

Enhancing Teacher Professional Collaboration through Junior Cycle Reform

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Introduction

Junior Cycle reform is widely regarded as the most fundamental and ambitious curricular reform at post-primary level since the foundation of the State. At the core of this momentous change is the overarching *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)* which sets out how teaching, learning, assessment and reporting practices should evolve to support the delivery of a quality, inclusive and relevant education that will meet the needs of Junior Cycle students, both now and in the future. This *Framework* places the student firmly at the centre of the learning experience and provides schools with the opportunity to provide a flexible programme for students' learning. It seeks to strike a better balance between acquiring subject knowledge and understanding, and aims to develop a wide range of skills, values and both cognitive and meta-cognitive capacities. The Framework is underpinned by a dual approach to assessment to reduce the focus on an externally-assessed examination as a means of assessing students and gives increased prominence to classroom-based and formative assessments. In this way, Junior Cycle reform allows schools to report on a broader range of student learning and achievement, thereby promoting student wellbeing.

Junior Cycle Professional Time

In realising these changes, the new *Framework* envisages and provides for greater professional collaboration between teachers to plan for teaching, learning and assessment and to discuss and share classroom practice. The value of such collaboration has been recognised by the Department of Education and Skills primarily by setting aside valuable time for teachers to facilitate ongoing collaborative engagement. From September 2017, for example, each full-time teacher's class contact time has been reduced from 33 forty-minute teaching periods in the timetable to 32 teaching periods. This reduction provides one forty-minute period of Junior Cycle professional time for each of the 33 weeks of the school year. This equates to 22 hours of professional time, within timetable, for each full-time teacher each year. Furthermore, teachers teaching less than 18 hours per week are facilitated to avail of professional time to support implementation of Junior Cycle on a pro-rata basis, which incorporates a minimum level of time provision. Teachers have always engaged in planning and other professional activities above and beyond their timetabled hours. This additional time has been provided to ensure that there is no additional workload on teachers arising from Junior Cycle reform.

So, how is this time to be used? A proportion of this time each year, depending on how many class groups of second and/or third year students a teacher might be teaching, is to be used to engage in Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings. In each subject, students will undertake two structured classroom-based assessments, generally one in second year and one in third year. To support classroom-based assessment, all teachers will engage in professional dialogue in the form of SLAR meetings where they will share and discuss samples of their assessment of students' work and build common understanding about the quality of students' learning. Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith (2010)¹ emphasise how discussing student work in a collaborative environment promotes professional development: *'When teachers do this moderation work together with the explicit intent of supporting students' learning, pedagogical possibilities will accumulate in a manner that strengthens practice across the learning collective'*.

¹ Klenowski, V. and Wyatt-Smith, C., 2010. *Standards, Teacher Judgement and Moderation in Contexts of National Curriculum and Assessment Reform*. Assessment Matters, 2, pp.107-131.

To promote rich discussion, each SLAR meeting is subject-specific and focuses on a discussion of the Features of Quality that apply to the CBA undertaken by the year group. Each SLAR meeting takes two hours.

By the end of the 2017/2018 school year teachers of English, Science and Business Studies were the only teachers to have formally experienced the SLAR process. Given that SLARs are very new in the school system some teething problems were to be expected, e.g., logistical matters relating to the timing of meetings, making decisions regarding what student assessment pieces to take to the SLAR meeting and how many, facilitation of meetings, finding consensus, knowing what to do if consensus is not reached, and the compilation of the report of the SLAR meeting. To support teachers and schools with the SLAR process, JCT has embedded key elements of SLAR meetings into our subject specific workshops, including facilitating discussions to develop an understanding of the SLAR process. Our target was to ensure that every teacher had attended such a workshop before engaging in a SLAR meeting themselves. In addition, throughout the 2017/2018 school year, JCT provided elective workshop opportunities aimed at those teachers who were nominated as SLAR facilitators in their school. These workshops focused on supporting and empowering the SLAR facilitator to lead discussions focused on teaching, learning and assessment with a view to agreeing standards for the CBA in their subject area. These elective workshops were over-subscribed and additional workshops were added to meet demand with subject teams providing additional phone and email support as required.

Feedback from the SLAR workshops, and indeed the SLAR process itself, has been overwhelmingly positive with teachers and schools valuing the opportunity to share and discuss samples of work and focus on teaching, learning and assessment. It is recognised that support for the SLAR process will need to continue until SLARs become part of the educational landscape, and a natural part of the three-year learning journey.

When the time required for SLAR meetings is extracted from the overall allocation of 22 hours of professional time for each teacher, the remaining time is used to engage in other Junior Cycle professional activities. To support schools, school leaders and teachers, JCT has prepared subject-specific advisory materials for teachers on how they can use their remaining hours of professional time. This is set out in terms of how the time might be used (i) individually, (ii) individually or collectively and, (iii) as a subject department. Geography teachers, for example, are advised that professional time could be used within the Geography Department in some of the following ways:

- Work towards developing a collaborative approach to teaching and sequencing the learning outcomes and linking with the elements
- Collaboratively select a number learning outcomes and devise units of learning anchored in the learning outcomes. Each teacher will subsequently develop learning intentions for their own individual class group.
- Share resources and discuss and share teaching approaches
- Consider, devise and agree formative assessment practices to support learning in the Geography classroom
- Discuss how opportunities could be provided for students to reflect on their learning
- Finalise the subject department plan for Geography and plan for its review
- Create a subject information leaflet for both parents and students

Advice regarding the use of professional time in the context of individual subjects may be accessed through the relevant subject tab on our website at www.jct.ie.

In our work with schools and teachers, JCT is bringing the practice of professional collaboration to a new level. Section 5.1 of the *Junior Cycle Reform: Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation* jointly signed by the Minister for Education and Skills and the teacher union leadership on 22 May 2015, refers to the fact that “schools should be supported to develop a collegial professional culture” (p.5). While the allocation of professional time, coupled with the SLAR process, will help promote the development of this professional culture in schools, it is contended that those models of teacher continuing professional development (CPD) (or ‘professional learning experiences’) currently being implemented by JCT are a significant catalyst to foster collaboration. This includes both our whole-school (or whole-staff) CPD and our school cluster-based subject-specific CPD models.

Whole-school CPD

Whole-staff CPD takes place where a school takes the decision to close to students for a full day and all staff come together to engage in professional activities around junior cycle.

This whole-school closure, a feature of Junior Cycle reform, is facilitated under the Department of Education and Skills circular 0015/2017, “approval continues for schools to close.... for a day of whole-school planning and self-evaluation for Junior Cycle implementation for each year of implementation up to the school year 2021/22” (section 3.1.1). Indeed, this has been the case since the 2014/2015 school year, albeit not all schools availing of it since that time.

The topics and activities that teachers engage with on these CPD days are teacher led - they are designed with feedback from teachers in mind – and are subject to a robust internal quality assurance process within JCT, inclusive of a ‘critical friends’ process whereby a number of representative principals and teachers are invited along to critique a trial run of the day before it is facilitated nationally. The whole-school CPD days are also quality assured by the Department’s Inspectorate.

Whole-staff CPD provides opportunities for the full staff in a school to come together to, amongst others:

- develop a common understanding of teaching, learning, assessment and reporting in the context of the Framework for Junior Cycle
- engage in professional conversations about learning, outside of subject specialisms
- explore the principles of Junior Cycle, such as wellbeing and inclusive education, and explore what it means for practice that these would be a shared responsibility of all teachers
- develop a shared language – e.g., subjects interface with whole-school around features of quality
- model activity-based collaboration ensuring engagement, effectively modelling highly effective classroom practice

The collaborative aspect of our whole-school support echoes Domain 4 of Looking at Our School (2016)² (teaching and learning) focusing on teachers’ collective/collaborative practice. This approach supports teachers in recognising that a student is not the responsibility of only one teacher in a department, but of all teachers in that department, and indeed in the school. This supports and facilitates teachers in ‘working together to devise learning opportunities for students across and beyond the curriculum’.

School Cluster Based Subject Specific CPD

² Department of Education and Skills (2016), *Looking at Our School (2016): A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*

Circular 0015/2017 also states that “*teachers will be provided with subject specific CPD at a school closure event and schools may close.... to allow teachers’ attendance. Where a school closes, all teachers must attend the school cluster event and engage in CPD activity*” (section 3.1.1). The school cluster events which focus on subject specific CPD are designed to enhance teacher collaboration not only at school level, but also at an inter-school level. A cluster of schools in a geographical region closes to students for a designated day and all the subject teachers from the schools involved come together for CPD. There can be up to seventeen different subject workshops in a cluster, all of which are based on teacher needs and subject to a rigorous quality assurance process. Advantages of this model include:

- Learning communities: the collaborative aspect of the school cluster delivery model mirrors a model of learning communities that is hoped will develop within and across schools. It has been shown that sustained teacher collaboration around understanding curriculum, student learning and assessment, as well as general collaboration, is the primary vehicle for continuous improvement of teacher practice. The cluster model focuses on aspects of professional learning communities as defined by DuFour (2004)³ where teacher discussion focuses on learning. The JCT cluster model is best represented in DuFour et al (2006)⁴ as ‘*an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve*’.
- System clarity: at a time of seminal education reform, the cluster CPD model allows for teachers from the same school to consider the same messages around the reform at the same time and gives them agency to construct meaning together. The importance of ‘*professional collegiality*’ in empowering teacher agency is highlighted by Biesta et. al. (2015)⁵. Previously, teachers from the same school department generally came to CPD events on different days, thereby reducing the potential to promote professional collaboration in the subject department. The JCT subject-based cluster model removes this barrier, supports teachers in developing a shared understanding and promotes teacher agency.
- Sharing of practice: the JCT subject-specific cluster model provides opportunities for subject departments to firstly develop a shared understanding of Junior Cycle reform and secondly to share their pedagogical approaches with teachers from other departments. Hunzicker (2010)⁶ highlighted the importance of collaboration in professional learning, stating that ‘*CPD is most effective when teachers have opportunities to learn from and with one another around common goals*’. Whilst this can have a strong impact on all subject departments, it is particularly the case for teachers in smaller or single teacher departments where opportunities for professional dialogue and sharing of practice are limited.
- Shared purpose: Libermann and Miller (1999)⁷ emphasises the importance of ‘*common purpose and shared identity*’ to strengthen and enhance teacher collaboration. The cluster CPD model emphasises, even by the very nature of its creation, the idea that teachers need time and space to collaboratively focus on and discuss the learning of students in their care.

³ DuFour, R. (2004). *What is a “Professional Learning Community?”*, Educational Leadership, 61(8), pp. 6-11

⁴ DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R. and Many, T. (2006), *Learning by Doing*, Bloomington, Solution Tree Press p.11.

⁵ Biesta, G., Priestley, M. and Robinson, S. (2015) *The Role of Beliefs in Teacher Agency, Teachers and Teaching*, 21:6, 624-640, DOI: 10.1080/13540602.2015.1044325

⁶ Hunzicker, J., (2010), *Characteristics of Effective Professional Development: A Checklist, Online Submission*.

⁷ Lieberman, A. and Miller, L. (1999), *Teachers - Transforming Their World and Their Work. The Series on School Reform*, Teachers College Press, PO Box 20, Williston, VT 05495-0020.

Concluding Remark

Fullan (1991)⁸ emphasises the sense of belonging in supporting teachers in developing new approaches to teaching and learning and how important this is when fostering educational change: *'Change involves learning to do something new and interaction is the primary basis for social learning. New meanings, new behaviours, new skills and new beliefs depend significantly on whether teachers are working as isolated individuals or are exchanging ideas, support and positive feelings about their work'* (p.77). We all learn more effectively through collaboration; this applies in the case of the student in the classroom, and it is also true of the teacher who stands in that very same classroom. Greater teacher collaboration will be but one of the hallmarks of junior cycle reform. While the reforms happening on the ground in schools will facilitate greater teacher collaboration through, for example, the provision of teacher professional time and SLAR meetings, the CPD models provided by JCT will be the greatest catalyst of all in respect of how teachers collaborate. JCT whole-school and subject specific CPD school cluster events will continue for the foreseeable future with a view to enhancing and fostering greater collaboration, thereby developing a shared vision for teaching, learning and assessment for Junior Cycle.

⁸ Fullan, M.G., (1991), *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, London: Teachers College Press