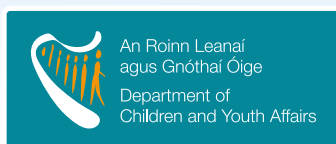


Report of a consultation with
young people on reform
of the Junior Cycle






'More relevant subjects to life.'
[Senior Cycle Student]

*'Standing up for myself,
to have a voice.'*
[Junior Cycle Student]

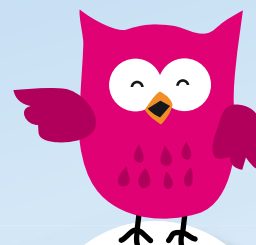
'Acting and singing – I love it!'
[Junior Cycle Student]

*'Explain how secondary school
works in 6th class.'*
[Senior Cycle Student]





A Consultation with
young people on reform
of the Junior Cycle



DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN
AND YOUTH AFFAIRS
2011

The author of this report is:

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Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
About the author	iv
Executive Summary	1
Introduction	3
1. Junior Cycle Results	5
Most enjoyed learning	5
Most useful thing ever learned	6
Most enjoyed learning in primary school	7
Most enjoy learning now	7
Junior Cycle curriculum	8
Assessment	10
How I like to learn	11
If I was Minister for Education and Skills, I would ...	13
2. Senior Cycle Results	14
Most enjoyed learning	14
Most useful thing ever learned	16
Most enjoyed learning in primary school	17
Most enjoy learning now	18
Junior Cycle curriculum	19
Assessment	23
How I like to learn	24
If I was Minister for Education and Skills, I would ...	27
3. Key findings	28
4. Conclusions	32



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About the author

This report was compiled by Sandra Roe, an independent Social Research Consultant who specialises in research involving children and young people.

She has worked with a variety of Government and non-governmental organisations in the youth and community sectors. She also works as a Researcher on the ongoing research commissioned by the OMCYA, *Growing up in Ireland: The National Longitudinal Study of Children*.

She has written a number of other reports for the OMCYA, including:

- ⇒ *Life skills matter – not just points: A survey of implementation of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in second-level schools* (2010);
- ⇒ *Fair Fares for Teens Report* (2009);
- ⇒ *Report of the Public Consultation for the Development of the National Recreation Policy for Young People* (2006).

She has also conducted research on behalf of the National Youth Arts Programme, Kilbarrack Youth Project, Dun Laoghaire VEC, Southside Partnership, Dun Laoghaire–Rathdown Anti-Racism and Diversity Steering Committee, Limerick Regeneration Agencies, the Adult Community Education Network, COPE Homeless Agency, Fundamental Rights of Irregular Migrants (FRIM) and Instituto Degli Innocenti for the European Parliament.

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Executive Summary

A consultation with young people on the reform of the Junior Cycle took place in November 2010. The consultation was organised by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Dáil na nÓg Council.

The consultation arose from one of the top two recommendations voted for by delegates at the 9th Dáil na nÓg in March 2010 and also the NCCA's consultation process on the reform of the Junior Cycle. That recommendation stated that: *'The Department of Education and Skills should lengthen the Leaving Cert cycle to 3 years and reduce the Junior Cert cycle to 2 years.'*

A total of 88 young people, aged 12-18, from various Comhairlí na nÓg around Ireland took part in the consultation. They were divided into groups of Junior Cycle students or Senior Cycle students, with each group discussing the following topics:

- ⇒ what they most enjoyed learning in their whole lives;
- ⇒ the most useful thing they have ever learned;
- ⇒ what they most enjoyed learning in primary school;
- ⇒ what they most enjoy learning now;
- ⇒ the Junior Cycle curriculum;
- ⇒ assessment;
- ⇒ how they like to learn;
- ⇒ what they would change if they were Minister for Education and Skills for a day.

Key findings

Young people participating in the consultation most enjoyed learning sport, arts-based activities and life skills because they are fun, interesting and practical, and encourage creativity and self-expression. Good teachers, as well as support from family and friends, were found to make learning more enjoyable.

Social skills were identified as the most useful skills young people have ever learned because they are helpful throughout life. In primary school, they most enjoyed learning sport, arts-based activities, history and English. Senior Cycle students are more likely than Junior Cycle students to be still studying these subjects in secondary school. Science, history, English and music were considered to be the most popular subjects young people currently learn in school.

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), English and maths were the only subjects that young people agreed should be compulsory at Junior Cycle level. But they recommended that improvements should be made to the present forms

of SPHE and CSPE. On the whole, young people would like to study a wider range of subjects at Junior Cycle level. Social skills and life skills were identified as the most essential skills young people should learn between 1st and 3rd year. They generally disagreed that schools should be allowed to develop their own courses since they feared this would create an unfair system and a lack of standardisation among schools.

The majority of young people considered the Junior Cycle curriculum to be too exam-focused and the Junior Cert examination itself to be a negative form of assessment, which causes stress and is essentially 'a memory test'. Suggestions for improvement included more assessment of practical aspects of subjects and the introduction of different types of assessment, such as participation in class and measuring progress and improvement.

There were mixed views on continuous assessment. While many students favoured assessment through a number of smaller exams during the year or project-based work, some felt continuous exams might cause more stress all year round and diminish the importance of exams.

Young people would like to receive more feedback in the form of constructive criticism from teachers because they felt it provides encouragement, measures progress and gives them motivation to improve. According to many young people, positive feedback encourages them to learn. Practical, enjoyable, interesting and opinion-based subjects and activities were deemed to be the easiest to learn.

Suggestions on how to ease the transition from primary to secondary school included allowing students to try out new subjects in the 1st year of Junior Cycle, before they choose what subjects to study for the Junior Cert (called 'taster' subjects), introductory days or weeks to Senior Cycle and 'buddy' or mentoring programmes.

Finally, if young people were the Minister for Education and Skills for a day, they would make the following changes:

- ⇒ change the Junior Cycle to 2 years;
- ⇒ change the Senior Cycle to 3 years;
- ⇒ have fewer exams and a wider choice of subjects;
- ⇒ place more emphasis on practical subjects and social and life skills;
- ⇒ encourage new teaching methods;
- ⇒ assess teachers better;
- ⇒ consult with students more.



Introduction



Background

A consultation with young people on the reform of the Junior Cycle took place on 13th November 2010 in Dublin Castle. The consultation was organised by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Dáil na nÓg Council.

Profile of participants

In total, 88 young people, aged 12-18, participated in the day-long consultation – 29 from Junior Cycle level and 59 from Senior Cycle level. They were divided up into 11 discussion groups, consisting of 8 students per group plus a facilitator and a note-taker. This was done in order to gain different perspectives of young people who are currently at Junior Cycle level and those who have progressed through the Junior Cycle.

Methodology

Various methodologies were used throughout the day's consultation. These included 'buzz groups', where each group was divided into two, initial ideas on a topic were written on post-its, discussed in the sub-group, then with the group as a whole, and key ideas were written on coloured cards.

Another methodology used was 'world café', where young people explored issues within groups while sitting around a table, similar to the environment in a café. Members of the groups were encouraged to write their ideas on the paper tablecloth. Participants also changed tables during the day in order to get a variety of views on the discussion topics.

In the final 'blue sky' exercise, which ended the day's proceedings, a sheet of paper was passed around with the heading, '*Congratulations! You are the Minister for Education and Skills for the day*'. Each young person was asked what one change they would like to make to the Junior Cycle if they were Minister for a day.

Key topics discussed

The key topics discussed at the consultation were:

- ⇒ In your whole life, what is the thing you have most enjoyed learning?
- ⇒ In your whole life, what is the most useful thing you have ever learned?
- ⇒ In primary school, what did you most enjoy learning?
- ⇒ What do you most enjoy learning in school now?
- ⇒ Thoughts on the Junior Cycle curriculum?
- ⇒ Thoughts on assessment?
- ⇒ How I like to learn.
- ⇒ If I was Minister for Education and Skills, I would ...

Dáil na nÓg

Dáil na nÓg is the annual National Parliament for Young People aged 12-18 years. Each year, delegates are elected by their local Comhairle na nÓg to represent them and to attend Dáil na nÓg. Some 200 delegates attend the one-day event each year and they select and vote on themes that they feel are important to young people nationwide.

Each of the 34 Comhairle na nÓg elects one young person to sit on the Dáil na nÓg Council. Dáil na nÓg Councillors serve for a term of 2 years. The Council meets once a month in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and is supported in its work by the DCYA and the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI).

The role of the Dáil na nÓg Council is:

- ⇒ to identify key areas of work from the recommendations agreed at Dáil na nÓg;
- ⇒ to conduct research into the issues identified;
- ⇒ to meet with relevant Ministers, TDs, Government officials, policy-makers and other stakeholders to seek their support in making changes for young people on the issues identified;
- ⇒ to feed back to their Comhairle na nÓg on the work of the Council;
- ⇒ to represent Dáil na nÓg at conferences and other events.

The most recent Dáil na nÓg, the 9th annual event, took place on 5th March 2010 in Dublin's Croke Park and was attended by 200 teenage delegates. Two major themes were discussed – 'Equality of access to education' and 'Mental health'. Under the theme of 'Equality of access to education', Dáil na nÓg 2010 recommended that *'The Department of Education and Skills should lengthen the Leaving Cert cycle to 3 years and reduce the Junior Cert cycle to 2 years'*.

In the weeks following Dáil na nÓg, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) announced a consultation process would be undertaken on reform of the Junior Cycle. At the first meeting of the Dáil na nÓg Council in May 2010, members decided that the Council should take the opportunity of influencing the NCCA's consultation process. Thus they proposed a special consultation for young people to discuss the ideas presented by the NCCA and to provide feedback on the key issues identified. The one-day consultation, the outcomes of which are the subject of this report, took place in November 2010 and was jointly organised by the Dáil na nÓg Council, the OMCYA and the NCCA.

Structure of report

This report follows the structure of the consultation day in terms of findings. The report is divided into the following chapters:

- ⇒ *Chapter 1* reports the findings of consultations with Junior Cycle students.
- ⇒ *Chapter 2* reports the findings of consultations with Senior Cycle students.
- ⇒ *Chapter 3* summarises the key findings for both Junior and Senior Cycle students.
- ⇒ *Chapter 4* presents overall conclusions from the consultation.



Junior Cycle Results

1



Most enjoyed learning

Young people at Junior Cycle level were asked what they most enjoyed learning in their whole lives, why and what helped them learn. Overall, young people most enjoyed learning sport, music and art.

Sport

Young people enjoyed learning sport because their friends were taking part and they enjoyed meeting new people and making new friends. They also found it fun, enjoyable and healthy. What helped them learn included family, friends, good teachers and coaches, motivation, determination and confidence, as well as training hard.

'All my friends did camogie, so I did it to be with them.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Music

Young people most enjoyed learning music because it was fun, interesting, cool, good craic and a way of expressing themselves. What helped young people learn music was encouragement and instruction from family and friends, imagination, talent, books and the Internet (e.g. YouTube).

'Singing – my music teacher and encouragement from my family helped.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Art

Young people most enjoyed learning art because it was enjoyable, relaxing, creative and allowed self-expression. Imagination, practice, having a good teacher and doing an apprenticeship all helped students enjoy learning art.

'Art – it made me express my ideas, helped with creativity.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Other subjects, activities and skills

Some young people most enjoyed reading and writing, with the help of their parents and teachers, as well as reading from an early age. Others enjoyed learning how to cook since they consider it to be an important life skill.

Further subjects, activities and skills enjoyed by young people included learning dancing, acting, electronics, mechanics, Irish in the Gaeltacht, circus skills, playing the Playstation, going to *Dublinia* (exhibitions of Viking and Medieval Dublin), problem-solving and alternative ways of learning.

'I enjoyed learning Irish in the Gaeltacht because it made learning fun by having to communicate in it all the time.' [Junior Cycle Student]

'I enjoyed going to Dublinia with my uncle. We learned about Irish history.' [Junior Cycle Student]

'I enjoyed learning that there are ways to learn other than the way adults and teachers want you to.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Most useful thing ever learned

According to young people from Junior Cycle, the most useful things they have ever learned are social skills; how to talk, read and write; playing sports; learning to be confident; how to cook; and playing a musical instrument.

Social skills

Social skills, such as how to make friends, talk to other people and have respect for others, were considered to be the most useful thing young people at Junior Cycle have ever learned.

'Learning when it is appropriate to say something about a subject without coming across as rude or cheeky.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Talking, reading and writing

Learning how to talk, read and write were also judged to be very important skills in terms of communicating, getting a job and getting places in life.

'How to write – it will be helpful to me for the rest of my life.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Sport

Learning to play various sports, particularly GAA and swimming, was mentioned as the most useful thing some participants have ever learned. Sport helps young people make friends and promotes a healthy lifestyle. One participant mentioned that the GAA provides useful contacts:

'How to play GAA – because you make friends nationwide and useful contacts through life.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Confidence

Confidence was the most useful skill some young people said they have ever learned; for example, learning how to stand up for yourself and having the ability to voice your opinion:

'Standing up for myself, to have a voice.' [Junior Cycle Student]

How to cook

Learning how to cook was mentioned by some young people as a very useful life skill.

'How to cook in Home Economics – a useful skill.' [Junior Cycle Student]



Other skills

Other skills young people deemed to be useful included maths, how to play a musical instrument, how to ride a bicycle, how to use the Internet and how to provide for themselves.

'Maths can be useful in most situations when you're older.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Most enjoyed learning in primary school

Junior Cycle students were asked what they most enjoyed learning when they were in primary school. Arts-based activities were most popular, followed by sport and playing; subjects such as Irish, history, maths, English, science, religion, French and geography; social skills, such as how to make friends and be part of a team; and cooking. Overall, about half of the participants at Junior Cycle level are still studying the subjects they most enjoyed learning in primary school.

Arts-based activities

Young people most enjoyed learning arts-based activities in primary school, such as art, crafts, colouring, acting, music and singing, because they loved the activities and found them fun, enjoyable, different, creative, adventurous and a distraction from school.

'Acting and singing – I love it!' [Junior Cycle Student]

Sport and playing

Young people enjoyed playing and sport in primary school, particularly swimming and life-saving because they were enjoyable and fun as well as being regarded as useful life skills.

'Playing – it was fun.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Subjects

Young people enjoyed Irish because it is our national language and the first language of some. They also found history, geography and science interesting and enjoyed doing experiments in science. Having a good teacher made maths and English more enjoyable. Maths and cooking were also considered to be useful life skills.

'Irish – it's our native language.' [Junior Cycle Student]

'Science – I find it very interesting.' [Junior Cycle Student]

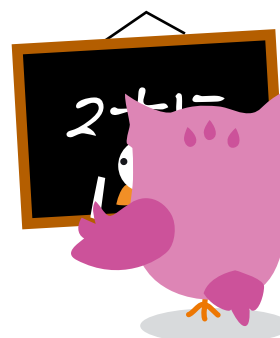
Social skills

Social skills, such as how to make friends and how to be part of a team, were regarded as essential skills that would help young people in life and create a good example for others.

'Learn how to make friends – because you need to make friends.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Most enjoy learning now

Young people participating in the consultation were asked what they most enjoy learning in school now. Subjects currently most enjoyed were history, maths, music and English.



History

Young people at Junior Cycle level currently enjoy learning history because it is an interesting subject, they enjoy learning about the past and about Ireland's history, they are good at it and they think the text books are helpful.

'I enjoy learning History because the book we learn from gets the message across very easily.'
[Junior Cycle Student]

Maths

Many students enjoy learning maths because they like it, they think it is fun, they have a good teacher and they believe it is a relevant life skill.

'I enjoy learning Maths in school most because I like it and the teacher is sound and teaches us, while having fun.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Music

Music and singing are popular among many young people because they have a passion for it and find it fun and interesting.

'Music – it's fun and interesting.' [Junior Cycle Student]



English

English is enjoyed by many young people because they are good at it and see it as a way of expressing themselves.

'English – a different way of expressing myself.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Other subjects

Other subjects young people currently enjoy learning in school are science because it is practical and has experiments; Irish because it is easy to learn; home economics because it is a life skill; business studies because they learn about today's world; art history because it is interesting to see how artists worked; technology because of the interesting things they make; sport because it is fun; and politics because it is important to know how the country is run. Social skills were also mentioned as enjoyable to learn and another student enjoyed learning how other people think. Only one participant out of the whole group of 88 stated there was nothing they currently enjoy learning in school.

'Business studies because you learn about today's world.' [Junior Cycle Student]

'Home economics because it's something I'll have my whole life.' [Junior Cycle Student]

'Social skills – they will be used throughout life.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Junior Cycle curriculum

Junior Cycle students were asked to discuss what are the essential things young people need to learn in school between 1st and 3rd year, what subjects should all students learn and what new subjects should be taught. In addition, students were asked what they thought of the idea that schools should be allowed to develop some of their own courses, instead of the entire curriculum coming from the Department of Education and Skills.

Essential skills and subjects

According to participants, essential skills and subjects young people should learn between 1st and 3rd year are social skills, personal development and practical subjects.

Social skills

Social skills were identified as the most essential thing young people at Junior Cycle need to learn. Such skills included communication, mixing with people, society and your community, and how to treat women well.

'Learn how to treat women well.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Personal development

Young people felt personal development was also an essential skill for students to learn in Junior Cycle – how to be happy, be a good person and express oneself were specifically mentioned.

'Learn how to be happy, how to be a good person.'
[Junior Cycle Student]



Practical subjects

Participants felt it is important to study more practical subjects at Junior Cycle level, such as computers, woodwork, mechanics, engineering and construction.

'More practical subjects, like computer skills.' [Junior Cycle Student]

New subjects and activities

Overall, young people felt there should be a wider choice of subjects and activities available to study at Junior Cycle level. They would like to see a broader range of languages in schools, including relevant modern languages such as Chinese. They would like to study new subjects and activities relating to Irish and world cultures, job skills, multimedia, public speaking and health and safety. In addition, they would like to study more topics similar to those discussed at their Comhairle na nÓg meetings, for example, accepting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) young people.

'More of the type of things discussed at Comhairles – like LGBTs and accepting who they are.'
[Junior Cycle Student]

Compulsory subjects

Subjects that all young people currently in Junior Cycle agreed should be compulsory at Junior Cycle level were English; maths; music; Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE); Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE); and Physical Education (PE). However, there were differing opinions on Irish, modern languages, art, business studies, home economics, religion, history and geography: some participants agreed they should be compulsory, while others disagreed. In addition, if SPHE and CSPE were to be compulsory, students would like these subjects to be restructured and improved (see p. 10).

Improvement of current subjects

Many participants called for the improvement of certain subjects currently taught at Junior Cycle level. In general, students would like more PE, SPHE and CSPE classes. They would also like a wider variety of sports activities to be available in schools and some would like PE to be an exam subject. A number of young people would like CSPE to be taught in a more structured way. Some students believe there should be less theory in the maths curriculum. In terms of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), students would like outside facilitators to teach the subject. One participant suggested that all schools have an 'Irish month' to promote the spoken language.

Schools developing own courses

Junior Cycle students were asked what they thought of the idea of schools being allowed to develop some of their own courses, instead of the entire curriculum coming from the Department of Education and Skills. More young people *disagreed* with this idea than agreed with it.

- ⇒ Those who disagreed argued that schools have no qualifications to develop courses, they would be unorganised and there would be too many differences between schools as regards subjects.
- ⇒ However, those who agreed believed more variety in the curriculum would be very positive, a wider choice of subjects would motivate students, and teachers would be able to teach subjects they are interested in.
- ⇒ Some believed there should be a balance of restrictions and freedom in relation to schools developing their own courses.
- ⇒ Others stated they were happy with the current curriculum.

Assessment

Junior Cycle students were asked if the activity they most enjoyed learning was assessed, examined or recognised, and how they knew they had achieved something, the advantages and disadvantages of having a Junior Cert exam, what should be assessed or examined and how, and the importance to them of feedback.

Assessment of most enjoyed activity

There was generally no assessment of the activities young people most enjoyed learning.

Achievement in most enjoyed activity

Positive feedback, making their parents happy and winning prizes were some of the ways participants knew they had achieved something in their favourite activities.

Advantages and disadvantages of Junior Cert exam

The majority of young people at Junior Cycle level felt that the Junior Cert exam was not the best form of assessment because they have to cram 3 years of learning into a few hours and the system does not take into account the different abilities and disabilities of students.

'You can't put 3 years' work into a few hours.' [Junior Cycle Student]

What should be assessed and examined

Students believe there should be more assessments of practical aspects of subjects in the Junior Cert, such as more oral exams in languages, practical music exams and science experiments. It was also suggested that exam marks should be given to students for participation in extra-curricular activities, such as sport and Comhairle na nÓg.

'More emphasis and marks for practicals.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Continuous assessment

Participants had differing opinions on continuous assessment. Exams, as well as projects and portfolios, were suggested as potential forms of continuous assessment. Young people agreed it would be easier to remember smaller amounts of information over shorter periods of time if continuous assessment took the form of exams.

Other forms of assessment

Other means of assessing students were discussed, including measuring performance, participation, enthusiasm and behaviour in class; assessing improvement and progress; grading homework and class work; on-the-spot quizzes, day-to-day tests and averages of class tests; orals and one-to-one interviews; discussions; essays; and project work. One participant suggested that the Junior Cert should be counted as a percentage of the Leaving Cert.

'People should be assessed on participation in class rather than exams. Someone could be brilliant, but fall down in exams.' [Junior Cycle Student]

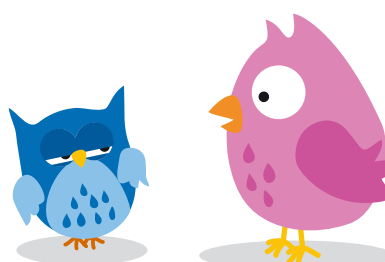
Feedback

Young people in Junior Cycle were asked about the importance of feedback when they are learning and what kind of feedback helps them learn. According to participants, the best type of feedback is positive feedback or constructive criticism. Young people believe feedback is important because it offers support and encouragement, gives a sense of achievement, makes people more determined and motivated, and helps them improve.

'Positive feedback is motivation, but you don't get this in school.' [Junior Cycle Student]

How I like to learn

Junior Cycle students were asked what was it about their favourite activity or subject they ever learned that made them want to learn it, what subjects they learn easiest at school, how they learn best, what would ease the transition from primary to secondary school, and the idea of allowing students to try out new subjects in 1st year before they choose what ones to study for the Junior Cert ('taster' subjects).



Learning a favourite activity or subject

Encouragement, positive comments and constructive criticism, particularly from parents, was primarily what encouraged young people to learn their favourite activity or subject. Enjoying the activity or subject, as well as peer involvement, were also significant factors. Other reasons why young people enjoyed learning their favourite activity or subject included interest, determination, good enthusiastic teachers, talent, success and surroundings (e.g. learning Irish in the Gaeltacht). Those students who learned Irish in the Gaeltacht or French in a language college agreed that learning languages in a practical and engaging manner made them more enjoyable and easier to learn.

'Being told by someone I'm good.' [Junior Cycle Student]

'Surroundings, like being in the Gaeltacht.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Easiest subjects to learn at school

According to participants, the easiest subjects to learn at Junior Cycle level in school are those that involve practical work, such as science, woodwork, metal work, technology, home economics, technical graphics and art. Subjects that allow students to give their personal opinion, such as history and English, were also regarded as being easy to learn. In addition, having a good teacher and the subject being fun were important to students in terms of subjects being easy to learn. Other subjects and activities deemed easy to learn were sports, music, SPHE, CSPE, maths, Irish and French.

'Technology – because it's practical.' [Junior Cycle Student]

'Maths – teacher explains in a way I understand.' [Junior Cycle Student]

Like to learn best

Young people like to learn through revision, making notes and summarising in their own words. Good teachers are also considered very important to learning – students learn best if teachers are interested in their subject, teach it in an interesting way, use alternate teaching techniques and help students learn from their mistakes. Other ways young people like to learn included through visual aids (e.g. diagrams and videos); class discussions and peer learning; technology and computers; practical exams; listening in class and asking questions; relating situations to everyday life; tests; and from their own mistakes.

Taster subjects

Most young people at Junior Cycle level agreed with the idea of having taster subjects in 1st year to help ease the transition between primary and secondary school because many found it difficult to choose subjects when they were in 1st year. They felt a trial period of between 1-3 months would be sufficient to allow them to choose the subjects they would like to study for the Junior Cert.

Help ease transition

Junior Cycle students were asked what else they thought would help ease the transition from primary to secondary school. The most popular idea was a better introduction to secondary school, for example, through open days or an introductory week at the end of 6th class. Starting secondary school subjects in 6th class and having shorter days in the first week of 1st year were also suggested. A 'buddy' or mentoring system was considered to be a good idea by many students.



Other ideas to ease the transition included having fewer teachers, basing students in the same classroom, shorter school days, less homework and text books, more visual learning and practical exams, study tips and more PE classes.

If I was Minister for Education and Skills, I would ...

For this 'blue sky' exercise, which finished up the one-day consultation, a sheet of paper was passed around with the heading, '*Congratulations! You are the Minister for Education and Skills for the day!*'. Each young person was asked what one change they would like to make to the Junior Cycle if they were Minister for a day. Some of the suggestions were:

- ⇒ **Junior Cycle:** If young people were Minister for the day, they would change the Junior Cycle to 2 years and the Senior Cycle to 3 years.
- ⇒ **Junior Cert exam:** Some students would abolish the Junior Cert exam in favour of continuous assessment. However, not all young people agreed with this form of assessment. Changing the Junior Cert marking scheme was also suggested.
'Continuous assessment rather than pressure of big exams at end of 3rd year.'
[Junior Cycle Student]
- ⇒ **Subjects and curriculum:** If young people had a say, they would like to place more emphasis on practical subjects and life skills at Junior Cycle level, make some subjects optional for the Junior Cert, introduce Chinese to the curriculum and only have double PE classes.
- ⇒ **Teachers:** If they were in charge, young people in Junior Cycle would like teachers to be assessed or examined more often and also for students to be consulted in relation to the assessment of teachers. In addition, they would like teachers to be trained to talk to students about any issues or problems they may have.
'Students should be allowed to tell teachers what they are doing wrong without getting in trouble.' [Junior Cycle Student]
- ⇒ **Other changes:** Other changes suggested included greater consultation with students and teachers on decision-making within schools; a school-book renting scheme; help for students with problems; and making the last class every day a homework class.

Senior Cycle Results

2



Most enjoyed learning

Young people at Senior Cycle level were asked what they most enjoyed learning in their whole lives, why and what helped them learn. Arts-based activities, such as art, music, drama and dancing, were the most popular activities, followed by sport, life skills, self-discovery and learning about others, learning a language, creative writing, public speaking and woodwork.

Arts-based activities

The reasons given for enjoying learning arts-based activities were because they were enjoyable, fun, relaxing, interesting, stimulating, allowed self-expression, built confidence and gave people a sense of achievement. Having a talent was also considered to make learning more enjoyable. What helped young people learn art, music, drama and dancing were good teachers, the support and example of family and friends, seeing an improvement, starting at a young age, the practical nature of the activities and exposure to the arts.

'Acting – it's my passion.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Sport

Young people most enjoyed learning how to play sport because it was a good way to meet new people and make new friends, and they enjoyed taking part, working as a team, being competitive and developing skills. Sport also provided a sense of escapism for some young people. What helped them learn sport were good teachers and coaches, the encouragement and example of family and friends, getting on well with other people, determination, enjoyment, starting at a young age, working as a team and starting the activity with friends.

'Working together as a team makes it more worthwhile.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Life skills

Life skills, such as learning to ride a bicycle, how to drive, cooking and first aid, were cited by many participants as being what they most enjoyed learning in their whole lives. They enjoyed learning life skills because they are practical, hands-on, not learned from a book, interactive, provide a sense of achievement, involve spending time with family, and have helped shape their personality. Life skills, it was agreed, were primarily learned from family and friends. Enjoying the activity and being determined were also considered to be important factors.

'Learning how to ride a bike when I was young was a big achievement as it took a while to learn.' [Senior Cycle Student]



Learning about yourself and others

Young people enjoyed learning about themselves and others through self-discovery, learning how they can make a difference, learning how to get on with others and how to work as a team. They enjoyed learning about themselves because it was fun, they learned their likes and dislikes and what they are good at. They enjoyed learning about others because it helped them make new friends, increased their social skills and gave them an understanding of equality issues.

'It is good to know yourself before you learn other things.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Languages

The main reason students enjoyed learning a new language was because they were learning the language in a practical and engaging manner, for example, through activities such as games and sports in a French or Irish college. Those who attended language colleges found it easier to learn because they were immersed in the language for a number of weeks, were open to learning and liked the enthusiasm of the teachers there. Other students enjoyed languages because they were interested in different cultures or would like to travel in the future.

'There were enthusiastic good teachers in Euro College. We did French games and activities, sports through French.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Creative writing

Young people liked creative writing because it allowed them to use their imagination and be inventive. Enthusiastic good teachers, being given the freedom to be creative and having a passion for writing were considered to be beneficial to learning this skill.

'We were given tips and the freedom to be creative.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Public speaking

Some students enjoyed public speaking and debating because they liked to voice their opinions and hear others. Encouragement from teachers and parents helped them learn, as did listening to politicians and getting support from their debating team.

Woodwork

A few young people said woodwork was what they most enjoyed learning. Good school facilities made learning this subject more enjoyable. What helped young people learn was the practical nature of the activity, being allowed creative freedom and it becoming a hobby for them.

'My father is a carpenter and I learned from a young age, so was ahead in school.'
[Senior Cycle Student]

Other activities

A small number of young people enjoyed learning about drug and alcohol awareness from Youth Services and friends because they found it interesting to learn more about the subject and be in a position to advise younger people. Other topics enjoyed were ancient mythology, philosophy and marketing.

Most useful thing ever learned

According to young people in Senior Cycle, the most useful things they have ever learned are social skills, confidence, how to read and write, and life skills.

Social skills

Social skills, such as how to talk and listen to people, make new friends and work as part of a team, were considered to be useful skills because they are essential for everyday life and make it easier to meet new people and make new friends.

'How to mix easily with people – you need it in everyday life.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Confidence

Confidence was considered to be the most useful thing some young people had ever learned. Being confident, learning how to stand up for yourself and voicing your opinion are important because it enables young people to get involved in new groups, make a difference and set a good example for others. Public speaking and drama were identified as activities that have helped increase young people's confidence.

'Public speaking helps confidence.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Reading and writing

Learning how to read and write has helped young people with their school work, improved their capacity for learning and given some a love of reading.

Life skills

According to young people, life skills, such as cooking and first aid, are useful because they are necessary skills and they also help build confidence.

'How to cook – you need to eat.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Other subjects, activities and skills

Other subjects, activities and skills that young people deemed to be useful included work experience, maths, metal work, how to speak and communicate, learn a musical instrument, walk, text, form a mini-company and use a Swiss Army knife.



Most enjoyed learning in primary school

Young people at Senior Cycle level were asked what they most enjoyed learning when they were in primary school. The most popular subjects or activities mentioned were sport and PE, art, history, English, creative writing, Irish, music and drama. The majority of students at Senior Cycle level are still taking part in these subjects or activities. The subjects they are most likely not to be still participating in are PE, art, drama, history and science.

Sport and PE

Young people enjoyed learning sport and PE because they were fun, enjoyable, a good way to make friends, easy and involved teamwork.

'Sport helps you make friends.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Art

Young people enjoyed learning art because it was fun, enjoyable, skilful, practical and non-academic.



History

Participants enjoyed learning history because it was interesting, easy and taught young people to be inquisitive about where they are from and about other countries.

'History taught me to be inquisitive about things.' [Senior Cycle Student]

English and creative writing

Creative writing was popular among young people since it broadened their minds, views and interests. English gave many young people a love of reading and increased their vocabulary.

'Creative writing broadened my views.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Irish

Irish was popular among participants because they had a good teacher, loved the language and, in a small number of cases, Irish was spoken at home.

'Irish – because I love the language.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Music and drama

Young people enjoyed learning music and singing because it was fun and they were interested in it. Fun was also central to the appeal of drama to young people, as well as exploring different characters.

Other activities

Other activities young people enjoyed learning in primary school included making friends, maths, how to use a computer, quizzes, science, discovering something new and developing public speaking skills by, for example, reading in class.

Most enjoy learning now

Senior Cycle students were asked what they most enjoy learning now in school. Science subjects, history, English, music, technology, art, home economics, languages and non-exam religion were cited by students as the subjects they currently enjoy learning the most.

Science

Science subjects, particularly biology and physics, were considered to be enjoyable to learn because they are interesting, practical and teachers have an interest in their subject. Some students mentioned their love of nature, while others said that studying science was necessary for certain college courses.

'Biology – you find out how things work.' [Senior Cycle Student]

History

History was considered to be enjoyable to learn because it is interesting, important, easy to learn, teaches about our past and has good teachers.

English

Students enjoy learning English because it is interesting, enjoyable, helps develop public speaking, allows creativity and use of imagination. Some young people also have a love of reading and poetry.

'English allows you to be creative.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Music

Young people enjoy learning music because they have a passion and/or a talent for it. They can express themselves through music and they have good teachers.

'Music is a way to express myself.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Technology

Technology was highlighted as an enjoyable subject to learn since it is practical, fun, creative and has good teachers.

Art

Participants enjoy learning art because it is enjoyable, they have a talent, it allows freedom and they have good fun teachers.

'Art – I enjoy the freedom.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Home economics

According to young people, learning home economics is enjoyable because it is practical, a life skill and they enjoy cooking and learning about other cultures and foods.

'Home economics – it's a practical subject.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Languages

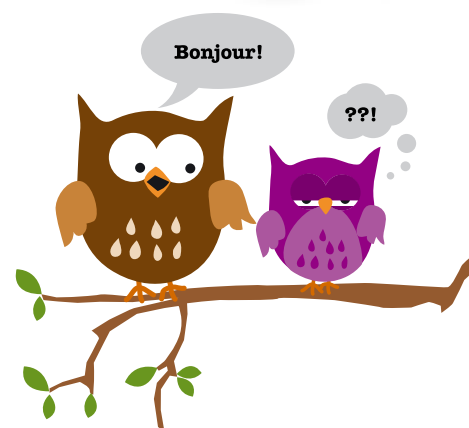
French, Spanish and Japanese were cited as languages students enjoy learning because they find them easy, useful and have good teachers.

Religion

Non-exam religion is regarded as an enjoyable subject to learn since there is no exam pressure, classes are relaxed, discussions are open and there is no homework.

Other subjects

Other subjects that Senior Cycle students said they enjoy learning at the moment included maths because they like problem-solving; business studies because they learn how to make money; art history because it allows expression of opinions; geography because it is an interesting broad subject; engineering because it is fun; construction because it is easy to learn; technical graphics because it is enjoyable; and PE because it is relaxed. Students also mentioned enjoying certain Transition Year modules, such as Third World studies and horticulture, as well as sign language and learning about other cultures.



Junior Cycle curriculum

Senior Cycle students were asked if the thing they most enjoyed learning is, or should be, part of the school curriculum. They were also asked to identify the essential things young people need to learn in school between 1st and 3rd year (Junior Cycle), what subjects should all students learn and what new subjects should be taught. In addition, they were asked if they thought schools should be allowed to develop some of their own courses, instead of the entire curriculum coming from the Department of Education and Skills.

Essential skills and subjects

Senior Cycle students identified life skills, social skills, mental health education and coping skills, sexual health education and alcohol and drug awareness as the essential skills and subjects that young people need to learn at Junior Cycle level.

Life skills

Practical life skills were considered to be the most essential thing young people should learn between 1st and 3rd year. Suggested life skills included first aid, personal finance, household management and budgeting, filling in forms, 'electronic babies', cooking, ironing, washing, typing, self-defence, sign language, road safety, how to drive and how to change a tyre.

'More relevant subjects to life.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Social skills

The development of social skills, such as how to make friends, and personal development through self-discovery and confidence-building classes were also considered to be very important skills for young people to learn at Junior Cycle level.

'More focus on finding out more about yourself, making friends and finding talents.'
[Senior Cycle Student]

Mental health education and coping skills

Mental health education and the development of coping skills to deal with issues such as bullying, relationships and personal problems were highlighted as essential areas in which young people should be educated at this age.

'Better support around relationships and personal problems.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Sexual health education

Sexual health education was seen as a priority in terms of young people's health and educational needs.

Alcohol and drug awareness

Alcohol and drug awareness was considered to be vital for young people in 1st and 3rd year.

'More in-depth alcohol and drug information.' [Senior Cycle Student]

New subjects and activities

New subjects and activities that Senior Cycle students would like to see introduced at Junior Cycle level included subjects usually taught at university or third-level, such as law, sociology, politics, marketing, journalism, tourism, dietetics and philosophy. They would also like to see more arts-based activities included at Junior Cycle level, such as photography, film studies, drama, singing and dancing.

Other new subjects and activities mentioned included current affairs and world issues; leadership and communication skills; debating and public speaking; study skills and career guidance; computers; Chinese; mythology; outdoor adventure activities; road safety; creativity classes; and spelling and writing classes for those with learning difficulties.

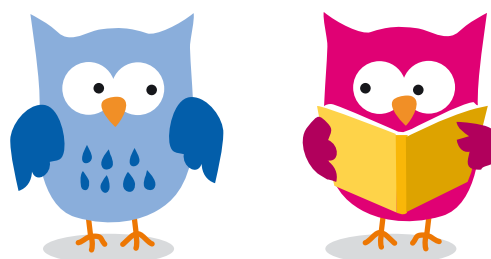
'Creativity class, so you can work on your imagination.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Compulsory subjects

Almost all Senior Cycle students agreed that English, maths, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) should be compulsory subjects at Junior Cycle level. However, many students would like the present forms of SPHE and CSPE to be restructured, taught differently and allocated more time (*see below*). There was disagreement over whether or not Irish and other modern languages should be compulsory for students. Most young people agreed that all other subjects should be optional.

Improvement of current subjects

In general, young people felt current subjects are too exam-focused and they would like to see more emphasis on practical subjects. However, some participants felt certain subjects, such as SPHE and PE, *should* become exam subjects. Many young people agreed that some subjects (e.g. SPHE, PE, religion, science and CSPE) taught at Junior Cycle level could be improved in various ways.



SPHE

As well as calling for more classes in SPHE, young people would like to see some changes in this subject. They would like SPHE to place more emphasis on issues such as breaking-down prejudices on sexuality, sex education, personal health, politics, alcohol and drug education, and study skills. Some young people stated that SPHE should not be taught by religion teachers since, in their experience, their views can be biased.

PE

As regards PE, young people would like more classes and a greater variety of activities, such as horse riding, surfing, swimming, running, cycling, yoga, Pilates, dance and fitness classes.

Creative subjects and activities

Overall, young people would like the Junior Cycle curriculum to focus more on creative subjects, such as art, crafts, music, drama and creative writing. Those studying music would like to study modern as well as classical music, and more reading for enjoyment was suggested within the English curriculum.

CSPE

Many participants would like more CSPE classes and the option of having an advanced level within the subject so more can be learned.

Religion

Students would like religion classes to cover all religions and to take a more spiritual approach.

'Religion should be included, but have a more spiritual approach.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Languages

Students felt that there should be more focus on spoken Irish and a wider choice of modern languages should be available to study at Junior Cycle level.



Science

Improvement of the Junior Cert science course was suggested.

Gender equality

Students believe that all Junior Cycle subjects should be available in all schools for both girls and boys.

'All schools should have all subjects for both girls and boys.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Schools developing own courses

Overall, more Senior Cycle students disagreed than agreed with the idea that schools should be allowed to develop some of their own courses, instead of the entire curriculum coming from the Department of Education and Skills. The main reasons against schools developing their own curriculum were:

- ⇒ Students thought it would create an unfair and unequal system, and a lack of standardisation between schools.
- ⇒ They also felt that private and urban schools would have more resources and therefore be able to offer a wider choice of subjects to students, while disadvantaged and rural schools would perhaps offer less subject choices and focus more on practical subjects. It was the students' belief that this would widen the gap between public/private schools and schools in advantaged/disadvantaged areas, increase competition between schools and lead to the stigmatisation of certain schools.

'It would be unfair as it would make schools unequal.' [Senior Cycle Student]

'If there was only one school in your area, it would be a disadvantage because of choices and travel.' [Senior Cycle Student]

- ⇒ They were also worried that if schools were able to develop their own courses, they might not be relevant to students, lack imagination and focus on mandatory subjects. Some participants voiced concern that teachers might not be qualified to teach newly developed courses. Others suggested that schools might become overly specialised in certain subject areas and narrow the opportunities for students. Finally, a small number of participants stated they would not trust schools to develop their own courses.

A number of young people agreed, at least in part, that it was a good idea for schools to develop some of their own courses:

- ⇒ Some felt schools should be consulted on the curriculum, but subjects should be the same in all schools.
- ⇒ Others felt schools should teach the same core subjects, but have a choice in relation to subject options and developing other subjects.
- ⇒ One participant suggested that schools should be able to choose one element of a subject, rather than have complete freedom in developing the entire curriculum.
- ⇒ Some argued that it would give students more options in terms of subject choices, would broaden their horizons and allow them to focus on the area they would like to study or work at.
- ⇒ Others believed that it would give schools a greater input into developing different types of learning and assessment, such as continuous exams and project-based assessment.

'If schools have more say, they could break learning and assessment into smaller chunks.' [Senior Cycle Student]

- ⇒ Some felt it would be an opportunity for schools to develop non-academic subjects (such as life skills) or focus on subjects that are relevant to the area in which a school is located (e.g. local industries).
- ⇒ While it was argued that lack of resources would affect the choice of courses in some schools, students proposed that schools could pool resources by sharing facilities to offer more choices.

Overall, the participants recommended that both teachers and students be consulted in relation to developing any new courses within schools.

'Schools and teachers will teach the curriculum better if they have a say.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Assessment

Senior Cycle students were asked if the activity or subject they most enjoyed learning was assessed, examined or recognised, and how they knew they had achieved something, the advantages and disadvantages of having a Junior Cert exam, what should be assessed or examined and how, and the importance to them of feedback.

Assessment of most enjoyed activity or subject

The majority of activities or subjects that young people most enjoyed learning were not formally assessed through exams, with the exception of music exams and competitions, and first-aid tests.

Achievement in most enjoyed activity or subject

The main way students knew they had achieved something was through encouragement, feedback, constructive criticism and praise from their family and friends.

'Encouragement from family.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Those involved in sport knew they had achieved something when they made the team, won matches, medals and trophies. Self-recognised improvement or advancing to the next level (e.g. the next team or class) also signalled to young people that they had achieved success. Increased enjoyment and confidence, as well as making new friends, were also significant indicators.

'I knew I had achieved something in soccer when I was made Captain.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Advantages and disadvantages of Junior Cert exam

The majority of young people at Senior Cycle level regarded the Junior Cert exam as a negative form of assessment. In general, students believe the Junior Cert is 'a memory test', which encourages cramming of information and does not provide an accurate picture of a student's abilities or capabilities. They argued that the Junior Cert exam does not suit all students and can cause undue stress. On the other hand, some young people conceded that examination of knowledge is the only option in some subjects and the Junior Cert exam was a good preparation for the Leaving Certificate.

'The Junior Cert is a memory test.' [Senior Cycle Student]

'There should be exams as they are preparation for the Leaving Cert.' [Senior Cycle Student]

What should be assessed and examined

Young people from Senior Cycle believe there should be more practical assessments of subjects and more assessment of practical aspects of subjects in the Junior Cert. For example, examination of cooking in home economics and more oral exams in languages. Participants also felt that the assessment of life skills, such as swimming and first aid, should be considered.

Continuous assessment

There were mixed views among young people in Senior Cycle on continuous assessment at Junior Cycle level. While the majority of participants agreed that continuous assessment through project work and a number of smaller exams was preferable to one final exam, a

number of young people felt that continuous exams would cause too much stress all year round, be too expensive and diminish the importance of exams. However, students in favour of continuous exams argued that this type of assessment would keep students focused all year round, ease stress and ensure teachers focused on the correct aspect of the curriculum. One student felt that continuous assessment through project-based work would provide a more individual and personalised type of education for young people.

'I feel continuous assessment would give a more tailored and personalised education, which would offer a more facilitating curriculum for individuals and their own needs. A formal exam limits the scope teachers have to cater for the needs of the individual.'

[Senior Cycle Student]

Other forms of assessment

In addition to continuous assessment, young people suggested other forms of assessment could be effective at Junior Cycle level. Participation, contribution and behaviour in class, as well as enthusiasm and general interest in subjects, were possible assessment methods identified by participants. Other forms of assessment proposed were project and group work; oral exams or interviews; measuring improvement; homework assignments; random quizzes; monthly reports; work experience; presentations; abstract reasoning; and creative thinking.

'Subjects shouldn't be assessed all at the same time as the huge pressure and stress won't give an accurate result of the person's capabilities in a particular subject. Some subjects, like art, shouldn't have exams to assess them; [they] should be completely practical.'

[Senior Cycle Student]

Feedback

Senior Cycle students were consulted on the issue of feedback and its importance in terms of learning. The majority agreed that positive feedback is very important because it gives encouragement, builds confidence, measures progress, provides motivation and helps students understand what they need to improve and change. On the type of feedback required, it was agreed that it should not only be positive, but also constructive, honest, genuine, equal, fair, specific, detailed, take into account progress and be provided regularly on a one-to-one basis.

A number of Senior Cycle students, who have completed the Junior Cert exam, commented that feedback on exams would be very helpful. It was suggested that more detailed exam results should be provided (e.g. A1, A2, A3), scripts with comments should be made available and examiners should give a general feedback on how exam questions were answered and where marks were lost.

How I like to learn

Senior Cycle students were asked what was it about their favourite activity or subject they ever learned that made them want to learn it, what subjects they learn easiest at school, how they learn best, what would ease the transition from primary to secondary school, and the idea of allowing students to try out new subjects in 1st year before they choose what ones to study for the Junior Cert ('taster' subjects).

Learning a favourite activity or subject

What made students want to learn their favourite activity or subject encompassed a myriad of factors – among them were making friends and meeting new people, having a passion for it, good teachers and the example of others, competitiveness, learning a relevant life skill, talent, determination, interest, being hands-on, fun, teamwork, affirmation, visual aids, responsibility, independence, self-expression, increasing confidence and wanting to pursue a career in that area.

'Driving – [I] wanted responsibility and independence.' [Senior Cycle Student]

'Public speaking – [I] wanted to be more confident in myself.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Easiest subjects to learn at school

In general, students felt the easiest subjects to learn at school were the ones they found most interesting and enjoyable, and that motivated them to learn. Many felt the role of teachers was most important: often students liked a subject because of who was teaching it or how it was being taught. Practical hands-on subjects were generally considered to be easier, but there was a consensus that some courses are easier than others. Working hard and having a flair for a subject were also considered essential factors in learning.

'Some subjects motivate you.' [Senior Cycle Student]

In terms of individual subjects, science subjects were considered to be the easiest to learn because of demonstrations and experiments. Biology, in particular, was identified by young people as being easy to learn because it is a practical interesting course that can be related to everyday life.

'Biology is related to everyday life.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Subjects such as English, history and art history were deemed to be easier to learn because they are opinion-based. The creative aspects of art and English make them easier to learn, according to some students. The oral aspect of French was mentioned as helping learning. Other subjects identified by participants as being easy to learn included geography, construction, technology, maths, home economics, religion, business, Irish, music and Lithuanian.

'Art history – there is no right or wrong answer.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Like to learn best

According to students at Senior Cycle level, they learn best through practical hands-on learning, such as experiments in science; visual aids such as videos, DVDs and slide shows; interactive multimedia learning; project work, group learning and class discussions; field trips and outdoor learning; enthusiastic nice teachers; guest speakers and talks from outside groups; theory notes and study cards; proper structure; stories and examples they can relate to; through speaking a language; fun; quizzes; creative learning; and finding things out themselves.

Participants would like more class- and student-led learning in schools, as well as more facilitated learning. They would also like different types of learning to be recognised in the curriculum.



Taster subjects

The majority of young people in Senior Cycle agreed that having taster subjects in the 1st year of Junior Cycle was a good idea. It was felt that taster subjects would give 1st year students the opportunity to see what subjects and teachers they liked, so they could make informed, independent, uninfluenced decisions in relation to subject choices when they reach secondary level. It would also give them the chance to try new subjects that they might otherwise not have chosen, for example, some subjects like woodwork or home economics can often be gender-specific. The suggested length of studying taster subjects ranged from between 2 weeks to a full year. The majority felt 6-8 weeks would be sufficient to allow students to make a decision on what subjects they wanted to study for the Junior Cert.

'It [taking taster subjects] would help students make informed decisions.' [Senior Cycle Student]

A small number of young people disagreed with the idea of taster subjects. They argued that it is not necessary because some students have already researched the subjects they would like to study and feel they should not be made study subjects they do not like.

Help ease transition

Senior Cycle students were asked what else, other than taster subjects, would ease the transition from primary to secondary school. The most common approach suggested by participants was introductory days or weeks, or introductory programmes during 6th class or the summer before 1st year. Visits to secondary schools in 5th and 6th classes were also suggested, as well as visits from secondary school teachers to explain how it works. Introducing some secondary school subjects in primary school was another idea proposed.

'Introduction day at the start, where students meet to have fun.' [Senior Cycle Student]

'Explain how secondary school works in 6th class.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Mentoring programmes (i.e. having a Senior Cycle 'mentor' or 'buddy' to help Junior Cycle students) were also considered to be a good idea to help ease the transition between primary and secondary school. Having Transition Year in 1st year or making 1st year an introductory year was suggested by some young people. More clubs, social activities, class competitions and team-building exercises were proposed as good ways to make the transition easier for 1st year students. Practical ideas (such as giving students maps and basing teachers in the same classrooms so students would know where they are going for classes) were also put forward by some participants. Letting 1st years start school a week before other students and finish earlier each day was suggested by some.

'1st year should just be an introduction year – study for Junior Cert in 2nd and 3rd year.' [Senior Cycle Student]

'Leave school 5 minutes earlier every day.' [Senior Cycle Student]

Other suggestions included more practical subjects and life skills classes, limited homework and communication on homework requirements, active learning, more facilitation, continuous assessment, career guidance, icebreakers with teachers and paired reading in class.

'Teachers should communicate with 1st years about homework.' [Senior Cycle Student]

If I was Minister for Education and Skills, I would ...

As with the Junior Cycle students, each Senior Cycle student was asked what one change they would like to make to the Junior Cycle if they were Minister for Education and Skills for a day. Some of the suggestions were:

- ⇒ **Junior Cycle:** Young people said they would change the Senior Cycle to 3 years and the Junior Cycle to 2 years, and have Transition Year in 3rd year.
- ⇒ **Junior Cert exam:** Senior Cycle students would like there to be fewer exam subjects in the Junior Cert, an Irish oral exam, more time between exams to ease pressure, free rechecking of exam papers and Junior Cert project work to be completed in 1st and 2nd year. Many participants felt there should be continuous assessment in the form of a number of smaller exams or project-based work instead of the one final Junior Cert exam. They also thought that young people should not be allowed to drop out of school after the Junior Cert.
'Less subjects in the Junior Cert.' [Senior Cycle Student]
- ⇒ **Subjects and curriculum:** If young people were Minister for Education and Skills for the day, they would offer a wider choice of subjects to students; make courses shorter; focus less on academic subjects and more on practical and social skills and sport; make languages optional; ensure the SPHE syllabus focused more on self-discovery and learning about others; and let students study only what they are really interested in.
'Greater flexibility in subject choices.' [Senior Cycle Student]
- ⇒ **Learning:** If young people were in charge of learning, they would phase out old teaching methods, encourage different learning styles and promote more open and informal discussions between teachers and students. They would allow students to learn based on their own skills and abilities, and provide students with laptops or ipads instead of books.
'Open discussions between teachers and students.' [Senior Cycle Student]
- ⇒ **Teachers:** If young people had a say, they would ensure teachers were trained differently and assessed in a more rigorous manner, including through consulting with students. They would transform current teaching methods and focus more on facilitation and discussions. Above all, they would promote a mutual respect between teachers and students, make teachers listen to students more and give students and teachers equal rights.
'Change the relationship between students and teachers.' [Junior Cycle Student]
- ⇒ **Schools:** If young people were in charge of education in Ireland, they would improve school facilities; ensure all schools have the same resources; introduce more Educate Together and Community Schools; establish regional networks for schools to share ideas; consult with students on issues such as school uniforms; and appoint independent counsellors and drugs workers in every school.
'There should be a conference every two months with one representative from each school to talk about what can be improved.' [Junior Cycle Student]
- ⇒ **Other changes:** Other changes suggested included no education cut-backs; equal educational opportunities for all students; free school books; and no increase in college fees. Participants also thought students should have more recreational time and get a half-day off every week.





Key findings

3

The key findings from this consultation on the reform of the Junior Cycle with 88 young people, aged 12-18, from Junior and Senior Cycle levels are summarised below, using the same topic headings as discussed in the day-long session.

Most enjoyed learning

- ⇒ Junior Cycle students most enjoyed learning sport, music and art, while Senior Cycle students most enjoyed learning arts-based activities, sport, life skills, learning about yourself and others, languages, creative writing, public speaking and woodwork.
- ⇒ The main reasons why young people enjoyed these activities, skills and subjects, and what helped them learn were that they were fun, enjoyable, interesting, practical, creative and encouraged self-expression. Having good teachers, support from family and friends, working as a team, meeting new people and making new friends were also significant factors in learning.

Most useful thing ever learned

- ⇒ Young people from Junior and Senior Cycles agreed that social skills, confidence, reading and writing, and life skills are the most useful things they had ever learned because they are essential skills and will benefit them all their lives.

Most enjoyed learning in primary school

- ⇒ Sport and arts-based activities were what young people enjoyed learning most in primary school because they were fun, enjoyable, practical, non-academic, involved teamwork and were a good way to make friends.
- ⇒ The most popular subjects in primary school were history, English and creative writing, Irish, music, science, geography and maths. Senior Cycle students are more likely than Junior Cycle students to be still studying the subjects they most enjoyed learning in primary school. This is most likely due to the greater choice of subjects available to students at Senior Cycle level.

Most enjoy learning now

- ⇒ Young people at Senior Cycle most enjoy learning science subjects in school at the moment because they find them interesting and practical. All students enjoy learning history, English and music because they are enjoyable, interesting, and encourage self-expression, imagination and creativity.



Junior Cycle curriculum

- ⇒ Social skills, life skills, personal development, mental health education and coping skills, sexual health education, alcohol and drug awareness, and practical subjects (like computers) were considered to be the most essential set of skills and subjects young people should learn in Junior Cycle.
- ⇒ Overall, young people would like a wider range of subjects to be available to students at Junior Cycle level. They suggested expanding the curriculum to include more third-level or university-type subjects (e.g. law, sociology, politics, marketing, journalism, tourism, dietetics and philosophy), a wider range of modern languages, more arts-based subjects and cultural studies.
- ⇒ English, maths, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) were the only subjects that young people completely agreed should be compulsory at Junior Cycle level. However, in the case of SPHE and CSPE, while students would like these subjects to be central to the Junior Cycle curriculum, they felt strongly that SPHE and CSPE courses should be restructured, taught in a different manner and allocated more time.
- ⇒ In general, young people felt current Junior Cycle subjects are too exam-focused. They would like to see more emphasis on practical and creative subjects and also practical aspects of subjects. However, some participants stated that certain subjects, such as SPHE and PE, should become exam subjects.
- ⇒ More students disagreed than agreed that schools should be allowed to develop some of their own courses, instead of the entire curriculum coming from the Department of Education and Skills. The main reasons why young people disagreed with schools developing their own courses were they thought it would create an unfair and unequal system and result in a lack of standardisation between schools. However, some participants felt such a development would create a wider choice of subjects for students, which they considered to be positive. The idea of the Department of Education and Skills and schools consulting with teachers and students in relation to the curriculum was widely welcomed by young people.



Assessment

- ⇒ The activities or subjects young people most enjoyed learning were generally not assessed formally. Positive feedback, constructive criticism and encouragement from family and friends were the main ways they knew they had achieved something in their favourite activities.
- ⇒ The majority of young people agreed the Junior Cert exam is not an effective method of assessment since it encourages cramming, does not provide an accurate assessment of a student's academic competencies, does not suit all students, causes stress and is effectively 'a memory test'. More practical and continuous (*see below*) assessment of subjects was proposed since this was considered to be a more effective way of examining people's knowledge and capabilities.
- ⇒ Overall, there were mixed views among young people in relation to introducing continuous assessment into the Junior Cycle. While participants thought assessment through continuous exams and project-based work would make life easier and less stressful for students and keep them, as well as teachers, focused all year, others felt continuous exams might cause more stress throughout the school year and reduce the significance of exams.
- ⇒ Assessment of students' participation and behaviour in class, oral assessments and improvements over time were suggested as other potential forms of assessment that could be considered instead of exams at Junior Cycle level.
- ⇒ Feedback was viewed as very beneficial for students – positive feedback and constructive criticism were considered to be the most effective forms of feedback because they provide encouragement, measure progress and give students motivation to improve.

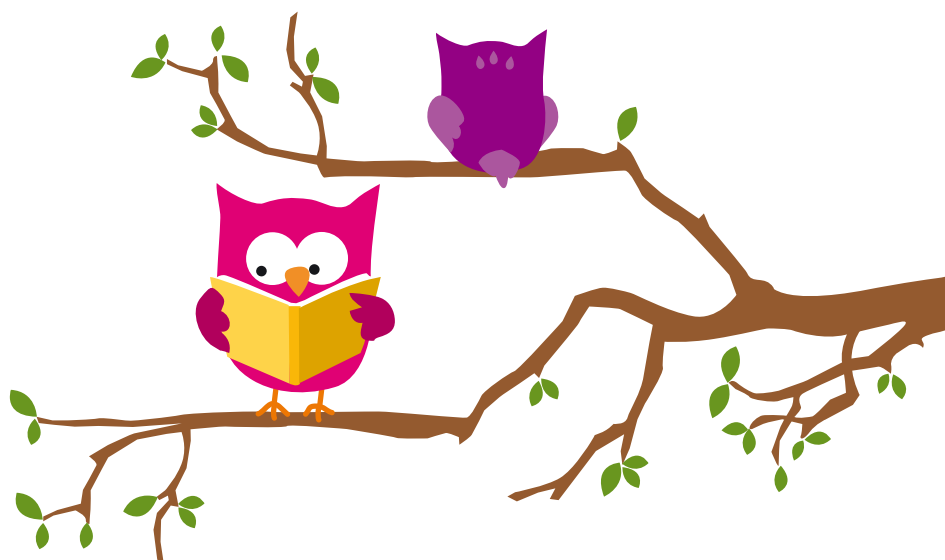
How I like to learn

- ⇒ Positive feedback was what principally encouraged young people at Junior Cycle level to learn their favourite activity or subject. Making friends and meeting new people were the factors that mainly encouraged Senior Cycle students.
- ⇒ Subjects that young people find easiest to learn in school are practical subjects (such as science and home economics), those they find interesting and enjoyable, and opinion-based subjects (such as English and history).
- ⇒ Students identified practical hands-on learning, revision, visual learning and varied teaching methods as the most effective learning methods.
- ⇒ Almost all participants agreed that having taster subjects in 1st year to ease the transition between primary and secondary school was a very good idea since it would enable students to make informed decisions on subject choices for Junior Cert. A reasonable trial period of 6-8 weeks was suggested as sufficient for 1st year students to decide on their future subjects.
- ⇒ Other recommendations to ease the transition included introductory days or programmes before starting secondary school, introducing some secondary school subjects in 6th class and mentoring programmes for 1st years.



If I was the Minister for Education and Skills, I would ...

- ⇒ If young people were Minister for Education and Skills for a day, they would change the Junior Cycle to 2 years and the Senior Cycle to 3 years. They would have fewer exam subjects in the Junior Cert. Some would introduce continuous assessment in the form of project-based work or continuous exams.
- ⇒ If young people had a say in developing the Junior Cycle curriculum, they would offer a wider choice of subjects and place more emphasis on practical subjects and social and life skills.
- ⇒ Young people would also encourage new teaching methods and ways of learning, such as student-led learning and open discussions.
- ⇒ If young people were in charge of the Department of Education and Skills, they would ensure teachers were assessed more rigorously and encourage consultation with students as regards the assessment of teachers. They would also promote a more positive relationship between students and teachers.
- ⇒ Other changes young people would like to make included a school-book renting scheme in all schools; greater consultation with students and teachers on decision-making within schools; better facilities in schools; independent counsellors and drugs workers in all schools; and no education cut-backs.



Conclusions

4



This consultation with young people has highlighted a number of important issues that should be taken into consideration when reforming the Junior Cycle. Discussions found that the skills, subjects and activities that young people find most enjoyable and useful are those that are considered fun and interesting, practical, opinion-based, creative and encourage self-expression. Therefore, introducing more practical subjects into the Junior Cycle and focusing on practical aspects of subjects in terms of learning and assessment would be welcomed by young people. Allowing for greater freedom of opinion within subjects should also be explored.

Young people identified good teachers, positive feedback, taking part with friends and encouragement from teachers, family and friends as being central to enjoying learning. Consequently, training teachers to teach in a more effective, interesting and fun way would help improve how young people learn. The introduction of positive feedback and constructive criticism on a regular basis would also be of great benefit to students since it would provide encouragement, motivation and measure progress.

Life skills and social skills were identified as the most essential things that all young people at Junior Cycle level should learn. While they acknowledged that life skills and social skills are predominately learned outside of school from family and friends, young people strongly recommended that these skills should also be learned and developed within schools. As a result, these important skills would be available for all young people to learn, not just those who are fortunate enough to learn them outside school.

In general, students felt that the Junior Cycle curriculum is too exam-focused and that the Junior Cert exam itself is a negative form of assessment, causes stress and is essentially 'a memory test'. Young people felt that less emphasis on written exams and more emphasis on assessment of practical aspects of subjects would counteract these issues.

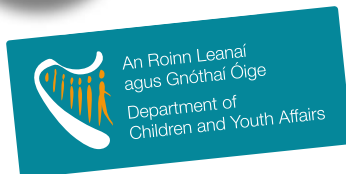
Overall, young people would like there to be less compulsory subjects in the Junior Cycle and a wider choice of subjects to choose from. If young people had a say, they would also like to change the Junior Cycle to 2 years and the Senior Cycle to 3 years.

Finally, students would like to be consulted more in relation to issues such as the assessment of teachers, curriculum development and decision-making within schools. Therefore, this consultation on the reform of the Junior Cycle is a positive step towards giving young people a voice in educational matters that concern them.

Au revoir



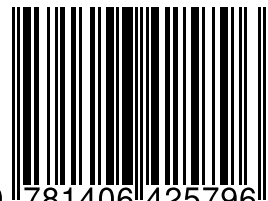
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