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**Challenges Teachers face in Successfully
Supporting Autistic Students in a Mainstream
Classroom within the new Junior Cycle Curriculum**

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Title:

Challenges Teachers face in Successfully Supporting Autistic Students in a Mainstream Classroom within the new Junior Cycle Curriculum

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Abstract

This thesis explores the challenges teachers in a mixed, rural, secondary school experience whilst trying to support autistic students within the new Junior Cycle curriculum. Through a mixed-method investigation using an online survey and semi-structured interview process, data was collected from n = 20 participating teachers who opted to complete an online survey and subsequently n = 7 participants self-selected to engage in an interview.

This study sought to answer four key questions: i) What challenges do teachers in mainstream secondary schools currently face in teaching and supporting autistic students under the new Junior Cycle curriculum learning outcomes? ii) What are teacher attitudes towards the expectations and content of the new curriculum in terms of their approach to teaching and supporting ASD students? iii) How have these challenges changed in comparison to teacher challenges faced in supporting ASD students under the old Junior cert curriculum? iv) What recommendations would teachers give to adapt the curriculum and ease these challenges so that they can best support autistic students?

Findings indicate that the challenges faced by teachers in a mainstream classroom, whilst supporting autistic students within the new Junior Cycle curriculum include: i) time constraints impacting their ability to form meaningful relationships with autistic students, ii) the ability to create appropriate differentiated materials, iii) the lack of differentiation in a common level paper, iv) difficulties in supporting autistic students in their completion of the Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs), and v) a lack of appropriate resources and supports provided by relevant government agencies and schools.

Recommendations made by participants and the researcher indicate that changes in success criteria, exam paper predictability, and provision of resources, including i) physical materials, ii) SNAs, iii) resource classes, and iv) planning time, are needed to help resolve some of these challenges.

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Glossary of terms

ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CBAs	Classroom Based Assessments
DES	Department of Education and Skills
HL	Higher Level
IEP	Individual Education Plans
JC	Junior Cycle Curriculum
JCT	Junior Cycle for Teachers
L1LP	Level 1 Learning Program
L2LP	Level 2 Learning Program
LO	Learning Outcomes
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
OL	Ordinary Level
PLI	Priority Learning Unit
SC	Success Criteria
UL	University of Limerick

Chapter One Introduction

Since 2014 there has been a phased introduction of the new Junior Cycle (JC) Curriculum (First Year – Third Year) within secondary schools across Ireland (DES, 2015). This was initiated to allow more flexibility within the mainstream classroom for students to engage with the curriculum and assessment arrangements in a way that allows for active and collaborative learning, emphasising the development of eight key skills and twenty-four learning outcomes. Assessment is carried out through a summative assessment at the end of Third Year and two Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs) that best align with a school's specific curriculum programme and the learning needs of its students (DES, 2015).

However, the format of the new curriculum has presented challenges for teachers in mainstream settings as reported by teachers who have taken part in surveys such as the Interim Report No. 2 (2023) carried out by the University of Limerick (UL) and the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI, 2022). For most JC subjects, there is no longer a Higher Level (HL) and Ordinary Level (OL) paper but a common-level for all students and an introduction of Learning Outcomes (LO) and Success Criteria (SC) that must be met by teachers before students sit their summative assessment at the end of Third Year (DES, 2015). Despite an emphasis on support being provided for teachers by Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) "through the provision of high-quality CPD and relevant learning and teaching resources" (DES, 2015, p. 30), specific training concerning how to support autistic students has yet to be provided.

Students, in most mainstream JC subjects, will now sit a common-level paper at the end of Third Year, a major change from the previous Junior Certificate exam which offered differentiated levels of Higher and Ordinary level. (DES, 2015) Currently, English, Irish, and Maths remain at Higher and Ordinary Level (DES, 2015). CBAs were also introduced to "provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their understanding and skills in a way which would not be possible in a formal examination" (DES, 2015, p. 37). The emphasis on demonstration of skills presents challenges for teachers in supporting some autistic students who may have difficulty engaging in tasks such as this which call for executive functions to be used, something research has suggested can be difficult for autistic students (Powell & Jordan 2012).

These changes in the curriculum, as well as the lack of provision of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), are areas of concern concerning teacher's abilities to support autistic students within the new JC curriculum successfully. Additionally, the increasing needs of learners and the new expectations of the JC curriculum have led to some teachers finding it challenging to

differentiate in their classroom and allow adequate support time for students, this includes supporting autistic students in mainstream settings (NCCA, 2018).

This research project focuses on the challenges teachers face in successfully supporting autistic students in a mainstream setting within the new JC curriculum. This research identifies the challenges teachers are facing because of the expectations and LOs of the new curriculum, as well as identifying the new challenges that have presented themselves within the new curriculum compared to the old Junior Certificate. This research also discusses teacher attitudes toward the new curriculum and provides recommendations as to how best to address the challenges teachers face in supporting autistic students.

The overarching aim of this project is to identify the challenges teachers face in supporting autistic students in a mainstream JC classroom, with specific objectives:

1. Gather data directly from teachers as to how they feel the curriculum could best be adapted to support autistic students to engage and succeed under the new curriculum guidelines.
2. Determine how these challenges have influenced their approach to teaching and learning.
3. Compare the challenges teachers currently face in supporting autistic students with those they faced under the previous curriculum.
4. Examine support provided to autistic students to successfully engage with the new learning outcomes and criteria of the new Junior Cycle curriculums.

The research undertaken is guided by the principal research questions which this project aims to answer. These include:

1. What challenges do teachers in mainstream secondary schools currently face in teaching and supporting autistic students under the new Junior Cycle curriculum learning outcomes?
2. What are teacher attitudes towards the expectations and content of the new curriculum in terms of their approach to teaching and supporting ASD students?
3. How have these challenges changed in comparison to teacher challenges faced in supporting ASD students under the old Junior cert curriculum?
4. What recommendations would teachers give to adapt the curriculum and ease these challenges so that they can best support autistic students?

This chapter provides both the rationale and aims of this research project, as well as the objectives and research questions for this research project. Chapter Two provides a relevant review of the literature presenting information relating to: (i) defining Autism and the Challenges

Autistic students face in Mainstream Classrooms, (ii) Challenges Teachers in Mainstream Settings Face in Supporting ASD (iii) Junior Cycle Framework and Rationale, and (iv) a Review of Junior Cycle Framework and Teacher Perspectives.

In continuation, Chapter Three outlines the methods used inclusive of the tools, practices, and timeframe used by the researcher to obtain the relevant data for this research project. Chapter Four presents the findings of this research project with both the qualitative survey and interview data presented in the following themes: (i) Teacher Attitudes and Challenges in Response to Supporting Autistic Students Under New Curriculum Expectations and Learning Outcomes (ii) Challenges faced within the new JC curriculum compared to the old Junior Certificate curriculum, and (iii) Teacher Recommendations for Improvements Needed in Supporting Autistic Students within the JC Curriculum.

Chapter Five presents a critical analysis of findings concerning the literature together with a detailed analysis of the significance of these findings. The final chapter reflects on the limitations of this study and provides a summary of the key findings of this research, together with recommendations for changes in practice needed for teachers to successfully support autistic students.

Chapter Two Literature Review

Defining Autism and the challenges autistic students experience in mainstream settings.

Conceptualising autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be difficult as those with autism present with a spectrum of different profiles, abilities, strengths, and challenges, including the prevalence of co-occurring conditions in people with ASD which makes it more likely for someone to be misdiagnosed if the clinical specialists are relying on 'loose diagnostic criteria' (Fletcher Watson & Happé, 2019, p.161). To date, no single cause of ASD has been identified. Due to the complex nature of the disorder and its symptomology, it can be assumed that there are many probable causes of ASD including both genetic and environmental (Alqaysi, et al., 2022). Most recently, to conceptualise ASD, the fifth edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) replaced the previously used DSM-IV (Black & Grant, 2013, p.2). This refinement of clinical diagnosis can help clinicians, careers, and individuals to predict what lies ahead (Black & Grant, 2013, p.11). This, as well as the 11th edition of the International Classification of Disease (ICD-11), identifies only one category for ASD (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019, p.31). This has allowed for specific guidelines to be made where different profiles of those with ASD were not generalised but were specific enough to highlight the differences between them and those without ASD (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019).

To diagnose ASD both DSM-5 and ICD-11 'requires evidence of features in two domains: atypicality in social and communication behaviours, and the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviours' (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019, p.32). The wide range of differences in terms of abilities and experiences each individual has, is presented on a spectrum or continuum of disorders that range from mild to severe. This spectrum is created based on the fundamental characteristics those with ASD present with which are 'persistent deficit in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts' and 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities' (Black & Grant, 2013, p.41).

Preece & Jordan (2010) found that children with ASD described their own school experience as being difficult and problematic due to a lack of ASD understanding amongst others. One participant noted that they were being bullied because "of [her] problems" (Preece & Jordan, 2010, p. 38). This lack of understanding in the school setting can impact students with ASD negatively as they might struggle, for example, to keep up with their teacher or make real connections with their peers.

Other studies have hypothesised that atypical sensory sensitivities might be misinterpreted by teachers, parents, or caregivers as children with ASD lack expressive

communication skills and cannot always articulate their discomfort or enjoyment of stimuli. This creates frustration in individuals who because of their atypical neurodevelopment do not always have the skills to engage with the world around them the way someone of typical neurodevelopment can (Emam & Farrell, 2009).

Language development amongst those with ASD has been theorised as a possible result of a delay in growth/function of the brain's left hemisphere which is responsible for language development (Stephenson, et al., 2023) Due to this atypical development of language competencies and function, miscommunication or lack thereof can occur which at times can result in societal misunderstandings between those with and without ASD (Stephenson, et al., 2023).

Understanding autism as a singular diagnosis is difficult as individuals have "uneven skill profiles or splinter skills" (Fleury, et al., 2014 p 70). According to research conducted by Fleury, et al (2014), characteristics associated with autism can impact students' performances and make academia more difficult for them. Executive functions such as metacognition and regulating behaviours can be impacted by ASD, "specifically the ability to plan multi-step sequences of events, demonstrate mental flexibility, reflect and reason" as well as "following multistep directions, keeping materials organized and being a 'self-starter'" (Fleury, et al., 2014, p. 70). This study also suggests that students with autism "require explicit instruction to learn new skills, including academic skills" (Fleury, et al., 2014, p. 72).

Modelling and guided practice is also recommended to support these students in learning new skills successfully, as well as facilitating "skill generalization" by allowing students opportunities to practice these skills across the school day (Fleury, et al, 2014, p 73). This scaffolding of learning as well as an introduction of specific learning interventions by teachers, according to this research, indicates successful support can be provided to students with autism throughout their academic careers.

Researchers such as Honeybourne (2018), Magnusen (2005), and Frith (2008), have also put forward their recommendations as to how educators can support autistic students throughout their education. Frith (2008) recommends guiding principles in teaching those with ASD that stress the importance of understanding the way ASD affects the child in question and using a 'behavioural approach' (Frith, 2008). Honeybourne (2018) recommends that schools use 'the neurodiversity paradigm [which] is about accepting that neurological difference is part of the natural diversity of being human.' This can help to ensure that schools cater for every neurologically diverse student and do not discriminate against any group in particular (Honeybourne, 2018, p.28).

With this as the motivation, teachers and schools should therefore embrace the differences ASD children bring to the school and adapt as best they can to the learning environment, in which every student is present, comfortable, and motivated to learn. To do this, schools must adopt a whole-school strategy whereby the child with a neurocognitive difference is not being forced to adapt and conform to the school environment and approach to teaching and learning, but rather reasonable accommodations, resources, and supports have been provided to support their unique way of learning, thus supporting a neuro-affirmative approach whereby every child will have equal access to education (Aitken & Fletcher-Watson, 2022). This will reaffirm the European Charter of Rights for Persons with Autism (1992) which declares the right of people with autism to access appropriate education (Autism-Europe, 1992).

However, this can only be achieved if the curriculum and school leaders allow for this to happen. Whilst teachers in mainstream settings where students with an ASD diagnosis are present might have a desire to ensure all students have equal access to education, the curriculum and school itself must facilitate this. This research aims to understand the challenges teachers in these mainstream settings encounter when supporting ASD students successfully within the new JC curriculum.

Junior Cycle Framework and Rationale

Since 2014 there has been a staggered rollout of the new Junior Cycle (JC) curriculum in post-primary schools across Ireland. This introduction of a new JC curriculum was created with various aims, one of which was to create a more student-focused learning experience (NCCA, 2015). The new JC curriculum was also designed to allow more flexibility within the mainstream classroom for students to engage with the curriculum and assessment arrangements in a way that allows for active and collaborative learning, with an emphasis on the development of eight key skills and twenty-four learning outcomes (NCCA, 2015).

The new curriculum introduced two Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs) per subject, that students would complete in Second and Third Year. These CBAs are to be conducted in a way that best aligns with a school's specific curriculum programme and the learning needs of its students (NCCA, 2015). Students then complete an 'Assessment Task' after both CBAs are completed that will reflect on some of the skills used in engaging with their CBA tasks. A final summative common-level exam will take place at the end of Third Year. These CBAs were intended to "provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their understanding and skills in a way which would not be possible in a formal examination" (NCCA, 2015, p.37). It is also intended to "facilitate

developmental feedback to students during their engagement with the assessment task and at the end of the process” (NCCA, 2015, p.37). Each subject area’s CBAs are designed to “best align with the school’s particular curriculum programme and the learning needs of its students” (NCCA, 2015, p.37).

Formative assessment is also a key feature of the new JC curriculum as it allows teachers to provide feedback to students for learning and development. This should allow students and teachers to ‘value the different aspects of students’ learning’ as well as generating evidence of this’ (NCCA, 2015, p. 8). This approach to supporting student learning is outlined in the Framework for Junior Cycle as being an acknowledgment that ‘students learn best when teachers provide feedback that helps students to understand how their learning can be improved’ (NCCA, 2015, p.7).

The JC curriculum emphasises flexibility in the engagement of the learning outcomes and completion of success criteria. Whilst trying to be flexible, the new curriculum provides ‘Learning Outcomes’ to guide teachers in what the student should know by the end of the teaching period between First and Third year whilst offering teachers scope and range in how these learning outcomes are engaged with (NCCA, 2015).

The new curriculum also saw the introduction of the Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes (L1LP and L2LP). These programmes were introduced as part of the Framework for Junior Cycle (NCCA, 2015) for students in the low, mild to high moderate range of ability. Priority Learning Units (PLUs) are provided as guidance. They are assessed throughout the traditional three-year JC course and are reported on as part of the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievements (JCPA). This new approach to a more student-centred learning experience is fundamental in the design of this new curriculum.

The Framework outlines how CPD opportunities are available for teachers through JCT support services which offer assistance to schools “implementing their junior cycle programme” (NCCA, 2015, p.30). It also outlines how other resources such as “exemplar materials and complementary online support” are on offer from the JCT to assist teachers in implementing the new curriculum. This work carried out by the JCT is intended to “complement the work already undertaken by schools themselves and the wide variety of materials produced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)” (NCCA, 2015, p.30). The NCCA is also a source of support for teachers according to the Framework “through specifying a range of assessment modalities for each subject” (NCCA, 2015, p.31), as well as providing an “Assessment Toolkit ...

designed to support and assist teachers in their work on junior cycle assessment.” (NCCA, 2015, p. 31)

Challenges for teachers in mainstream settings supporting ASD students

This new curriculum is not the only factor changing the educational landscape in post-primary schools in Ireland. Both nationally and internationally, there have been reports of an increase in SEN and ASD diagnoses among students (Markowitz, et al., 2022). In Ireland, inclusive education for all has been sought after in terms of policy reforms, pedagogical approaches, and the development of inclusive learning environments in schools since 1998 and implemented through Acts such as the Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004).

In 2020, a study investigating the changing landscape of education in Ireland within the context of special educational reforms found that the role of the teacher seems to be ‘significantly impacted by the emphasis on fostering appropriate inclusion within mainstream classrooms of an increasingly diverse cohort of students, with heterodox profiles and needs’ (Kenny, et al. 2020, p. 14). This same report found that between 2011 and 2014, NCSE annual reports established that the number of students entitled to receive teaching supports for ‘low incidence’ special needs in mainstream schools increased from 38,000 to 45,700 (Kenny, et al. 2020, p. 4). The number of children applying for Special Needs Assistance (SNA) also increased throughout the decade with findings showing an increase of 83% of applications made for SNA support for students with autism between the years 2011 and 2016 (Kenny, et al. 2020, p.4).

Inclusion itself is a difficult concept to define as what inclusion looks like in practice can vary from country to country or on a lower level, from class to class. From a post-primary context, the most comprehensive definition of inclusion might be from our national framework for inclusive education whereby inclusion is defined as addressing and responding to the diverse needs of learners through enabling participation and removing the barriers within education (NCSE, 2011). In a qualitative study where thirteen experienced educators were interviewed from Ontario Canada, the report found that challenges teachers faced included understanding and managing behaviour, creating an inclusive learning environment, and obtaining resources and training needed to improve support for autistic students. The report also found that there were socio-structural barriers obstructing teachers from sourcing appropriate resources and training also (Lindsay, et al., 2013).

Studies in the UK have reported teachers are struggling to build relationships with autistic students due to a lack of understanding of their autistic manifestations including understanding the social and emotional difference autistic students might have to their peers (Emam & Farrell, 2009). A multiple case study was conducted, with 17 autistic students ranging from 7 to 16 years of age, across three primary schools and five secondary schools, and interviews were conducted with relevant educational stakeholders including teachers and teaching assistants (Emam & Farrell, 2009). Teachers reported struggling to motivate students to participate in academic and extra-curricular tasks, direct their learning, or build relationships that could support the creation of an inclusive environment (Emam & Farrell, 2009). These challenges have also been reported to make teachers more vulnerable to 'burnout' due to the 'unique characteristics of these pupils (Emam & Farrell, 2009).

This research shows that there is a lack of self-efficacy among teachers in their feelings of competence in supporting the social, emotional, and academic needs of autistic students in a mainstream classroom (Cook & Ogden, 2022). The added pressure of completing curriculum LOs was also reported in a study conducted in Southeast England through a qualitative design where twelve teachers working with autistic students were interviewed and discussed their perspectives on the needs and experiences of autistic students in mainstream and special schools (Cook & Ogden, 2022). This study found that teachers in mainstream schools struggled to manage learning differences of autistic students in their classes due to 'their rigidity of thinking' (Cook & Ogden, 2022). This caused frustration for teachers and increased their lack of confidence in supporting the student's needs.

The rigid nature that autistic students can present with has been described as 'frustrating' by teachers when they are providing feedback to students as sometimes, students cannot understand and internalise the feedback (Cook & Ogden, 2022). This, teachers within the study have acknowledged, is a characteristic of the student's ASD traits, as they struggle to understand other's perspectives, but it served only to add to teacher's frustrations and negative view of their self-efficacy in supporting these students (Cook & Ogden, 2022). This study again noted the challenge teachers face in supporting the social and emotional needs of autistic students as teachers noted how pupil's anxiety affected their learning. Teachers felt that they were unable to help those students, as it was difficult for the teacher to identify the signs of anxiety in the students due to their atypical show of anxiety that the teacher was unfamiliar with due to a lack of understanding of the students' autistic diagnosis. Within the study, a link was made between the lack of understanding and adequate training in supporting autistic students by teachers and

the teacher's frustrations with providing fair and adequate support for all students, inclusive of those with an ASD diagnosis (Cook & Ogden, 2022).

The inclusion of special schools in the Cook & Ogden (2022) study recognised that these schools emphasised a need for Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to support their autistic students whereas mainstream schools relied on a 'generic approach' to providing these supports. These generic approaches were found to be less effective than IEPs when meeting the needs of autistic students, teachers in this study also felt the generic approach did not work as effectively as IEPs could but understood due to financial restraints and workload pressures a generic approach was most efficient (Cook & Ogden, 2022). This ultimately resulted in a perception that some of the autistic students' needs were too great to address and reduced teacher self-efficacy.

Despite their best efforts to support autistic students, teachers still face challenges that they can struggle to overcome. These challenges, whether they be a lack of resources, time to prepare appropriate resources, lack of CPD, or difficulty in building relationships with these students, the challenges appear to be universal.

Review of Junior Cycle Framework and Teacher Perspectives.

The new curriculum has been reviewed by the University of Limerick (UL) since 2022 and is currently still under review. The study uses a mixed-methods research design to capture the views of teachers, principals, students, parents, and other educational stakeholders (McGarr, et al., 2023). This study combines three dimensions using twelve case studies, sampling 100 different school settings including post-primary, special schools, and youth-reach centres as well as data collection using surveys and interviews. The study aims to explore the 'implementation, enactment and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle in post-primary schools in Ireland' (McGarr, et al., 2023, p. 9). To date, it has found that 70% of teachers involved in the study agreed that there was a need for 'curricular change at Junior Cycle'.

Interim Report No. 2 (2023) found that the areas teachers were most concerned, about creating a more inclusive classroom, a re-focus on skills development, adopting a student-centered approach to teaching and learning as well as decreasing student stress levels when completing summative assessments and exams. Teachers reportedly feel that although the introduction of CBAs is believed to have addressed the desire for more skill development within this new curriculum, they also believe it has increased student workload due to the number of CBAs they must complete (McGarr, et al., 2023).

Stress levels were also a concern for teachers when discussing the new common-level exam papers which many 'perceived as too challenging for some students and too easy for others' (McGarr, et al. 2023, p. 47). Teachers also noted that the new common-level exams were challenging for students who lacked the literacy levels needed to fully engage with and understand the questions they were being asked, one participant also mentioned "common-level doesn't suit all kids with SEN. It is that bit above them" (McGarr, et al. 2023, p. 47) Exams also lacked choice for students and a concern relating to the 'single two-hour exam to offer sufficient scope for students to demonstrate learning' (McGarr, et al., 2023, p. 48) was also identified by teachers in this report.

Whilst these new challenges have been identified by JC teachers, positive changes have been made in post-primary classrooms because of the curriculum's introduction. Teachers in this report discussed the success of creating a more inclusive learning environment with the introduction of both the L1LPs and L2LPs. Whilst these programmes offer more inclusivity, they are not always appropriate for all SEN students, including some autistic students, who instead will engage with the new JC curriculum in all or most subject areas (McGarr, et al., 2023).

A report conducted by the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI) found teachers faced challenges due to the lack of guidance and provision of support for teachers (ASTI, 2022). Learning Outcomes (LOs), which are provided for each JC subject and outline what the intended learning goals of the course are, have been described as 'too vague and lacking guidance to the teacher on what students are expected to be able to do to show they have achieved the learning outcome' (ASTI, 2022, p.14). The lack of teacher guidance in the teaching and assessing of curriculum content through LOs, as well as the reported 'over-emphasis in the curriculum on promoting students' self-reflection and learner autonomy' has been negatively associated with students who need a 'lot of assistance or 'scaffolding' to engage in the iterative process' (ASTI, 2022, p.15).

Currently, the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) offers CPD and in-service training for all schools across the country. Teachers who have attended training days have reported they were 'very unhelpful' as they were 'unable to answer detailed questions' with 'no resources shared or practical help in how to deliver' the new JC programme (ASTI, 2022, p.18).

These perspectives from teachers, principals, and other educational stakeholders give an insight into the challenges teachers in post-primary schools in Ireland are facing as a result of the introduction of the new JC curriculum. As the new curriculum is still under review, with reforms being made to subjects such as Well-being which is inclusive of Social Political Health Education

(SPHE) and Physical Education (PE) respectively, new findings are still emerging on the challenges teachers face in implementing this new curriculum and supporting all students, including autistic students, in their mainstream classrooms.

Conclusion

Research has shown that teachers in mainstream post-primary schools have the desire to support autistic students in their classrooms but feel that the lack of resources and training to understand autism has negatively impacted their ability to do so. Despite teachers being found to have a 'mostly positive attitude' towards the inclusion of autistic students, there are elements of the new JC that 'doesn't suit all kids with SEN' (McGarr, et. al., 2023, p.47). As such, teachers struggle to overcome the various obstacles presented to them in supporting autistic students in engaging in curriculum content and assessments. This research aims to identify the challenges teachers face in supporting autistic students in mainstream classrooms, under the new curriculum and outline the recommendations to address these challenges.

Chapter Three Methodology

This chapter outlines the process undertaken by the researcher in collecting and collating the data for this research project. It focuses on the selection process in which these methods were chosen, the process in which the chosen demographic was selected as well as providing a rationale for the inclusion of these methods and their intended purpose of the overarching aims and research questions of this research project.

This research was conducted as a mixed-method action research study (Burke Johnson, et al., 2007) collecting quantitative data in the form of a survey and qualitative data via a semi-structured interview process. Mixed method research 'recognises the importance of traditional qualitative and quantitative research, ... but also offers a third paradigm choice that often will provide the most informative ... and useful research results' (Burke Johnson, et al., 2007) The sample population was identified as practicing teachers in a range of subject areas across the JC year groups (1st to 3rd year) in one rural, co-educational secondary school in which the researcher is employed as a teacher. A mixed method approach to the data collection was deemed the most appropriate method of research as qualitative data was collected during the semi-structured interview process as well as a survey provided to participants.

Quantitative and Qualitative Data Collection

During this research process, qualitative data was gathered through the use of a survey and a semi-structured interview process. This was deemed the most appropriate method of collecting data that would provide an in-depth insight into the challenges facing teachers whilst supporting autistic students in a mainstream classroom setting, within the JC curriculum. Qualitative research focuses on "understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 7).

Quantitative data was collected during the survey process to ensure demographic information relating to the analysis of teacher population perspectives and viewpoints; therefore, a mixed-method approach was used. The survey (Appendix 1) consisted of 39 questions with an approximate completion time of 10 minutes and gathered quantitative data relating to years of JC curriculum teaching experience, JC subjects taught, rating scales to measure experience in assessment of CBAs, rating scales for levels of difficulty in teaching the new JC curriculum compared to previous JC curriculum, and confidence levels in supporting autistic students in the classroom.

Surveys are used with the intention of “encapsulating information from respondents by direct or indirect means” (Chaudhuri, et al., 2020, p. 1536). The survey questions used were reviewed by the researcher’s supervisor and revised twice before 56 teachers were invited to answer the survey. The questions were designed to gather data relating to the experiences teachers had supporting their autistic students within the JC curriculum. These questions contained direct quotes from the JC Framework to best reflect the intentions and goals of the new JC curriculum (Appendix 1).

Questions also offered multiple choice selections, tick-the-box answers, and opportunities for participants to provide their comments/viewpoints to questions asked. This qualitative data was gathered from open-ended survey questions, inviting comments and feedback on i) teacher attitudes towards the new curriculum LOs and expectations, ii) teacher’s experience to date in supporting autistic students in mainstream classrooms throughout assessments, and iii) supports provided to aid support of autistic students in mainstream classes. The questions also allowed participants to respond via multiple choice or provide a written answer in which they could include their responses to the question being asked. This was offered with the intended purpose of collecting as much data that would establish the real-life experiences and challenges participants faced supporting autistic students.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen also as they have been found by researchers to be useful in helping to create a narrative in which data can be gathered and presented “while also including questions informed by theory. It also leaves a space through which you might explore with participants the contextual influences evident in the narratives but not always narrated as such” (Galletta, 2013, p.2). This method of qualitative research allows for the experiences of participants to be discussed in a way that allows participants to share their own experiences in a level of detail they determine they are comfortable with whilst also allowing the researchers to further question and gather more data relating to their experiences.

Participants were asked 18 questions in total during interviews. The interview questions (Appendix 2) focused on i) gaining more in-depth data relating to teacher challenges faced due to expectations and LOs, ii) the challenges faced during assessments iii) the support provided to teachers in their efforts to support autistic students in mainstream classes.

The interview allowed teachers to discuss any possible solutions or adaptations that they felt should be made to overcome the issues discussed. This qualitative data allowed for more depth to be given by teachers in answering the questions asked in the survey provided.

Data Collection Process

To begin the data collection permission and consent was sought from the school Principal (Appendix 3). Subsequently, a purposive sample of 56 participants from all subject departments teaching in a rural, co-educational, mainstream, post-primary school setting, who have or are currently teaching the new JC curriculum in their subject area were invited to join this research process via email. Teachers received an email invitation explaining the purpose of the study together with a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 4) containing details of the research being conducted, the purpose of the project, aims and objectives, and ethical information. The email also included a link to the online survey.

The first question in the survey asked participants to indicate their consent to participate in the study and for the data and information they give to be used in the research process. A final question in the survey invited participants to self-select for an individual interview by submitting contact details (email or phone number). On completion of the survey, responses were screened and filtered for those respondents who met the inclusion criteria in that they have or are currently teaching the new JC curriculum in their subject area and have done so with autistic students in mainstream settings.

N = 20 teachers opted to take part in the survey, with 7 of these participants volunteering to participate in a semi-structured interview. These teachers were all interviewed as they were all post-primary teachers currently teaching or had taught the new JC curriculum, engaged with Classroom-Based Assessments, and have had ASD students within their mainstream classrooms.

Data Storage and Privacy

Data collected during this research process was stored for the duration of the research process and subsequently deleted from online storage on the 5th of December 2024 once the thesis submission had been made. All data shared with both the researcher and the researchers' supervisor was done so through a password-protected two-step verification Microsoft OneDrive account within the Hibernia College system. Data, including survey results and interview transcripts from teachers involved, could be accessed upon request of the individual participant. No personal data such as names, addresses, ages, or places of work was asked of participants other than their indication to self-select for the interview process, during either the interview or survey process. Pseudonyms, such as 'Participant 1' were used for all participants. All participants were asked if the data they provided could be used for this research study at the beginning of the

survey and interview process. All participants agreed. Interviews were conducted in a private location, one-on-one, between the researcher and a single participant.

All hard copies of data, paper, online transcripts, and recordings were kept in the personal care of the researcher with restricted access measures in place. All audio recordings were stored in a secure location, separate from all written notes, and written transcripts, to ensure that written information is not traceable to these recorded sources. Whilst critically analysing the data collected through both the survey and the interviews, the researcher worked alone and in private so that no information would be shared with the public.

Data was collated using Google Surveys and Word documents. The use of Google Surveys allowed the researcher to present data findings from the survey in bar charts and written comments from participants. The interviews were transcribed into Word Documents and collated into relevant themes including i) Challenges in differentiation within the new JC Curriculum and its impact on student-teacher relationships, ii) Challenges the common level papers and Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs) present to teachers supporting autistic students in mainstream settings and iii) Challenges lack of appropriate supports from relevant government agencies and schools have presented for teachers. Data was analysed through notetaking, drafting of research findings, and final written thesis. The following chapter presents the findings of this data.

Chapter Four Findings

This research was conducted as an action research study utilising a survey in which n = 20 teachers from a rural, mixed, post-primary secondary school participated. The questions aimed to gather data around teacher's experience in successfully supporting autistic students in a mainstream classroom within this new curriculum, with a focus on the challenges they have faced to date in doing so. Subject teachers in this survey included English, History, French, Irish, Geography, Physical Education (PE), Science, Maths, Business, Civic Social Political Education (CSPE), Engineering, Home Economics, Religion and Social, Personal, Health, Education (SPHE) (Appendix 1). This chapter presents the findings of both the survey and interviews that took place during the data-collection process of this research project. The following headings have been provided in which the data gathered will be presented:

1. Teacher Attitudes and Challenges in Response to Supporting Autistic Students Under New Curriculum Expectations and Learning Outcomes
2. Challenges teachers face within the new JC curriculum compared to the old Junior Certificate curriculum
3. Teacher recommendations for improvements needed in supporting autistic students within the J.C. curriculum
4. Teacher attitudes and challenges in response to supporting autistic student under new curriculum expectations and Learning Outcomes

Teacher Attitudes and Challenges in Response to Supporting Autistic Students Under New Curriculum Expectations and Learning Outcomes

The expectations of the new curriculum, outlined by the curriculum Learning Outcomes (LOs), have created challenges for teachers in successfully supporting autistic students in JC mainstream classrooms. These expectations and LOs have created a cumbersome curriculum, reduced time available for teachers to build relationships with autistic students and identify their strengths and needs as well as create differentiated materials that will support and scaffold their learning. Participants reported an increase in teacher workload and reduction in self-efficacy which has created negative attitudes towards the new curriculum.

During their interview, Participant 2 shared their own experience of trying to meet autistic students' needs under curriculum expectations and increase in teaching pace;

“The lack of teaching time and the time constraints in the exam needs to change. These make it impossible for the students themselves to succeed to the best of their ability ... It’s more of a ‘hit the ground running’ and race through the stuff because of the new JC, even though I like it. It’s great on paper but the practice needs some fine-tuning.”

Participant 5 also expressed frustrations towards the reduction of time available to build important relationships with students;

“You have to know [the autistic students], you have to bring them with you and if you don’t have that relationship, you won’t! It’s jarring me when I’m inside the classroom that I can’t get to [my autistic students] unless I spend more time outside of my school life working on it ... I don’t have the time to give them the support, they need to get there. I just have to move on.”

Survey results supported these findings as teachers, reflected on their familiarity with the needs, strengths, and interests of the autistic students in their mainstream classrooms (Figure 1). Participants responded with a varying level of knowledge of student’s needs with 60% of teachers being familiar with ‘some of their needs, strengths and interests’. However, participants noted ‘autistic students need a huge level of help, with this in mind it is difficult to answer this question’. Whilst most responded to knowing some of the needs, strengths, and interests of these students, one teacher felt they were ‘more familiar’ with these compared to their mainstream students, and another teacher felt they were ‘very familiar’ with them (Figure 1).

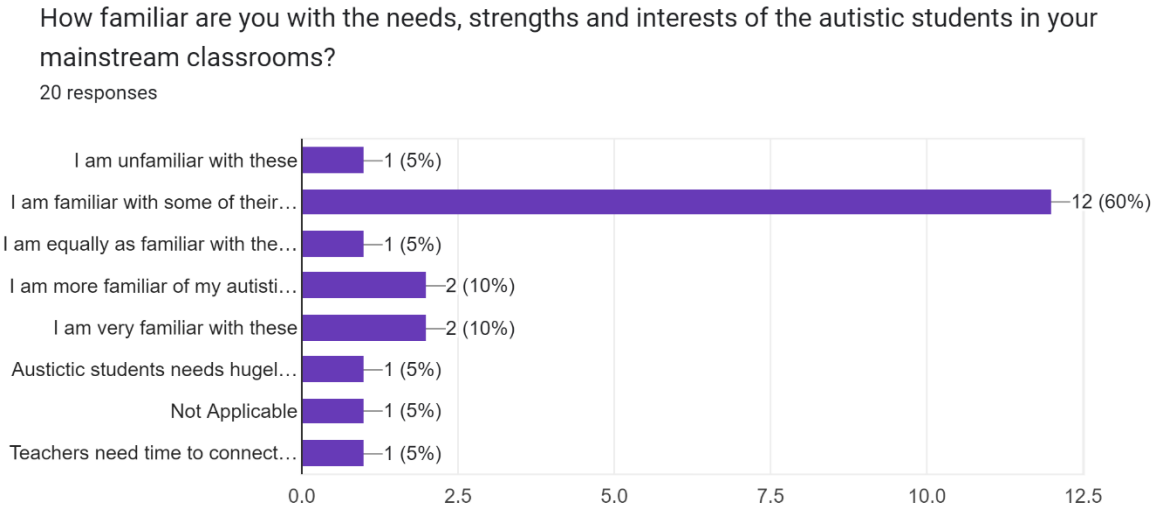


Figure 1 Teacher familiarity with needs, strengths and interests of autistic students

Although the JC curriculum emphasis a greater degree of flexibility is afforded to teachers to ensure that, within the school’s programme, there is sufficient flexibility to cater to the individual learning needs of all students, including those with special educational needs, survey results show that only 80% of participants “agreed” or “somewhat agreed” that the curriculum provides this level of flexibility (Figure 2). Notably, 20% disagreed as one participant explained, “Due to time constraints, one does not have the opportunity to create relationships with students” (Figure 2). Whilst the curriculum is acknowledged as being flexible regarding teacher autonomy, participants felt that due to the demands of the curriculum “the practicalities of being as flexible as needed are limited” (Figure 2).

The New Junior cycle curriculum states that - "The greater degree of flexibility afforded by the Framework will allow schools to take account of th... autistic students in your mainstream classroom?
20 responses

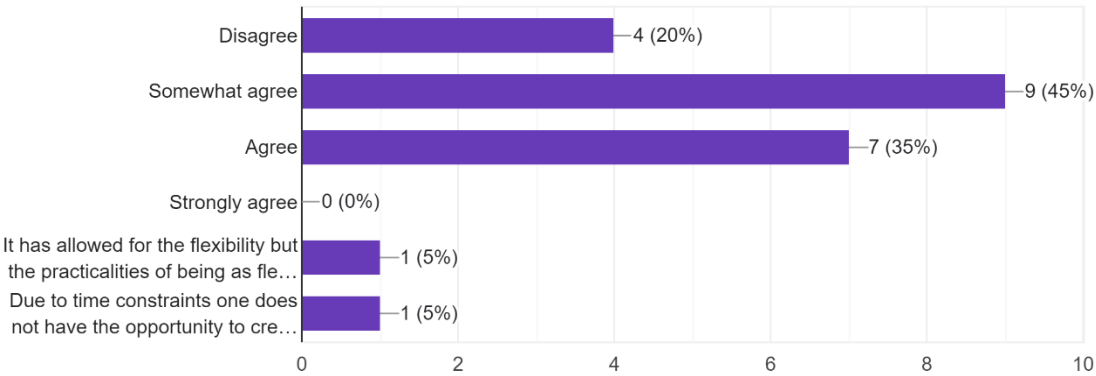


Figure 2 Teacher response to flexibility of JC curriculum

This level of flexibility is intended to allow teachers to differentiate for students, such as autistic students, however, only 55% of survey participants felt that they were able to differentiate within their mainstream classrooms to specifically support their autistic students (Figure 3). One teacher felt that there were “opportunities but [differentiating can be] time-consuming as [the] course is broad and [there] is a lot of content to get through”.

Do you feel the new Junior Cycle curriculum allows for differentiation within your classroom in terms of delivery of content that can specifically support your autistic students?

20 responses

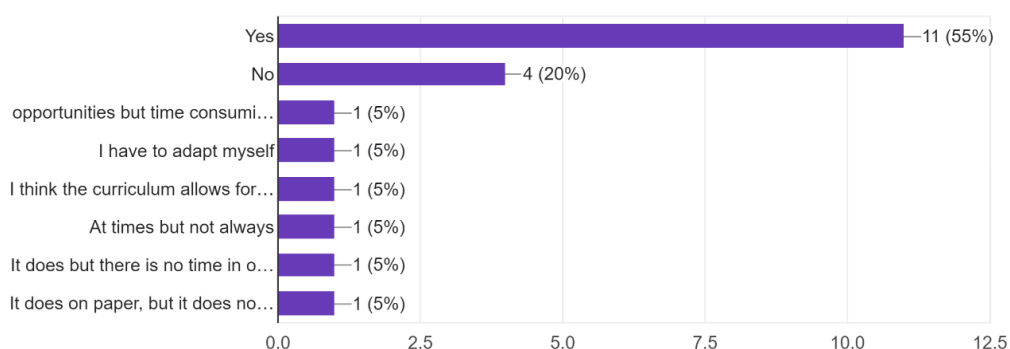


Figure 3 Teacher response to ability of JC curriculum to allow for differentiation for autistic students

Several others noted that whilst the curriculum can be differentiated, “there is no time in or outside of the classroom to pursue it”. This can be linked to the added pressures on teachers to meet curriculum L.O.s and expectations, rather than focus on the individual needs of learners.

Challenges teachers face within the new JC curriculum compared to the old Junior Certificate curriculum

Teachers in this study identified both advantages and challenges of both the old Junior Certificate and the new JC curriculum, however, the new JC has led to new frustrations emerging due to the ‘cumbersome’ nature of the curriculum. Most notably, frustrations relating to the challenge of supporting autistic students in preparation for a common-level exam which has replaced the previous Higher and Ordinary Level exam options in all subjects excluding English, Irish, and Maths, (NCCA, 2015) and facilitating suitable time and support for autistic students throughout the completion of their CBAs

The change from previously differentiated papers of Higher and Ordinary levels to a common level exam caused concern amongst survey participants due to the difficult language used, and lack of guidance in the new exams. They explained;

“There is a varying level of difficulty in the questions asked which makes the paper more accessible, but it is a challenging paper for ASD students who need that extra support and guidance like an OL paper might have provided”

“I feel it is wrong to have common level papers at Junior Cycle...It is difficult to give autistic students a clear idea of what they need to study for an exam. I feel this would be helpful in helping them to reduce their anxiety levels.”

“Some of the questions are not at all accessible to the ASD students at all. In the OL JC, they were able to attempt some part of most questions”

Interviews also found similar concerns relating to the structure of the new paper as Participant 4, explains their concerns about the lack of predictability in the common-level papers;

“The lack of predictability in [the Junior Cycle exam] is part of the ethos of it but I think there was nothing wrong with the students, particularly ASD students or academically weak students knowing [for example] question one was going to be a photograph [for History] or question three in the French paper was going to be a recipe. They didn’t know what it was going to be, but they knew the format [of the old Junior Certificate paper] and that lack of structure particularly for the ASD students is very difficult”

Participant 7 understood the need to eliminate the ‘rote-learning’ culture the old Junior Certificate had created but was concerned that the lack of predictability had created challenges, “I understand why there’s no predictability [for the summative exam] because, by the end of the old Junior Certificate, I could see people were teaching to the paper ... I just wonder though has it gone too far the other way?”

Additionally, Participant 6 reflected on how the lack of predictability has also impacted teacher’s ability to support their autistic students in class, commenting “There’s so much to cover now and move through the curriculum, it’s challenging to find time to even assess what the barriers are to my autistic students in terms of accessing the curriculum”.

The common-level paper has also created a challenge for teachers in their ability to create differentiated resources for the classroom. One participant explained;

“The challenge [of a common level paper is] it really limits your opportunities for differentiation in a classroom. For English where I have an Ordinary and Higher Level paper, I can say ‘Okay everyone doing Ordinary Level do this and everyone doing Higher Level do this’ whereas if you know something is needed for a common level paper you’re kind of denying any opportunity to do it if you don’t give them the work that’s required and if you do give them the work required they can feel terrible because it might be too difficult for them or it’s just not suitable for them.”

A new addition of the JC not formally present in the old Junior Certificate is the introduction of Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs) in both Second and Third Year for all exam subjects. CBAs are reliant on student autonomy and independent work where a presentation or project format is used to demonstrate students' learning and skills. (NCCA, 2015), survey participants expressed concerns as to how this has impacted autistic student's ability to engage with their CBAs;

“Because the CBA is an independent task where student autonomy is emphasised, I found it challenging to get my autistic students started and focused on the task whilst also supporting the rest of my class in completing their CBAs. My autistic students needed more one-on-one support and guidance, but I struggled to find the time to do this. The lack of structure in the CBA can be quite overwhelming. Often an ASD student likes maths as it can be repetitive and follows rules, and they find comfort/security in this. The CBA is in contrast to all of that.”

Participant 4 in their interview, shared how they felt the unstructured nature of CBAs can cause frustrations for autistic students;

“[The] biggest challenge was the lack of structure ... For the History CBA [the students] had to go and research it themselves and that was the ethos of the thing but I found they needed to be supported a lot more than the other students in the class and got very anxious and stressed.”

Additionally, Participant 1 questioned the benefit of CBAs for autistic students. Sharing their own experience with the English CBA, they explained;

“By me encouraging a student with ASD presenting in class I don't know if I'm doing them any good ... They don't always have the coping skills and don't always want the satisfaction of [the CBA]”

The demands of the CBAs have also increased teacher workload, impacting their ability to support autistic students in their classes. Participant 5 explained;

“If you have a support/resource class first and you have your students with you, you can explain [the CBA] to them but you cannot do it in class when you have 24 students in front of you and two are autistic. You’re doing your best, you give them an extra sheet for the CBA but otherwise, you’re there and you have to help everyone”

The JC curriculum has created significant challenges for teachers supporting autistic students due to the nature and structure of curriculum assessments. The unstructured CBA format, the unpredictability of summative exams and a lack of differentiated assessments have increased teacher workload, and limited availability of time available to offer support, leaving teachers frustrated and concerned about their self-efficacy to support autistic students in their classrooms.

Teacher Recommendations for Improvements Needed in Supporting Autistic Students within the JC curriculum.

Survey results show that 70% of participants feel inadequately supported by the Department of Education and other agencies such as the JCT and NCCA which they feel has amplified the challenges they are facing in supporting autistic students. Through CPD and other relevant resources specifically focused on supporting autistic students in JC mainstream classrooms (Figure 4).

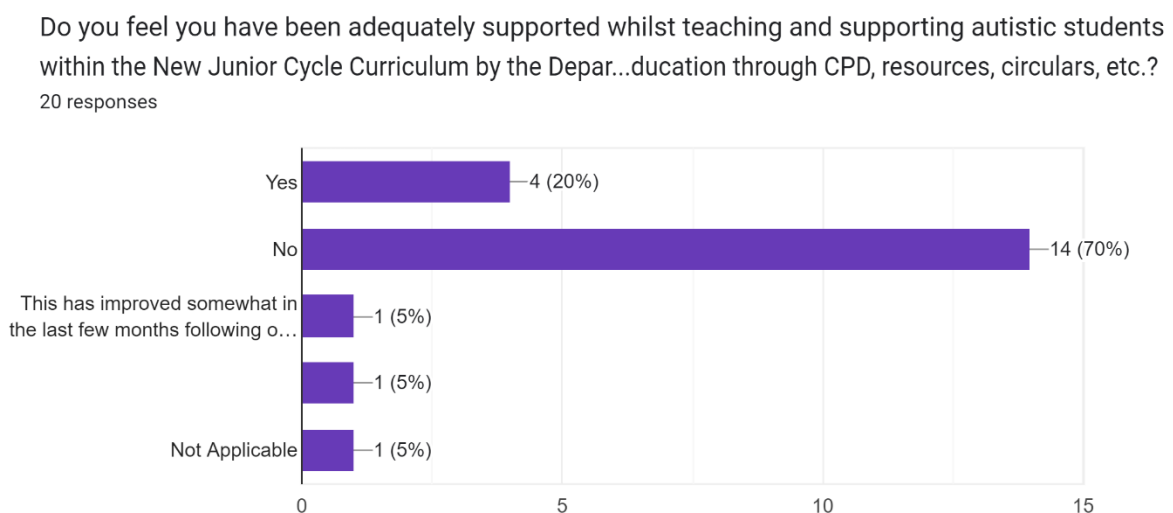


Figure 4 Teacher response to how adequately they are supported in their support of autistic students in mainstream classes by Department of Education and other agencies

40% of teachers involved in this survey also felt that their school did not adequately support them in supporting autistic students within the new curriculum (Figure 5). One teacher

noted that they had not been given ‘time to engage in CPD that has educated [them] on the challenges [autistic] students face in the classroom’.

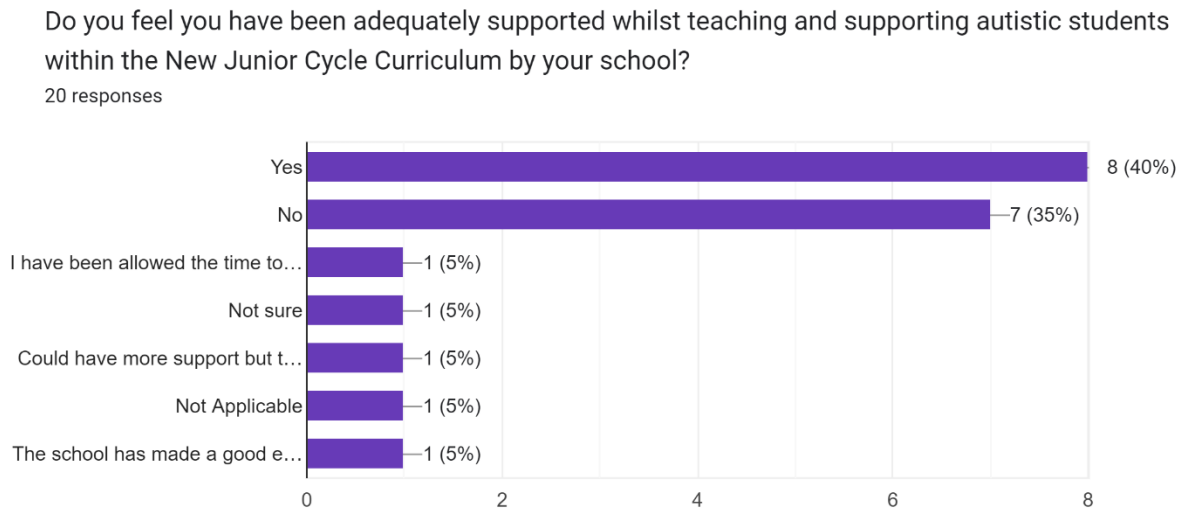


Figure 5 Teacher response to how adequately they are supported in their support of autistic students in mainstream classes by their school

Interview participants further expressed their frustrations as Participant 5 highlighted the lack of practical support provided by the JCT:

“I think the JCT are ticking boxes ... look at my autistic kids and tell me what I can do for them don’t just tell me come into my classroom and show me. I need practical support on all levels from someone who’s actually in it and doing it every day.”

Participant 3 felt frustrated with the training, or lack thereof, provided once they had completed their teacher training:

“I haven’t had an ASD-specific CPD. It’s so frustrating I haven’t done any and I think we’re being short-sold here. Students and teachers are being left hanging. We get a lot of training from JCT but nothing specific about ASD or any AEN at all ... We need the department to come in with up-to-date information and best practice. I feel very strongly about this!”

Additionally, 40% of survey participants felt they were not adequately supported at school level whilst supporting autistic students (Figure 5). One teacher noted that they had not been

given 'time to engage in CPD that has educated [them] on the challenges [autistic] students face in the classroom'. Another felt that "the school has made good effort, but more quiet spaces are needed, and class composition needs to be reconsidered."

Interviewee, Participant 2, felt class size and lack of individual supports available for autistic students had made it challenging for teachers to address autistic students' needs, "we need and what all schools need is more space, more physical space, bigger classrooms, better strategies for managing noise and distractions, more sensory and nurture rooms, more money for these and better technology." Additionally, Participant 6 noted that a despite having some physical resources such as SNAs, they are being too heavily relied on which is not addressing the needs of the students, "some students, they're just about mainstream and expecting an SNA to be able to deal with [more than 1] student like that at a time, with all the will in the world, these students just won't get the support they need."

Teachers are frustrated with the lack of support provided to them to support students within the JC curriculum. Teachers feel a need for additional support and changes to teacher training to implement the curriculum successfully.

Conclusion

Whilst there are positives and negatives in teacher's reflections on the experiences of supporting autistic students throughout the JC curriculum in teacher's respective subjects, one teacher emphasised that despite all of this there is a "resistance to change and a lack of understanding and awareness around the curriculum" from a teacher's perspective. These comments, shared experiences, and answers to the questions in both the survey and interviews have highlighted the challenges teachers face in successfully supporting autistic students within the new JC curriculum but also the potential the new curriculum has in developing key skills and knowledge of autistic students as the curriculum intends, once these challenges have been addressed. These findings are discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Chapter Five Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter presents a critical analysis and discussion of the main findings of this study, supported by relevant literature. These findings include the challenges teachers face as a result of the new JC curriculum expectations and Learning Outcomes, the challenges faced under the new JC curriculum compared to the old Junior Certificate and key discussions on the attitudes and recommendations teachers have as to how to support autistic students in mainstream JC classrooms. This chapter also reflects on the limitations of this study and provides a summary of the key findings of this research, together with recommendations for changes in practice needed to aid teachers in their work efforts to successfully support autistic students.

Recap of Main Findings

The main findings of this research indicate that teachers are facing challenges in supporting their autistic students in mainstream JC classrooms due to the expectations the new curriculum has in terms of student achievement based on Learning Outcomes, CBAs, and summative common-level assessments. As well as this, findings indicate that there is a lack of support provided to teachers both in physical resources and ASD-focused CPD. This has amplified the challenges teachers are facing in their efforts to support autistic students in mainstream JC classrooms. The research findings suggest that these challenges have had a direct effect on teachers' self-efficacy, and teacher-student relationships and have increased the risk of teacher burnout due to the increased pressures of the new curriculum's expectations concerning student successes.

Findings also reveal that teachers are facing challenges supporting autistic students under the new assessment guidelines as students now undertake CBAs and, in most subjects, complete a common-level exam, a change from the old Junior Certificate assessments of one summative exam at the end of Third Year in which students would sit either a Higher Level or Ordinary Level paper. Lastly, teachers reported a lack of CPD available to them, as well as a lack of physical support such as resource classes and SNA support in mainstream. Findings show that teachers have become frustrated with this as they feel they are not being supported despite their best efforts in trying to support all students in their mainstream classrooms including their autistic students.

Discussion of Main Findings

Challenges Teachers Face within the New JC Curriculum Compared to the Old Junior Certificate Curriculum

The findings of this research study indicate that one of the most notable challenges teachers now face, compared to the challenges faced within the old Junior Certificate curriculum, is concerning the efforts in supporting autistic students in the completion of the CBAs and preparation for common-level summative exams. These features of the new curriculum have created challenges for teachers in managing their workload, differentiating in the classroom, and meeting the individual needs of autistic students.

CBAs aim to assess key skills through a “broad range of activities including oral presentations, written work of different types, practical or designing and making activities, artistic performances, scientific experiments, projects or other suitable tasks” (NCCA, 2015, p. 37). However, this has proved challenging for teachers supporting autistic students as Fleury et al. (2014) research shows areas where autistic students often need more support include beginning tasks, staying organised, and following multi-step instructions, all of which are required in the completion of CBAs. Fleury et. al (2014) recommends explicit instruction and scaffolding to be used to support autistic students in such tasks. One participant felt that this was difficult to implement, explaining “If you have a support/resource class first and you have your students with you, you can explain [the CBA] to them but you cannot do it in class when you 24 students in front of you and two are autistic ... you have to help everyone.” Teachers felt that compared to the old Junior Certificate, the CBAs had increased teacher workload and reduced their time to support autistic students in preparation for their summative assessments.

Participants also emphasised how the lack of differentiated resources available for the new curriculum, has impacted their ability to differentiate in the classroom effectively. Due to the nature of the old Junior Certificate exams, the curriculum itself was differentiated in preparation for students to sit either Higher or Ordinary-level exams. Now teachers must create differentiated resources whilst still preparing all students for the same exam, something teachers felt there was a lack of purpose in doing, as all students then sit a common level paper in most subjects. One participant explained,

“For English where I have an Ordinary and Higher-Level paper I can say ‘Okay everyone doing Ordinary Level do this and everyone doing Higher Level do this’ whereas if you know

something is needed for a common level paper, you're denying any opportunity to do it if you don't give them the work that's required."

This perspective is shared by teachers in the UL's Interim Report (2023), where participants believed the new common-level doesn't suit some SEN students (McGarr et al. 2023, p. 47).

The unpredictability of the exams is also a challenge for teachers as one participant explained, "I think there was nothing wrong with the students, particularly ASD students or academically weak students knowing [for example] question one was going to be a photograph [for History] ... that lack of structure particularly for the ASD students is very difficult." This unpredictability has also reduced the scaffolding provided in the old Junior Certificate exams where students knew what to expect and were familiar with the exam structure, something important to autistic students who often have an "extreme need for consistency and predictability in daily living routines" (Prizant, et al., 2003, p. 296). This view was shared with participants of the UL Interim Report (2023), where participants felt stress levels were increasing in students as questions were perceived as "too challenging for some students and too easy for others" (McGarr, et al. 2023, p. 47).

Participants expressed concerns that "some of the questions are not at all accessible to the ASD students at all. In Ordinary level Junior Certificate, they were able to attempt some part of most questions." This change from differentiated papers to common-level potentially limits the ability of autistic students to demonstrate their learning as Stephenson et al, 2023 explains, language acquisition for those with autism occurs atypically, resulting in misunderstandings, another added stress for autistic students that teachers attempt to address.

Participants also noted that, "Papers can often have broad questions with little guidance as to what to focus on and there are no marks to guide them in how much to write." This lack of scaffolding is a significant challenge for autistic students who rely on explicit instructions and structured tasks as indicated in these findings, as well as Fleury et al.'s (2014) research. These observations are also consistent with findings from McGarr et al. (2023), where teachers found the common-level papers "too challenging for some students and too easy for others" (McGarr, et al. 2023, p. 47)

Participants in this study suggested that the common-level summative assessment which has replaced the old Junior Certificate differentiated approach of providing Ordinary level and Higher Level subject options, has led to a "one-size-fits-all" approach that does not account for

the varying needs of students, including autistic students, who in participants experience, require explicit instruction, scaffolding and guidance to successfully demonstrate their knowledge.

Teacher Recommendations for Improvements Needed in Supporting Autistic Students within the JC curriculum

The results of this study reveal how the lack of support and training provided has led to teachers feeling frustrated and negatively impacting their self-efficacy in their abilities to support autistic students. Participant 5 heavily criticised the JCT, responsible for teacher training of the new JC, for “ticking boxes” rather than providing resources and methodologies that could be used effectively in the classroom. These findings align with the same sentiment found in research conducted by the ASTI (2022) where teachers noted that JCT training days were “very unhelpful” and did not provide any practical support or guidance on how to effectively deliver the new curriculum (ASTI, 2022). Emam and Farrell (2009) also found that a lack of training and time to understand autistic students' unique characteristics often led teachers to struggle to find appropriate strategies to support them. These findings, along with those of the ASTI, indicate that teachers are facing challenges in supporting autistic students due to a lack of support from relevant agencies. This has increased frustrations and harmed teachers' well-being due to burnout.

Studies conducted by Cook and Ogden (2022), discuss the negative impact on teachers that a lack of understanding of how to support autistic students can have, whereby teachers feel they are not capable of meeting the needs of their students. The lack of CPD tailored for ASD is referred to multiple times in both the interview and survey findings. Participant 3, shared their views stating, “I haven’t had an ASD specific CPD. It’s so frustrating I haven’t done any and I think we’re being short-sold here.” Cook and Ogden’s research supports the negative impact such frustrations can have on teachers as they identified how teachers who struggle to find effective strategies to support their autistic students, can develop a negative perception of their abilities. However, participants highlighted a desire to support autistic students and expressed frustration in not being supported effectively to do so. One participant noted, “Those with personal interest and care do a lot for these students,” suggesting that teachers can have a desire to support their autistic students and compensate for the lack of support provided to them.

Teacher Attitudes and Challenges they face Supporting Autistic Students Under Curriculum Expectations and Learning Outcomes

Teachers reported that they felt the JC curriculum was cumbersome and caused much frustration among participants in their efforts to support their autistic students. Whilst allowing flexibility in

the delivery of content, teachers felt that curriculum expectations, including the completion of LOs within three years, meant that the curriculum was not flexible in such a way that would allow them to accommodate necessary adaptations to coursework and exam preparations for autistic students. The limited timeframe due to what teachers have claimed to be a need to cover the entire curriculum and the lack of choice and predictability of the summative exams, has created a challenge for teachers to find significant time to learn the individual needs of their autistic students and accommodate those needs efficiently.

Many participants felt they did not have a strong enough understanding of the needs of their autistic students or how to provide the necessary support for them to engage with the JC curriculum. Participants shared their thoughts by stating, "You have to know [the autistic students], you have to bring them with you and if you don't have that relationship, you won't!" These findings also align with findings from previous research, such as that conducted by Emam and Farrell (2009) which indicated that teachers struggled to build relationships with autistic students due to limited knowledge of how autism manifests in individual students.

The inability to establish strong relationships affects not only students' learning but also teachers' professional satisfaction and sense of efficacy. Participants indicated feelings of inadequacy as they often had to "move on" in the curriculum despite knowing that some autistic students were struggling to grasp certain elements of the curriculum. Participant 5 described their own classroom experience stating, "There are parts of the curriculum I recognize some autistic students just aren't going to grasp because I don't have the time to give them the supports, they need to get there." This pressure to cover the curriculum content to prepare a class for a summative assessment whilst also allocating time to support the individual needs of autistic students is challenging for teachers. These findings indicate this has negatively impacted teacher wellbeing.

The link between these challenges and teacher burnout is again referenced by Emam and Farrell (2009) whereby increased stress due to a lack of training and understanding of autism has increased teachers' risk of burnout. This study echoes these findings, as participants expressed concerns about their ability to maintain their well-being while trying to meet the needs of their students. Teachers indicated that the current curriculum structure does not support their well-being whilst they try to support their student's needs.

The JC's expectations, LOs, and common-level assessments have restricted teachers' ability to develop personal relationships with autistic students, an element both research findings and

literature have endorsed as being fundamental in understanding the individual needs of autistic students. Due to the spectrum of needs autism can present with participants as well as researchers Stephenson, et al. (2023) have identified the need for educators to learn “how to view and understand the world as best we can from an ASD perspective so that we can better understand and meet the needs of autistic individuals (Stephenson, et al., 2023) something the current JC format is making challenging for teachers.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Whilst the new curriculum was created as a student-centered model of learning, with the hopes of providing teacher autonomy and flexibility to meet the individual needs of students, the introduction of LO, common-level papers, and CBAs, combined with a lack of appropriate CPD and physical supports/resources, has invertedly led to teachers challenges in effectivity supporting autistic students. The findings reveal that the curriculum format does not allow for sufficient support to be provided to autistic students in mainstream by their teachers as teacher workload and school demands, including an increase in SEN present in mainstream classrooms (Kenny et al, 2020) have hindered teachers ability to provide all appropriate supports to autistic students. However, teachers are frustrated, burnt out, and lacking self-efficacy in their efforts to support autistic students successfully, findings also provided recommendations as to how best to adapt current curriculum practices to combat some of the challenges they are facing. These recommendations include;

1. Reduction in LO to reduce the cumbersome nature of the curriculum and allow more time for teachers to support the individual needs of students
2. Restructuring of CBAs to provide more explicit instruction to students
3. Revision of summative assessments i.e. Common Level Papers
4. Increase in provision of CPD and physical resources to support teachers to relieve teacher workload and address teachers’ self-efficacy issues.

Reduction in LO to reduce the cumbersome nature of the curriculum and allow more time for teachers to support the individual needs of students

Findings indicate that participants found the new curriculum to be both cumbersome and lacking flexibility due to the lack of predictability of the summative assessment at the end of Third Year. As a result, teachers are finding it challenging to support autistic students’ individual needs due to time constraints the LOs, summative assessments, and curriculum expectations of completing LO,

CBA's and for most subjects, a common level summative assessment, have put on teachers. A reduction in curriculum content is recommended whereby, LO's are reduced. This can reduce teacher workload and allow them time to build relationships with autistic students to identify their individual needs and address these needs appropriately.

Restructuring of CBA's to provide more explicit instruction to students

The CBA's have been identified as not fit for purpose concerning autistic students' engagement with them. Therefore, a revision of the CBA's is needed to address the challenges both students and teachers are facing. More support for autistic students must be provided through additional scaffolding, teacher or SNA support, and guidance. However, to address this, teachers must be supported through the provision of additional guidance and SNAs or additional teachers being present in the CBA process. More allocation of resources such as these as well as a re-structuring of the CBA to provide more specific scaffolding and guidance through specific guidelines being provided for students and teachers would help to reduce the challenges teachers are currently facing.

Revision of summative assessments i.e. Common Level Papers

Research suggests that it is recommended to have some predictable questions in summative exams as well as provide marks to help guide autistic students who may need extra scaffolding and support. Reviewing the need for differentiated assessments rather than common level for all is also recommended, as this would provide differentiated material, that is more accessible for students. It would also cut down curriculum workload, counter the 'one-size-fits-all' grievance noted by teachers, and allow more time for teachers to build meaningful relationships with their students to help identify their needs.

Increase in provision of CPD and physical resources to support teachers to relieve teacher workload and address teachers' self-efficacy issues.

Teachers feel they are not prepared to meet the needs of autistic students as a result of the increase in workload due to curriculum content, assessment structures, and lack of CPD. Therefore, more support services should be offered to teachers with targeted materials and practical resources specifically designed for teaching autistic students.

Furthermore, there is an urgent need for ongoing professional development (CPD) focused on understanding the unique needs of autistic students and adapting the curriculum to meet those needs effectively. Such training would provide teachers with appropriate strategies, reduce

feelings of inadequacy, and enhance their confidence in supporting autistic students in mainstream classrooms.

Conclusion

Whilst teachers recognise the positive aspects of the JC curriculum, such as greater autonomy and a reduction in rote learning, the overwhelming workload, rigid assessment structures, and insufficient CPD leave them feeling unprepared to address the needs of autistic students. By revising assessment practices to reduce teacher workload and provide autism-focused training and resources the challenges discussed can begin to be addressed.

Limitations

This thesis explores the challenges teachers in a mixed, rural, secondary school face whilst trying to successfully support autistic students in their mainstream JC classrooms. Whilst conducting this research, certain limitations of this study became apparent, including;

- i) limited sample size of participants with no geographic diversity
- ii) limited range of subject teacher participants
- iii) overlap of survey and interview questions
- iv) limited experience in teaching the new curriculum due to COVID-19

i. Limited sample size of participants

A limitation of this study was the small population size of participants available. Within the sample school, 56 teachers were invited to participate in an online survey where 20 self-selected to participate. Additionally, all 56 invited participants were invited from the same school environment, thus limiting this research further by all 20 participants representing the same school background. As a result, the research findings are isolated to one school environment and context and, thus are not representative of other educational environments or demographics such as single-sex schools, urban schools, or DEIS schools, where resources, supports and school policies might influence teachers' experience in supporting autistic students in JC mainstream classrooms.

ii. Limited range of subject teachers' participants

Not all subjects were represented in this study, thus the research is not reflective of all subjects available within the JC curriculum. 20 participants took part in the online survey, including English, History, Maths, Science, Religion, Business, French, Science, P.E. Geography, Home Economics, Engineering and Irish. Of the 7 interview participants, 4 taught either English, History, or both. Consequently, the challenges teachers from other subject areas were not represented in the findings. This lack of representation of all subject areas may limit this study's ability to truly identify subject-specific challenges teachers face in supporting autistic students within the JC curriculum.

iii. Overlap of survey and interview questions

The research conducted was done so using a mixed-methods approach of both quantitative and qualitative data collection through the use of an online survey and semi-structured interviews. Whilst a substantial amount of data was collected, some survey and interview questions

overlapped. This overlap of questions resulted in no new data being obtained for certain questions during the interviews, thus highlighting the need for further refinement of the data collection process.

iv. Limited experience in teaching the new curriculum due to COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 is still evident in the delivery of the new JC curriculum resulting in several limitations of the research study as some features of the new curriculum have not yet been fully implemented. Some CBAs and reflective tasks have yet to be completed due to COVID-19 allowances and time constraints. Furthermore, new common-level exams for JC have only been implemented since 2021 and as a result, participants at the time of study were not confident in their views of the new curriculum due to a lack of experience in areas such as the new exam format, success criteria, answer structure, and content. This limitation may have affected participants' views as to the challenges the new curriculum presents due to this lack of experience.

Conclusion

By identifying these limitations, they can be addressed to ensure that any future research undertaken can be done with more efficiency, ensuring focused survey and interview questions, a broader range of subjects and educational contexts represented, and the participation of teachers with more experience implementing all elements of the new curriculum without the effect of COVID-19. With these limitations addressed, future research can further enhance the data collated to date.

Work undertaken

This thesis investigated the challenges teachers faced supporting autistic students in a mainstream classroom under the new JC Curriculum. The primary research questions include;

- i) What challenges do teachers in mainstream secondary schools currently face in teaching and supporting autistic students under the new Junior Cycle curriculum learning outcomes?
- ii) What are teacher attitudes towards the expectations and content of the new curriculum in terms of their approach to teaching and supporting ASD students?
- iii) How have these challenges changed in comparison to teacher challenges faced in supporting ASD students under the old Junior cert curriculum?
- iv) What recommendations would teachers give to adapt the curriculum and ease these challenges so that they can best support autistic students?

The research undertaken was conducted in a series of stages. The first stage began with a review of relevant literature and supporting documents. This was done under the following headings;

1. Defining Autism and the challenges autistic students experience in mainstream settings
2. Junior Cycle Framework and Rationale
3. Challenges for teachers in mainstream settings supporting ASD students
4. Review of Junior Cycle Framework and Teacher Perspectives

The second stage focused on data collection using a mixed-method approach, utilising an online survey where 56 participants were invited to take part, n=20 participants chose to complete this survey. Additionally, semi-formal interviews were used following the survey where n=7 survey participants self-selected to take part. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected during the data collection process and all questions asked in both methods of collection were done so with the focus on answering the primary research questions. Survey responses were automatically presented by Google's online survey response forum and interviews were transcribed in preparation for stage three.

Stage three involved an in-depth analysis of the data collated in both the survey responses and interview transcripts. All data was collated into relevant thematic headings where visual representations of survey responses were also created to support the quantitative data collected. The thematic headings that emerged included;

1. Teacher Attitudes and Challenges in Response to Supporting Autistic Students Under New Curriculum Expectations and Learning Outcomes
2. Challenges teachers face within the new JC curriculum compared to the old Junior Certificate curriculum.
3. Teacher recommendations for improvements needed in supporting autistic students within the J.C. curriculum

In the final stage, findings were synthesised and contextualised. These findings were analysed and linked to relevant literature findings with recommendations for improved practice provided in the same discussion chapter. Limitations of this study as well as a reflection of the work undertaken were also presented in this final stage.

In conclusion, this research investigated the challenges teachers faced in their efforts to successfully support autistic students in mainstream JC classrooms. The most notable challenges that emerged were identified as an increase in teacher workload due to new assessment arrangements, time constraints affecting teachers' ability to support autistic students' individual needs and create meaningful relationships, and a lack of support from the JCT, NCCA, and educational bodies such as the Department of Education or participants own school. Practical and insightful recommendations were provided in this study to address these challenges.

Reflection of Research Journey

While conducting this research, I faced many challenges throughout this research process. The planning, research process, collection of data, and analysis of findings proved to be an enormous undertaking, however, these challenges were disputed by the rewarding experience I had and the insights I learned about the experiences of teaching autistic students in a mainstream classroom.

Whilst researching relevant literature, I found there was a vast amount of literature available on the characteristics of autism and the experience both autistic students and their teachers had in overcoming the challenges curriculums have presented. This enabled me to appreciate the relationships between students and their teachers further as the literature available imparted to me a sense of the importance of student-teacher relationships.

As the JC is still undergoing review I struggled to find relevant literature on the ASD experience, and the JC rationale was well-researched. Literature such as this allowed me to understand the purpose and intentions of the JC in a way that I had not previously known despite delivering the curriculum myself for four years.

Reflecting on the methodologies used, I struggled with my inexperience in conducting such a research study and the use of both surveys and interviews to collect and collate my data. However, throughout the interview process, I found myself developing lifelong skills in how to appropriately conduct an interview whereby relevant and focused data could be collected through the use of well-prepared questions and providing my participants with a clear focus of the interview's intended purpose. I also learned that sometimes it is best to allow participants to share their thoughts and experiences that are not always focused on the individual questions being asked as information shared by them allowed me to understand the wider context in which they were speaking about.

I also struggled to condense the data collected as it felt unjust to exclude some of the data my colleagues had shared that they had felt was important. Within the data itself, I often found myself touched to hear of the desire all participants had to support their students and felt for them as their frustrations were clear in the experiences they shared. Their willingness to continue to give 100% to their students despite the lack of support they felt they had was commendable.

As I come to the end of this research journey, I am aware of both the personal and professional growth I have experienced. I have developed a personal appreciation for the work my colleagues and teachers do to support their students every day and value my contribution as a

teacher in doing so also. I have also found inspiration throughout this research journey to continue my development and progression in the field of Special Education and will strive to develop my knowledge further to ensure I am capable and confident to support my current and future students.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Survey to Teachers

Challenges teachers face in successfully supporting autistic students in a mainstream classroom within the new Junior Cycle Curriculum

1. Do you consent to allow for the information you provide today to be used for a research study conducted by a MAISE student attending Hibernia College Maynooth?

Check all that apply.

Yes

No

2. What subjects have you taught with the new Junior Cycle curriculum and what * year groups have you taught these subjects to date?

Sample answer:

English 1st and 3rd.

History 1st-3rd

3. Have you taught a mainstream class in any of these Junior Cycle subjects with * one or more autistic students present?

Check all that apply.

Yes

No

4. How many years have you been teaching the new Junior Cycle curriculum?

Please include the year if you know this.

5. What CBA's and in what subject area have you engaged with? *Please write N/A * if you have not engaged with CBAs*
-

6. Have you ever taught the old Junior Certificate curriculum? *

Check all that apply.

Yes

No

7. How many years did you teach the old Junior Certificate Curriculum? *If applicable*

8. The New Junior Cycle Curriculum aims to develop eight key skills (see below) How * would you rate your confidence level in successfully supporting the development of these key skills within your mainstream classroom for **all students** under the current curriculum guidelines?



Check all that

- Not
- Somewhat
- Conden
- Very
- Extremely
- Othe

9. The New Junior Cycle Curriculum aims to develop eight key skills (see below). How would you rate your confidence level in successfully supporting the development of these key

skills within your mainstream classroom for your **autistic students** under the current curriculum guidelines?



Check all that

- Not
- Somewhat
- Conde
- Verv
- Oth

10. **The New Junior Cycle Curriculum is underpinned by 8 key principles, please respond to the following principles and consider whether you feel this is true in your experience of supporting autistic pupils in the classroom:**

The school's junior cycle programme is broad enough to offer a wide range of learning experiences to all, and **flexible enough to offer choice to meet the needs of students.**

Check all that apply.

- Disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

11. **All students** experience a high-quality education, characterised by high expectations of learners and the pursuit of excellence.

Check all that apply.

- Disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

12. The educational experience is **inclusive of all students** and contributes to **equality of opportunity**, participation and outcomes for all

Check all that apply.

- Disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

13. High quality curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning **support students in developing greater independence in learning** and in meeting the challenges of life beyond school, of further education, and of working life.

Check all that apply.

- Disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

14. The New Junior cycle curriculum states that - "*The greater degree of flexibility afforded by the Framework will allow schools to take account of the school's local context and the backgrounds, interests, and abilities of their students when planning their junior cycle programme. **This flexibility will also allow them to ensure that, within the school's programme, there is sufficient flexibility to cater for the individual learning needs of all students, including those with special educational needs.***" Do you agree that the New Junior Cycle Curriculum has allowed this level of flexibility for successfully supporting autistic students in your mainstream classroom?

Check all that apply.

- Disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree
- Other:

15. The New Junior Cycle Curriculum aims to develop 24 statements of learning also. How would you rate your confidence level in successfully supporting the development of these statements of learning within your mainstream classroom for **all students** under the current curriculum guidelines?

The student:

1. communicates effectively using a variety of means in a range of contexts in L1⁵
2. listens, speaks, reads and writes in L2 and one other language at a level of proficiency that is appropriate to her or his ability
3. creates, appreciates and critically interprets a wide range of texts
4. creates and presents artistic works and appreciates the process and skills involved
5. has an awareness of personal values and an understanding of the process of moral decision making
6. appreciates and respects how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which she/he lives
7. values what it means to be an active citizen, with rights and responsibilities in local and wider contexts
8. values local, national and international heritage, understands the importance of the relationship between past and current events and the forces that drive change
9. understands the origins and impacts of social, economic, and environmental aspects of the world around her/him
10. has the awareness, knowledge, skills, values and motivation to live sustainably
11. takes action to safeguard and promote her/his wellbeing and that of others
12. is a confident and competent participant in physical activity and is motivated to be physically active
13. understands the importance of food and diet in making healthy lifestyle choices
14. makes informed financial decisions and develops good consumer skills
15. recognises the potential uses of mathematical knowledge, skills and understanding in all areas of learning
16. describes, illustrates, interprets, predicts and explains patterns and relationships
17. devises and evaluates strategies for investigating and solving problems using mathematical knowledge, reasoning and skills
18. observes and evaluates empirical events and processes and draws valid deductions and conclusions
19. values the role and contribution of science and technology to society, and their personal, social and global importance
20. uses appropriate technologies in meeting a design challenge
21. applies practical skills as she/he develop models and products using a variety of materials and technologies
22. takes initiative, is innovative and develops entrepreneurial skills
23. brings an idea from conception to realisation
24. uses technology and digital media tools to learn, communicate, work and think collaboratively and creatively in a responsible and ethical manner

Check all that apply.

- Not condent
- Somewhat condent
- Condent
- Very condent

16. The New Junior Cycle Curriculum aims to develop 24 statements of learning also. How would you rate your confidence level in successfully supporting the development of these statements of learning within your mainstream classroom for your **autistic students** under the current curriculum guidelines?

The student:

1. communicates effectively using a variety of means in a range of contexts in L1⁵
2. listens, speaks, reads and writes in L2 and one other language at a level of proficiency that is appropriate to her or his ability
3. creates, appreciates and critically interprets a wide range of texts
4. creates and presents artistic works and appreciates the process and skills involved
5. has an awareness of personal values and an understanding of the process of moral decision making
6. appreciates and respects how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which she/he lives
7. values what it means to be an active citizen, with rights and responsibilities in local and wider contexts
8. values local, national and international heritage, understands the importance of the relationship between past and current events and the forces that drive change
9. understands the origins and impacts of social, economic, and environmental aspects of the world around her/him
10. has the awareness, knowledge, skills, values and motivation to live sustainably
11. takes action to safeguard and promote her/his wellbeing and that of others
12. is a confident and competent participant in physical activity and is motivated to be physically active
13. understands the importance of food and diet in making healthy lifestyle choices
14. makes informed financial decisions and develops good consumer skills
15. recognises the potential uses of mathematical knowledge, skills and understanding in all areas of learning
16. describes, illustrates, interprets, predicts and explains patterns and relationships
17. devises and evaluates strategies for investigating and solving problems using mathematical knowledge, reasoning and skills
18. observes and evaluates empirical events and processes and draws valid deductions and conclusions
19. values the role and contribution of science and technology to society, and their personal, social and global importance
20. uses appropriate technologies in meeting a design challenge
21. applies practical skills as she/he develop models and products using a variety of materials and technologies
22. takes initiative, is innovative and develops entrepreneurial skills
23. brings an idea from conception to realisation
24. uses technology and digital media tools to learn, communicate, work and think collaboratively and creatively in a responsible and ethical manner

Check all that apply.

- Not condent
- Somewhat condent
- Condent
- Very condent

17. Do you feel the new Junior Cycle curriculum allows for differentiation within your classroom in terms of delivery of content that can specifically support your autistic students?

Check all that apply.

Yes No

Other:

18. The new Junior Cycle Curriculum asks for students to engage in a CBA1, CBA2 and a reflective task. How well do you feel your autistic students have coped engaging with and completing these assessment tasks.

Check all that apply.

They have been overwhelmed

They have struggled more so than other their peers

They have faced similar struggles as their peers

They found these assessment tasks manageable

They found these assessment tasks more suited to their way of learning

Other:

19. To date, what has been your biggest challenge (if any) in supporting your autistic students in mainstream classrooms whilst completing their CBAs and reflective tasks?

20. To date, what positive outcomes (if any) have you seen for your autistic students in mainstream classrooms whilst completing their CBAs and reflective tasks?

21. How familiar are you with the needs, strengths and interests of the autistic * students in your mainstream classrooms?

Check all that apply.

- I am unfamiliar with these
- I am familiar with some of their needs, strengths and interests
- I am equally as familiar with these as I am with any other student in my classes
- I am more familiar of my autistic students needs, strengths and interests than those of the rest of the mainstream class I am very familiar with these Other:
- _____

22. The new Junior Cycle curriculum has brought in the introduction of common * level papers for all students at the end of 3rd year. Have you noticed an increase in stress for autistic students who are now sitting the same exam as their peers?

Check all that apply.

-
-
-

Yes No

Other:

23. What do you feel are the challenges and/or benefits (if any) of a common level paper for all students? *Reference to supporting ASD students is appreciated but not required.*

24. If you taught the old Junior Certificate curriculum have you noticed an increase/decrease or no change in stress levels for autistic students compared to the introduction of the new Junior Cycle curriculum?

Check all that apply.

- Yes
 - No
 - Equal weighting on strengths and needs
 - Other:
-

25. Do you feel the new Junior Cycle curriculum has a strength-based approach to development of students academic performances rather than a needs based approach?

Check all that apply.

-
-
-

Yes No

Other:

26. Do you agree or disagree with the statement: 'The New Junior Cycle curriculum allows for the individual learning needs of students including the uneven ability of profiles in a mainstream classroom to be addressed'

Check all that apply.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree

Strongly agree

27. How confident are you in adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of your autistic students?

Check all that apply.

- Not confident
- Somewhat confident
-
-
-

Con dent Very

con dent

Other:

28. When providing feedback for homework, in-class assessments, CBAs and progress reports do you differentiate the form of feedback given to your autistic students?

Check all that apply.

- Never
 - Sometimes
 - Always
 - Other:
-

29. The New Junior Cycle framework emphasises the importance of assessment and feedback for student learning. *"A vital part of formative assessment is the feedback that teachers provide to their students. Through a range of assessment activities the teacher helps the student to identify what has been achieved and where there is room for further learning and development."* Do you agree with this approach to supporting student learning and development?

Check all that apply.

- Disagree
 - Somewhat agree
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
 - Other:
-

30. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: *'The new Junior Cycle curriculum allows for the regular assessment of the quality of the learning experience had by autistic students?'*

Check all that apply.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

31. When planning lessons for a mainstream class with autistic students present, do you feel the learning outcomes for your specific subject allow for differentiation to be made to support the needs of autistic students specifically?

Check all that apply.

-
-
-

Yes No

Other:

32. What challenges do you feel are most prevalent when supporting autistic students within the Junior Cycle curriculum?

Mark only one oval.

- Adapting the learning outcomes to support the strengths, needs and interests of autistic students
- Allowing for differentiated assessment tasks whilst preparing for a common level paper
- Preparing activities that are inclusive of autistic students needs, interests and strengths
- Providing direct instruction and guidance to develop key skills
- Delivering direct instruction in a way that supports autistic students
- None of the above

Other:

33. If you have engaged in CPD for the new Junior Cycle curriculum, what if any were the benefits of attending the CPD?

34. Have you engaged in any CPD specifically for supporting autistic students within the New Junior Cycle Curriculum and if so, what were the benefits, if any of this CPD?

35. Do you feel you have been adequately supported whilst teaching and supporting autistic students within the New Junior Cycle Curriculum by your school?

Check all that apply.

Yes No

Other:

36. Do you feel you have been adequately supported whilst teaching and supporting autistic students within the New Junior Cycle Curriculum by the Department of Education through CPD, resources, circulars, etc.?

Check all that apply.

Yes No

Other:

37. Any other comments about your experience supporting ASD students successfully in mainstream can be made here.

-
-
-
38. Would you like to take part in a 30 minute interview to discuss some of the* topics in this survey?

Check all that apply.

Yes

No

39. If you'd like to participate in the interview please provide the relevant contact details below.

Appendix 2 Interview questions to participating teachers

Challenges teachers face in successfully supporting autistic students in a mainstream classroom within the new Junior Cycle Curriculum

1. Do you consent to allow for the information you provide today to be used for a research study conducted by a MAISE student attending Hibernia College Maynooth?
2. What subjects have you taught with the new Junior Cycle curriculum? Please state what year groups have you taught these subjects too to date as well as the CBA's you have engaged with.
3. Have you ever taught the old Junior Certificate curriculum and in what subject areas?
4. The New Junior Cycle Curriculum aims to develop eight key skills; being literate, managing myself, staying well, managing information and thinking, being creative, working with others and communicating. How would you describe your confidence level in successfully supporting the development of these key skills within your mainstream classroom for autistic students specifically and why would you describe it as such?
5. The New Junior Cycle Curriculum is underpinned by 8 key principles, please respond to the following principles and consider whether you feel this is true in your experience of supporting autistic pupils in the classroom:

The school's junior cycle programme is broad enough to offer a wide range of learning experiences to all, and flexible enough to offer choice to meet the needs of students and why?
6. "The greater degree of flexibility afforded by the Framework will allow schools to take account of the school's local context and the backgrounds, interests, and abilities of their students when planning their junior cycle programme. **This flexibility will also allow them to ensure that, within the school's programme, there is sufficient flexibility to cater for the individual learning needs of all students, including those with special educational needs.**" Do you agree that the New Junior Cycle Curriculum has allowed this level of flexibility for successfully supporting autistic students in your mainstream classroom, please explain.

7. Do you feel the new Junior Cycle curriculum allows for differentiation within your classroom in terms of delivery of content that can specifically support your autistic students? Please explain.
8. What do you feel are the challenges (if any) of a common level paper for all students?
9. To date, what has been your biggest challenge and/or positive experiences (if any) in supporting your autistic students in mainstream classrooms whilst completing their CBAs and reflective tasks?
10. If you taught the old Junior Certificate curriculum have you noticed an increase/decrease or no change in stress levels for autistic students compared to the introduction of the new Junior Cycle curriculum?
11. Do you agree or disagree with the statement: The New Junior Cycle curriculum allows for the individual learning needs of students including the uneven ability of profiles in a mainstream classroom to be addressed through teacher autonomy and flexibility within the curriculum?
12. How confident are you in adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of your autistic students?
13. The New Junior Cycle framework emphasises the importance of assessment and feedback for student learning. "A vital part of formative assessment is the feedback that teachers provide to their students. Through a range of assessment activities the teacher helps the student to identify what has been achieved and where there is room for further learning and development." In your own experience, how have you used formative feedback, if ever, to support your autistic students? Please explain.
14. When planning lessons for a mainstream class with autistic students present, do you feel the learning outcomes for your specific subject allow for differentiation to be made to support the needs of autistic students specifically?
15. What challenges do you feel are most prevalent when supporting autistic students within the Junior Cycle curriculum? Multiple choices can be made.

16. Have you engaged in any CPD for the New Junior Cycle Curriculum focused * on supporting autistic students in mainstream settings and has it been of any benefit to you?
17. Do you feel you have been adequately supported whilst teaching and supporting autistic students within the New Junior Cycle Curriculum by your school/the Department of Education and is there anything you feel the school/department could do to increase the level of supports for teachers (if needed)?
18. Any other relevant comments you would like to make?

Appendix 3 Letter of Permission to School Principal

Dear Principal,

I am currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Inclusive and Special Education at Hibernia College. As part of my studies, I am required to conduct a small-scale action research project focusing on the challenges teachers face in supporting autistic students in mainstream classrooms within the new Junior Cycle Curriculum.

To carry out this study, I would like to request your permission to access certain resources within the school. The research activities involved will include inviting all teaching staff to participate in an online survey as well as the opportunity to engage in an interview process. All teaching staff will be contacted using the school emails and interviews would take place within the school building.

I assure you that all participants involved in the study will be treated with strict confidentiality and their identities will be protected. The information collected will be used solely for the purpose of this study and will be securely stored during the research process. No identifying information about the school, teachers, or students will be included in the thesis or any subsequent publications.

Confidentiality and anonymity are of utmost importance, and pseudonyms will be used to ensure the privacy of all participants. The collected data will be securely stored, accessible only to myself and my supervisor through the use of Hibernia College Outlook emails where files, data and resources will be shared. Data analysis will be conducted for the purpose of completing my Masters thesis, and any potential findings may be shared in relevant academic journals.

Thank you for your interest and support in this research endeavour. If you have any concerns or require further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Appendix 4

Invitation for teachers to participate in research process and relevant information

Hello all,

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study about the challenges teachers face in successfully supporting autistic students in a mainstream classroom setting within this new Junior Cycle curriculum

Who is doing this study?

This study is being conducted by Molly Brady, a teacher in the school who is completing a Master's programme in Hibernia College.

Who is this study for?

This study invites current members of staff in the school who are currently teaching the new Junior Cycle curriculum in their subject area will be invited to join this research process. Teachers from a variety of subject teachers across the curriculum will be asked. Teachers teaching the core subjects will be included also.

Why?

I want to identify some of the challenges teachers face in successfully supporting autistic students in a mainstream classroom setting within this new Junior Cycle curriculum, and gain insight into some of the recommendations teachers have in how to best resolve these challenge areas.

What do you want me to do?

- I am inviting you to complete a 5-10minute online survey about your observations on the experiences of autistic students in the school yard.
- You may also be invited to a short individual interview about your observations and viewpoints.

Will my responses be anonymous?

I will not share any private information about any participants. Responses are anonymous i.e. I do not ask you to identify yourself by name in the questionnaire unless you wish to participate in an individual interview, and I am not collecting computer IP addresses.


Where can I find out more?

You can find out more about this study by reading the information leaflet attached to this email.



How can I take part?

If you are interested in participating in the study, please read the information leaflet and access the survey by clicking on this link. (Also available on Teams)



Thank you for taking the time to read this invitation, I very much hope that you decide to participate in the survey.

Sincerely
Molly Brady

Appendix 5 Participant Information Sheet

Title of Research Study: Challenges in successfully supporting autistic students in a mainstream classroom setting within the new Junior Cycle Curriculum

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study on the challenges teachers face in successfully supporting autistic students in mainstream classroom settings within the new Junior Cycle Curriculum. This information sheet will provide you with essential details about the study to help you make an informed decision about participating. Please read the information carefully and feel free to ask any questions before making your decision.

Purpose of the study

This research aims to identify the various challenges teachers today face in supporting autistic students in mainstream classroom settings within the new Junior Cycle Curriculum. This new Curriculum has changed both teaching, learning and assessment practices in Ireland and this research study aims to identify some of the new challenges that have emerged with the introduction of this curriculum, more specifically the challenges teachers face in successfully supporting autistic students in their mainstream classrooms. This new curriculum has seen the introduction of CBA's, common level summative exams and an emphasis on development of eight key skills. With this in-mind this research study will gather data on teacher experiences and challenges in meeting the needs of autistic pupils within this new curriculum.

Study procedures

If you choose to participate, the study will involve the following procedures:

1. You must read all of this information sheet before engaging in the survey attached
2. You must consent to taking part in the survey where all data/information provided will be reviewed by the researcher and may be used for this research study if applicable/relevant
3. You can then complete the survey attached
4. At the end of the survey you will be asked if you would be interested in taking invited to take part in an interview process relating to this research study
5. You will have the choice to remove the data you have provided at any time throughout this research study

Risks and benefits

While participating in this study, there are minimal risks involved. However, some potential benefits include:

- Potential benefits of taking part in this study include:
- Opportunity to reflect on your experience teaching the new Junior Cycle Curriculum
- Opportunity to reflect on how you are successfully supporting autistic students in mainstream Junior Cycle classrooms
- Opportunity to voice your concerns, opinions and views relating to the introduction of the new Junior Cycle curriculum in relation to support autistic students

Confidentiality and Data Handling

Your participation in this study will be strictly confidential. All data collected will be anonymised and stored securely, accessible only to the researcher. Data will be used for research purposes only. Your personal information will not be disclosed or identifiable in any publications or reports resulting from this study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. Your decision to participate or withdraw will not affect any current or future relationships with the researchers or the educational institution.

Contact Information

If you have any questions, concerns, or would like further information about the study, please contact

By participating in this study, you acknowledge that you have read and understood this information sheet. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form before starting the study. Thank you for considering being a part of this important research.

30/04/2024