

Placing the Student at the Centre of Learning

In the context of junior cycle reform, Dr. Pádraig Kirk, Director of Junior Cycle for Teachers, takes a closer look at what this can mean.

In her foreword to the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) the then Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O’Sullivan, wrote that the Framework “*places the student at the centre of the learning process and envisages a modernised curriculum across all subjects*”. As the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) continues its sterling work in revising the curriculum for each of the twenty-one subjects available to students at junior cycle level, this ‘modernisation’ process cannot be denied. Indeed, it is likely the most concentrated and comprehensive curricular review at second-level in Irish history. What I’d like to focus on in this piece, however, is the Minister’s reference to the ‘student being placed at the centre of the learning process’ as this feature is possibly the most fundamental shift happening in schools right now as a result of junior cycle reform.

Firstly, it does need to be said that placing the student at the centre of learning is not to infer that students are not already front and centre in learning that takes place in schools. Indeed, many are, but it is true to say that some of the instruments that have characterised our education system to date have not entirely supported this. For example, the old junior certificate syllabuses currently being phased out – treated by many as a list of topics to be covered in class by the teacher - could be described as being less than conducive to supporting students who may want to embark on a journey of discovery learning concerning subject knowledge that is not explicitly referenced in the syllabus. Further, our current examination system, where it generally all comes down to how well (or otherwise) a student, following three years of learning, can perform in two/three hours in a sun drenched examination hall in the middle of June, places the student at a centre alright, but not at the centre of learning.

So, what does ‘placing the student at the centre of the learning’ mean? Well, there is no simple answer to this question, and what one teacher does to place their student(s) at the centre of learning in their classroom, could differ significantly from another teacher’s endeavours. The good news, however, is that both of these teachers could well be on target with their efforts. By putting the student at the centre of learning we are simply stripping away at aspects that can hinder learning, aspects that can prevent a student from learning optimally and aspects that can prevent a student from being fulfilled on a personal level. If we really want our students to be the key beneficiaries of our efforts in the classroom then the teaching methodologies and the assessment practices need to be planned solely with the student in mind, not the teacher next door, not the school principal and not even the inspector.

Practices should differ in schools and classrooms across the country as teachers endeavour to do just this. Yet, that being the case, it should be possible for us all to agree on a few things that have as a common aim the desire to see the student placed at the centre of learning. These are; (i) new subject specifications, (ii) reformed assessment and reporting practices, (iii) innovative approaches to teaching, and (iv) a focus on student wellbeing.

New subject specifications: While the old junior certificate syllabuses and the new junior cycle subject specifications were written with the students’ learning at their core, the new specifications are structured using a learning outcomes based format. The focus is no longer on what material should be covered in class, but instead it is firmly on what student learning should look like. While the learning outcomes specify the knowledge, skills, values and understanding that we would like students to espouse, they are flexible enough to give teachers autonomy and students choice of how to experience the learning. The specifications come with a revamped

approach to assessment, one that is aligned with more appropriate and relevant assessment arrangements in order to capture all of the students' achievements.

Reformed assessment and reporting practices: To date, assessment has been seen very much as the end game. Students were 'put through' three years of learning and took their junior certificate examination at the end to 'check' how much they learned. If they 'passed', great, if they didn't, many moved on regardless. Now, in the new dispensation, assessment (both formative and summative in nature) is to be used to support student learning right across their junior cycle experience. Classroom-based assessments (or CBAs) have been introduced as a means of allowing teachers to check in on a student's learning at more regular intervals. The final examinations in June have been capped at two hours duration and (hopefully) the 'grind effect' will soon be a thing of the past as it will become practically impossible to predict what might, or might not, come up in a final exam paper. In terms of reporting, the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (the JCPA) will record student achievements across a range of learning, and not just in state examinations. The JCPA will also enable the recording of a range of other areas of learning. These changes clearly demonstrate that the student is now the focus, not the exam, nor the resultant certificate.

Innovative approaches to teaching: No matter what change takes place as part of this reform, if classroom teaching doesn't change, then one could question whether change happens at all. The reality, however, is that teaching cannot stand still. Teaching now needs to be cognisant of the eight key skills of junior cycle – i.e., working with others, being creative, being numerate, managing information and thinking, staying well, managing myself, being literate and communicating. These skills require to be brought to life through the learning experiences encountered by students. JCT's continuing professional development workshops place an emphasis on innovative, active and engaging classroom teaching strategies. Teachers are given the space to explore new ways of teaching, time to talk about their own classroom practice with colleagues, and resources to help them cultivate new approaches back in their schools. Ultimately, our CPD will challenge teachers' practice and support them in broadening their teaching methodology repertoire.

Student wellbeing: The new emphasis in the Framework for Junior Cycle on student wellbeing perhaps epitomises the overall effort to place the student at the centre of learning. Research tells us that students learn more effectively when they are happy in their work (e.g., Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Student Wellbeing Report (2017)). Wellbeing is now a formal part of the curriculum for junior cycle students. It comprises PE, CSPE, SPHE and guidance related learning and has started out at 300 hours of class contact time across the three years of junior cycle, rising to 400 hours by 2020. To put this in context, one subject accounts for 240 hours, while a short course accounts for 100 hours. We live in a fast paced, constantly changing and unpredictable world and it was only a matter of time before student wellbeing took centre stage in schools. The six indicators of wellbeing - *active, responsible, connected, resilient, respected and aware* – make what is important explicit for students, their teachers and parents, and the wider school community in general. They will act as a touch stone for teachers in respect of their students, but also in respect of teachers themselves.

Concluding remark

Junior cycle reform is heralding significant changes in schools and classrooms. We shouldn't rest on our laurels thinking that 'we're doing all of this already' because we're not. As true educationalists we all want effective student learning to be the aim of our efforts. Placing the student at the centre of learning is the Holy Grail. We are on the right path now.