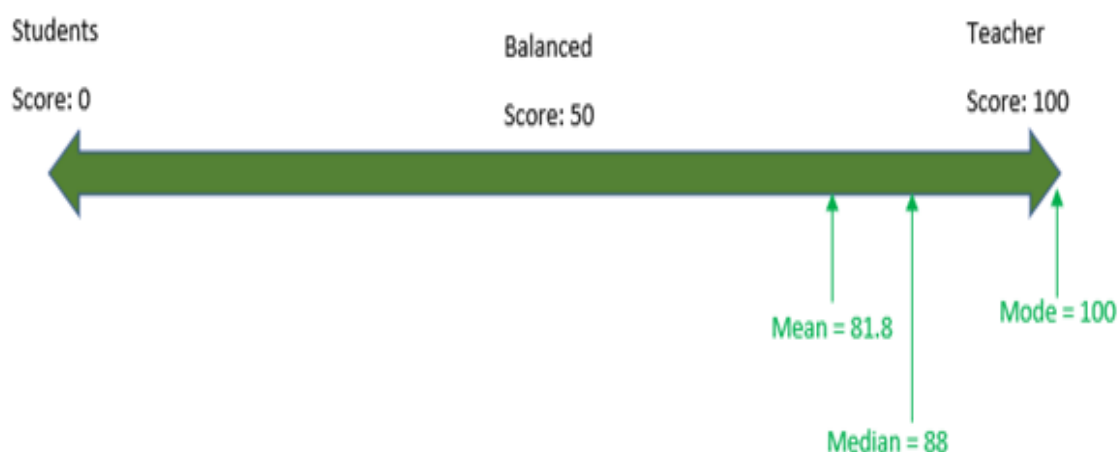
Figure 63. Who has responsibility for classroom decisions at Junior Cycle?

As shown in Figure 63, the most common score submitted by students was 100. In total, 678 of the 1754 students who answered this question gave a score of 100 meaning 38.7% of students felt they had no say whatsoever in decisions made in the classroom. In addition to this the high mean and median figures suggest that while 61.3% may have believed they had some say in the decisions made in the classroom, very few believed this to be a regular

occurrence. This issue was further investigated in another survey item. Students were asked to rate their level of agreement, using a five-point Likert scale, with the following statements:

(a) *I have opportunities to voice my opinions*

(b) *The opinions I offer are acted upon*

The responses to both of these questions are summarised in Figure 64.

The extent to which the following occur at Junior Cycle
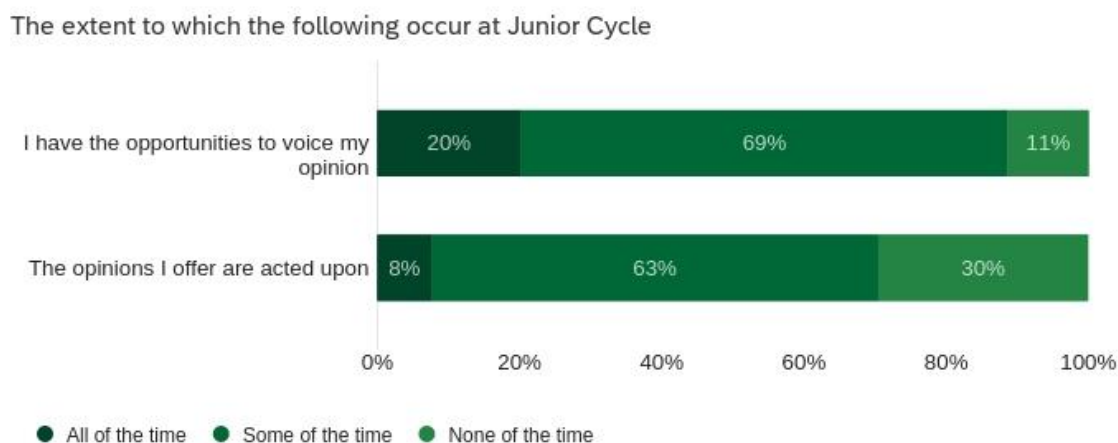
Figure 64. Student voice at Junior Cycle.

From Figure 64 it is evident that a large proportion of students (88.7%) feel that at Junior Cycle they have the opportunity to voice their opinion all or some of the time with only 12.3% of students believing this never to be the case. While many students may feel that they have the opportunity to voice their opinions, almost one-third of students (29.7%) surveyed believe that their opinions are never acted upon by teachers or the school. On the other hand, only 7.6% of students felt that the opinions they shared were always acted upon.

In comparison, students in the Youthreach centre felt that their voice was heard and actioned e.g. '*we can voice our opinion and it would definitely be followed through … they listen really well*' (Student 1).

Summary of Part 2: Student Perspectives

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the student survey and focus group discussion data. In terms of teaching and learning, students favoured engaged, collaborative, creative, and active learning experiences which offered a balance between individual and group work. They valued choice in their learning, and they appreciated when stimulus variation was introduced to support their engagement. They disliked didactic approaches, and most were averse to the practice of notetaking and methods of learning that were passive and teacher-centred.

A significant number believed that their learning needs and interests were met during their Junior Cycle, particularly during its early years. A substantial majority also believed they were supported in their transition to post-primary school.

Assessment and performance were to the forefront of the vast majority of students' minds as they navigated everyday life at school. While many students deemed exams/tests to be a suitable form of assessment, large summative exams were a source of stress for many students and most viewed them as not adequately assessing their 'full potential'. Students called for more choice and less pressure in exams, and they deemed grading bands to be too broad. Students had a preference overall for continuous assessment and, in this vein, they were aware of the positive aspects enabled by the CBAs. They enjoyed inquiry-based learning, the development of research and presentation skills, and groupwork/teamwork which they believed CBAs helped to support. However, the students believed that CBAs did not deliver many of the benefits that continuous assessment promises. Students saw CBAs as largely disconnected from summative exams and this induced a sense of futility and frustration for them, because students were predominantly concerned with their grades in exams. Students appeared to see CBA work as 'extra' and thus putting pressure on the perceived core priority of study and exams. Moreover, the perceived lack of credit attached to CBAs in the overall scheme of their Junior Cycle caused frustration for these students. Homework was perceived as a source of negativity too. Some did not see 'the point' of homework, particularly at stressful times when they had a lot of CBAs at once and/or were studying for exams.

Students across the schools reported experiencing significant stress with regard to their everyday workloads and struggled to balance homework, CBAs and study for tests and exams. This appeared to have a negative impact, in some cases, on the rapport and relationships between teacher and student, with many students resenting the 'pressure' they experienced in this regard.

The stress experienced in managing everyday workloads, combined with the pervasiveness of academic pressure, induced most of the participating students to adopt mechanisms and strategies for coping. For most, this involved on-going surveillance and evaluations about whether specific content and learning activities were 'relevant' in order to be successful in exams. Some students were acutely aware of 'playing the game' as they attempted to learn-off answers and make strategic decisions about what to memorise.

The adoption of a strategic and disciplined academic focus was also very strong across the majority of case study schools. Students believed that in order to be successful at Junior Cycle they must: engage in early and sustained academic engagement, engage in diligent notetaking, build a repository of notes for study, ensure adequate preparation for any forthcoming tests and place a strategic focus on homework.

Part 3: Parent perspectives on the curriculum change

The interviews with parents explored their hopes and perspectives in relation to their child's education, their transition from primary school into Junior Cycle, their views on the assessment and reporting of the Framework for Junior Cycle and their views on the impact of Covid on their child's education. They were also provided with an opportunity to express any other comments they had in relation to the curriculum changes.

Hopes for their child's education

When asked what they believed was important in their child's education, many different perspectives were expressed, however four main overlapping themes emerged. The need to achieve a 'broad' educational experience as part of Junior Cycle was commonly expressed and an excessively 'academic' experience was disliked. For example, one parent, when expressing this desire, said that '*I don't want it all to be academic learning*' (School 7). In a similar tone, another parent believed that a broad range of subjects would '*round out*' the academic curriculum (School 4), suggesting that alternative experiences provide a form of a counterweight to traditional subjects:

> *The first I think is important is a love of learning … fairly well-rounded in both senses of subjects and being human. So, to have that sort of broad range of experiences to round out an academic curriculum (School 4)*

This 'broad' curriculum was also seen as a way of catering for students that were 'not academic'. Linked to the need for a 'broad' curriculum was a hope that their children would develop important life skills. This included independent learning skills, practical skills, presentation skills, teamwork skills and research skills. For example, one parent believed that she was, '*not interested in a piece of paper at the end of semester*' (School 10) and that it was more important that their child developed, '*life skills and preparing her for the outside world'* (School 10). The students' social development and sense of belonging to a school community was also commonly mentioned as an important issue. This included opportunities to '*learn about themselves and learn empathy*' (School 7) as well as opportunities to take part in extra-curricular activities. The final common theme to emerge was a hope that their students would enjoy school and develop a love of learning. One parent lamented that, '*I think a bit of enjoyment has gone out of learning … there's so much emphasis on the academic work*'

(School 2). A parent of a child with special educational needs hoped that their child would be appropriately accommodated in the school to ensure a 'level playing field' (Parent, School 4).

> *I want him to get the appropriate accommodations that he needs so that he can actually complete the Junior Cycle on a level playing field with the other candidates (School 4)*

Views on the transition from primary to post-primary

Parents were also asked to comment on their child's experience of their transition from primary to post-primary school. Very different experiences were reported by parents, even from parents from the same schools. In four of the schools there were positive views expressed about the management of the transition whereas in the other schools there was a mix of views expressed. Positive experiences made reference to the caring and supportive environment within the school in general and the specific efforts made to support the transition process, as the two examples highlight:

> *everybody was just phenomenal with navigating that whole process and I do think in first year they are very mindful of the students and that it is a transition … the school has developed their own book for Wellbeing (School 3)*

> *They [the school] have a fantastic transition program … they explore any needs, and they bring the children in and they facilitate (School 6)*

Negative experiences of the transition were also reported, and it is notable that in some school's parents had quite different opinions in relation to the level of support offered to assist transition. This may indicate that such supports are not experienced uniformly by all students in the school or that specific needs of some students were not adequately catered for in this process. In relation to the transition there was also an acknowledgement that school closures and the wider disruption caused by Covid impacted on students' transition. For example, in speaking about the impact of Covid on their child's transition, one parent commented that, '*there's a lot of people in his class. He did not know what they looked like. So that's very hard as a social thing to do and some of the teachers still aren't back, they're still online. So that's hard*' (School 5).

Parents' understanding and views of assessment at Junior Cycle

When asked to comment on the assessment at Junior Cycle parents mainly commented on the CBAs. These were seen very positively by the parents. They were seen as motivational for students as they provided students with a level of autonomy to select topics to investigate as the two parents' comments show:

> *I think it's good to keep them interested and engaged all the way through the year … it also personalizes it a little bit (School 5)*

> *I think within the curriculum, if any of the children have that power to pick the topics, it's good. That's important (School 6)*

As well as their motivational value, parents also spoke about how the projects helped develop additional skills, '*it will help them in the future doing any kind of a project whether that be in college or a presentation at work*' (School 7) and that topics of interest to the students could be linked to existing subject areas. These positive views of the CBAs were tempered by a disappointment that the work completed by the students was not afforded sufficient importance in the context of the overall assessment of Junior Cycle. The following selection of comments from parents of different schools highlights this issue:

> *I definitely think when they put that much effort into their classroom-based assessment I think there should be a reward at the end* (School 2)

> *I see the effort isn't reflected in the scoring and I did not really understand that (School 3)*

> *The only thing is they don't count for anything … For all the work that goes into it (School 5)*

Apart from comments on the CBAs parents did not venture further into commenting on other aspects of the assessment and several parents admitted that they had little knowledge of how Junior Cycle was assessed and whether it differed from the previous Junior Certificate. For example, one parent assumed that the students were engaging in continuous assessment and that this was contributing to their eventual grades, however they also admitted that, '*now I am only presuming, I do not really know how they assess*' (School 2). Another parent from a different school was unsure whether the school was '*continuously assessing*' (School 5).

There was also a lack of understanding in relation to the position and role of the CBAs where one parent asked, '*Is it 40% or something with the exams?*' (School 6).

For those that did believe they had a good knowledge of the assessment there appeared to be a misunderstanding of the nature of the assessment used. This was reflected in comments from parents where they assumed that continuous assessment and project work was given greater significance and that the significance of the final examinations had been reduced accordingly, '*at least that not everything is left to the final exams*' (School 1). The following quote provides a good example of this where the parent speaks very positively about the CBAs and assumes they are weighted 40% in terms of their contribution to the subject's assessment;

> *I think the CBAs are fantastic …, I think they are the way forward. … With the project work, he works on it meticulously. He works on it like an assignment for university. He researches, he finds information and he enjoys the process, he loves it and he learns so much better from doing that than he'll ever learn from sitting in the class and learning things off, memorizing and then throwing it back on a page. … So, I really love the way it's going. I'd love to see it going for the Leaving Cert too. I think should be, I would even weight it in the opposite, I would say 60% of it should be CBAs and 40% the exam* (School 8)

When asked to comment on the assessment at Junior Cycle many parents also used it as an opportunity to critique the existing modes of assessment employed in schools highlighting the unfair focus on a single terminal examination and the lack of alternative modes of assessment that would capture a wider range of acquired skills. Speaking about the over-emphasis on summative examinations, one parent commented:

> *… an exam is like just, the colossal amount of information crammed into your brain. You put it down in an exam and then it evaporates, and then you never go back to whatever again. I mean, it's really not the way to do things right in this day and age … I think it's very it's very encouraging that they brought it [CBAs] into an extent in Junior Cycle, but my concern is that it's been diluted in the negotiations between the teachers* (School 8)

Parents' views on reporting at Junior Cycle

Parents' views on the nature and extent of reporting from schools were mixed. It was common for parents from the same school to describe different reporting experiences with

some praising the school's approach while others criticising it. By way of an example, in one school, one parent criticised the school report as it, '*might be just carbon copies from the person before*' (School 3) whereas another parent praised the reports claiming, '*it is very detailed, they do put a bit of work into it*' and noting that '*a breakdown is very important, and it does stand to them, and it definitely improves their learning*' (School 3). Some of the most negative views were expressed by parents who had students with additional challenges in the school such as challenges 'fitting in' or specific learning needs. One parent, for example, reported that her daughter was, '*there from September to June, and nobody reached out to tell me she was struggling*' (School 3) another noted that, '*I haven't got a report out since last summer, so it is very hard sometimes to know where they are at*' (School 2). Other parents had very positive experiences. When speaking about their own experiences of their school's reporting one parent said that the school, '*did not just comment on academic performance, but on how they were in the classroom, their manner, how they interacted with others*' (School 1).

The need for more timely reports from some of the schools was also accompanied by a desire for more comprehensive reporting that captured not only the students' academic performance but also information on their Wellbeing, particularly in the context of the challenges associated with their post-Covid integration into the school. One parent, for example, asked, '*how are they coping at school? Do they have friends? Are they getting on with their peers?*' (School 2). The need for this type of reporting, that was specific and comprehensive, was seen as important to get a good understanding of their integration into the school:

> *It's horrible when you feel like the comment is copied and pasted from 12 of the children, but it's nice when you see a comment where you know that the teacher actually gets your child* (School 5)

It was also recommended that school reporting should also inform parents of wider school plans so that parents are informed about the school's current activities and future plans.

Impact of Covid

Across all parent interviews it was evident that the Covid pandemic had a substantial impact on students. Some parents noted the impact of the school closures and restricted functioning

of schools on the students' preparedness for Junior Cycle examinations and subsequently their preparation for the Leaving Certificate. Some parents believed their children had 'lost' a year and that this would need to be acknowledged as the students progressed in their education. While these aspects of the children's academic development were a concern, the majority of parents were more concerned about the impact of the pandemic on students' mental health and social development. A lack of opportunities for students to mix with friends, engage in extra-curricular activities and participate in school events inhibited transition from primary school and led some students to disengaging from the wider school community. It was also reported that student motivation was impacted as learning online was not a positive experience for many students and many had not successfully adjusted to the classroom on return from lockdown and restrictions. For example, a parent whose child attended a Special School explained how Covid and related school closures had a '*huge impact*' on their child. They reported how '*COVID-19 had a huge impact on his social skills … I had to completely go back to the beginning with his routines. Routines are really important to him*'. As well as having an impact on social skills, the parent felt their child 'm*issed out on loads*' academically. While they were '*doing stuff online with their teacher'*, it wasn't '*the same*' as being in the classroom (Parent, Special School).

When provided with the opportunity to comment on other aspects parents tended to return to points previously raised focusing on the need for greater practical work in Junior Cycle, more recognition for the CBAs and better reporting from schools.

Part 3 summary: Parents' perspectives

Parents value a broad educational experience that develops important life skills for the children and that values students' social development, their sense of belonging and enjoyment of school.

Parents' experiences of their child's transition to post-primary school varied with some reporting positive experiences and supports from the school while others were critical of the supports provided. Restrictions caused by the Covid pandemic impacted on students' transition to post-primary schools in many instances.

Parents were very supportive of the introduction of the CBAs and cited many benefits for their children, however they expressed disappointment that the students' work was, from their perspective, not afforded sufficient importance in the context of the overall assessment at Junior Cycle.

It appears that some parents lack clarity on the assessment at Junior Cycle assuming that continuous assessment is employed, and that CBA work is more heavily weighted in the context of the overall assessment at Junior Cycle.

Parents' views on the nature and extent of reporting from schools were mixed. Some praised the reporting practices employed by the school whereas others were critical of the reporting and expressed a need for more timely reports that, not only reported on academic progress, but also reported on their child's social development and how they were 'fitting in' to school.

According to almost all parents, the Covid pandemic had a significant impact on their child's education. It was believed that this impacted on their transition to post-primary school, their levels of motivation, their social development, mental health and impeded the learning.

Section 4: Reflecting on some emerging insights

This second interim report draws primarily on the research data collected from the twelve case study schools in the Spring of 2022. This is complemented by the first phase of data from the teacher surveys which includes the remaining survey responses not collected at the time of the completion of the introductory report. The case studies not only present views of students and parents for the first time, but they also include in-depth one-to-one interviews with teachers and thus provide further understanding of the teacher voice presented via the teacher survey data reported previously. The insights emerging at this stage of the study resonate with many of the themes presented in the previous report and they also raise new perspectives and provide new insights. It is important to bear in mind that schools were visited as they were readjusting to a post-Covid environment and teachers' and students' experiences were influenced by the lockdowns and restrictions previously imposed. This needs to be taken into consideration when considering the insights at this stage of the study, as does the ongoing longitudinal nature of the research. The previous section of the report has described teachers', students' and parents' views on and experiences of the enactment of the curriculum changes. This section now turns to explore possible reasons why it has been experienced in this manner by teachers, students and parents, cognisant of what the curriculum change literature, outlined at the start of this report, illustrates about the complexities of change. In order to explore this, relevant contextual factors that may shape its manifestation will be drawn on.

Signs of change

Ni Dhuinn et al (2021) notes that Junior Cycle represented a 'significant transformation' in curriculum assessment and modes of assessment in lower post-primary education in Ireland and in a similar tone, Gleeson (2021) noted that the changes marked a 'significant departure', from the traditional discourse of programmes and subject syllabi. As the previous section has highlighted, there are many changes that appear to be taking place. The data collected at this stage of the study indicates that teachers had begun to make some changes coherent with the policy and cultural shifts set out in the Framework for Junior Cycle (DES, 2015). For example, they reported providing greater feedback, particularly more formative feedback, to

their students and they have implemented project-based learning through the introduction of CBAs resulting in more cross curricular linkages in their teaching. The teachers also indicated that they were collaborating more with colleagues and had a greater number of professional conversations with colleagues, supported through the use of SLAR meetings. Across the interview data, teachers largely spoke positively about SLARS and viewed them as a welcome introduction to their experience of Junior Cycle. Teachers indicated that they were satisfied with their Junior Cycle work overall and believed they were making a significant educational difference in the lives of their students. From a student perspective, a significant number believed that their learning needs and interests were met during their Junior Cycle, particularly during its early years. A substantial majority also believed they were supported in their transition to post-primary school. Students also favoured student-centred learning experiences such as groupwork, active learning and inquiry-based 'real life' learning. The CBAs were viewed positively in this regard as they facilitated this type of learning. Teachers, as outlined in this report, and principals (reported in the first introductory report) also indicated that student voice has increased, and students had gained greater confidence through the types of activities offered to them as part of Junior Cycle. Parents valued the shift towards an emphasis on skills and valued the project-based learning that was introduced as part of the students' CBA work. These perspectives indicate that changes have taken place but are incremental and ongoing in nature aligning with the literature on curriculum change (Fullan, 2016).

While this provides an indication of the range of changes, there is also evidence that wider contextual factors may have shaped teachers', students' and parents' experiences of the Framework for Junior Cycle. These can be generally grouped into two categories. The first set of factors could be defined as wider characteristics of post-primary education in Ireland (and internationally) that have tempered and refracted elements of the changes. The second set of factors relate to issues of curriculum coherence linked to the changes themselves. These aspects are explored below.

The influence of summative examinations on enactment

Previous research undertaken by the ESRI for the NCCA into students' experiences of the Junior Certificate found that it lacked a distinct identity and was seen as a 'dry run' for the Leaving Certificate. The third year of the programme was generally focused on examination preparation resulting in more homework and the employment of traditional teaching methods (NCCA, 2010). Previous research had also reported issues of student disengagement (Smyth et al, 2006). In an attempt to address these issues, a core emphasis of Junior Cycle change was to facilitate more student-centred learning and reduce the emphasis of final examinations.

There is evidence from the student surveys that they engaged in student-centred learning (in pair and group work), but the most frequently experienced learning was individual work which increased as they progressed through Junior Cycle (See table 2). Some teachers did report changes in their teaching, towards a more student-centred practices, but others acknowledged that their teaching practices had not changed significantly. It is also evident that in some cases the CBAs were treated as somewhat of a 'break' from the normal demands of the subject rather than being integrated as part of the teaching and learning within a subject. While the CBAs provide an opportunity to engage in self-directed project-based learning, the extent to which these more student-centred approaches to learning have been embedded in classroom practices outside of the 'CBA window' appears to vary. For example, when asked in the teacher survey whether they saw CBAs as stand-alone events, separate from normal teaching, the response suggests quite an even split in relation to this question and indicates that 31% of teachers agreed to a 'considerable extent' or to a 'great extent' (see Figure 6).

The student survey data shows that in the third year of the programme students indicated that the extent to which their needs and interests are met is lower than responses from first and second-year students (See Table 3). There is also an indication that while the proportion of independent, paired and group work experienced by the students is similar in the first and second years of the programme, independent learning is more frequently reported in the third year of the programme. While the Covid pandemic may have contributed to this,

student focus group discussions indicate that this may be a result of increased attention given to examination preparation. It appears to result in increased academic pressure, an increased workload with greater levels of homework and less time for their wellbeing - all resulting in increased reported stress. This would suggest that, in the third year of Junior Cycle, the final examinations have a greater influence and have a 'negative backwash effect' (NCCA, 2022, 46) resulting in more didactic pedagogy and less student-centred experiences. The extrinsic motivation of examinations that appears to determine students' levels of engagement and their reported priorities in their learning would also indicate that their practices may also be shaped by this culture of examinations.

This suggests that final examinations remain a central concern and that such an emphasis refracts enactment. This shows how intended changes can be influenced by the context in which they are introduced. Personal interpretations and responses to the changes also influence this refraction reflecting the micro, meso and macro contexts of change (Taguma & Fernandez Barrera, 2019). It also indicates that untangling Junior Cycle from this wider culture of examination preparation and assessment remains a challenge, particularly untangling Junior Cycle from the existing Leaving Certificate. Notably, for example, teacher survey responses indicate that they believed Junior Cycle was effective in assisting transition from primary school, but less effective in facilitating transition to Leaving Certificate, and in the teacher interviews, teachers also raised concerns about the readiness of students for their Leaving Certificate courses. Existing regimes of assessment also appear to act as a benchmark through which the changes were judged (Mellegård & Pettersen, 2016). For example, teachers were also more likely to believe that written examinations were capable of testing the student learning that Junior Cycle aspires to achieve. Similarly, concerns about the lack of specificity within the grading bands of the new Junior Cycle, commented by many teachers, could also reflect this assessment culture where education and assessment are primarily viewed in terms of their qualification function (Biesta et al, 2015). To some extent this wider assessment culture therefore becomes a lens through which Junior Cycle changes are viewed and reflects a wider dominance of a high stakes summative discourse in Irish post-primary education (MacPhail et al, 2018).

Curriculum coherence

A critical aspect of curriculum change is to achieve a good level of curriculum coherence ensuring an alignment between curriculum outcomes, its mode of delivery, how it is experienced by learners and its mode of assessment (Lange & Meaney, 2012). Teachers' and students' experiences of the curriculum would indicate that there is a level of incoherence in its actualisation. For example, in relation to the CBAs, teachers, students and parents reported that they felt the amount of effort devoted to completing a CBA was not rewarded in assessment terms. Despite the CBA's motivational value and the enjoyment that many students appeared to gain from their completion, the perceived lack of parity in esteem to SEC examinations appears to cause frustration amongst students, parents, and teachers. In the teacher interviews, many teachers also commented that it was not adequately weighted as an assessment instrument for Junior Cycle. Similarly, in the teacher survey, when asked to what extent does the assessment task represent a valid assessment of the students' work through the CBAs, 30% of teachers responded, 'not at all' and only 6% selected 'to a great extent'. This points to a significant level of curricular misalignment.

This misalignment also helps to explain the time pressures reported in the teacher interviews where time allocated to the CBAs was seen as an impediment to achieving wider subject specification requirements. Time pressures also appeared to limit teachers' abilities to engage in more student-centred pedagogies as the lack of choice within the exam appeared to create pressures on teachers to 'cover' content. It also goes some way to explain the assessment overload reported by students in the focus group discussions and the related reported stress. The CBAs appeared to be interpreted by many teachers as an additional assessment requirement as opposed to a pedagogical vehicle to achieve particular learning outcomes. As a result, they were seen to be an addition to the existing assessment requirements and therefore perceived as placing more demands on both teachers and students. This is supported by Gleeson et al (2020) in their analysis of Junior Cycle curriculum change who commented that,'*all the 'new' assessment arrangements have been grafted on while none of the 'old' assessment architecture has been dismantled*' (p. 487). While CBAs facilitate the type of inquiry-based project learning aligned with the intended Learning Outcomes of the curricular change (and are liked by students and valued by parents), they are

not aligned with what are historically perceived as formal and legitimate mechanisms of assessment. As a result, CBAs are seen by many as peripheral exercises. This highlights the gap between the intent of the original changes and how they are realised and experienced by all stakeholders. It is notable that when asked whether the Learning Outcomes associated with the changes were a good representation of what young people should know, whether they were achievable and whether they were clearly communicated, teachers' survey responses indicate a positive skew to all three questions. This would suggest that the most significant incoherence relates to the alignment of assessment practices with the curricular changes.

Calls to placing CBAs on a more formal footing through the allocation of suitable credit could be seen to address this curricular misalignment and alleviate its associated effects, however it could also contribute to a narrow utilitarian justification to engage in such tasks and undermine the original values of the Framework for Junior Cycle and its intentions to nurture a more intrinsic valuing of learning. At a broader level, adjustments to alleviate specific pressures that were themselves a result of compromises to original curriculum goals are unlikely to address the wider curricular misalignment. This wider alignment appears to be a result of the use of summative external assessment to assess subject specifications that were originally designed with significant teacher autonomy in mind. Removing assessment in this manner, while maintaining the existing Learning Outcomes, contributed to the teacher anxiety in relation to depth of treatment, how it would be assessed and the need for sample examination papers. Issues related to the assessment of the common level specifications are arguably also a result of this misalignment. It is notable that in school-designed Short Courses teachers drew on assessment guidelines to assess students (see Figure 17).

These changes to the original Framework may also help explain misunderstandings evident amongst the parents interviewed. While some parents interviewed as part of the school case studies admitted they had limited understanding of the assessment practices, some others believed they understood the assessment requirements but mistakenly believed that continuous assessment contributed to Junior Cycle assessment and that the CBA project work contributed to their child's Junior Cycle result. This suggests that many parents may not be fully familiar with Junior Cycle changes and is supported by comments from principals and

stakeholders, previously presented in the introductory report, that expressed concerns about the level of engagement with parents and the general public in relation to the curriculum changes. The national media reporting of the curriculum changes that focused on the negotiations surrounding the Framework rather than the Framework itself and on assessment without a critical discussion about the rationale underpinning the changes (Devitt, 2021) has perhaps contributed to this lack of, or altered, public awareness. Cornbleth (2008) argues that 'var*ious professional, private, and local discourses—as well as mass media and public discourses—are sources of echoes of social phenomena and carriers of potential echo effects on curriculum policy and practice'* (p.2153), hence resulting in altered understanding amongst communities on the nature, focus and meaning of curriculum change. Schools need support from external sources, including parents, if a change is to be fully enacted in schools (Hanson, 2001), suggesting that informing parents of the rationale of the changes and what they involve requires ongoing engagement and shows the importance of such an endeavour.

Impact of Covid

The introductory report previously reported that the Covid pandemic had impacted on student collaboration, student-teacher interactions and teaching and learning approaches in classrooms. It also reported on concerns raised in relation to student motivation, engagement, and the impact of school closures. The impact of Covid was again evident in the data from this phase. At a school level it restricted opportunities for innovative practices. For some teachers it also hampered their engagement with the curriculum changes and some teachers also expressed concerns about students' motivation and potential gaps in their subject knowledge.

Parents expressed similar views and across the parent interviews it was evident that the Covid pandemic had a substantial impact on students. While some parents noted the impact of the school closures and restricted functioning of schools on the students' preparedness for examinations, the majority of parents were more concerned about the impact of the pandemic on students' mental health and social development. A lack of opportunities for students to mix with friends, engage in extra-curricular activities and participate in school events inhibited transition from primary school and led some students to disengage from the

wider school community. Some students appeared to struggle to re-adjust to the normal functioning of schools.

This impact would indicate that, while academic progress of students was reported as having been curtailed, at the time of the data collection in Spring of 2022, dealing with the significant challenge of integrating students back into the school community, was a priority in schools. The level of engagement and progress with the curriculum changes was deemed to have been delayed due to the Covid pandemic. It will be important in the next phase of the data collection to explore whether these challenges have been alleviated over time or whether schools are continuing to be hampered by these challenges. It will also be important to explore the role of Wellbeing elements of Junior Cycle in supporting this re-adjustment.

Professional development and collaboration

In the previous report, an increase in teacher professional collaboration was reported by school principals and teachers. It has again been reported as a significant change in the teacher interviews from the school case studies. In relation to professional development there was a preference for cluster meetings where teachers could meet and discuss classroom practices at a subject level. This may indicate that such settings are most suited for teachers to share practices and understand the nature of the changes, it may also indicate a preference for more practically-oriented professional development directly linked to the subject area and classroom rather than exploring broader rationales for the changes and its merits. Teacher survey data indicates that SLAR meetings were seen to help teachers in terms of assessing students work. For example, when asked to what extent have SLAR meetings helped to promote consistency and fairness in judgement in assessment practices, 73% indicated that it had to 'some', 'considerable' or 'great' extent. This valuing of peer support in responding to curriculum change is not unique to the Irish context. For example, in exploring teachers' responses to curriculum change in Norway Mellegård and Pettersen (2016) found that working with peers was the main source of support and this collaboration both provided assurance and strengthened professional identity. Such settings, they argue, become arenas where teachers balance the external and internal forces for change. The establishment of this culture of collaboration is a significant positive outcome and provides solid foundations

for future developments. Not only does it provide a form of informal professional development which is favoured by teachers over more formal approaches, it also provides an infrastructure to reduce a siloing of practices and provides support for teachers at a school level.

Digital technology use

The emergency pivot to technology-supported distance learning appears to have advanced the digital competence of many teachers. While it was acknowledged that schools were moving towards greater digital technology use, the need for online distance learning during the pandemic lockdowns provided a catalyst to accelerate the development of teachers' skills in this area. There was again evidence in this phase of the study that digital technologies were playing an increasingly important role. Teachers were using the technology more to share resources, communicate with colleagues, develop materials and use it as part of their teaching. It appeared primarily used by students during the completion of their CBAs where they were needed to enable students to undertake research on their topic of choice and to compile their presentations and reports. This use was reflected in the pressures reported by some teachers and principals in accessing the schools' digital resources at these key times. This professional upskilling and use is commendable and reflects teachers' commitment to professional advancement; it also has the potential to assist curriculum advancements in the future. That being said, access to the digital resources in some of the schools was limited due to their level of IT infrastructure. While some schools were introducing one-to-one laptop or tablet initiatives, others relied, at best, on access to designated computer rooms that were in heavy demand and therefore access was limited. Such limited access raises questions of equity. As the pandemic has highlighted, not all students have access to suitable digital resources at home to use as part of their learning (Mohan et al., 2020). If completion of tasks such as CBAs are increasingly reliant on access and use of digital devices, care must be taken to ensure that students with limited access outside of schools are not disadvantaged by this.

Section 5: Looking forward: next steps and future work

Ongoing and future data collection

As a longitudinal study, data collection is ongoing. At the time of writing the team is preparing the second iteration of the online teacher survey that will be distributed to school in March 2023. In addition to the original questions asked in the initial teacher survey, further survey items related to the nature of the summative exams have been included in response to teacher feedback.

In the Autumn of 2023, the second round of school case study visits will take place. As with the previous visits, the views of students, teachers, school management and parents will be obtained using interviews, focus-group discussions and surveys. During Autumn 2023 the remaining school principal interviews will also be conducted. These interviews are conducted online. Future reports will capture these views and aim to provide even further understanding of the views and experiences of all of those involved in enacting this curriculum change.

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