The Irish education system has seen a proliferation of top-down reform in recent decades (Gleeson 2012), however assessment structures at post-primary level have been subject to little adjustment, therefore fostering and maintaining a national ecosystem reflecting a careful evolution and fit of policies and practices, marking scaling high-stakes, state-certified summative examinations (Murchan 2018). The silence on the change front was broken in the past decade with the reform of the Junior Certificate programme, a reform considered by many as the largest educational reform undertaken by the State in recent times. However, the process has come fraught with complexities. This study attempts to radically alter assessment models and subsequently wrangled with teacher hostility which perniciously led to industrial action and frequent repetition of the reform. This study therefore sought to gain an insight into how Junior Cycle reform became so fraught with difficulties and to examine how real post-primary teachers experienced and are continuing to experience the reform in their everyday teaching lives.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

In order to gain an insight into personal experiences of post-primary teachers, a qualitative approach was adopted by the researcher. Interviews offer a powerful tool to examine the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, values and perceptions of participants (Cohen et al 2018). Therefore semi-structured interviews of five post-primary teachers was deemed most suitable by the researcher to view the reality of Junior Cycle reform in the context of teachers’ experiences. Due to COVID-19 restrictions semi-structured phone interviews were carried out or face-to-face interviews were carried out. Whilst in-person interviews were originally planned, data reliability may be increased as participants may disclose information that may not be so forthcoming in a face-to-face interview (Cohen et al at el 2018). Interviewing primarily met to contextualize in order to select teachers with as wide a range of experiences as possible, however this was a small-scale study involving five post-primary teachers from the Munster region, therefore the findings of this study are not intended to be representative of all teachers’ experiences of Junior Cycle reform. The following overarching embedded questions provided the basis for interview questions in order to investigate teachers’ experiences of Junior Cycle reform and to gauge how they felt towards proposed Senior Cycle reform;

1. What are teachers’ perspectives on the development of Junior Cycle reform?
2. What are teachers’ perspectives on the level of support and continuous professional development provided to teachers for Junior Cycle reform?
3. What effect is the Junior Cycle reform having on teacher workload and job satisfaction?
4. What are teachers’ attitudes towards proposed Senior Cycle reform in light of their Junior Cycle reform experience?

FINDINGS

Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) are viewed positively but frustration at the lack of percentage weighting given to CBAs.

All participants recognised the merit of CBAs despite some having been anxious initially about their introduction. There was a sense that CBAs have materialised as much less of a challenge than had been envisaged in the initial stages of reform. Teachers expressed enjoyment in facilitating CBAs recognising the benefits of allowing students to take charge of their own learning and acquire new skills but expressed frustration at the lack of percentage weighting allocated to the CBAs.

Views on Continuous Professional Development (CPD) supports and the increase in professional collaboration

Teachers tended to view the level of support provided to implement the new reforms as excellent. However, the increased workload and perceived increase of administrative tasks following implementation of reforms, was an ongoing concern throughout interviews.

Junior Cycle Reform Has Increased Workload

All participants remarked that Junior Cycle reform has increased in terms of planning and preparation to adapt to the reform of Junior Cycle and to facilitate CBAs and Subject Learning and Assessment of Review (SLARs) meetings and it was generally accepted that the forty-minute timetabled period for professional collaboration was not enough to complete the level of work required.

Linked Decrease In Job Satisfaction

A linked decrease in job satisfaction associated with this increase in workload was also clearly evident amongst teachers, in particular where administrative tasks have offset the positive elements of reform such as teaching new curricula and facilitating CBAs.

Openness to Continuous Assessment (CA) at Senior Cycle

Most participants were open to more CA being introduced in some form at Senior Cycle having experienced this positive element of Junior Cycle reform.

Mixed views regarding teachers assessing their own students at Senior Cycle

Participants expressed mixed views in regard to the prospects of assessing their own students at Senior Cycle with some viewing assessment as part and parcel of their role as a teacher, whilst others were less open to the prospect citing external pressures that may be placed on them.

Concerns of Further increases in workload from SLARs

Participants were generally concerned about proposed Senior Cycle and introductions of continuous assessments would mean a further increase of workload and administrative tasks for them.

CONCLUSIONS

This study’s findings illustrate that increased teacher workload as a result of reform has generally decreased teachers’ job satisfaction, possibly posing a risk to teachers’ commitment to the profession long-term. This is particularly relevant at a time when further reform initiatives such as that of Senior Cycle reform are being considered.

KEY REFERENCES

Martin Carey, MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE
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