

**National University of Ireland  
Maynooth**

**Continuity between the Primary School and the  
Junior Cycle of Post-Primary**

**A School-Based Study**

**A thesis submitted to the Education Department,  
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**By**

**Derek C. Ball**

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(School Leadership)**

**Head of Department: Professor John Coolahan**

**Research Supervisor: Dr. Padraig Hogan**

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## Declaration

I declare that this work is all of my own and not part of or copied from any other work or thesis.

Signature:  \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 04<sup>th</sup> JUNE 2004

**Dedication**

**To  
Stephen and Abi**

***Transition.....***

***The College President;***

Such rawness in a student is a shame,  
But lack of preparation is to blame.

***High School Principal;***

Good Heavens, what crudity, the boy's a fool!  
The fault of course is with the grammar school.

***Grammar School Principal;***

Oh, that from such a dunce I might be spared!  
They send them up to me unprepared.

***Primary Principal;***

Poor Kindergarten fool! And they call that preparation!  
Worse than none at all!

***Kindergarten Teacher;***

Never such a lack of training did I see!  
What sort of person can the Mother be?

***Mother;***

You stupid child, but then you're not to blame,  
Your Father's family are all the same.  
Shall Father in his own defence be heard?  
No! Let the Mother have the final word!

(Bossard, 1956)

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## INTRODUCTION.

Education and learning seem to have gained exceptional importance within our society over the last three decades, and educational changes seem to have rarely escaped media attention, political agendas and economic reforms. As a result the Irish education system has been faced with many new demands and has undergone a proliferation of changes over the last 30 years. The importance and relevance of education is unquestionable, and the knock-on effects which education impinges on society and industry are nowhere clearer or more evident than in Ireland. Much of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' can be attributed to the large amounts of funding spent on teaching and training of our unemployed during the '80's, through government funding and European Social Fund grants from the EU (Benner & Lenzen, 1995).

With greater numbers partaking in the education system, schools now need to offer a greater range of programmes in order to meet and address the wide diversity of abilities, talents and needs of the modern student. New programmes and subjects have been introduced at both junior and senior cycle level to address this change and development in our society, including transition year, leaving certificate applied programme (LCA); leaving certificate vocational programme (L.C.V.P); social, personal and health education; junior certificate school programme, to name a few. Curricula and syllabi are being updated on an on-going basis with the objective of providing alternative methods of learning and assessment.

Much acclaim has been awarded to the Irish education system, both self-expressed and through reports such as the recent OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, (2003). The author notes that the measurement criteria being used in these reports seem to be largely centred on the elements of literacy and numeracy, and the assessment tools largely focused on written examinations, and will later in his writings discuss these factors that have come to dominate the junior cycle.

During the 1960's in Ireland there was an unprecedented economic and social change, cultural nationalism ceased to be the dominant ideology. Arising from these changes, and influence of reports such as Investment in Education (1965), The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, (2003), and Curriculum Improvement and Education Development (1965), together with the abolition of the primary certificate examination, the introduction of free post-primary education, the time presented itself for a radical redevelopment of a new primary curriculum. This cumulated in the publication of the Primary School Curriculum (1971), its aims predominantly centring on the individual child. The needs, potential, interests, cognitive and affective development of the child were emphasised, the range of subjects broadened. The 1980's came and brought with them a period of economic recession and stringent public service cutbacks. One of the more serious consequences of these developments was the huge increase in pupil/teacher ratio at primary level (Circular 20/87). After the publication of various reports by numerous outlets



(eg. the Government's Action Plan for Education (1984-87), The Curriculum and Examinations Board's discussion document (1985), The Report of the Review Body on the primary Curriculum (1990, to name a few), a Primary Committee was established in 1984 with responsibility for issuing a discussion paper, it called for a revision of the primary curriculum. 1999 saw the introduction into schools of the revised Primary School Curriculum. This curriculum constitutes the recommendations of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum (1990), whilst encompassing the original thrust of the 1971 Primary Curriculum and the interim Education Act (1998).

### **The Purpose of this Study**

Within this dissertation the author will endeavour to ascertain whether the junior cycle of post-primary education is conducive to the primary cycle. The author will explore to what degree the Junior Certificate maintain and develop upon the educational aims and objectives practised in the primary curriculum. The author will examine the evident constraints that are being placed on both teachers and students at the junior certificate level, which in turn are inhibiting them from developing upon the child-centred approach used in the primary schools. These constraints include, pressure from parents in regards to success in examinations, pressures placed on the system by terminal examinations and summative assessment, lack of resources, and over-crowding of syllabi.

The key elements incorporated and examined will include the transfer process between primary and post-primary cycles, recognition of new and

alternative learning styles amongst individual students, and the forms of assessment used to determine if the systems have achieved their aims and objectives. It is the author's belief that neither of the three elements mentioned above, transfer between cycles, learning styles, and assessment, can stand-alone. In order for curriculum development to occur the three mentioned areas must be addressed simultaneously. Whilst the revised primary curriculum is extremely innovative and successful, the author wishes to investigate problems which have arisen in recent years, namely problems that arise when these students who to date have experienced a pupil-centered curriculum transfer from the primary cycle to the junior cycle of secondary school. This transfer from primary education to post-primary education highlights the difficulties that many students are suffering eg. Movement to a much larger organisation (in most cases), specialist teaching, a tightly structured day, a longer school day and many more elements. It is the author's opinion that many of these associated problems arise from the differences between what constitutes modern primary education compared to secondary schooling.

### **The Aims of this Study**

Transfer from primary to junior certificate cycle has shown to be a demanding time for both students and their families, Smyth, McCoy & Darmody (2004), Naughton (1997), Gorwood (1986). For students it involves a triple transition, the move from the familiar school culture to a new one, the informal move from established friendships and peers to new

groupings at secondary school, and most importantly the movement from childhood to adolescence.

**The purpose of this study, as stated in the author's research proposal, is:**

- To investigate the difficulties which are arising for children and teachers as students transfer from the primary cycle to the junior cycle of secondary school.
- To investigate variances, relating in particular to 'learning styles' and 'assessment', which have become evident in curriculum implementation between the primary cycle and the junior cycle of secondary school.
- To make recommendations towards reducing these differences and improving the transfer of students between the primary and post-primary cycles. These recommendations will arise from opinions gathered from teachers, and from a review of research literature.

### **Summary of the Chapters**

The introduction has outlined the purpose of the study in the context of the author's own school and has outlined the aims of the of this thesis along with the nature of the research.

**Chapter 1** presents a profile of the primary school and the secondary school that have been chosen for investigation in this research study. The author will examine:

- The background to both schools
- The missions of both schools

- The individual school policies for dealing with issues such as individual student development, creating positive environments within the schools, pastoral care structures, transition procedures for students transferring from primary to secondary

**Chapter 2** reviews the literature on transition from the primary school to the junior certificate cycle. This review will allow the author to establish a bank of knowledge to draw from when presenting findings, conclusions and recommendations at a later stage. This chapter gives an analysis of the research on the four main topics that form the purpose of this thesis,

- Overview of the two new curricula (primary and junior certificate)
- Transition from primary cycle to junior certificate cycle
- A review of the contrasting styles of learning used at both primary and junior certificate level
- The purposes and methods of assessment used at both primary cycle and junior certificate cycle

**Chapter 3** outlines the methodology, which was used throughout the research. It is a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis and both are described. This chapter will describe the research site, research subjects and outline the methods of analysing the data collected.

**Chapter 4** presents the findings of the research.

**Chapter 5** records an analysis of the key findings from the research.

**Chapter 6 arrives at the conclusions and presents recommendations that could be put in place to address the variance in issues such as assessment procedures and learning styles that contribute to the difficulties being faced by some students when transferring from the primary cycle to the junior certificate cycle.**

## **CHAPTER 1.**

### **THE SCHOOLS AND THEIR CONTEXT**

#### **1.1 St. Mary's Secondary School**

For the purposes of this dissertation the author wishes to accord the school and all associated with it anonymity and will refer to the school as St. Mary's hereafter. The school is located in a middle class suburban area of Dublin, is an established girls' school, which was founded in 1968. A new building for 500 students was officially opened in 1977. During the late 1980's the cohort reached a maximum of 620 students. In line with the national pattern in recent years, St. Mary's has been experiencing a fall in numbers, but the cohort has generally remained in and around the 470 mark. This is an achievement in itself, in light of the schools geographical location in an urban residential area that comprises mainly an ageing population, mostly "empty nesters" (parents whose children have grown up and moved out of the area). The majority of our students now commute in from areas termed upper-working class and working class.

In 1998 a Board of Management was appointed consisting of four nominees of the Trustees (St. Mary's), two elected teacher representatives and two elected parent representatives. Since 1998 the Board of Management has been disbanded on three occasions due to internal industrial relations problems. The school is currently under the guidance of a single Manager. The first Lay Principal was appointed in 1990.

All applicants for first year are accepted and applicants for places in other years are considered when vacancies arise. Traditionally, most of the schools' students would have transferred over from its feeder primary school, St. Mary's primary School. However this trend has changed in recent years with only between 60% and 70% of the potential students transferring across. Informal discussions with the primary school suggest that these students are transferring to some of St. Mary's major competitors who are perceived to be more academic in their offerings and possess sporting grounds. Student intake shows a variety of academic ability. Students are tested using standardised tests of reading, numeracy and general intelligence before they start first year, the results of which are used to identify areas of special need and attention. Students are not streamed. The majority of the school's students are sent to St. Mary's from areas outside its immediate catchment area, bypassing schools in their own catchment areas. It is rare for any student to drop out prior to taking their Junior Certificate and the numbers that drop out post Junior Certificate is also minimal in light of today's prosperous economic conditions and the ready availability of unskilled jobs.

The school's academic record is of a high standard; each year the Leaving Certificate students achieve well above the national average with the vast majority proceeding to third level education. In addition to Junior and Leaving Certificate courses, the school offers Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. A wide range of subjects is available and students are taught in mixed ability classes. In first year students are

introduced to all subjects, after which they choose subjects to take at examination level. This seeks to ensure that the interests and abilities of each individual student are catered for. A specialist teacher caters for students in need of Learning Support on a one-to-one or small group basis; this learning support programme is co-ordinated. All parents are invited to be members of the Parent/School association, with the executive committee playing an active role in many areas of school life. Assessment procedures take the form of tests in February and May for all years, with 'mock' examinations for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students. All tests are of written format, apart from the orals, practicals and project work in state examinations.

The school has 37 teaching staff (28 permanent, 7 temporary, 5 student teachers on placement, 3 on career break), plus a Principal, Deputy Principal, School Secretary, caretaker and cleaners. Three teachers are currently on the redeployment panel. The school participates in planning, policy-making, partnership with parents, and whole school evaluation. The Principal, Deputy-Principal and holders of Posts of Responsibility together form the in-school management team, with the Principal having overall responsibility under the school Manager for the day-to-day management of the school.

Members of staff are encouraged to avail of opportunities for on-going personal and professional development. Provision for staff development includes in-school conferences and seminars, career development courses



arranged by Department of Education and ASTI (association of secondary teachers Ireland), staff meetings, sub-committees, and staff handbooks. School planning and development has been on going in St. Mary's for quite a few years and the school is about to enter a second stage of the process. Areas which have been reviewed under school planning and development include school code of behaviour, student examination and reports, staff room facilities, information & communication technology, learning support, classroom management, transition year programme, LCVP, pastoral care, school administration, language assistance programmes, substance abuse prevention.

### **The School's Mission**

*To provide high quality education within a caring, creative and Christian community, where relationships matter, where high self-esteem, tolerance and participation are promoted and where emphasis is on the development of the individual.*

St. Mary's aims to achieve its mission through

- Encouraging each individual student to believe in themselves and acknowledging a wide range of talents and abilities
- Admitting non-Catholic students and encouraging all students to partake in Religious classes should they so wish
- Creating a positive climate where there is mutual respect between 'students & teachers' and a strong sense of community for all involved

- Creating a happy and stimulating environment in which students achieve, experience success, and grow in confidence
- Offering a strong Pastoral Care structure with each student having direct access to a class tutor, year head, deputy principal, principal, guidance counsellor and learning support co-ordinator
- Maintaining a home/school link, through school reports to parents, parent-teacher meetings, parents councils etc. and links with the local community through various partnerships such as work placements, class visits to various industries, invitations extended to local persons (business etc) to come into the school and give presentations etc

St. Mary's offers a strong pastoral care and tutor system, with each student meeting their class tutor for a 10-minute period each day. Students are also encouraged where possible to partake in teamwork activities, sports, foreign exchanges, school tours etc. Students are also involved in the management of the school through student councils, special duties and class prefect/assistant-prefect structures. This positive climate is maintained through a strong and fair discipline procedure. St. Mary's is a lucky school in that it does not encounter many problems in this area and any disciplinary problems, which do arise, are usually of a non-serious nature (uniform/jewellery etc). Visitors and parents often note that there is a lovely atmosphere within St. Mary's and that the students always seem to be happy. This is maintained through the school policy of acknowledging and respecting students. All achievements, birthdays, awards, progress etc are acknowledged either via the intercom or written communication. Ample use is made of the extensive number of notice boards throughout the school.

There is a mentoring structure in place for first years where they each have a mentor in the Leaving Certificate year.

However, unfortunately St. Mary's cannot boast a positive teacher/teacher relationship climate, there are numerous deeply embedded divisions among the staff and serious industrial relations problems. Whilst these problems may not directly affect the teaching aspect of St. Mary's, they are having serious consequences among the staff and staff development. There is a task culture in St. Mary's, in that the staff seem to act as if they are there merely to do narrowly conceived job; they tend to concentrate on their own specialist fields to the extent that there is very little evidence of cross-curricular activities. However the majority of staff at St. Mary's are dedicated to their work, innovative and have the best interests of the students and school at heart, and have contributed to making St. Mary's the school it is today. Further proof of this is the fact that the school has no sporting grounds, yet it has still managed to maintain its numbers in line with competitors who can offer vast sporting facilities, and parents are citing non-academic credentials as important factors in selection of a school. St. Mary's is 'Cruising' as a school, in that it is effective but declining. Declining in innovation, everything seems to have come to a stand still. The first stage of the school development plan was very successful but seems to have been suspended. St. Mary's hosts a large 'young' staff, whose talents are not being utilised or suggestions, acted upon. The Principal is transactional in nature, leading on the basis of rewards for services, developing plans and ensuring task completion. However there is a lack of communication

and visible presence on his behalf, with a complete lack of evaluation on staff work and no feedback.

St. Mary's post-primary school addresses the issue of transfer between the primary school and junior certificate cycle, through organising the following events,

- An open-day for the incoming first year students before they transfer into the junior certificate cycle;
- An information evening for the parents of the incoming first year students;
- Potential incoming first years are brought into the school for an assessment test;
- All students are encompassed in the schools pastoral care system from day one;
- Also two teachers (one 'A' post holder and the learning support teacher) have been appointed by the Principal to orchestrate the transition of pupils from the primary school into first year of the junior certificate.

On discussing the issue of transition between the primary school and the junior cycle of St. Mary's with these two teachers the following points were expressed. The teachers in question felt that their brief is primarily centred on the following areas, promotion of the secondary school, arranging an open day, and arranging the assessment test for the present 6<sup>th</sup> class students. Their dealings with the primary school are minimal, even as low

as three visits to the school per year. These dealings usually take the format of a meeting with the Principal and a learning-support teacher of the primary school. These visits have invariably centred on the issue of children with special needs in recent years, due to the increase of students falling into this category. To date they have not received the report cards for each student transferring into the junior certificate cycle, and have only received report cards when they have had reason to make individual requests pertaining to an individual student. They get an opportunity to address the 6<sup>th</sup> class students, but admit this is usually in a promotional nature, to ensure St. Mary's secure transfer of as many students as possible from the primary school into their junior certificate cycle. These teachers in charge of the transition process also noted in respect of the pupils who transfer to St. Mary's from primary schools other than our feeder school (St. Mary's primary school), that in a lot of these cases there is no communication or contact between these primary schools and St. Mary's leading up to the transition.

## **1.2 St. Mary's Primary School**

St. Mary's Primary School was established in 1866 by an established religious order, to provide education for young girls in a then country village, on the outskirts of Dublin. Today the school plays host to over six hundred pupils, enrolments have been fluctuating in recent years in line with current trends. There are thirty-four teachers, six special needs teachers, two learning support teachers and numerous ancillary staff. A Board of Directors consisting of members of the teaching staff, religious order, Department of

Education & Science, and external community representatives manages the school. All applicants are accepted in compliance with legislative guidelines as set by the Department of Education and Science.

St. Mary's primary school holds the following aims in accordance with the schools mission statement,

- To foster attitudes and habits related to spiritual fulfilment and to ensure a sound social, moral and religious development.
- To develop self-discipline and training in good behaviour patterns based on consideration, respect and tolerance for others.
- To create a stimulating and caring environment conducive to growth in learning, knowledge and discipline.
- To maintain good order throughout the school environment and the local environment.

The school would hold that education in today's world is changing, challenging and demanding, it requires dedication and commitment from all parties involved. It requires that all parties are open and accepting of change, not simply for the sake of change but rather to meet the changing needs of our times. All staff are encouraged where possible to attend in-service's both inside and outside of school times. School planning is up and running and all teachers are involved in the process, where their inputs are greatly accepted and acknowledged.

St. Mary's Primary School has developed into a multi-denominational organisation where respect must be accorded to the Christian ethos upon which it was founded. Pastoral care is an issue that is embraced by all teachers within the school and not the sole responsibility of a particular group of teachers. Whilst there is not a home/school liaison officer, the school maintains a valuable link with the parents through a parents association who are actively involved in the development of the school. The school operates a buddy system between the sixth class students and the younger members of the school, this system not only include social comfort for the juniors but also an academic aspect, where the seniors help the younger pupils with reading etc. The school has no set procedures in place for dealing with the transition between sixth class and first year of the junior cycle (within the class). However, the Principal and Special needs teacher's liase with the Principal and two teacher representatives of the secondary school prior to transition.

## **CHAPTER 2.**

### **THE ELEMENTS OF THE TRANSFER QUESTION: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

Transition from primary to post-primary education coincides with the transfer of the pupil from education of childhood to education of adolescence, and in turn, all of this coincides with numerous other adjustments such as movement to a much larger organisation (in most cases), different teachers for each subject, a tightly structured day, a longer school day and many more elements. Naughton (1997) talks of how 'care' is the corner stone of the structure and relationships within schools.... "rather than an add-on, it is a crucial factor in enabling students to meet challenges and changes with confidence" (ibid, p.319).

In this chapter, the author proposes to explore the research literature that is relevant to the issue of transition between primary and secondary schools. Research and studies have been carried out on the area of 'transition' since the early part of the last century. For the purposes of this thesis the author will review literature pertaining to Ireland and the United Kingdom, which have highlighted problems that occur during the transition of students between primary school and secondary systems. Some of the English writings reviewed include, The Hadow Report (UK) (1926 & 1931), The Plowden Report (UK) (1967), The Bullock Report (UK) (1975), Nisbet and Entwistle (UK) (1969), Derricott (UK) (1985), Hargreaves & Earl and Ryan (UK) (1996). In an Irish context, the author looked at numerous studies and



reports, including Naughton (1997), Department of Education (1981), Report of the Pupil Transfer Committee, NCCA, (1999) Junior Cycle Review).

The author will examine the literature under four headings which are significant to the purpose of this theses and which are relevant to the issue of transfer between the primary cycle and junior certificate cycle. The first section will explore the new Primary Curriculum (1971 & 1999) and the Junior Certificate, examining the curricula's aims, objectives and functions with particular reference to the transfer of students between cycles. The second section reviews literature pertaining to the actual transfer of students between the primary and secondary cycles, highlighting the difficulties some of these students are encountering and issues that need to be addressed by the schools when dealing with transition of students. The third section explores literature that focuses on the different learning styles being implemented in both the primary and secondary sector. In particular this section will examine to what degree are the active-learning child-centred strategies being used in primary schools maintained and developed upon in the junior certificate cycle. This section will also address the concept of multiple intelligences and examine what place or role the junior certificate curriculum affords them. In the final section, the author will review literature in the area of assessment, what role assessment plays in both primary and junior certificate cycles and the constraints that assessment is placing on the implementation of the junior certificate curriculum.

## **2.2 Overview of the two New Curricula**

The term 'curriculum' encompasses the content, structure and processes of teaching and learning, which the school provides in accordance with its educational objectives and values. The curriculum in schools is concerned, not only with the subjects taught, but also with how and why they are taught and with the outcomes of this activity for the learner (Department of Education, 1995, p.18).

Introduced in 1988, the new 'Junior Certificate' with its seven new syllabi took the place of the Intermediate and Day Group Certificates. Coinciding with this development was the establishment of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, replacing the existing Curriculum and Examinations Board. The objectives of the NCCA are broad and include issues relating to both primary and post-primary curriculum, however their main focus at this time was to oversee the completion of the review of the primary school curriculum and to revise the junior certificate syllabi for the new junior certificate examination.

These developments took place amidst a 'changing' Ireland and were fuelled by political views that in order to maintain our high-ranking achievements amongst world education, then progression and change were required. The culture surrounding our education system at the time was changing rapidly, such changes incorporated access to post-primary education to be widened, hence, the legal age for leaving school was raised to 15 years. This dramatically increased the number of students transferring to post-primary education. Other changing factors included, developments in curriculum, changing skills of teachers, and economic and social changes.

The Primary School Curriculum (1999) is the outcome of many years of planning and development overseen by the NCCA. It enshrines the aims of the original Curriculum Na Bunscoile, yet brings it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century encompassing changes in economic and social developments, and the needs of children in a modern world. Whilst the original Curaclam Na Bunscoile was both pioneering and ahead of its time, the revised curriculum reflects the current trend in many countries towards active, inquiry-orientated, hands-on teaching and constructivist learning, believing that assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning (INTO, 1997). A function of primary education is to prepare children effectively for the transition from primary to post-primary education, the importance of this function is acknowledged in the Primary School Curriculum (1999, p.6), which aims to offer a consistency of approach between the primary curriculum and curricula in post-primary education. "There should be continuity between classes and schools (primary and post-primary) in relation to assessment, thus, there is a need for a moderating component in the assessment" (NCCA, 1990, p.81).

Central to the primary curriculum is its recognition and encouragement of the principle that there are different kinds of 'learning styles'. It is through this approach that the primary curriculum has prospered, recognising that one size does not fit all and encouraging a variety of approaches not alone to learning, but also to teaching. Also at the heart of the primary curriculum is its determination to develop within the student a positive understanding

and approach towards learning, realising that learning is a lifelong process. The students are also encouraged to act independently within the learning process, developing their ability to investigate, analyse, question, solve problems and interact. This development seems to be enhanced by the fact that there is no one formal assessment procedure at primary level, alleviating the pressure associated with learning at secondary level and somewhat allowing for more freedom and fulfilment whilst learning at primary level. This is not to say that there are no assessment procedures at primary level, on the contrary, their varied range of assessment tools are geared towards identifying the students needs and providing experiences that will fulfil these needs, taking into account the breadth and variety of learning offered. The key to the successful implementation of the primary curriculum has been the degree of flexibility afforded to primary schools in allowing them to develop programmes, which best suit their schools circumstances and the individual needs of their students, as opposed to a secondary system, which seems to be bowing to the needs of third level colleges on an increasing basis.

### **2.2.1 Aims and Objectives of The Primary and Junior Certificate Curricula**

The junior cycle of post-primary education caters for young people between the ages of 12-15 years. It currently constitutes the final phase of compulsory education in Ireland. The junior certificate as a single national programme sought to provide equality of access and certification that was intended to meet the needs of all students.

The NCCA presented the following aims for the new Junior Certificate:

- To reinforce and further develop in the young person the knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies acquired at primary level.
- To extend and deepen the range and quality of the young person's educational experience in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies.
- To develop the young person's personal and social confidence, initiative and competence through a broad, well-balanced, general education.
- To prepare the young person for the requirements of further programmes of study, for employment or for life outside full-time education.
- To contribute to the moral and spiritual development of the young person and develop a tolerance and respect for the values and beliefs of others.
- To prepare the young person for the responsibilities of citizenship in the national context and in the context of the wider community. (NCCA (3), 1989, p.8).

The programme is based on the principles of breadth and balance, relevance, and quality. Providing every young child with a wide range of educational experiences which address their individual needs, and enable them to achieve the highest possible standards with due regard to their individual aptitudes and abilities. "The curriculum at junior cycle is a further development of the approaches to learning which underpin the primary curriculum and takes cognisance of the full range of knowledge, concepts,

skills and attitudes associated with primary education” (NCCA (4), 1999, p.7).

**The aims of the primary curriculum are:**

- To enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual.
- To enable the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society.
- To prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning

(NCCA (1), 1999, p.7)

The curriculum focuses on the individuality of each child, recognising each ones personality, level of intelligence and individual potential for development. The flexible nature of the curriculum encourages the involvement of the child in the process of learning, placing credence on the development of social skills, fostering social inclusion where possible both internally and externally and recognises the influential role which education plays in moulding society.

### **2.2.2 Features and Principles of the Primary and Junior Certificate Curricula**

The NCCA highlighted eight features of the junior certificate:

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| Coherence:  | Cross-curricular elements to enable students to connect the different educational experiences. |
| Continuity: | Provide a link between the primary curriculum and the senior cycle programme.                  |

**Progression:** Build upon and develop the student's skills and competencies acquired at primary level.

**Flexibility:** Involvement of outside resources within the curriculum and its delivery, a certain degree of autonomy awarded to teachers in their methods of delivery.

**The European Dimension:** Where possible the curriculum should highlight the economic, social and cultural implications of EU membership and the challenges and opportunities provided by the same.

**Equity of Treatment:** Equity of treatment to all students in terms of curriculum and assessment.

**Differentiation:** A curriculum, which recognises and awards differences in abilities. (NCCA (3), 1989, p.10)

**The principles of the primary curriculum are developed from the thrust of the original 1971 curriculum, and have been somewhat widened to incorporate:**

- Celebrating the uniqueness of the child.
- Ensuring the development of the child's full potential.
- The child's sense of wonder and natural curiosity is a primary motivating factor.
- The child is an active agent in his or her learning.
- Learning is developmental in nature.
- The child's existing knowledge and experience form the base for learning.
- The child's immediate environment provides the context for learning.
- Learning should involve guided activity and discovery methods.
- Language is central in the learning process.
- The child should perceive the aesthetic dimension in learning.
- Social and emotional dimensions are important factors in learning.
- Learning is most effective when it is integrated.
- Skills that facilitate the transfer of learning should be fostered.
- Higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills should be developed.
- Collaborative learning should feature in the learning process.

- The range of individual difference should be taken into account in the learning process.
- Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning. (NCCA (1), 1999, p.8)

Fundamentally, the new primary curriculum seeks the child's active participation in the learning process in contrast to a more passive role hitherto. Subject barriers were broken down and integration across a range of subjects becomes routine. Rigid timetabling disappeared, greater freedom is exercised within the classroom and group-work becomes a regular feature of activity. The importance of rote learning diminishes and greater emphasis is placed on self-discovery, discussion and doing.

### **2.3 Transition from Primary Cycle to the Junior Certificate Cycle**

Anderman and Maehr (UK) (1994) conducted research into views of students on their own ability. Students discover that by the age of eleven or twelve that they have formed beliefs about the relationship between ability, effort and attainment. The students believe that it is a fixed entity and that as a result what you can achieve is restricted, regardless of effort.

The transition in education between primary cycle and the secondary school occurs for most students at the average age of 12 in the Irish system, when all pupils in the 6<sup>th</sup> class of the primary cycle are transferred to the first year of the junior certificate cycle. Few concessions are afforded to variances in each individual students ability, attainment and achievements at this particular stage, and their readiness for the precision of secondary school.



Those who may have just grasped and settled into the primary system, with its principles of expanding autonomy and collaboration in learning, are prematurely forced into an arena of instruction, discipline, competition, assessment and basically a world of adults. Pupils, having been at the pinnacle of their primary school must now begin to learn all over again as they enter at the lowest level of the junior cycle. The twelve-year old transferee carries with him/her an academic portfolio that is exclusive to the individual. The Report of The Pupil Transfer Committee (1981) states that, "it is to be assumed that, apart from a minority of probably around 20%, the pupils generally will, by then have attained to a standard of reading and other basic cultural skills which will enable them to benefit as fully as may be from a post-primary course". The Plowden Report (UK) (1967) affirms that learning is a continuous process and the importance of avoiding any strains at the points of transfer between classes or schools. This report claimed the age of eleven was too young for transfer between cycles and proposed the concept of the middle school to ease problems of transition. The middle school cared for students aged between eleven and thirteen and posed as the meeting point between primary and post-primary.

The Hadow Report (UK) (1926, p.46) outlined what it foresaw as an adequate structure for strengthening the continuous process of education between the different cycles through the following metaphor.....

transplanted to new ground and set in a new environment, which should be adjusted, as far as possible, to the interests and abilities of each range and variety, we believe that they will thrive to a new height and attain sturdier fibre

This view was further perpetuated in a follow up report in 1931,

It is true indeed that the process of education between the age of five and the end of the secondary stage should be envisaged as a coherent whole, that there should be no sharp division between infant, junior and post-primary stages, and that the transition from any one stage to the succeeding stage should be as smooth and gradual as possible.

However as research has indicated, this is not the case, the Report of the Pupil Transfer Committee (1981, p.18) identified that between 13-14% of students studied, presented as needing special attention when transferring between primary and post-primary education, they divided these pupils into seven different categories:

- Slow learners
- Deprived background
- Emotional difficulties
- Specific learning difficulties
- Handicapped
- Sensory or physical disabilities
- Uninterested and poorly motivated

This report felt that for these children transfer was being made even more difficult, with the serious repercussion that a sense of failure and negative attitude towards school may set in amongst these pupils if the issues were not alleviated. They called for the establishment of a pastoral care team in each school and an overall improvement of communication between the schools.

The Bullock Report (UK) (1975) stressed the need for effective liaison in order to alleviate the difficulties associated with the transfer between the different cycles. The author discovered during discussions amongst his peers on this course, one of the key problems within this whole area of continuity, is the lack of awareness amongst teachers of both levels as to what the other is doing and problems they are encountering, "The most potent stimulus for the development of a course of action is awareness of a need, but for a need to be obvious there has to be communication across school boundaries" (Gorwood (UK), 1986, p.195). Naughton (1997) recommends that greater communication between teachers would play a large role in easing these difficulties, which are being experienced during transition periods.... "a further 'spin-off' from the building of common teaching, would be the engagement of teachers at both levels in genuine dialogue that has been conspicuous by its absence over the years" (ibid, p.322)

Derricott (UK) (1985) addresses the issue of 'social continuity' of the pupils when transferring between schools, friendship patterns or membership of certain groups may continue with the transfer, but in certain circumstances may not, where the child enrolls in a different post-primary school than their peers, or where in the case of some post-primary schools that they discourage continuity and break up circles in order to encourage integration of pupils from varying feeder schools.

Gorwood (UK) (1986) speaks of the issue of 'curricular discontinuity' at the transfer stage, varying capabilities of students coming from different feeder schools can lead to repetition and boredom for some students in first year of the junior cycle. More testing during the first stages at junior cycle can rectify this, but this will only continue to interrupt curricular continuity and cause setbacks in progress. Gorwood (UK) (1986) also talks of another major upset in the transfer between primary and post-primary, the pupil goes from a somewhat self-contained unit (one teacher, relaxed timetable) to a time-driven environment. The sound of a bell every 35/40 minutes signifies, a change in room, a change in subject, a change in teacher, but more importantly a change in teaching style or learning environment. The transfer between levels may also hold emotional implications, contributed to by all of the above-mentioned factors, along with other factors. These include, the student's fear of the huge increase in workload which may come with the transfer, and the implications for the students who don't express their anxieties, but bottles them up. To achieve complete continuity between the levels would be next to impossible, but the differences should not be allowed remain so distinct that they can cause emotional disturbances. Nisbet & Entwistle (UK) (1969) identify through their research that differences in pupils background characteristics influence their experience of transfer, areas include level of parental education, type of accommodation, attitudes towards literacy.

Nisbet & Entwistle (UK) (1969) conclude in their research on the transfer of pupils that the transfer affects different children in different ways, and whilst

there were serious degrees of problems within this transfer, these problems and anxieties could be short lived if both the primary and post-primary schools in question adhered to simple organisational innovations.

The Birmingham Report (UK) (1975, p.56) listed the main barriers to the establishment of curricular continuity as the following:

- Physical distances between the primary and secondary schools discourage contact between the principals and teachers of both schools.
- Liaison between primary and secondary schools, with a view to establishing continuity is a time-consuming process and poor staffing ratios did not allow teachers to be released from classrooms to pursue contacts with their counter-parts in other schools.
- Liaison between schools was often seen as part of the head teacher's role.
- Heads of Departments and class teachers were reluctant to take initiatives and to get involved.
- Too few teachers were experienced in both primary and secondary schools and their parochial outlooks did not help in understanding each other's difficulties.
- Some head teachers in both primary and secondary schools had little or no interest in establishing liaison with other schools
- Some secondary schools recruited from too many feeder primary schools and this made liaison difficult to establish

Up to 1,000 students do not transfer from the primary sector to the junior certificate cycle (NCCA (4), 1999, p.67).

## **2.4 Learning: A Review of Contrasting Styles**

According to the primary school curriculum, (NCCA (1), 1999, p.14) "The impulse for learning is the child's sense of wonder at the complexity of the world, the desire to understand it, and the spontaneous impetus to explore it through play."

Williams & Collins (1997) discuss research which indicates that anxiety does exist amongst students transferring between primary and post-primary, but more interestingly that this anxiety is short lived. They indicate that it is the student's failure to identify with and engage in the new learning environment of the junior cycle that causes most problems. The whole area of learning has taken precedence within the primary curriculum, accredited for its recognition and acknowledgement that children react and learn in different ways. The primary curriculum seeks to facilitate the establishment of each child's individual position and the development of a learning experience best suited to that position. The primary curriculum presupposes the concept that learning is a continuous process that is not concrete in its nature, or defined by set periods of instruction on particular days. It is a process of building on each child's existing knowledge, in a sensitive, holistic and relevant manner, best suited to that individual, incorporating academic, social and emotional issues. Learning within the primary curriculum is not so much subject specific or related, but more of an interconnectedness amongst subjects and the application of this acquired knowledge to dealing with the world around them.

The junior certificate only honours achievement in the areas of certain intelligence, hence demonstrating to students what actually counts as learning success within the school. The Junior Certificate system emphasises relative ability above effort and achievement, as is the case at primary level. This has been backed by research as outlined in Anderman & Maehr (UK) (1994), showing the negative impacts of this reality on students motivation, and the lasting effects which it retains on the students future in education after having been labelled below average/weak from the start.

'Active learning' is crucial within the primary curriculum, the child is central to the process and is encouraged where possible to be actively involved in the process, whether in an individual capacity or as part of a group. The child is encouraged to take part in the learning process through interpreting the problem, suggesting solutions, identifying the core information and asking questions, in short developing the child's ability to think for himself/herself. Callan (1997) suggests active learning enables the teacher to address a wider range of learning styles amongst pupils, some learning through text books, whilst others learn better through engaging in activities such as project work, fieldwork and role play. Active learning is a necessary requirement for understanding a subject, to study a subject is to participate, engage, apply the knowledge, use the language and think the subject according to Callan (1997).

Callan (1997) identifies a major difference here between the rhetoric and the reality of the syllabus and its aims, which impinge upon the teacher's

ability to reinforce active learning at Junior Certificate level; the fact is that our education system favours and centres on content knowledge. Textbooks, transmission of knowledge, 40-minute class periods and terminal written examinations dominate the process. In reality secondary school's organisational structure is not conducive to offering an active-learning approach at the best of times, with unsuitable resources, lack of technology, and impinging external forces gaining greater foothold on the system and its direction. The Irish initiative *Schools for Active Learning* Callan (1994) highlights that these issues of school organisation and teacher role were not adequately addressed in the implementation process for the junior certificate and that this neglect has contributed to why active-learning has not been realised to the degree intended by the syllabus writers and policy makers. One only has to look at the junior cycle of the post-primary system to see it has remained primarily didactic in its nature, with the teacher being the initiator, structured lessons with the students working alone, focusing on factual content. In the authors opinion teachers are not primarily at fault here, in that, today's academic goals as set by third level institutes, students and parents are primarily attained through didactic teaching.

Rhetorically the junior certificate curriculum and its syllabi are progressive and up to date, incorporating all the elements associated with active learning and individual student learning, two examples include;



### English: Junior Certificate Syllabus (NCCA)

The student should be encouraged to explore, order, express....nurturing the imaginative and emotional growth of each student.....developments of skills in speaking and listening.... respect for each student's linguistic competence.... students should be encouraged to use, explore, develop, and refine the language that is most immediate and closest to themselves.

### Science: Junior Certificate Syllabus (NCCA)

The method of teaching must allow the student to learn through active participation in both practical and experimental work....there should be an emphasis on the thought process of science as well as the knowledge content.

However, there seems to be an ever-growing infringement and influence of external bodies such as third level institutes and industry on the education system, which are causing secondary level teachers to fray from the ideal and go with the reality. Teachers must provide the customers (parents and pupils) with what they require, whether this equate with the principle aims of education or the demands of modern society.

Callan (1997) believes that secondary schools organisational structures and the new junior certificate were not aligned accordingly and identified four significant areas,

### 1. Time

School timetables are based upon allocating sufficient time to cover each individual course syllabus and textbooks; these same textbooks are centred on supplying adequate knowledge in relation to the junior certificate examination questions. Even this fact contradicts the aim of the junior certificate in that assessments were not supposed to influence course content. The allocation of 35/40-minute periods is not conducive to 'active-learning' activities such as project work and field studies and teachers are reluctant to surrender too much time in fear that they will not complete the required syllabi in time for the junior certificate exam. Also resources are not in place or available for the cover of secondary teachers who are out on fieldwork etc.

### 2. Curriculum Coherence

It would be unrealistic not to include that many teachers teach the junior certificate syllabus, keeping in mind the requirements of the leaving certificate. Whatever about using active-learning methodologies at junior certificate level, it almost becomes non-existent at leaving certificate level, where the career expectations of pupils and parents come into play and take precedence in the classroom. This can give rise for teachers to question the credibility and purpose of the junior certificate.

### 3. Physical Environment

School ethos on codes of practice can place a damper on the possible introduction of active learning; they need to overcome the concept that

where there is noise there is disorder. However this is often forced on teachers due to poor building insulation, large class sizes and objecting colleagues. Other physical inhibitors often include lack of resources, technology and equipment or the laborious task of obtaining the same.

#### **4. Class Profile;**

The style of teaching used will be determined by factors such as class size, student behaviour and student expectations. In order to undertake active-learning projects with the class, an accepted code of practice must first be established with the pupils. In today's society students have been known to question their teachers on the relevance of such teaching innovations in respect to their examination requirements. (Callan, 1997, p.24)

#### **2.4.1 Learning Styles**

Much publicity and time have been afforded to the area of learning styles and multiple intelligences in recent years. Learning styles is defined as the way that we process information, and recognition is now given to the fact that there are different approaches or ways of learning. Traditionally education has recognised and acknowledged three main types of learning styles and according to (Edelson, 1992, p.74) most people learn using a combination of two or three of these styles:

##### **1. Visual Learners**

These students basically learn by watching, they think in picture terms and learn best from visual displays such as diagrams, videos, role-play, and body language. Some 40% of students fall into this category.

## 2. Auditory Learners

Students in this category learn best through listening ie. lectures, discussions, talking through things. They tend to spell phonetically and benefit from reading text aloud and using tape recorders.

## 3. Tactile/Kinaesthetic Learners

These students learn best from a hands-on approach, become actively involved in the environment around them and are required to know how things work. These students can express difficulty in learning through traditional school settings. This group of learners can make up to 50% of students.

The individual students learning style and how it is in treated will in turn effect how that student performs in school. Secondary schools depend heavily on auditory and visual methodologies in their transmission of knowledge, with students depending on their area of strength. In cases, where students have difficulties in dealing with both of these learning styles they tend to experience difficulties with the education system in general, and as a result are often failed by the system. Schools often brand a student's failure in one or more of these learning styles as a weakness or even a disability, rather than finding out which learning style would better enhance those students learning ability, in turn leading to a more effective learning process. All of these factors highlight the necessity and importance of identifying each student's individual learning style and matching teaching

methodologies accordingly. According to educator Sandra Rief (Rief, 1993, p.14), students retain:

- 10% of what they read
- 20% of what they hear
- 30% of what they see
- 50% of what they see and hear
- 70% of what they say
- 90% of what they say and do

These statistics cannot be ignored by educationalists especially the fact that 90% of student retention comes from saying and doing, this is in stark contrast to the predominance of didactic teaching which presently occurs within the junior certificate cycle. The primary curriculum encourages the use of variable learning-styles (NCCA (1), 1999, p.14) recognising that every child is individual. The primary sector is not alone in this progression; in more recent times new curriculum introductions in the Junior Certificate cycle have addressed the issues of learning styles and incorporated components and modules aimed at awakening and exercising different learning styles into the curriculum eg. Practical components in the home economics subject. Secondary schools and the Junior Certificate curriculum have not been as innovative in this area of addressing different learning styles, not that they have not wanted to address the issue, but cultural factors within the secondary sector are often not conducive to the treatment of variance in learning styles. One of the major factors inhibiting the addressing of variances in learning styles within the class is the methods of assessment that are used to evaluate students. Assessment procedures

used in the junior cycle serve little function to encourage teachers to explore and utilise different learning styles within their teaching methodologies. These current assessment methods are dominated by written examinations, with the minimal percentage awarded to orals/aurals in foreign languages and course work in home economics.

#### **2.4.2 Measuring Intelligence**

There has been much criticism of the business of intelligence testing, in an Irish context, Lynch (1992), believes that most standardised tests are basically verbal tests so that people who are not verbally strong cannot be defined intelligently by them. Intelligence is a genetically inherited quantifiable entity, while ability is a person's capacity to learn. However many believe that academic ability is intelligence and use the terms interchangeably.

A narrow view of intelligence seriously circumscribes one's vision of what is educationally possible. If an education system defines intelligence as being primarily verbal and/or mathematical, then it condemns those who do not have these abilities to a continuous experience of negativity and failure in schools (Lynch, 1992, p.139).

In recent decades there has been a shift in the balance in the definition of intelligence, there are several theories, but one of the most topical and popular is Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences. His theory is that human intelligence is pluralistic rather than unitary. Gardner (UK) (1993, p.48) suggests nine different intelligences to account for a broader range of potential in humans:

- Linguistic Intelligence (words)
- Logical-mathematical Intelligence (number or logic)
- Spatial Intelligence (pictures)
- Bodily-Kinaesthetic Intelligence (physical experience)
- Musical Intelligence (music)
- Interpersonal Intelligence (social experiences)
- Intrapersonal Intelligence (self reflection)
- Naturalist Intelligence (experience in the natural world)
- Existential Intelligence (meaning of life)

The multiple intelligence theory should encourage the education systems and teachers to regard students' ability more broadly and to understand that areas such as the arts, dance and music are just as important to students understanding of the world as the more traditional subjects. Gardner (UK) (1993, p.12) believes that schools emphasize the linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences too much "In my view, the purpose of a school should be to develop intelligences and to help people reach vocational and vocational goals that are appropriate to their particular spectrum of intelligences". It goes without saying that to recognise variances in intelligences must be accompanied by recognition of different learning styles and different teaching styles. The issue arises with a typical class having the potential to be made up of multiple intelligence profiles, problems will not occur where teacher and student are matched, but when a mismatch occurs difficulties will arise, with certain students being left out. Gardner (UK) (1993, p.56) recognised two remedies to deal with this issue of mismatched intelligences, 1) The teacher must first identify their own intelligence profile, then that of their students and assess whether it would

be possible to distribute their teaching approaches across this milieu of intelligence's. 2) That teachers consider different 'entry points' when teaching a new topic. Gardner, identified 5 'entry points':

**1. The narrational**

Using a story or narrative to introduce the concept.

**2. The aesthetic**

Using sensory or surface features.

**3. The logical-quantitative**

Approaching the topic through deductive reasoning or using numerical considerations.

**4. The foundational**

Examining the philosophical reasoning behind the concept.

**5. The experimental**

Approaching the topic through discovery for oneself.

The whole concept of addressing multiple intelligences within the classroom opens serious debate amongst those involved in education, particularly at junior certificate level, who feel that they are being increasingly constrained by lack of resources and external influences on the system ie. Parents, third level colleges, employers, as to what should be taught and how it should be examined. When addressing the area of multiple intelligences the teacher must realise that no one concept is perfect for all situations or group of students. One might also say that teachers have an obligation to address the needs and abilities of all their students and therefore must address the



issue of multiple intelligences and constantly grasp any new innovations which may enhance their grasp and deliverance of the concept.

## **2.5 Assessment: A Question of too little and too much?**

The over emphasis on academic achievement to the detriment of other types of achievement has a direct relationship to the academic orientation in curriculum and assessment, hence for a student whose strengths may lie outside the academic, there is little alternative to under-achievement and failure.

The Governments, 1995 'White Paper on Education' *Charting our Education*

*Future* claims that assessment should:

Cover comprehensively all parts of the curriculum and all the various elements of learning – the cognitive, creative, affective, physical and social development of students, their growth in self-esteem, the personal qualities being acquired, and the acquisition of knowledge, comprehension skills, attitudes and values...combine informal teacher assessment with the judicious use of standardised tests, without making disproportionate claims on class-time or activities (White Paper, 1995, p29).

Assessment continues to push apart the primary and secondary systems. As Hargreaves (UK) (1986) points out, in the English system, there is a clash of cultures which now sets primary and post-primary schools apart, they have different orientations to the student, to teaching and learning, and to assessment, there is little evidence to suggest that the situation is any different in Ireland. Students pass over from an integrated individualised learning environment where assessment is formative in nature to a subject-

centred environment at secondary level where assessment takes on a summative role.

There is an on-going mismatch between the aims and principles of the junior certificate and the modes and techniques currently in use for its formal assessment, this mismatch is particularly felt within individual subjects which are built on a framework of broad and balanced aims and objectives, of which only some are assessed (NCCA (4), 1999, p.32)

Murphy & Torrance (UK) (1988) outline some of the purposes of assessment:

- Assessment fulfils a variety of rolls within the education system, both at primary and post-primary levels.
- Ensures correlation between teacher activities and pupil needs.
- Identifies areas of weaknesses in the pupils learning.
- Helps the teacher plan and develop their methodologies.
- Provides a synopsis of the pupils' achievements.
- Helps identify suitability or lack of suitability in programmes being offered by the school.

Assessment is seen as a continuous, dynamic, formal and informal process which is carried out by the child's own teacher for formative, summative and diagnostic purposes (NCCA (2), 1999, p.40).

- Formative assessment is used to inform decisions on teaching and learning, and provides information to the child on his/her own progress and learning, as well as to the teacher and parents.
- Summative assessment usually takes place at the end of a course and provides information on what the child has learned.
- Diagnostic assessment (close to formative assessment) is used to identify learning difficulties.

Naughton (1997) discusses some of the problems facing Irish students during the transition from primary to second-level schooling in recent years, the students enter a zone of no-mans-land between primary and second-level education and as a result experience a greater degree of culture shock when they enter secondary school system than is necessary. One must remember that prior to 1971 primary school students had to engage in regular forms of standardised structured assessment, cumulating with the primary certificate. Prior to 1993 most pupils transferring to the post-primary sector had to undertake a Secondary school entrance examination at the end of sixth class. Primary teachers repeatedly condemned these examinations, proclaiming they damaged the child-centred approach being adapted in the new primary curriculum (NCCA (1), 1990). These forms of terminal examinations (primary certificate and secondary school entrance examination) were abolished in 1967 and 1993 respectively. Today students' progress from a primary curriculum, which centres on the individual child, with no formal terminal assessment to a secondary education system where they are immediately drilled on the importance and relevance of assessment to their future careers.

These events along with the new primary curriculum have only acted to widen the gap between primary and post-primary sectors, mainly due to the lack of equitable innovations at junior certificate level. Mulcahy (1981) discusses how these developments led to criticism by a large number of post-primary teachers of the new primary curriculum, blaming its child-

centred pedagogical practices for what they perceived as a decline in standards in their pupil intake “a form of schooling which originally had been designed for a select group....was now being made available – indeed compulsory – for all” (Mulcahy, 1981, p.135). The variance in pupils is not necessarily a decline in their academic knowledge but came in the form of weaker students and students with special needs who previously had been filtered out of the system through the primary certificate and entrance examination. Another issue arising from the transfer of students from primary to post-primary sectors, with links to the area of assessment, was the introduction of a ‘school record card system’ aimed at filling the gap left by the primary certificate. In practice it is supposed to chronicle each student’s background and attainments in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class and in turn this information is to be passed on to the post-primary schools. This system has in turn received much criticism in that there exists wide variances in its interpretation and degree of implementation between schools.

On the basis of submissions made to this review body, there seems to be a general consensus that the record card system has now become ineffective. In particular there would seem to be difficulties in comparing the ratings across teachers, schools and subjects (Report of the Pupil Transfer Committee, 1981, p.82).

Coolahan (1981) also highlighted that these records are often not passed on to the post-primary schools, and in a large number of cases were not cited by the Principals as part of the transfer arrangements.

In an Irish context Lynch (1988) has suggested that the greatest single constraint in Irish education is the ‘narrow and scientifically untenable conception of ability’ which underpins it, intelligence is understood as a

fixed entity which does not change over time, is defined in narrow linguistic/logical terms, and is widely held to be measurable by an IQ score.

However the Education Act (1998) states that the Principal and teachers shall 'regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents'. The implications of this are currently being considered as part of the junior cycle review.

Assessment has a significant role to play and is central to effective teaching and learning. Assessment allows teachers to monitor student's progression through the education system, identifying attitudes, responses, skills, understanding and problem areas as expressed by the student. Through assessment, the teacher is able to identify individual learning styles as expressed by the students and adapt their teaching methods and forms of assessment accordingly. As Williams (1992) discusses, assessment almost acts a right-of-passage, success at one level, whilst not affording automatic entry to the next level (ie. leaving certificate to third level), encourages students to progress to the next level. Students who do not do well at junior certificate assessment can and are detracted from progressing with their formal education.

The finale, ie. Junior Certificate examination sets the scene and precedence for the content of the curriculum, teaching methods and learning styles prior to its enactment. Despite major developments and innovations in our education system, we still depend heavily on terminal examinations as the

prime source of assessment. "Ireland is the only developed country which has a fully externally examined system of written assessment at the end of the junior cycle phase of post-primary education" (NCCA (4), 1999, p.31). The 1990 recommendations for the assessment of the junior certificate were never fully implemented, and the terminal written paper remained the sole means of assessing the subjects taken by the majority of students. There have been some innovations in the junior certificate in recent years, such as project work, and portfolios, but the weight of marks awarded to these methods reflects the lack of credence attached. One of the major problems with the assessment procedure is its neglect to match objectives of the junior certificate with appropriate assessment methods. Government papers and NCCA documents have all recognised and highlighted this fact:

The development of teaching methodology seeks to ensure that the methods used are appropriate to the objectives sought. Teaching methods employed are central to the process of innovation and change, the importance of complementing traditional methods with a wider range of teaching strategies is a key element in realising the objectives of the restructured second level curriculum. New strategies will also help to harmonise approaches between primary and second level schools" (White Paper on Education, 1995).

All these visions are progressive and stimulating for education and present visions, which are reflected in both primary and junior certificate aims and objectives, however, it would seem in general that such visions have not been matched with relevant assessment criteria. If assessment continues to concentrate on the verbal and mathematical, and students engage in that assessment solely through written tests, then it is likely that the teaching and learning styles will reflect the same bias. "Such a bias in teaching and

learning is at odds with the principles of breadth and balance which underpin the curriculum at junior cycle and with the active learning methodologies envisaged in the development of the junior certificate programme” (NCCA (4), 1999, p.33).

As stated earlier assessment holds a strong power over curriculum, teaching and learning, hence it seems that if the area of assessment is not addressed, how can teachers be encouraged to change their teaching methodologies to address different learning styles and so forth. “The report on the National Education Convention noted that the current junior certificate examination was encouraging an emphasis on teacher-centred rote learning in which the student had a passive role” (NCCA (4), 1999, p.33). Due to the diverse nature of the revised primary curriculum, new equally multifaceted forms of assessment have to be introduced, reflecting the curriculum’s objectives. The primary curriculum, recognising the varied styles in learning and purpose of assessment, has consented that traditional assessment methods such as standardised tests are not sufficient to gauge the breadth of learning in all subjects. They also recognise that not everything is easily measured, such as values and attitudes. Hyland (1998) outlines various assessment tools appropriate to the revised curriculum at primary level:

Teacher Observations	Homework	Work Samples
Portfolios	Projects	Check-lists
Self-assessment	Tasks & Tests	Conferences
Diagnostic tests	Standardised tests	
Criterion-referenced tests.		

It is vital that all involved in the education process recognise that assessment succeeds the learning process and not visa-versa. It seems the junior certificate has fallen into this trap of assessing the product rather than the process of learning. One has to acknowledge that the process is different for each student, it's not simply a matter of one form of assessment assesses everything and will suit everyone, nor will one form of assessment produce an overall picture of the child in question. Assessment should be applied sympathetically, in line with the student's individual abilities; assessment does not solve any problems, but can be used very successfully as a diagnostic tool. Research indicates a number of principles that should underpin any assessment system, notably clarity of purpose, enhancement of learning, equity and congruence with aims and objectives of the curriculum,

the choice of assessment modes and techniques should serve the purpose of improving learning by exerting a positive force on the curriculum at all levels. It must, therefore reflect the full range of curriculum goals and reflect a full range of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes set out in the curriculum objectives (NCCA (4), 1999, p.43).

Society plays a large role in dictating what goes on within the school/classroom. Williams (1992) highlights this point, indicating two constraints placed on the school by society. Society expects the junior certificate to continue the socialisation of its children from primary level, developing them as adolescents, and secondly, society expects schools to prepare students for the world of work. If the junior cycle is supposed to be developing a child both socially and personally, then as Williams (1992) points out, we are failing to do so in a lot of cases. Particularly with students



who fail to achieve in the cognitive-skills on which the junior certificate is based and hence develop a negative self-image, students see what teachers/parents value as success in regards to the junior certificate, and become demoralised when they are unable to make the grade. As Williams (1992) mentions assessment offers a chance to examine various facets of the child's ability including personal qualities and qualities of character and of course include a degree of academic ability.

The report of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum (NCCA, 1990), identified the following principles in regards to the nature of assessment at primary level:

- The system of assessment should be related to and reflect the content and objectives of the curriculum.
- Assessment should provide information on how pupils are performing and their potential ability in relation to the objectives of the curriculum.
- The results of the assessment should provide a basis for decisions about pupils further learning needs.
- There should be continuity between classes and schools (primary and post-primary) in relation to such procedures. Thus there is a need for a moderating component in the assessment.
- Assessment procedures should be comprehensive enough to allow for the full range of abilities across all the subjects of the curriculum.
- The procedures should allow for effective communication of relevant information to parents, teachers, Department of Education & Science and other agencies.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

The Primary Curriculum represents current educational perceptions and effective pedagogical practices, embracing new methodologies, and approaches to teaching and learning. It prides itself on the acknowledgement of the child as an individual learner and nurtures his/her in all dimensions of life (spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical). The junior certificate curriculum is based on being a further development of the approaches to learning that underpin the primary curriculum and is supposed to take cognisance of the full range of knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes associated with primary education. This review of literature has highlighted issues that prove contrary to the aims of the Junior Certificate, with lack of continuity in the areas of assessment, learning styles, and teaching methodologies coming to the forefront. Problems occurring within the transition period between schools were also noted.

The area of assessment, too much or too little, poses as a serious contributor to the variances that are arising between the primary curriculum and junior certificate cycle. The materialistic values that are being attached to assessment results, particularly in the junior certificate cycle, are causing teachers and students to deter from the intended aims and objectives of the junior certificate programme and place more value on the gains to be achieved from the summative results. The primary cycle has deflected away from structured summative assessment formats, instead adapting more formative methods of assessment.

Literature reviewed identified the various types of learning that can exist within the classroom and how these different styles can be incorporated into active learning. The impact of not recognising these alternative learning styles became evident in the sense of failure experienced by the child when their individual learning style was not catered for did not match that of the other pupils. The current dominance of formal assessment (particularly terminal written examinations) within the Junior Certificate seems to be playing a significant role in inhibiting teachers from engaging in active learning.

# **CHAPTER 3.**

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

As we have seen in the introduction, transition from primary to secondary education has been recognised as a crucial stage in young people's schooling career. Students' experiences of the transition process can influence their subsequent academic and social development and difficulties during the transition period can contribute to continual problems and even later, educational failure.

The research undertaken for this thesis focuses on the particular secondary school in question (St. Mary's) and centres on collecting information pertaining to the objectives as stated in the introduction:

- To investigate the difficulties which are arising for children and teachers as students transfer from the primary cycle to the junior cycle of secondary school.
- To investigate variances, relating in particular to 'learning styles' and 'assessment' that have become evident in curriculum implementation between the primary cycle and the junior cycle of secondary school.

There are five sections within this chapter. The first section gives a general overview of the chapter. In the second section the author looks at the methods of research used in this project. In order to obtain primary

information related to the objectives of this thesis the research methodology used was predominantly 'Quantitative' but also encompassed some 'Qualitative/Action Research' elements. In the third section the author looks at the components of the survey incorporating; questionnaire design, target samples used, methodology used to collect information, and administration of the questionnaire. In the last section the author will conclude this chapter.

### **3.2.1 Action Research / Qualitative Dimension**

Whilst the research methods used were predominantly quantitative in nature, the author draws some ideas from Lomax' interpretation of research "action research.....a form of educational research which incorporates a commitment to act to bring about improved practices, as part of the research process" (Lomax, 1994, p.2). The school being used in the research is the researchers own school and the researcher is an employee of that school, "action researchers need to be insiders researching practices integral to their work" (ibid, p.4). The qualitative methodology used in this thesis involves action research in that the open-ended questions encouraged the respondents to reflect on their own practices and encouraged teachers and students to reflect on the curriculum implementation, transition process, learning-methods and assessment procedures implemented within the school. The author recognises that the findings and recommendations of this research are not an end in itself and that issues pertaining to transition, assessment and learning will continue to be researched and developed long after this research is completed. It is

hoped that the findings of the action research will be of some practical use to the school in question.

### **3.2.2 Quantitative Dimension**

Creswell (2003) points out

a quantitative approach is one in which the investigator primarily uses post positivist claims for developing knowledge (ie. Cause and effect thinking, reduction to specific variables and hypotheses and questions, use of measurement and observation, and the test of theories), employs strategies of inquiry such as experiments and surveys, and collects data on predetermined instruments that yield statistical data (Creswell, 2003, p.18).

A quantitative method of research was chosen by the author for this study, based on the advantageous practicalities of using questionnaires/survey's; they provide precise information quickly, they are administratively simple, and they facilitate the collection of information from a large sample group. "Surveys include cross-sectional and longitudinal studies using questionnaires or structured interviews for data collection, with the intent of generalising from a sample to a population" (Creswell, 2003, p.14). The author also felt, taking account of sensitivities of respondents who are also colleagues that surveys were a more appropriate way of obtaining participants' honest views. Personal interviews were avoided and the respondents enjoyed anonymity when answering questions.

### **3.3 Components of Survey**

The recommendations of Creswell (2003) were noted and considered when designing the questionnaires for the teachers and students of the secondary

school. Attention was given to the questions asked, ensuring they were capable of delivering the necessary data and that the answers generated were definite and quantifiable. In the case of both questionnaires the author chose to use predominantly multiple-choice as distinct from open-ended questions. The author chose this form of question for two reasons, (1) multiple-choice questions are relatively easier to answer than open-ended questions, particularly for the students, and (2) multiple-choice questions are relatively less time consuming to answer than open-ended questions, a factor which the author felt would play a large role in obtaining a high response rate, particularly from the teachers. Where possible the author introduced an open-ended element to key questions in keeping with the action research emphasis. Many of the questions included a space for the respondent to express their own opinion thus encouraging them to reflect on the reasons for their answers. The layout of the questionnaires was clear and structured, with answering instructions provided for the students, and a cover letter provided for the teachers (see appendix 1 & 2).

### **3.3.1 Administration of the Questionnaires**

The target population chosen by the author consisted of:

- The 35 teachers (28 full-time and 7 temporary whole time) within the staff of St. Mary's secondary school. The author decided to exclude part-time teachers and trainee teachers from the survey as they would not have been in the school long enough to have experienced teaching a complete junior certificate cycle.

- The students of second year in St. Mary's secondary school who had transferred over from St. Mary's primary school. The author decided on second year students as they had completed a full academic year within the school, yet would still have fresh memories of their experiences in the primary school. Of the 68 students surveyed 44 had transferred over from the primary school used in this survey.

The author distributed a pilot questionnaire to three teachers and four students in early January, prior to administering the final questionnaires to the target sample later on that month. The teachers in question were given two weeks to complete the questionnaire and were assured anonymity. Of the 35 questionnaires, 32 were completed and returned yielding a response rate of 91%. The student sample was brought to the library on the day in question and were given two class periods (70 minutes) to complete the questionnaire, all instructions were made clear to them and again anonymity guaranteed. Of the second year student cohort (68) there are 44 students who have transferred over from St. Mary's primary school. All 44 students were present on the day and completed the questionnaires successfully. Only these 44 questionnaires were used for compiling information from the student questionnaire.

### **3.3.2 Questionnaire Design**

#### **3.3.2.1 'Questionnaire One'**

Questionnaire One, was administered to the teachers in the secondary school used for this research. It consisted of 19 questions, 16 of these questions were multiple-choice answers, and eight of the questions also



contained a section for the respondents' own opinions or additional comments. The questionnaire centred around seven themes that reflected the aims and objectives of the research:

Junior certificate curriculum (Questions, 1,9,15,16)

Primary school curriculum (Questions, 2,3,5)

Transition between primary and secondary school (Questions, 4,6,7)

Learning (Questions, 4,8,17)

Teaching methodologies (Questions, 10,11,18)

Assessment (Questions, 12,13,14)

Staff development (Questions, 19)

### **3.3.2.2 'Questionnaire Two'**

The second-year students of the secondary school used in this research, completed questionnaire two. It was administered to 68 students in total, 44 of which were used in compiling the results. The unused questionnaires were from students who transferred to St. Mary's secondary school from primary schools other than our feeder primary school. There were 24 questions in total, all of which were multiple-choice, 18 questions were open-ended. The students were given clear instructions in questions that required them to express their own opinions and views. The author focused this questionnaire on seven different areas that bore relevance to the theme of the research:

The primary curriculum (Questions, 1,6,7,11,12,15)

The junior certificate curriculum (Questions, 2,13,14,16,18)

Reasons for education (Questions, 3,4)

Assessment (Questions, 5,17,22,24)

Transition between primary and secondary school (Questions, 8,9,10)

Learning (Questions, 19,20,21)

Teaching styles (Question 23)

### **3.4 Conclusion**

The questionnaires were administered with permission from the school Principal. All participants (teachers/students) were informed of the reasons for and background to the research. This was done via a letter to the teachers (see appendix 3) outlining the objectives of the thesis. Teachers were also guaranteed anonymity when filling out the questionnaire. The author spoke to the students preceding the administration of the student questionnaire, outlining the reasons for their participation; Students were also guaranteed anonymity and were given the option of not partaking should they so wish. The author explained that he would be available to answer any confidential questions that should arise. The results from the questionnaires were collated, analysed and presented in graph form in chapter 4.

## **CHAPTER 4.**

### **PRESENTATION OF QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS.**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter the author examines and presents the data yielded from the empirical studies with a view to establishing what difficulties are arising for pupils and teachers in the transition process, and to establishing the variances which exist relating in particular to learning styles and assessment within curriculum implementation between the primary and secondary school.

There are four sections within this chapter. The first section gives a general overview of the chapter. The second section explores 'Questionnaire One' (see appendix 1), which was administered to the teachers of St. Mary's secondary school. This questionnaire investigates issues including; teacher knowledge of the primary school curriculum and it's learning styles, issues surrounding the implementation of their own junior certificate curriculum, the transition process between the schools in question, and the ability of current assessment procedures namely the junior certificate to adequately examine the aims and objectives set within the junior certificate curriculum. The third section reports on the findings of 'Questionnaire Two' (see appendix 2) that was administered to the second year pupils of St. Mary's secondary school. Some of the issues examined through this questionnaire incorporated obtaining students views on; the relevance of the junior certificate, their feelings (before and after) about the transition between primary and

secondary school, their perceptions on learning styles incorporated in both curricula (primary and junior certificate), and the abilities of current assessment methods used within the junior certificate to adequately reflect their achievements in the learning process. In the last section the author will present a conclusion to the findings of the questionnaires.

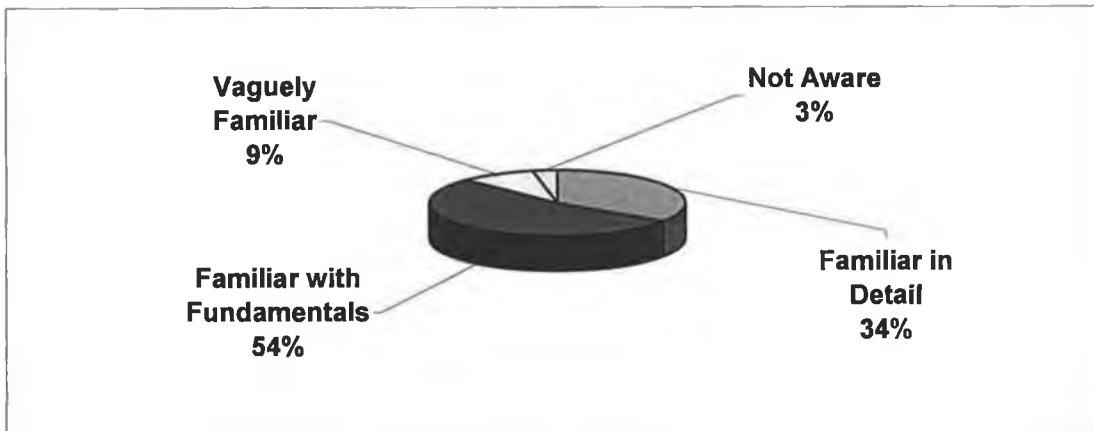
#### **4.2 Questionnaire One (Teachers in Secondary School)**

This questionnaire was distributed to 35 teachers (28 full-time and 7 temporary whole time) within the staff of St. Mary's secondary school. The sample surveyed was made up of teachers who have been positioned in the school for at least two years. These same teachers have taught and continue to teach the junior certificate course to the students (sample used in questionnaire two) who transferred across from the primary school in September 2002. Of the 35 questionnaires distributed, 32 were completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 91%. The results were as follows:

**QUESTIONNAIRE ONE**  
**COMPLETED BY TEACHERS OF ST.MARY'S SECONDARY SCHOOL**

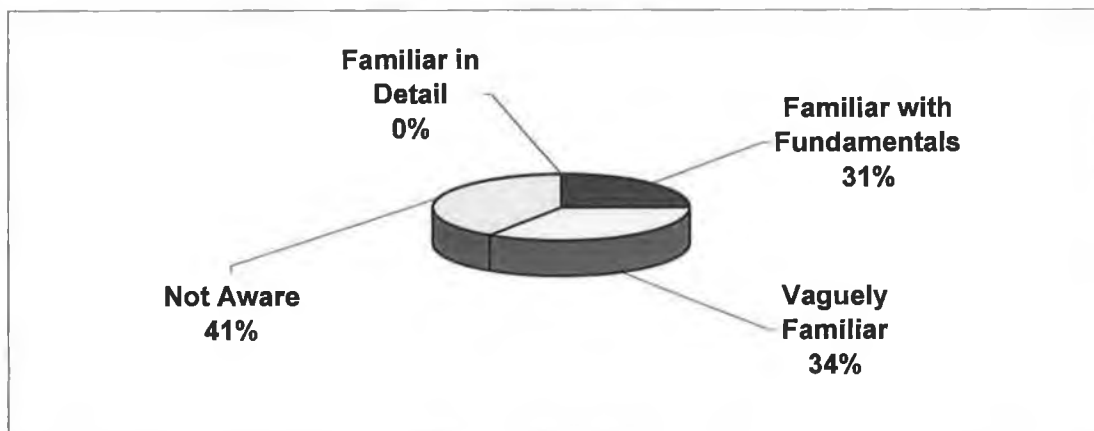
**Q.1. To what extent are you aware of the aims/objectives of the Junior Certificate Curriculum?**

<b>Familiar in Detail</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Familiar with Fundamentals</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Vaguely Familiar</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Not Aware</b>	<b>1</b>



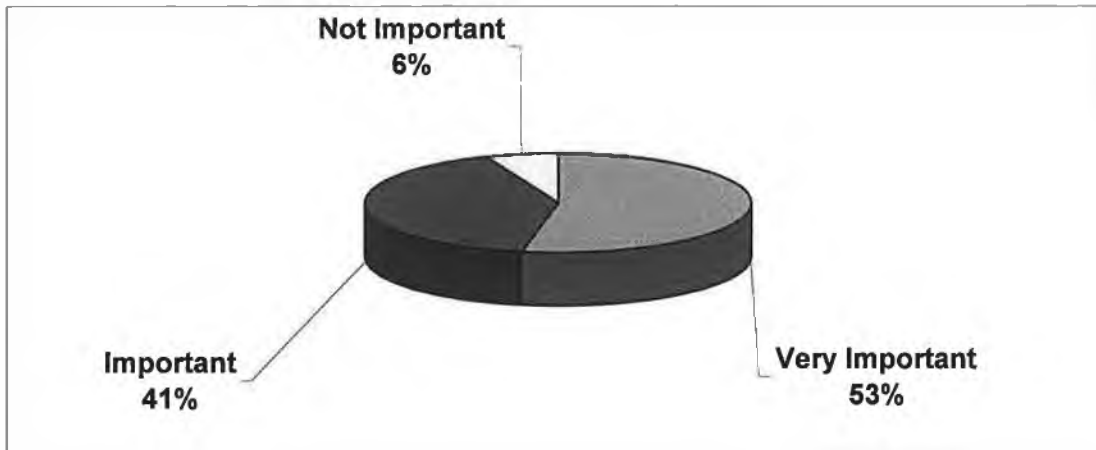
**Q.2. To what extent are you aware of the aims/objectives of the Primary Curriculum?**

<b>Familiar in Detail</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Familiar with Fundamentals</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Vaguely Familiar</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Not Aware</b>	<b>13</b>



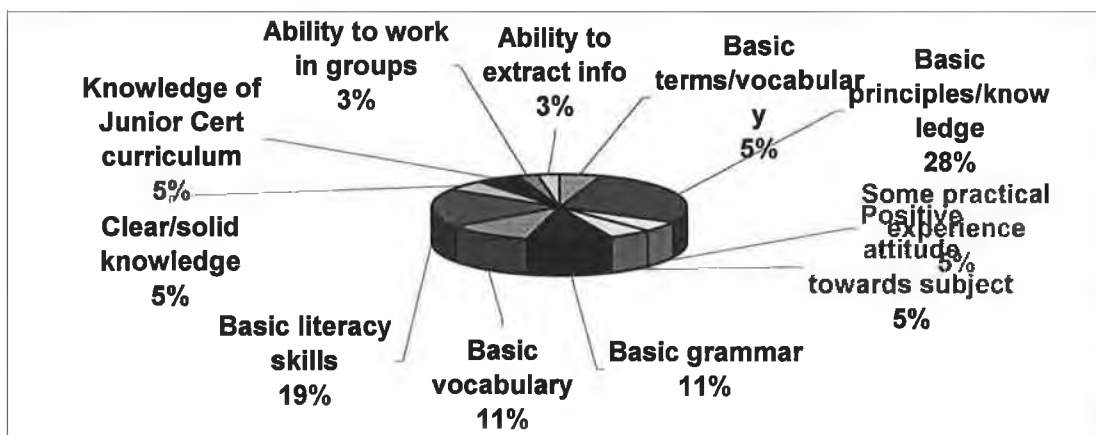
**Q.3. To what extent do you feel it is important for second level teachers to be familiar with students past learning and involvement in the Primary School?**

<b>Very Important</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Important</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Not Important</b>	<b>2</b>



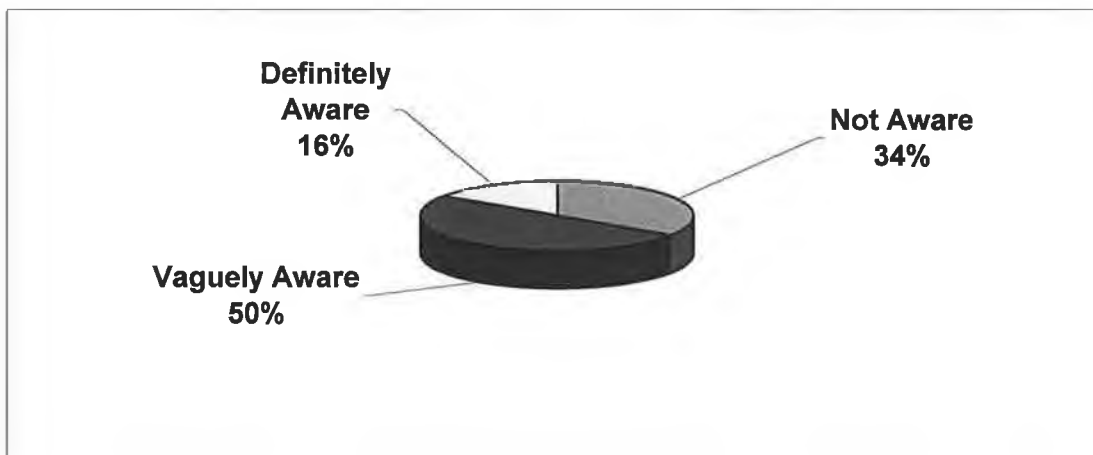
**Q.4. What is your expectation of 1st year students in respect of 'your' subject area (regarding competency, proficiency, weaknesses and strengths)?**

<b>Basic terms/vocabulary</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Basic principles/knowledge</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Some practical experience</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Positive attitude towards subject</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Basic grammar</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Basic vocabulary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Basic literacy skills</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Clear/solid knowledge</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Knowledge of Junior Cert curriculum</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Ability to work in groups</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Ability to extract info</b>	<b>1</b>



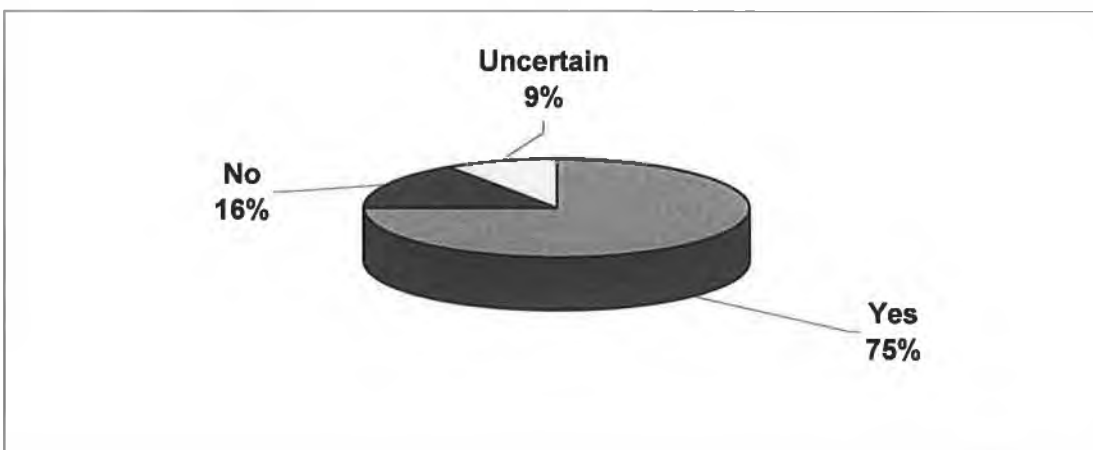
**Q.5. Are you aware of the contents of the 6th class Primary School Curriculum in your Subject?**

<b>Not Aware</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Vaguely Aware</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Definitely Aware</b>	<b>5</b>



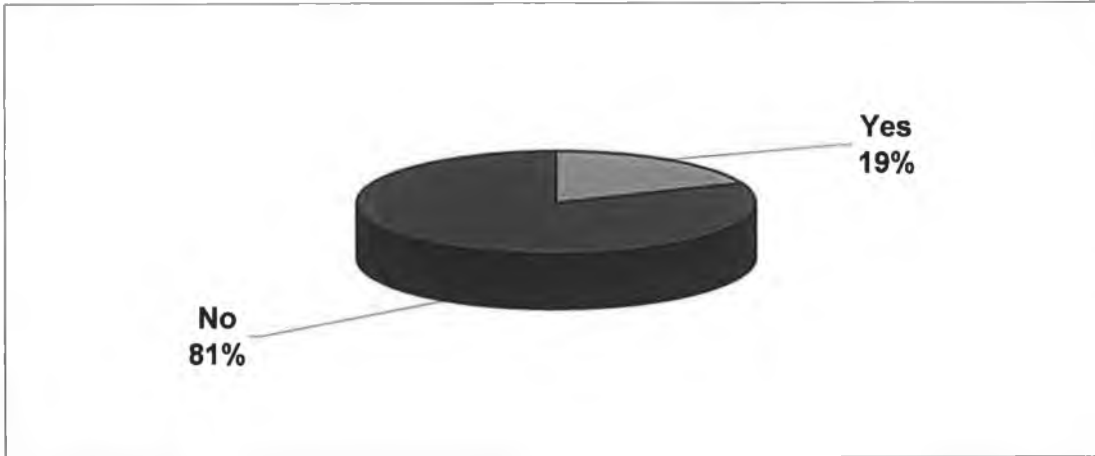
**Q.5. Do you feel it is necessary to be aware of the Primary Curriculum in your subject?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Uncertain</b>	<b>3</b>



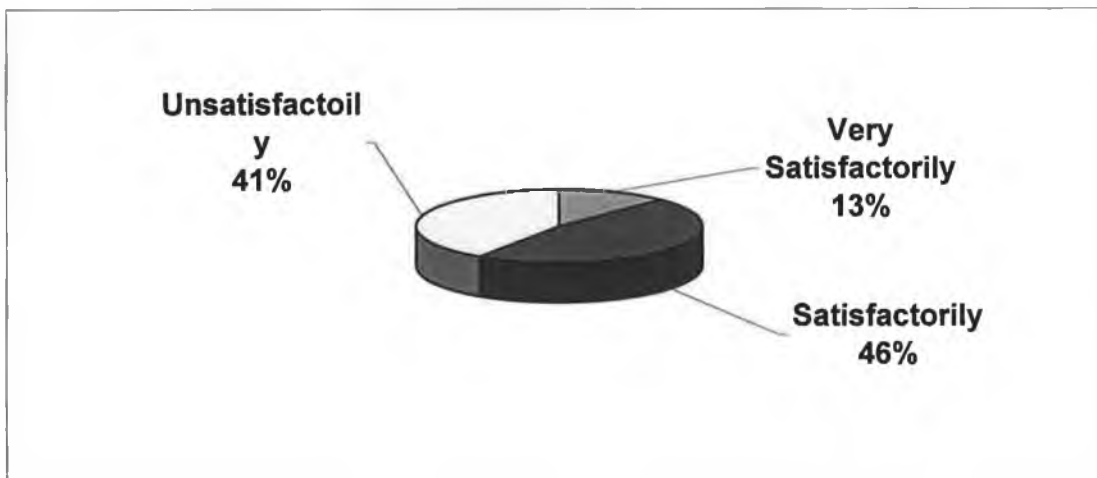
**Q.6. Have you had any professional involvement with any of the teachers in the Primary School (apart from as a parent)?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>26</b>



**Q.7 How satisfactorily do you feel our school addresses the transition from Primary to Secondary?**

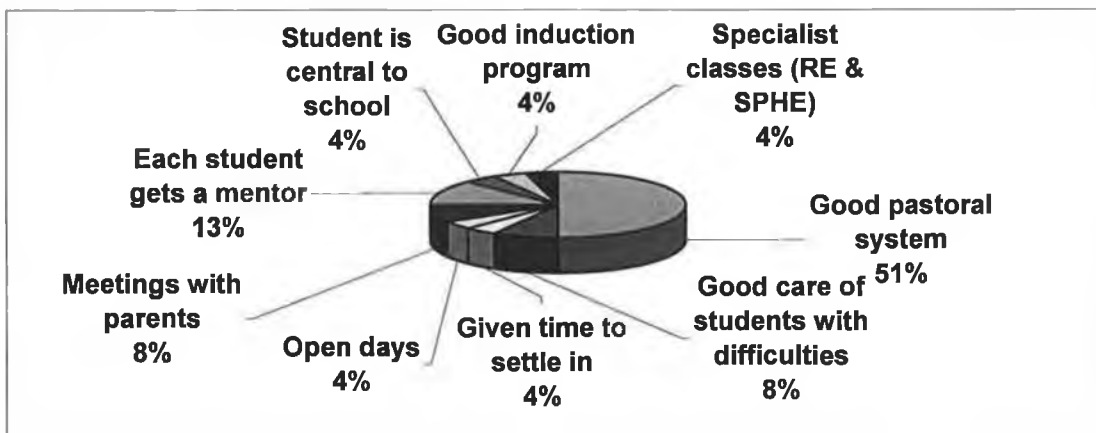
<b>Very Satisfactorily</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Satisfactorily</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Unsatisfactorily</b>	<b>13</b>





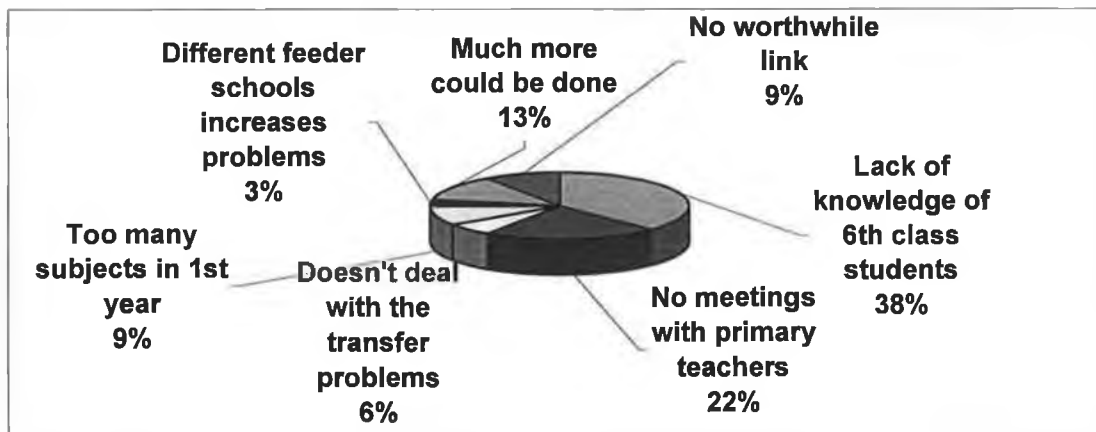
**Reasons (Satisfied with system)**

<b>Good pastoral system</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Good care of students with difficulties</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Given time to settle in</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Open days</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Meetings with parents</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Each student gets a mentor</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Student is central to school</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Good induction program</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Specialist classes (RE &amp; SPHE)</b>	<b>1</b>



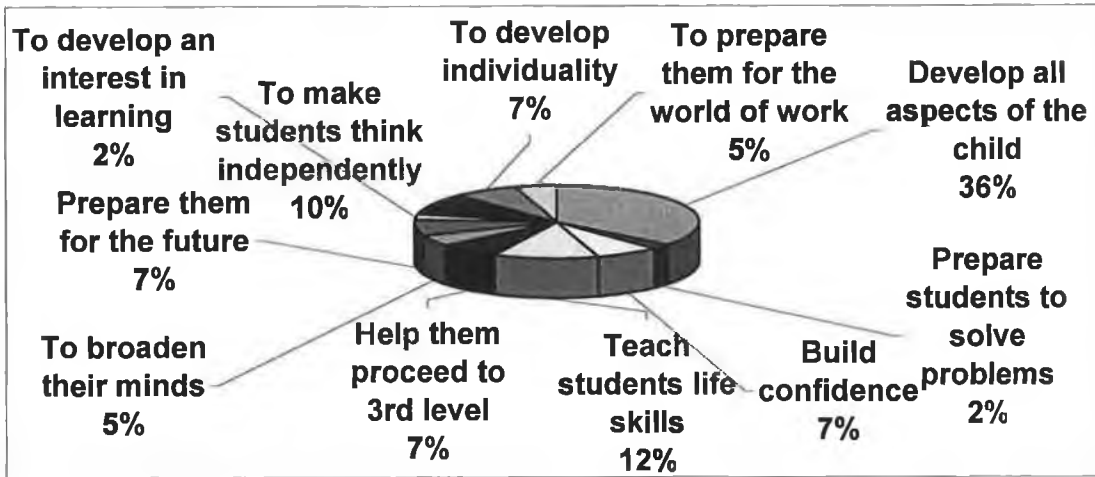
**Reasons (Not satisfied with system)**

<b>Lack of knowledge of 6th class students</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>No meetings with primary teachers</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Doesn't deal with the transfer problems</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Too many subjects in 1st year</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Different feeder schools increases problems</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Much more could be done</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>No worthwhile link</b>	<b>3</b>



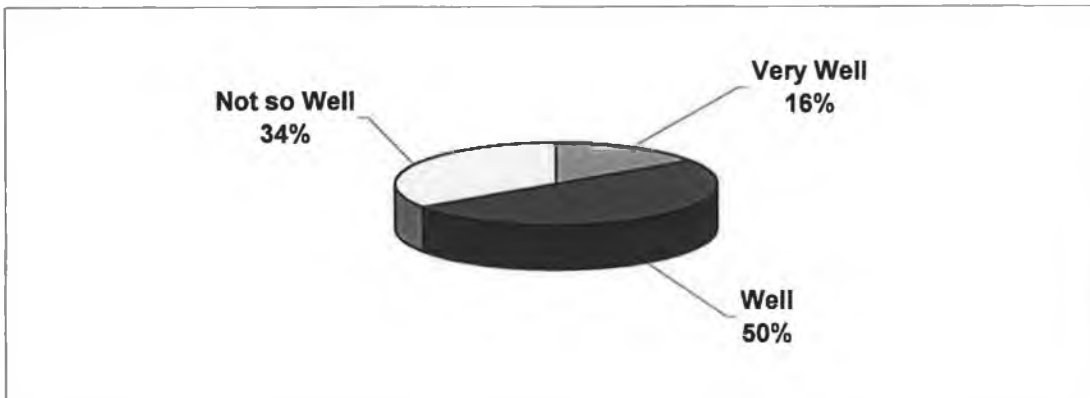
**Q.8. In a sentence, what in your opinion is the chief role of education?**

<b>Develop all aspects of the child</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Prepare students to solve problems</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Build confidence</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Teach students life skills</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Help them proceed to 3rd level</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>To broaden their minds</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Prepare them for the future</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>To develop an interest in learning</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>To make students think independently</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>To develop individuality</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>To prepare them for the world of work</b>	<b>2</b>



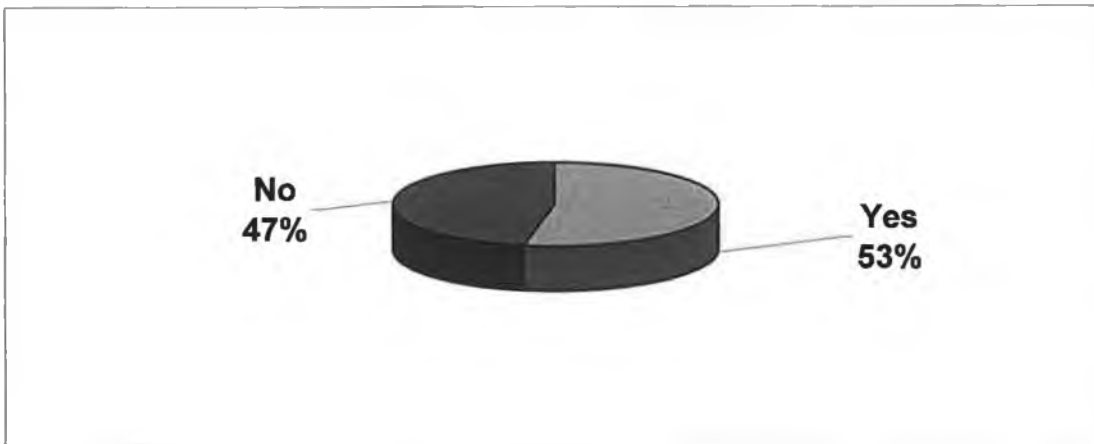
**Q.9. To what extent do you feel you are achieving the objectives of the Junior Certificate?**

<b>Very Well</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Well</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Not so Well</b>	<b>11</b>



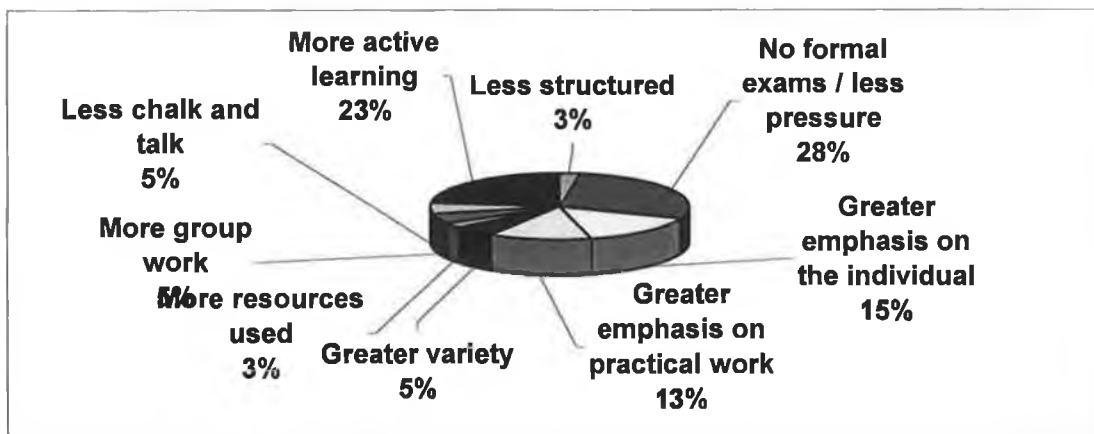
**Q.10. Are you basically familiar with the teaching methodologies used in the (A) Primary School?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>15</b>



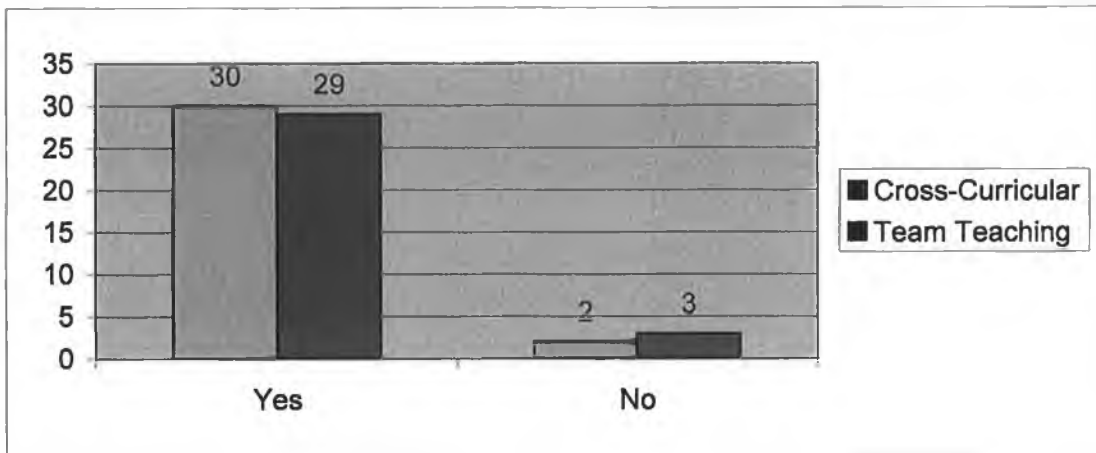
**Primary System (Methodologies)**

<b>Less structured</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>No formal exams / less pressure</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Greater emphasis on the individual</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Greater emphasis on practical work</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Greater variety</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>More resources used</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>More group work</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Less chalk and talk</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>More active learning</b>	<b>9</b>



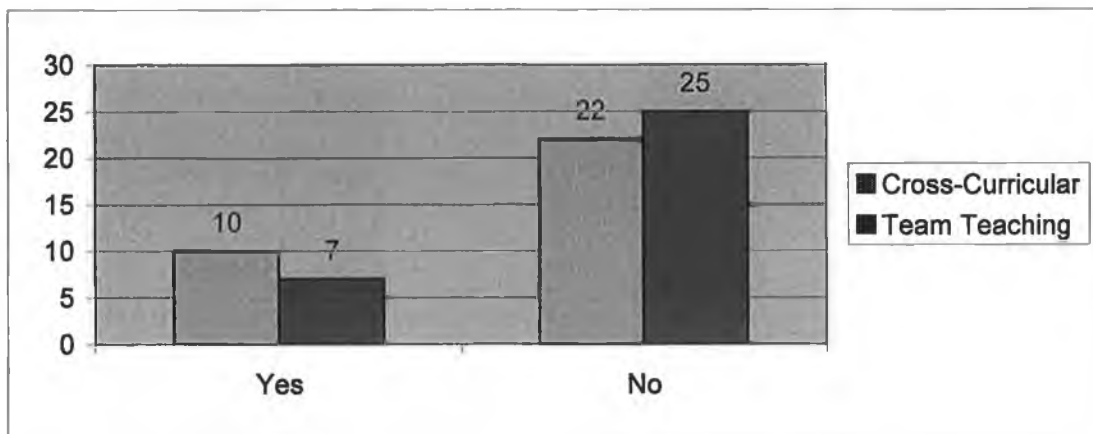
**Q.11. Is it possible to engage in cross-curricular/team teaching activities in your subject as secondary level?**  
**(A)**

	Yes	No
<b>Cross-Curricular</b>	30	2
<b>Team Teaching</b>	29	3



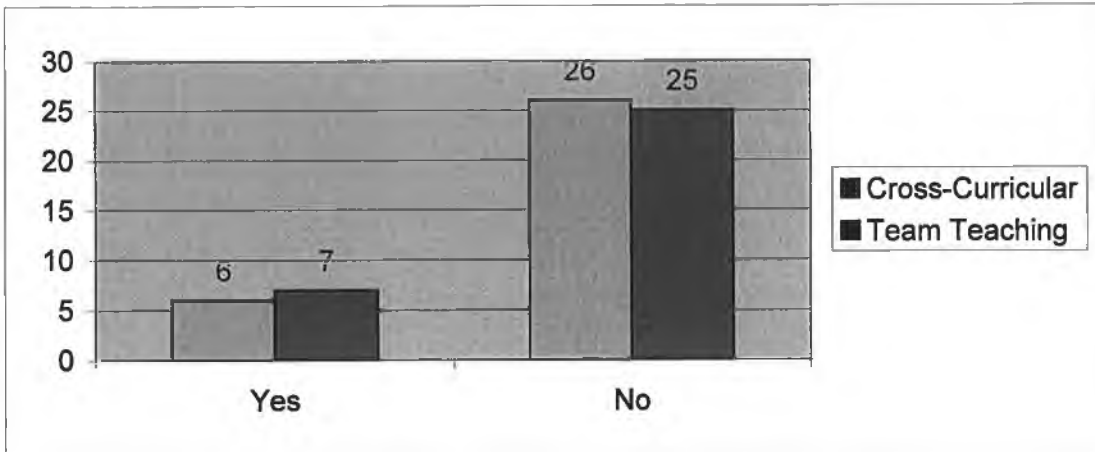
**Q.11. Does it happen within your subject?**  
**(B)**

	Yes	No
<b>Cross-Curricular</b>	10	22
<b>Team Teaching</b>	7	25



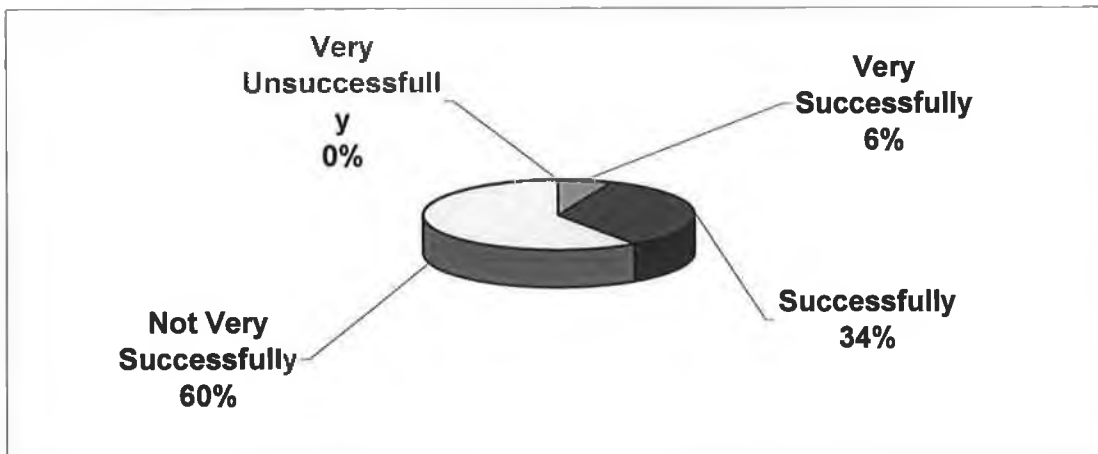
**Q.11. Would you like it to happen within your subject?**  
**(C)**

	Yes	No
<b>Cross-Curricular</b>	6	26
<b>Team Teaching</b>	7	25



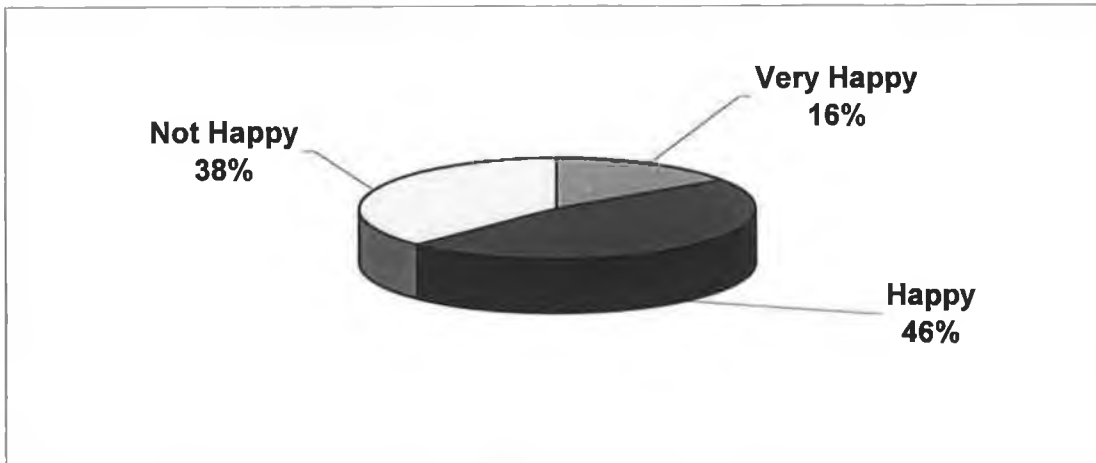
**Q.12. To what extent does the existing assessment structure meet the needs of 'all' your students?**

<b>Very Successfully</b>	2
<b>Successfully</b>	11
<b>Not Very Successfully</b>	19
<b>Very Unsuccessfully</b>	0



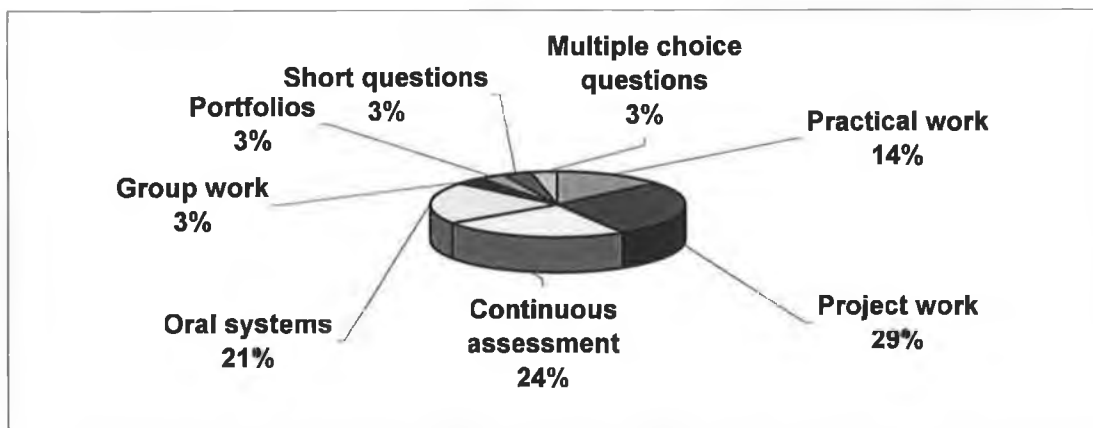
**Q.13. To what extent are you happy with the means of assessment used at Junior Certificate level for your subject?**

<b>Very Happy</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Happy</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Not Happy</b>	<b>12</b>



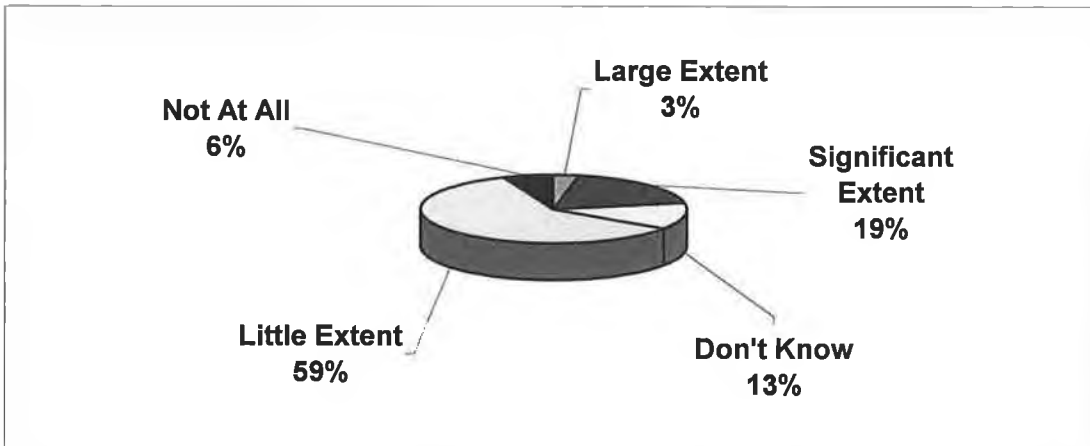
**Q.13. What would be a better form's) of assessment for 'your' subject?**  
(B)

<b>Practical work</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Project work</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Continuous assessment</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Oral systems</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Group work</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Portfolios</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Short questions</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Multiple choice questions</b>	<b>1</b>



**Q.14. To what extent does the existing 'assessment' system address multiple intelligence's?**

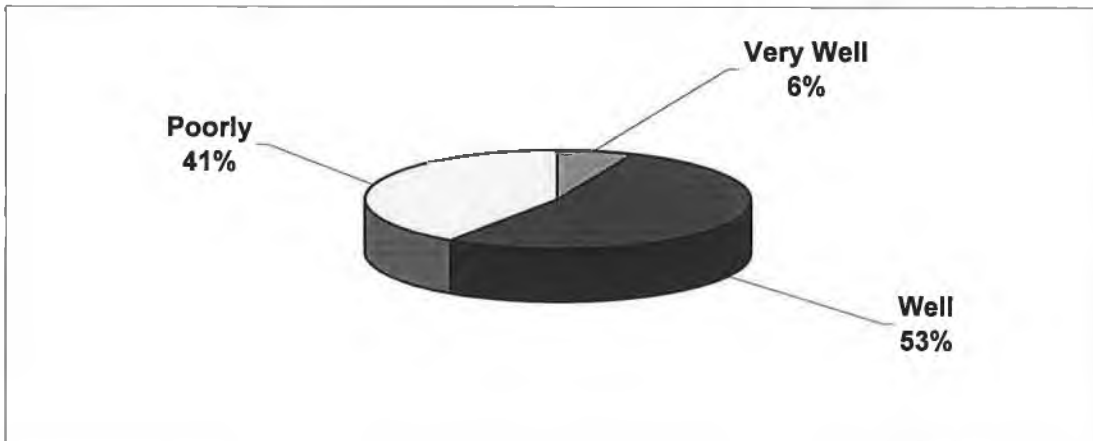
<b>Large Extent</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Significant Extent</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Little Extent</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Not At All</b>	<b>2</b>



**Q.15. To what extent does the Junior Certificate prepare our students adequately (A) for:**

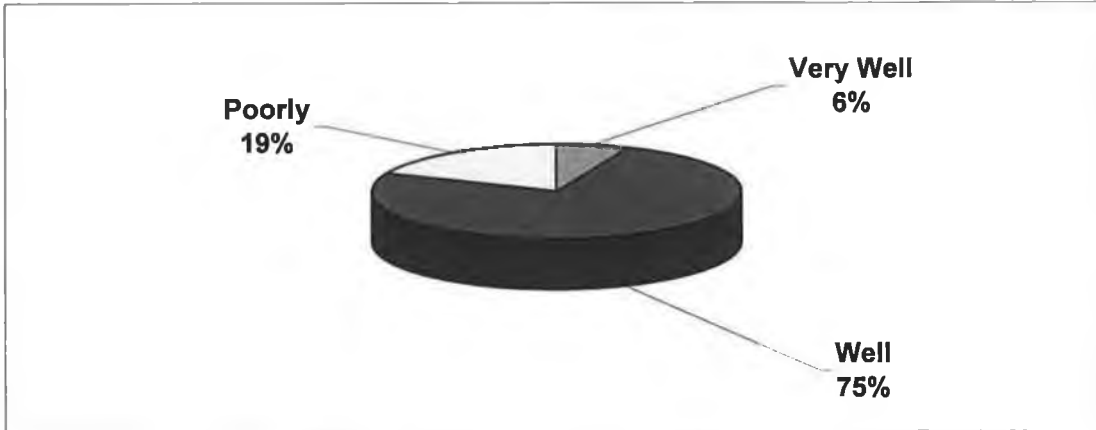
**The World of Work**

<b>Very Well</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Well</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Poorly</b>	<b>13</b>



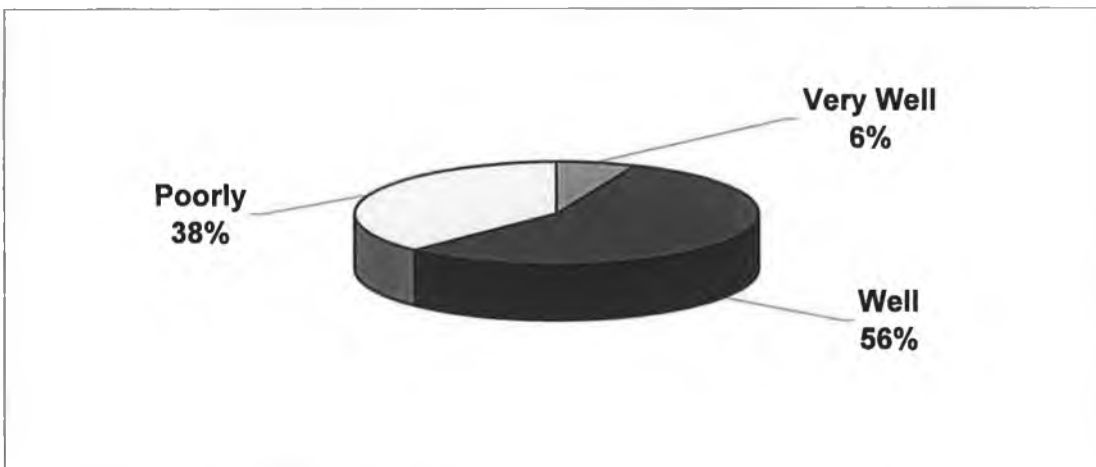
**Today's Modern Society**

<b>Very Well</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Well</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Poorly</b>	<b>6</b>



**Social Development**

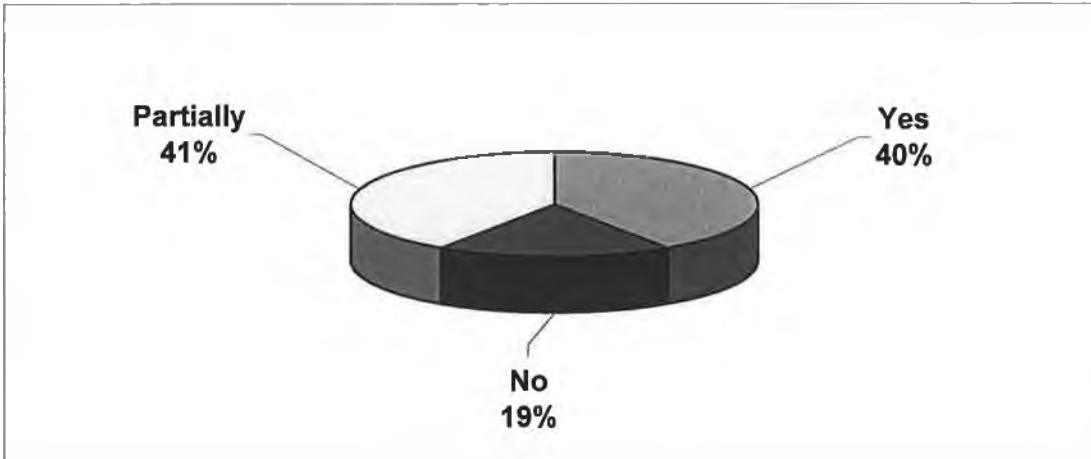
<b>Very Well</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Well</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Poorly</b>	<b>12</b>





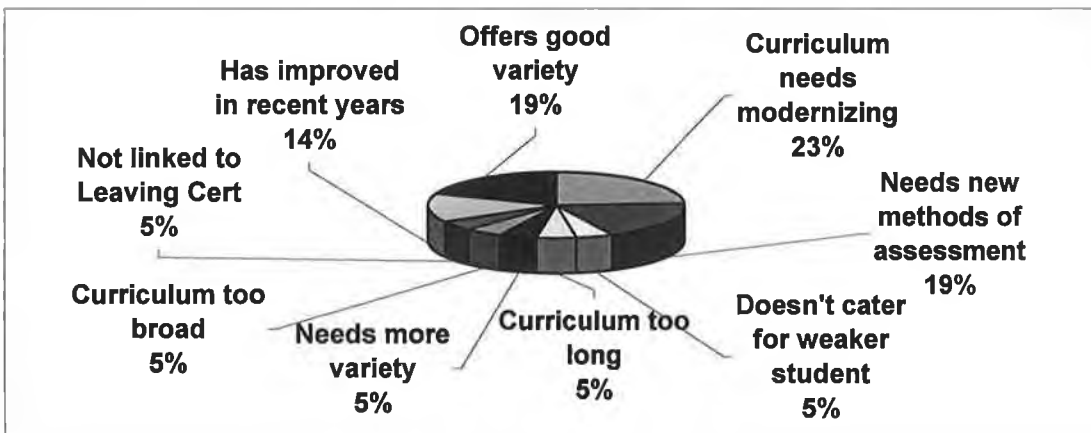
**Q.16. Are you happy with the content of 'your' subject curriculum in the Junior Certificate?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Partially</b>	<b>13</b>



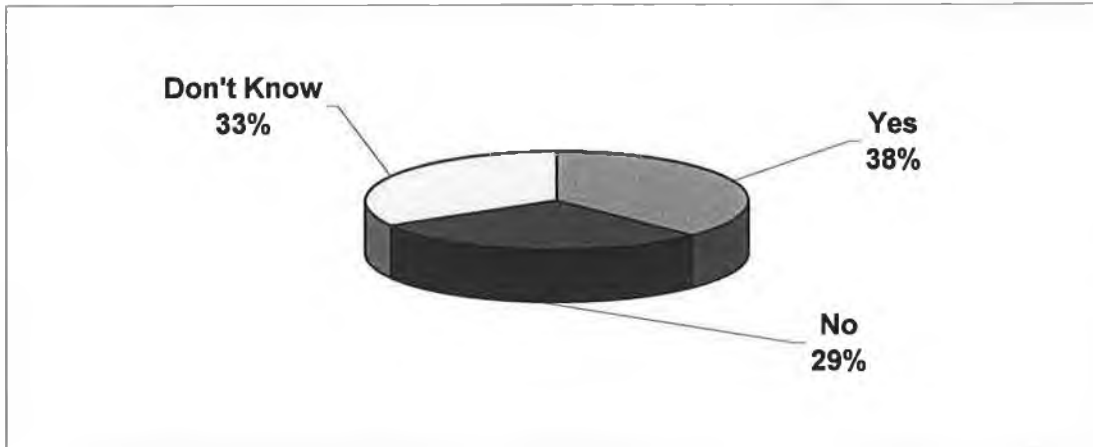
**Comments:**

<b>Curriculum needs modernizing</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Needs new methods of assessment</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Doesn't cater for weaker student</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Curriculum too long</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Needs more variety</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Curriculum too broad</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Not linked to Leaving Cert</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Has improved in recent years</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Offers good variety</b>	<b>4</b>



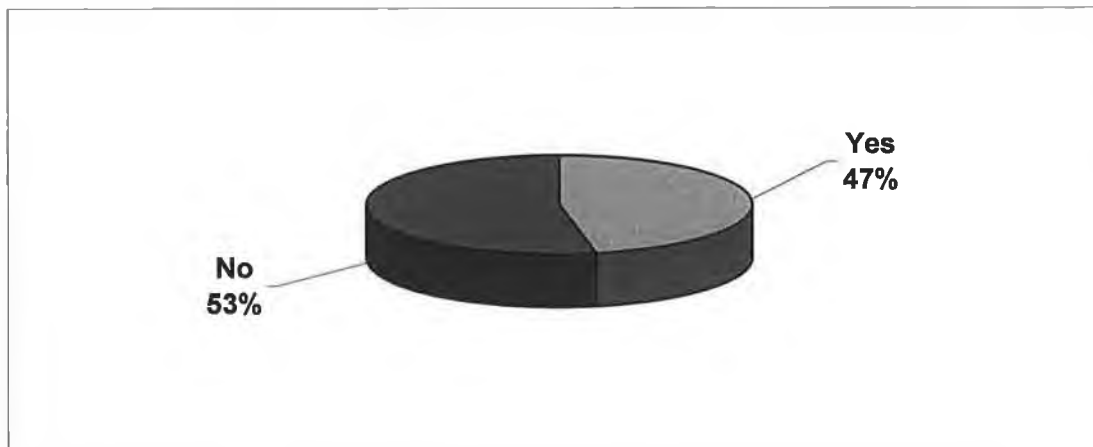
**Q.17. Is 'your' subject curriculum linked with it's 6th class counter-part at Primary level (if relevant)?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>8</b>



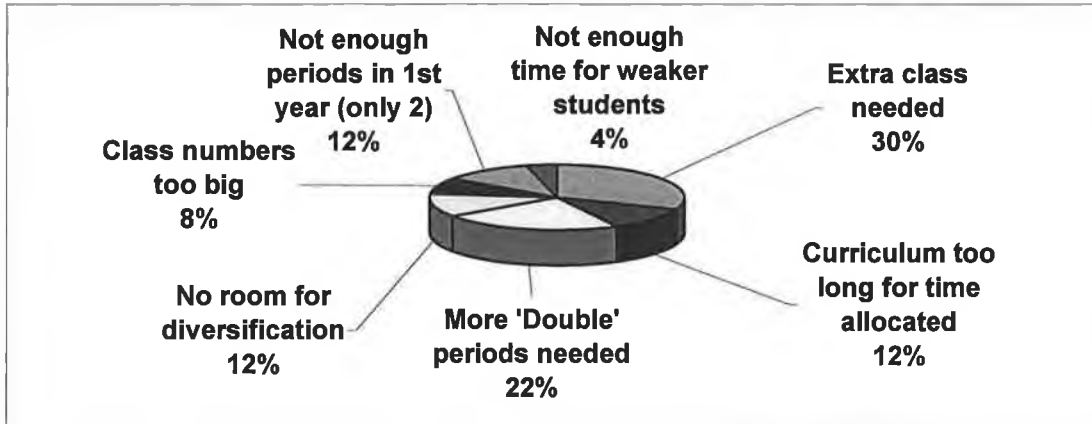
**Q.18. Is the Secondary School structure (timetables, class allocation, frequency) sufficient/adequate for the delivery of 'your' subjects Junior Certificate curriculum?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>17</b>



**Comments:**

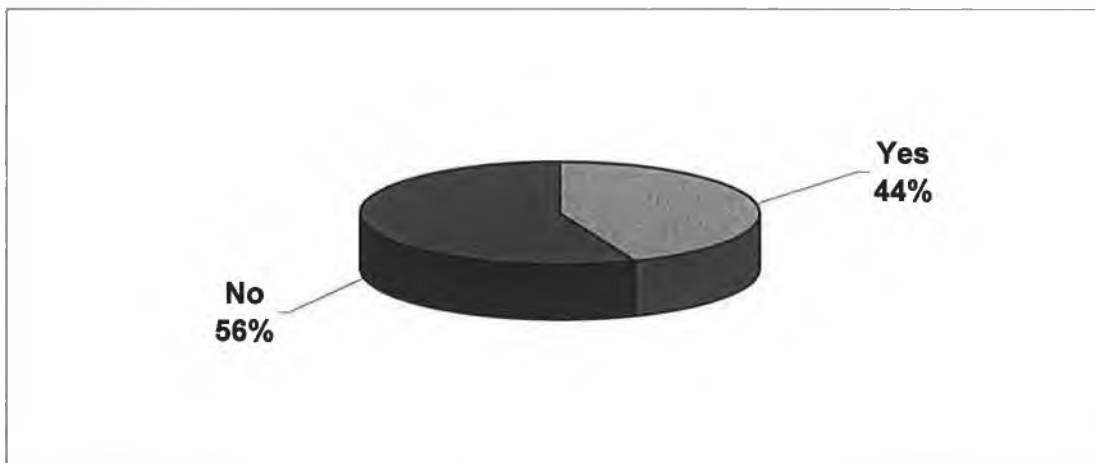
<b>Extra class needed</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Curriculum too long for time allocated</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>More 'Double' periods needed</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>No room for diversification</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Class numbers too big</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Not enough periods in 1st year (only 2)</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Not enough time for weaker students</b>	<b>1</b>



**Q.19. Have you attended an in-service for 'your' subject in the last 5 years?**

**(A)**

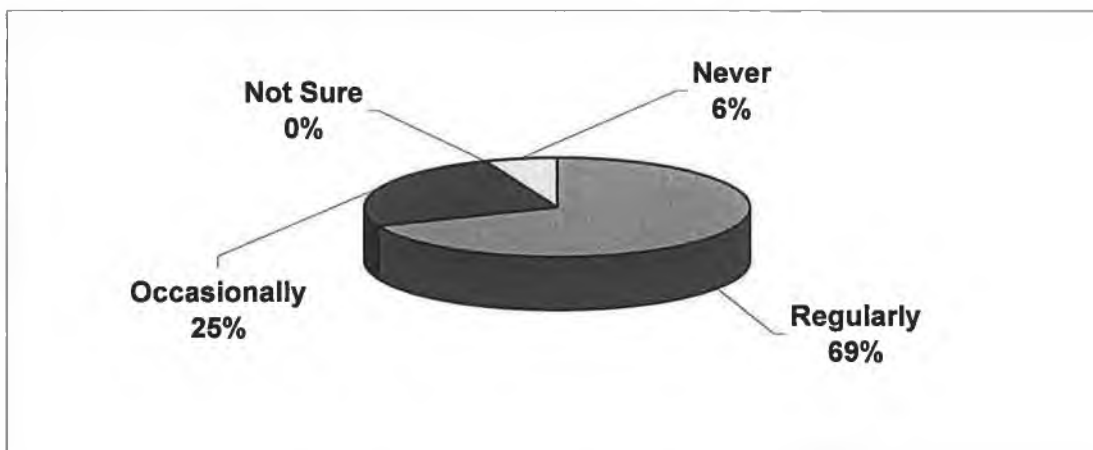
<b>Yes</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>18</b>



**Q.19. Do you feel there is a need to attend an in-service?**

**(B)**

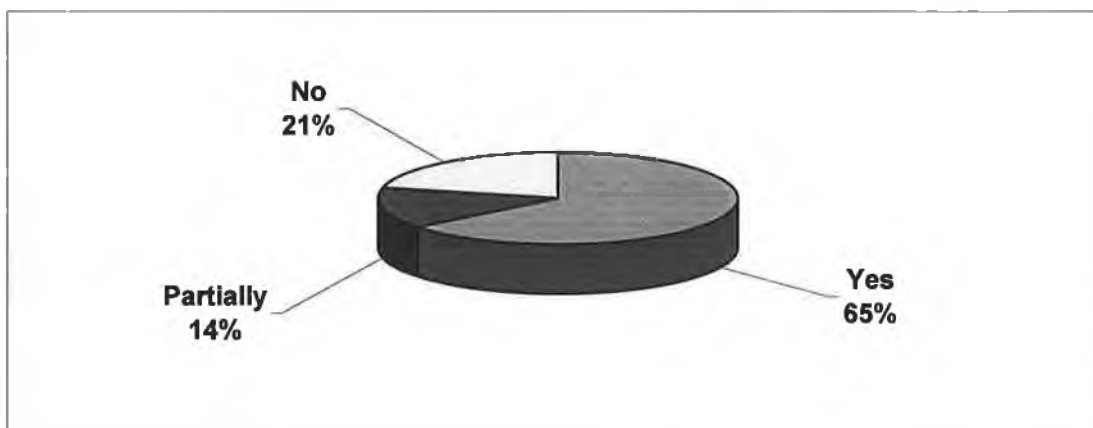
<b>Regularly</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Occasionally</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Never</b>	<b>2</b>



**Q.19. If you have attended one, do you feel it was relevant?**

**(C)**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Partially</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>3</b>



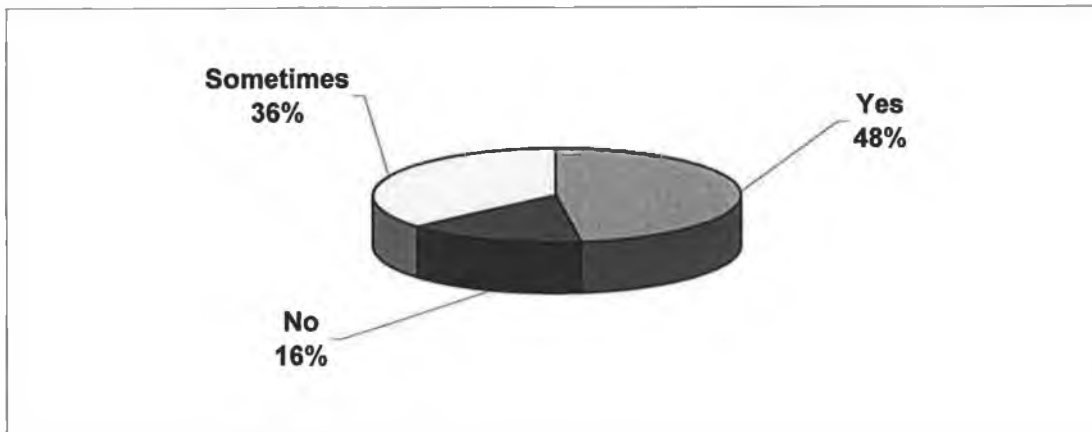
### **4.3 Questionnaire Two (Second Year Students in Secondary School)**

The data presented in this section is based on the responses to Questionnaire Two. The sample surveyed in this questionnaire was that of the second year students who had transferred from St. Mary's primary school over to St. Mary's secondary school. Of the 68 students surveyed on the day it was found that only 44 (65%) had transferred over from the primary school in question. These 44 questionnaires were used to compile the results that follow:

**QUESTIONNAIRE TWO**  
**COMPLETED BY 2ND YEAR STUDENTS**  
**St.MARY'S SECONDARY SCHOOL**

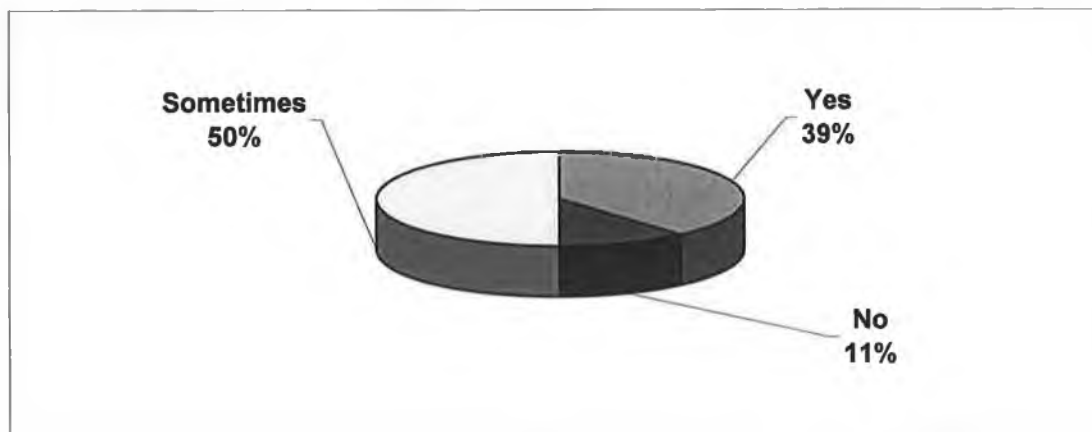
**Q.1. Did you enjoy Primary School?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>16</b>



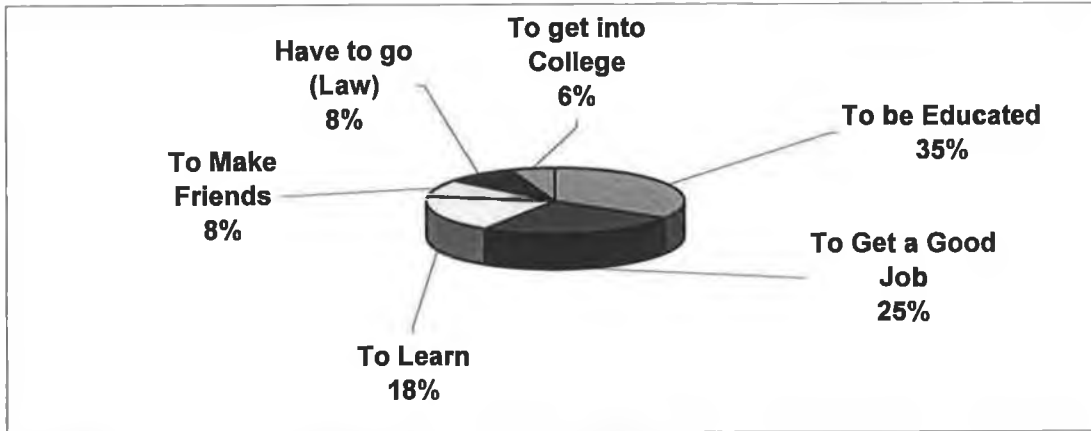
**Q.2. Are you enjoying Secondary School?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>22</b>



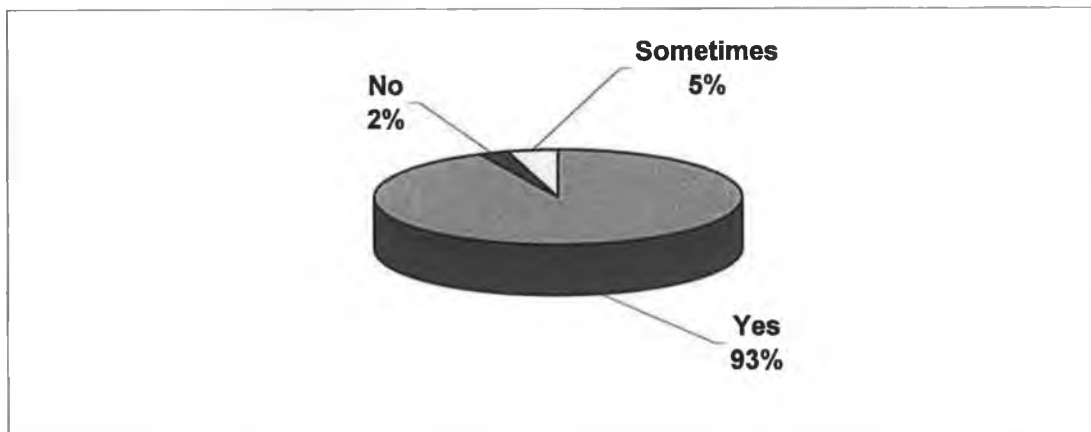
**Q.3. Why do you go to school?**

<b>To be Educated</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>To Get a Good Job</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>To Learn</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>To Make Friends</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Have to go (Law)</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>To get into College</b>	<b>4</b>



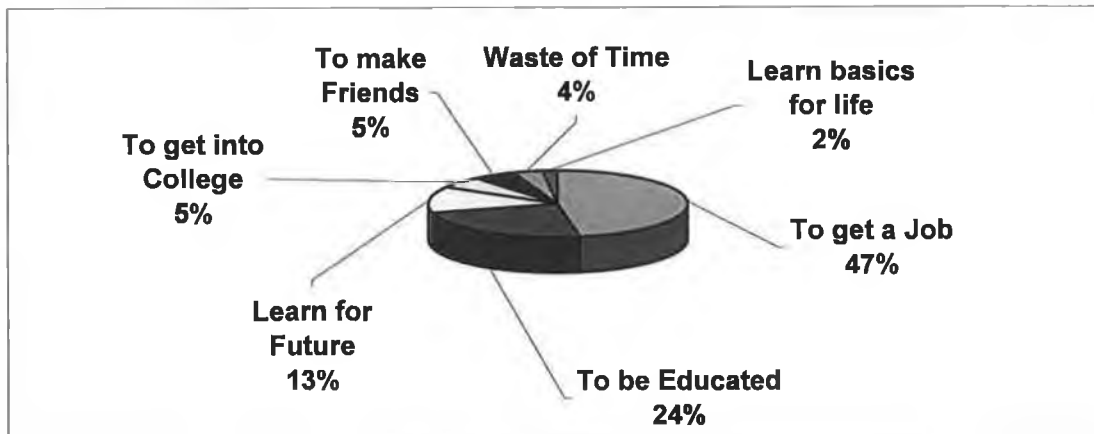
**Q.4. Is School relevant/necessary for you?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>2</b>



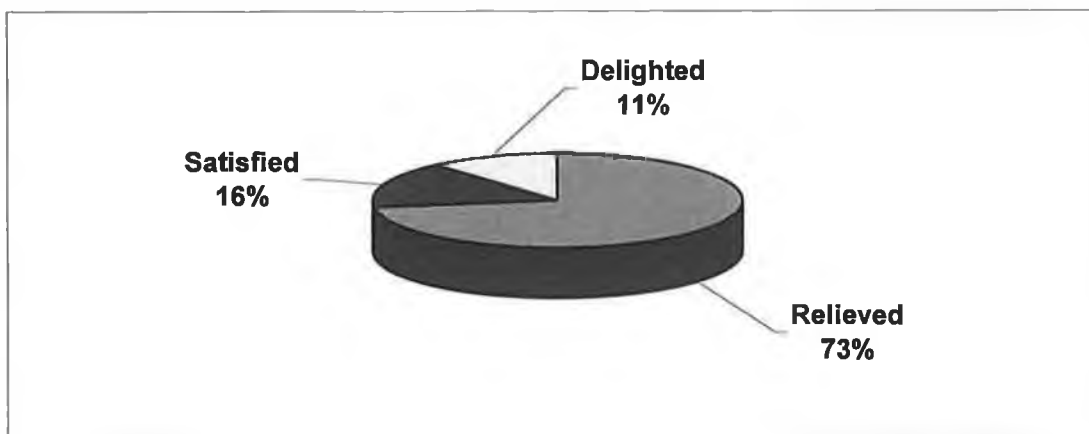
**Why?**

<b>To get a Job</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>To be Educated</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Learn for Future</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>To get into College</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>To make Friends</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Waste of Time</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Learn basics for life</b>	<b>1</b>



**Q.5. How do you feel after you've sat an exam (at Secondary School)?  
(Please tick the most important one)**

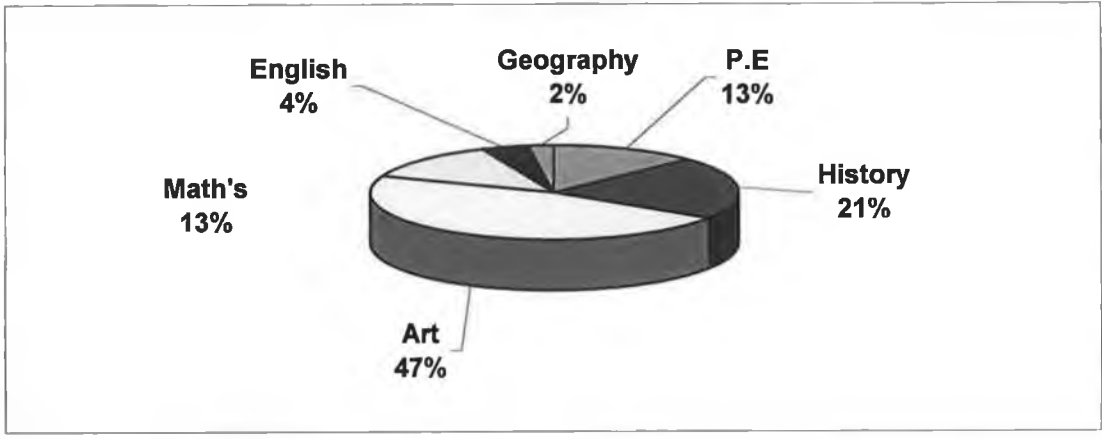
<b>Relieved</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Satisfied</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Delighted</b>	<b>5</b>





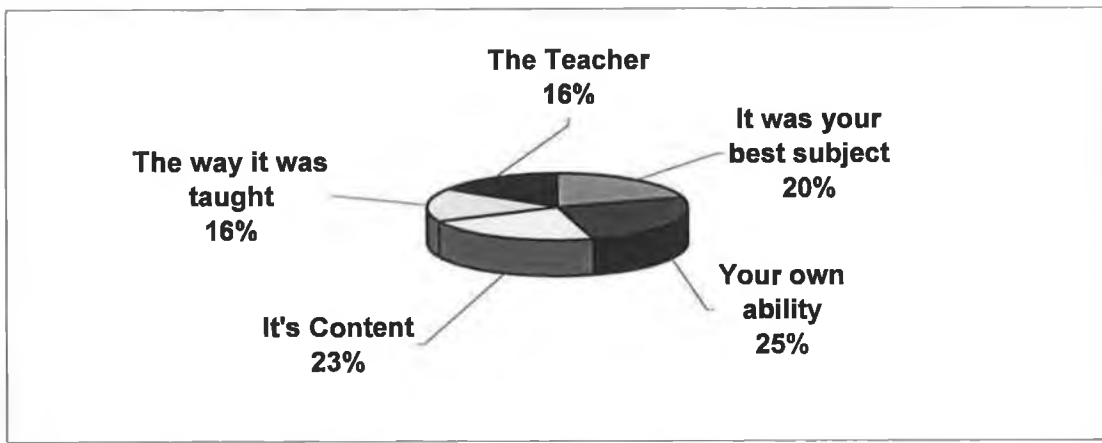
**Q.6. What was your favourite subject at Primary School?**

<b>P.E</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>History</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Art</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Math's</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>English</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Geography</b>	<b>1</b>



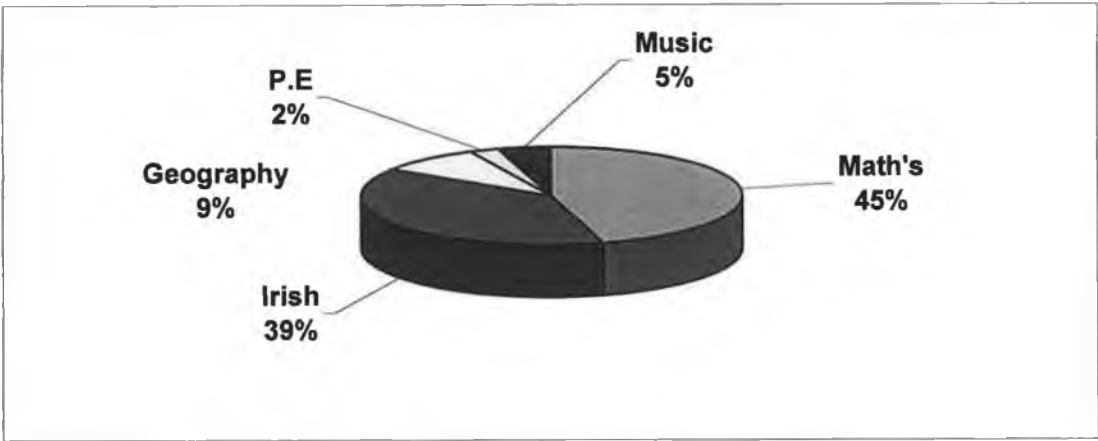
**Why? (Please tick the most important one?)**

<b>It was your best subject</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Your own ability</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>It's Content</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>The way it was taught</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>The Teacher</b>	<b>7</b>



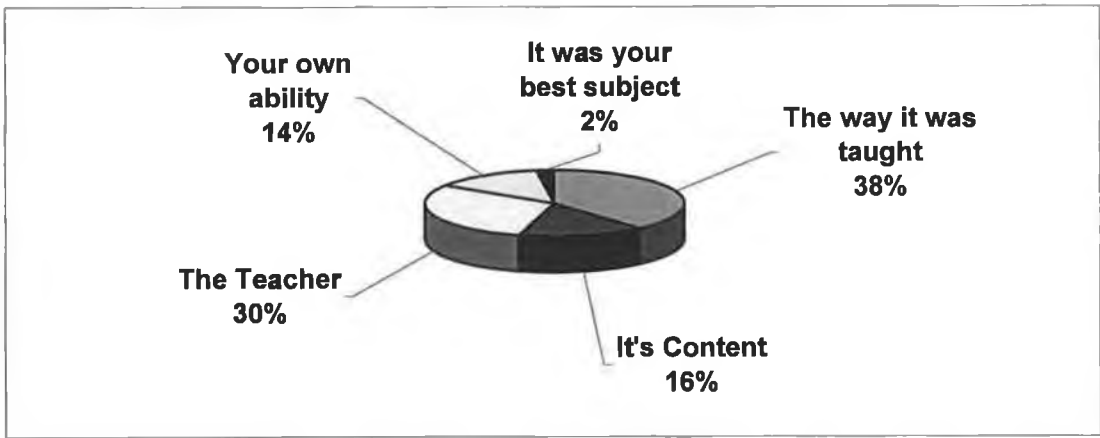
**Q.7. What was your least favourite subject at Primary School?**

<b>Math's</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Irish</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Geography</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>P.E</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Music</b>	<b>2</b>



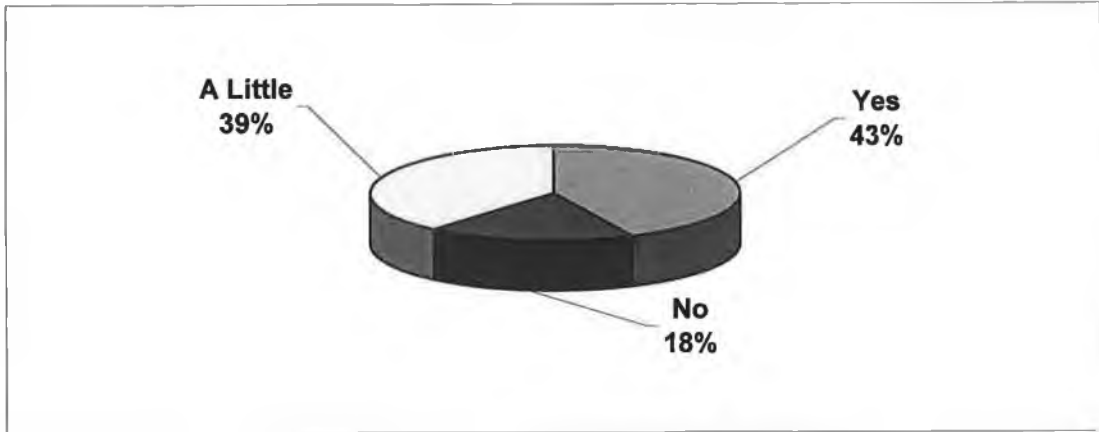
**Why? (Please tick the most important one)**

<b>The way it was taught</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>It's Content</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>The Teacher</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Your own ability</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>It was your best subject</b>	<b>1</b>



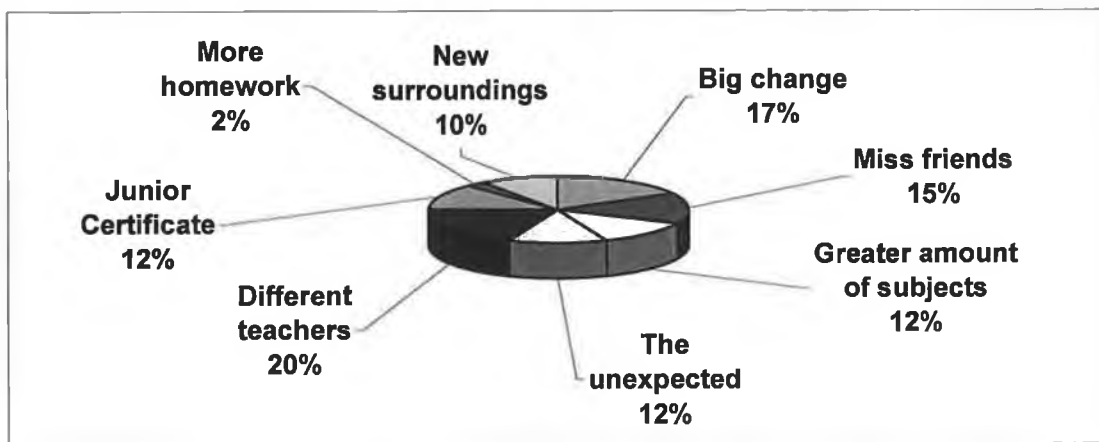
**Q.8. Were you anxious/nervous about moving from Primary school to Secondary school?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>A Little</b>	<b>17</b>



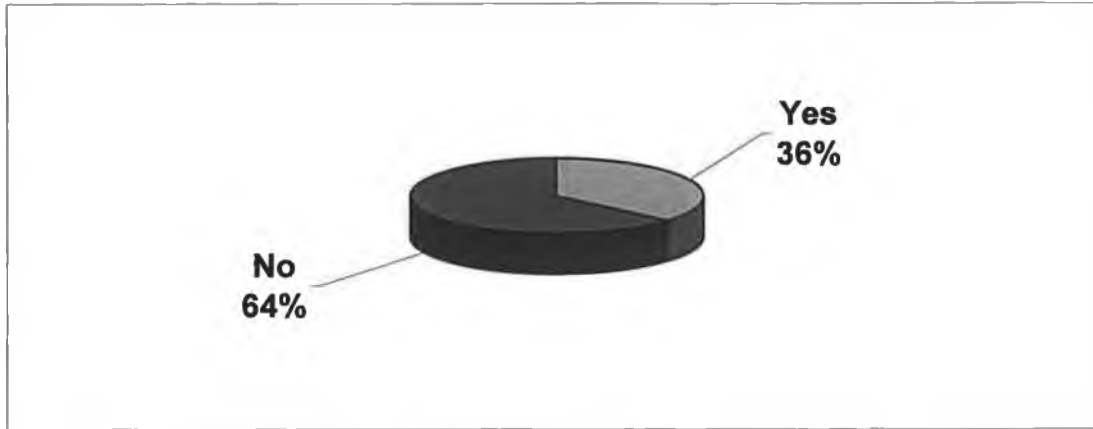
**Reasons (For being nervous)**

<b>Big change</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Miss friends</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Greater amount of subjects</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The unexpected</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Different teachers</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Junior Certificate</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>More homework</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>New surroundings</b>	<b>4</b>



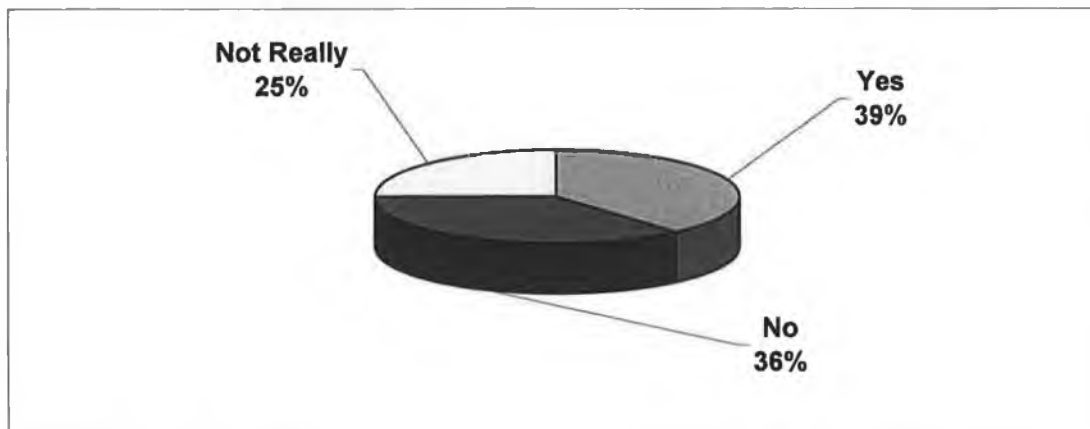
**Q.9. When you moved from Primary to Secondary, was it as you expected it to be?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>28</b>



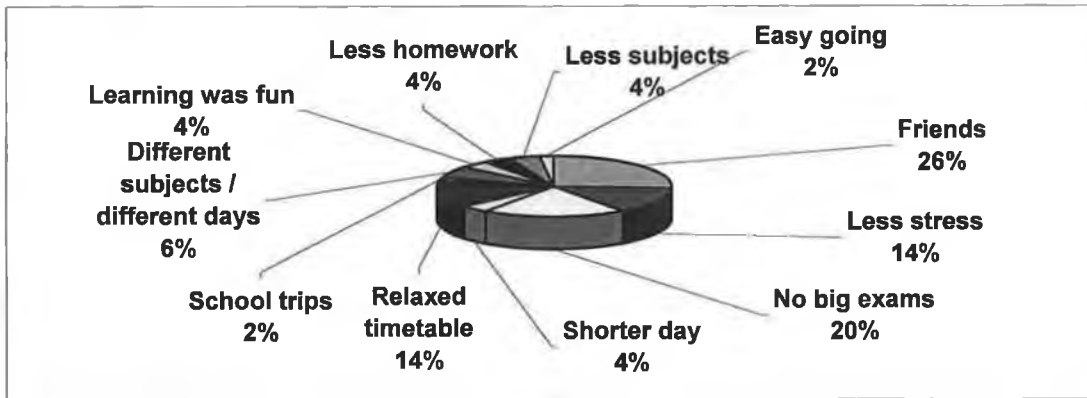
**Q.10. Were you prepared for the change between Primary school and Secondary school?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Not Really</b>	<b>11</b>



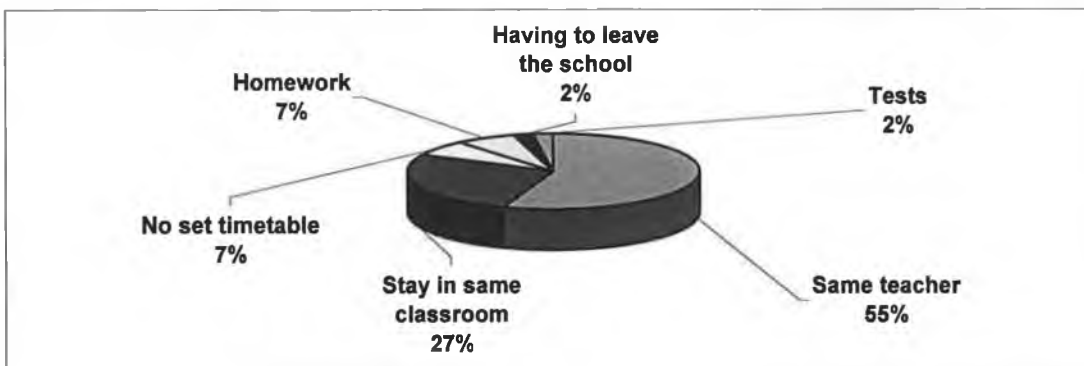
**Q.11. What was your favourite thing about Primary school (doesn't have to be a subject)?**

<b>Friends</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Less stress</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>No big exams</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Shorter day</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Relaxed timetable</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>School trips</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Different subjects / different days</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Learning was fun</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Less homework</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Less subjects</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Easy going</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Teachers</b>	<b>1</b>



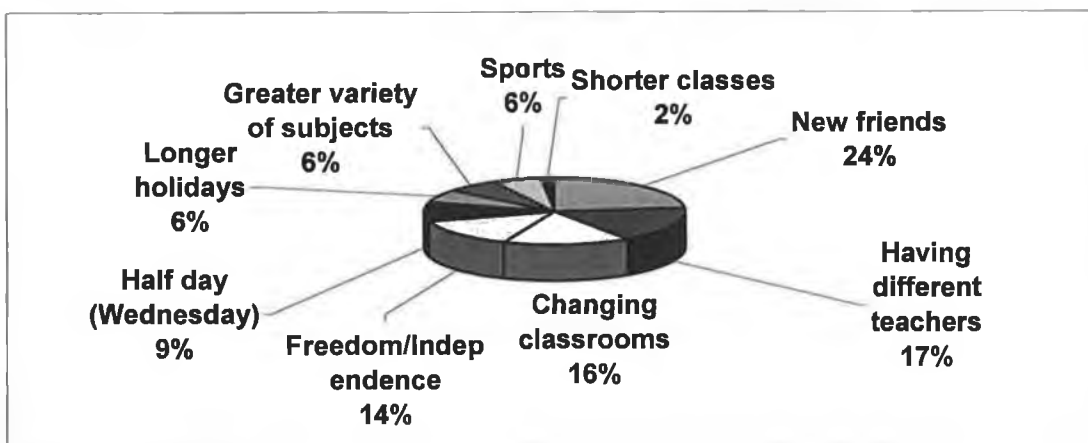
**Q.12. What was your least favourite thing about Primary school (doesn't have to be a subject)?**

<b>Same teacher</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Stay in same classroom</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>No set timetable</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Homework</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Having to leave the school</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Tests</b>	<b>1</b>



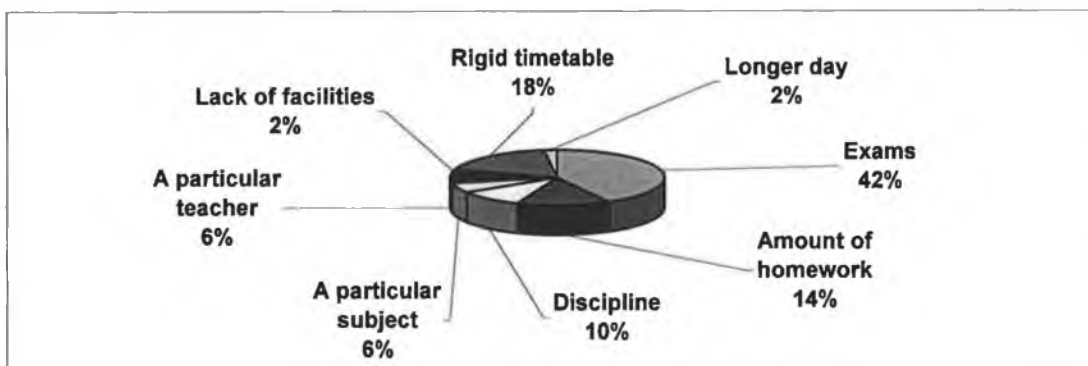
**Q.13. What is your favourite thing about Secondary school (doesn't have to be a subject)?**

<b>New friends</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Having different teachers</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Changing classrooms</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Freedom/Independence</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Half day (Wednesday)</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Longer holidays</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Greater variety of subjects</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Sports</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Shorter classes</b>	<b>1</b>



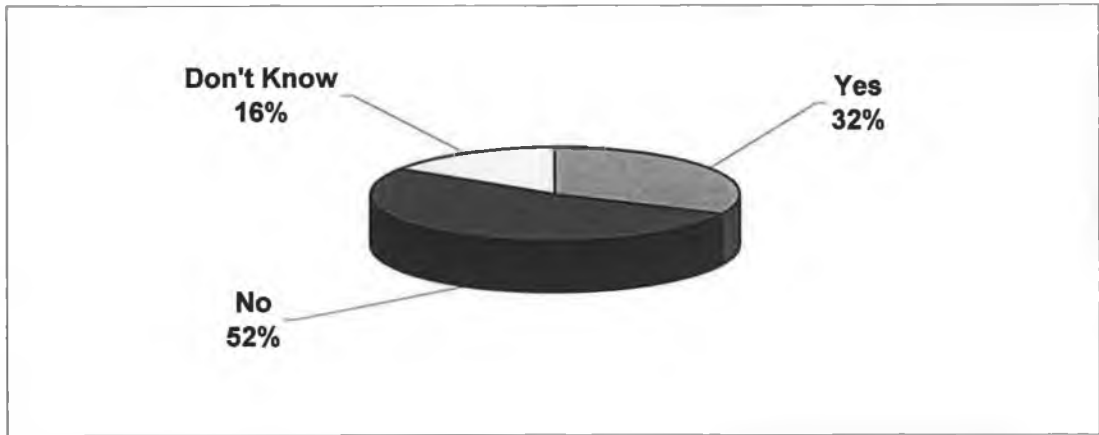
**Q.14. What is your least favourite thing about Secondary school (doesn't have to be a subject)?**

<b>Exams</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Amount of homework</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Discipline</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>A particular subject</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>A particular teacher</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Lack of facilities</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Rigid timetable</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Longer day</b>	<b>1</b>



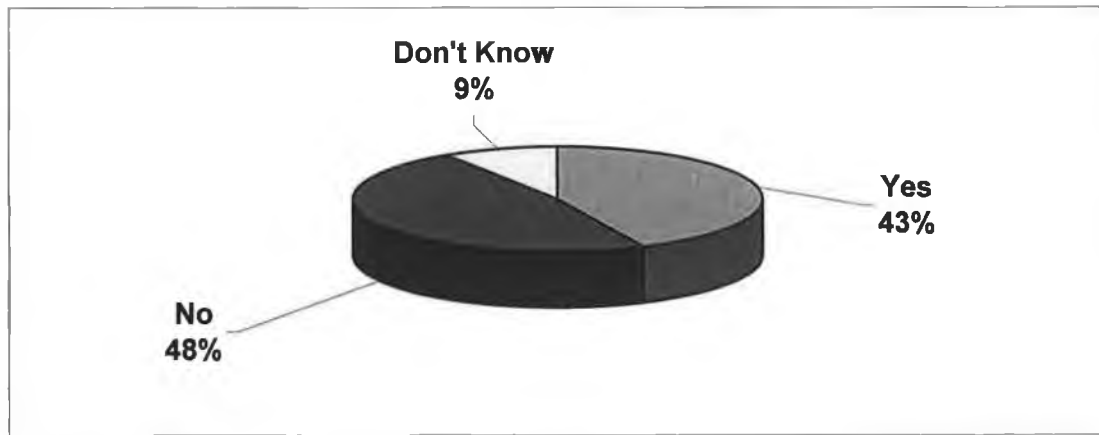
**Q.15. Do you think the Junior Certificate will have any effect on how you get on in life?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>7</b>



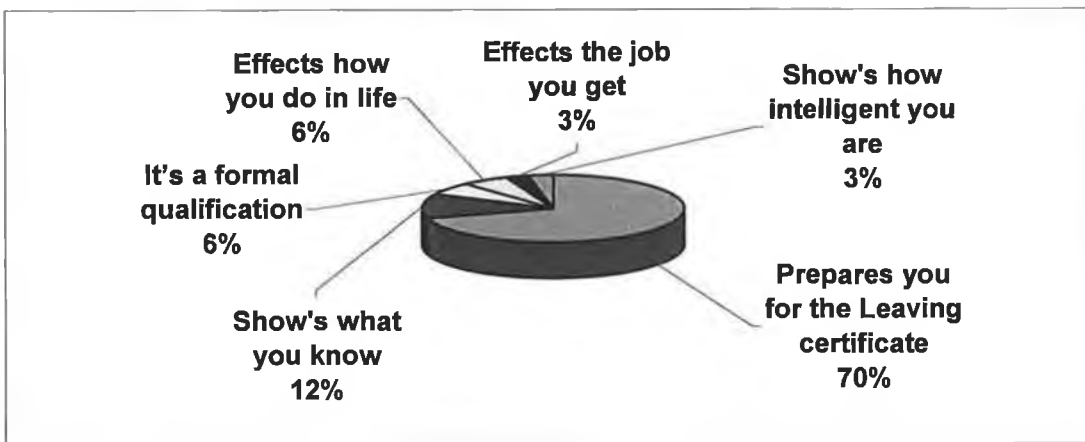
**Q.16. Is the Junior Certificate important?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>4</b>



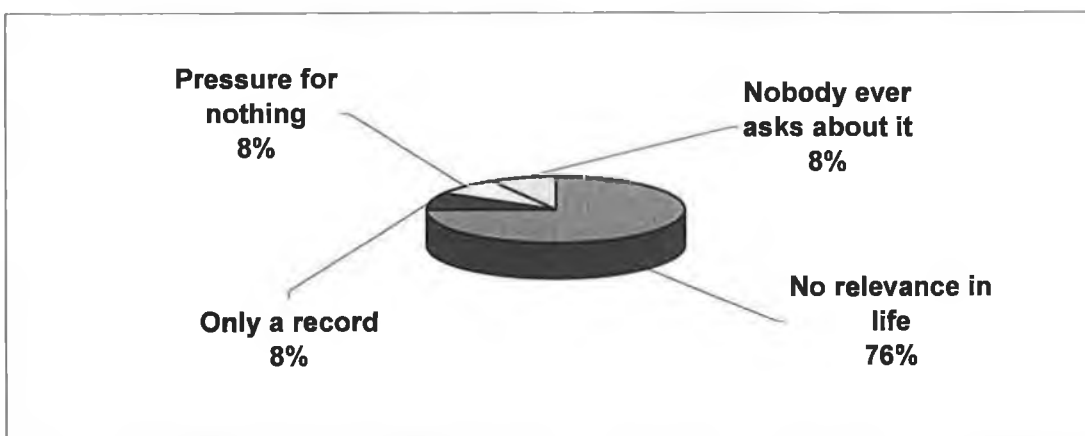
**Reason (why it is important)**

<b>Prepares you for the Leaving certificate</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Show's what you know</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>It's a formal qualification</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Effects how you do in life</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Effects the job you get</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Show's how intelligent you are</b>	<b>1</b>



**Reason (why it is not important)**

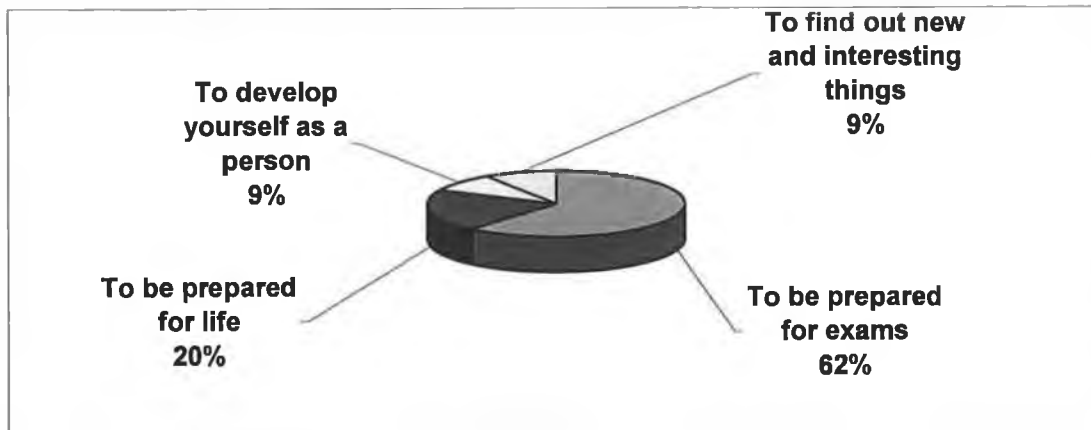
<b>No relevance in life</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Only a record</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Pressure for nothing</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Nobody ever asks about it</b>	<b>1</b>





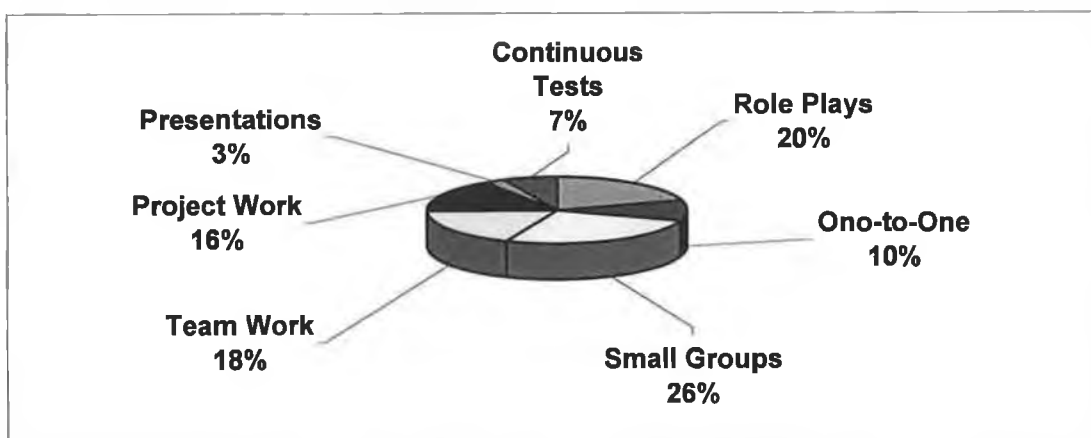
**Q.17. What is the most important reason for 'Learning' in your opinion?**

<b>To be prepared for exams</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>To be prepared for life</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>To develop yourself as a person</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>To find out new and interesting things</b>	<b>4</b>



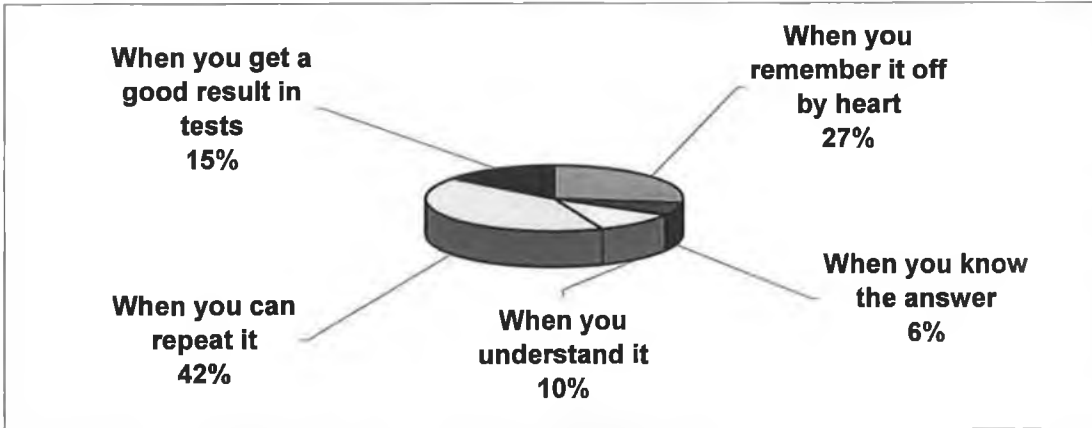
**Q.18. Which of the following situations do you learn best in?  
(Tick your 3 favourite ways)**

<b>Role Plays</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Ono-to-One</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Small Groups</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Team Work</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Project Work</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Presentations</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Continuous Tests</b>	<b>8</b>



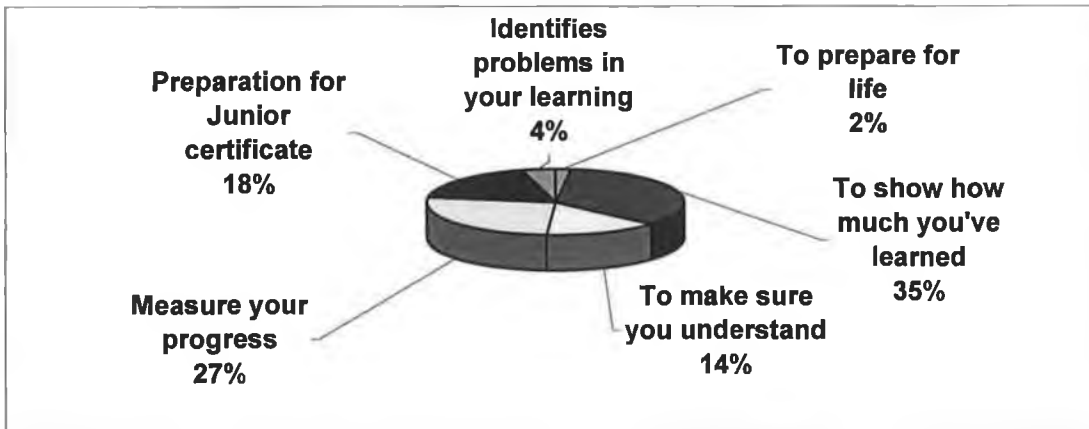
**Q.19. How do you personally know when you have 'learnt' something?**

<b>When you remember it off by heart</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>When you know the answer</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>When you understand it</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>When you can repeat it</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>When you get a good result in tests</b>	<b>7</b>



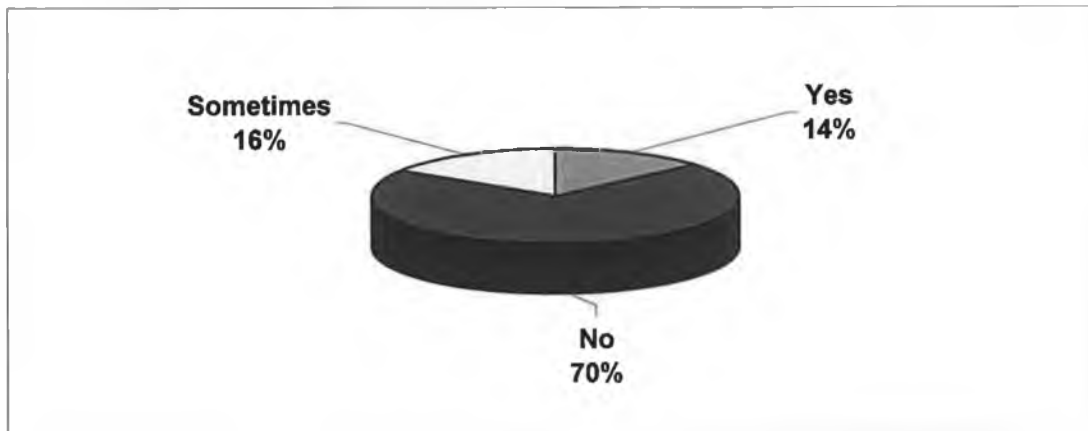
**Q.20. In your opinion why are you given exams?**

<b>To prepare for life</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>To show how much you've learned</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>To make sure you understand</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Measure your progress</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Preparation for Junior certificate</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Identifies problems in your learning</b>	<b>2</b>



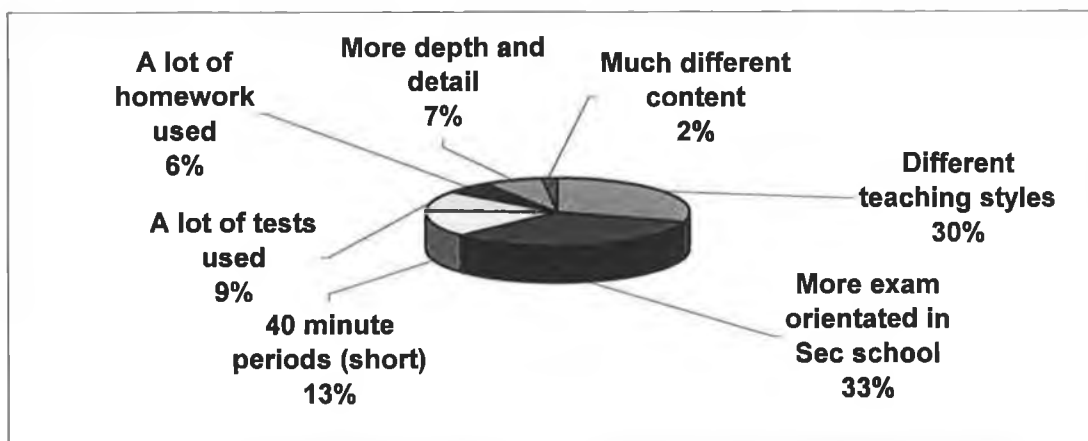
**Q.21. Are subjects taught in the same way at Secondary school as they are at (A) Primary school?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>7</b>



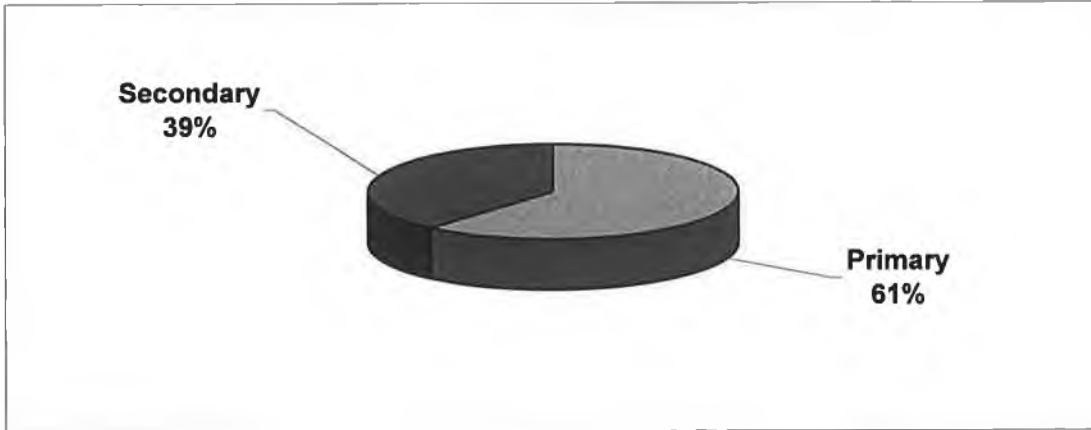
**(B) If not, what are the main differences?**

<b>Different teaching styles</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>More exam orientated in Sec school</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>40 minute periods (short)</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>A lot of tests used</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>A lot of homework used</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>More depth and detail</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Much different content</b>	<b>1</b>



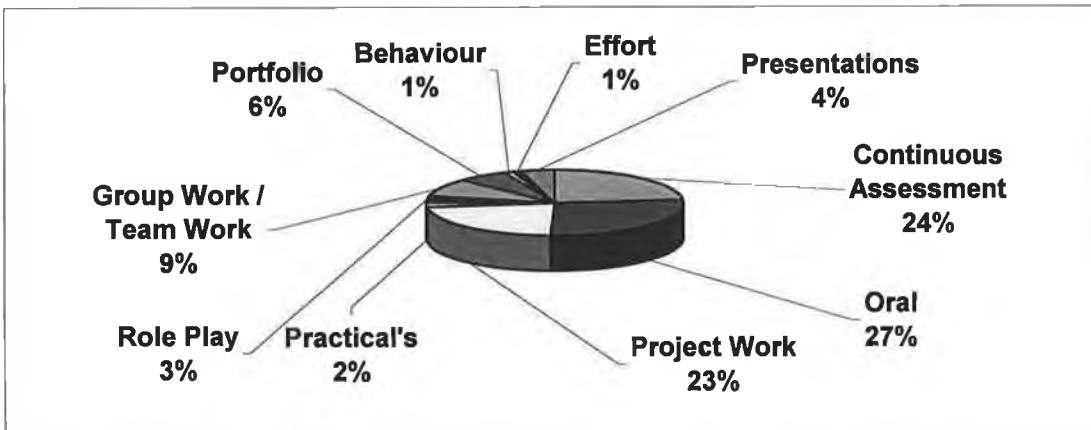
(C) Overall, which way do you prefer?

Primary	27
Secondary	17



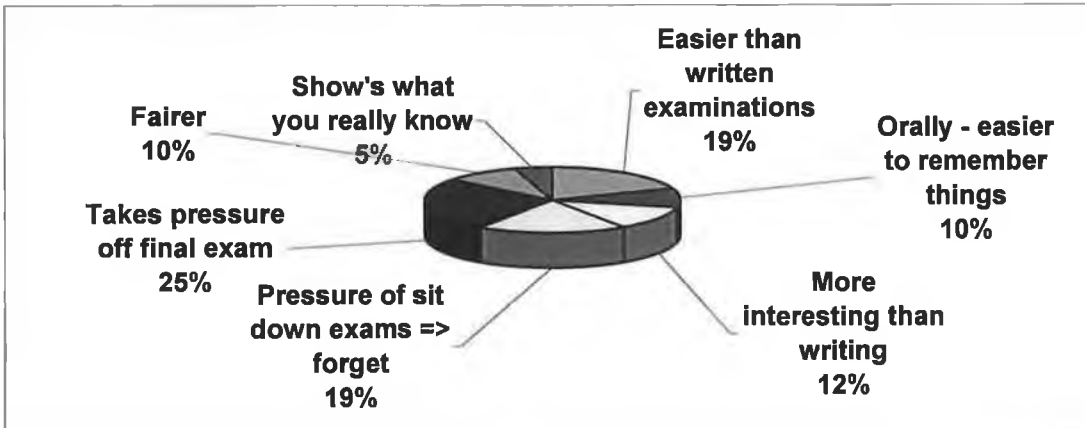
Q.22. List three ways you would like to be examined other than 'sit-down exams' at the end of the three years?

Continuous Assessment	22
Oral	25
Project Work	21
Practical's	2
Role Play	3
Group Work / Team Work	8
Portfolio	6
Behaviour	1
Effort	1
Presentations	4



Why?

Easier than written examinations	8
Orally - easier to remember things	4
More interesting than writing	5
Pressure of sit down exams => forget	8
Takes pressure off final exam	11
Fairer	4
Show's what you really know	2



#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This concludes the feedback from the two questionnaires administered to the teachers and second year students within St. Mary's secondary school in January 2004. The areas examined have revealed interesting data which merit the attention of the schools (management) and teachers used in the research. In the following chapter the author will attempt to analyse these findings pertaining to the main areas of significance related to the aims and objectives of this theses.

## **CHAPTER 5.**

### **ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

Continuity between primary and post-primary education has been the focus of a good deal of international research, predominantly focusing on the students' social adjustment to their new school. Within an Irish context, research has also concentrated on the experiences of students transferring from primary to secondary education Department of Education (1981), Naughton (1997), Report of the Pupil Transfer Committee (1981), Junior Cycle Review (1999), Smyth, McCoy & Darmody (2004). Once again most of this Irish research looks at the psychosocial adjustments involved in transferring between primary and post-primary school. Similarly this thesis examined the experience of pupils during this transfer process, but in addition also sought to examine and research students' and teachers' perceptions of the process correlated to curriculum, learning and assessment. The findings will now be analysed in an attempt to shed light on the issue of discontinuity between the primary and post-primary cycles in line with the objectives of this thesis as stated in the introduction.

This chapter comprises eight sections based on the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires. The first section gives a general overview of the chapter. The second section will look at teachers' and students' perceptions of the primary curriculum, noting the more favourable and least attractive elements of the same. The third section deals with the Junior Certificate curriculum and how teachers achieve or fail to achieve its aims

and objectives. Following this the author will look at the links that exist between the primary and junior certificate curricula, similarities and differences in teaching methodologies, and links/continuity between the syllabi of sixth class and first year subjects. In the fifth section areas surrounding the anxieties of transition between schools will be looked at, students' fears and teachers' concerns on the issue will be analysed. The next section deals with areas pertaining to assessment, its function, relevance, limitations and possible alternative mediums. Finally, the author will analyse the issue of learning, the role it plays in the students' lives, and which situations are more conducive to progressive learning. A brief conclusion will be given at the end of the chapter.

## **5.2 The Objectives of The Primary Curriculum**

The aims of the primary curriculum, as set out by the NCCA are,

- To enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual.
- To enable the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society.
- To prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning (NCCA (1), 1999, p.7)

An analysis of the post-primary students' and secondary teachers' responses to their respective questionnaires will give some indication as to how the Primary Curriculum achieved these aims.



## **5.2.1. Primary Curriculum and Students' Responses**

### **5.2.1.1 First aim of Primary Curriculum**

In response to why a particular subject was a favourite one, 25% of the students cited their own ability, yet when asked the same question with respect to their least favourite subject 36% said it was the manner in which the subject was taught, with only 14% marking their ability as a contributing factor.

### **5.2.1.2 Second aim of Primary Curriculum**

48% of the post-primary students questioned said that they enjoyed their time at primary school. When questioned further as to their favourite aspects of primary schooling, 25% prioritised having friends. It would seem that the rhetoric of the primary curriculum objectives and the reality of their implementation have been successful. When asked to rank in order their best learning situations, the top three responses were: small groups (26%), role-play (20%) and team work (18%). Each of these involves a high degree of social interaction and are excellent examples of "enabling the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others" (NCCA (1), 1999, p.7)

### **5.2.1.3 Third aim of Primary Curriculum**

The students appeared to draw a sharp distinction between the reason they attended school and the necessity/relevance of school. In response to why they went to school 35% said it was to be educated, followed by 25% saying it was to get a job. In contrast 45% saw school in terms of securing a job, with only 25% regarding schooling as a means to be educated. What pupils understood by 'education' was not explored.

### **5.2.2 Primary Curriculum and Teachers' Responses.**

There is a general lack of familiarity on the part of post-primary teachers with the aims of the primary curriculum. While none were familiar with detailed knowledge of the aims, 41% were not even aware of them, with 31% saying they were only familiar with the fundamentals. The researcher notes that the most recent published research found that half of post-primary teachers felt that they were familiar with the primary curriculum (Smyth, McCoy & Dermondy, 2004). This leads to a break down in continuity with teachers at Junior Certificate repeating work already covered by the pupils at 6<sup>th</sup> class. This theme of unfamiliarity was again highlighted by the responses to further questions, when 33% of teachers stated that they didn't know if their subject curriculum was linked with its counter-part at primary level.

On the other hand there are some contradictory responses. For example, when questioned as to their awareness of the contents of the sixth class primary curriculum in their individual subjects, 84% of secondary teachers questioned were not aware or only vaguely aware, of the sixth class primary syllabus. Yet 75% are emphatic that it is necessary to be aware of the curriculum. When asked if they were familiar with the teaching methodologies of primary school, 53% were familiar with the remaining 47% not being aware. On being asked to highlight what they perceived as being the methodologies used at primary cycle, the responses were varied, ranging from no formal exams/less pressures associated with assessment

(28%), more active learning used (23%), greater emphasis on the individual student (15%), to less structured environment / more relaxed (3%). Despite the admitted lack of knowledge of structure of primary curriculum, 94% of teachers felt that it was important to be familiar with the students' past learning and involvement in the primary school. 28% of secondary teachers expected the students to have the 'basic principles/knowledge' of their subject when transferring from the primary school. Less than one third of the secondary teachers felt that the primary curriculum was a good foundation for their subject according to Smyth, McCoy & Darmody 2004. Interestingly 5% of teachers expected the students to have knowledge of the Junior Certificate curriculum in their subject when transferring to the secondary school.

### **5.3 The Objectives of The Junior Certificate**

In 1989 the NCCA presented the following aims for the new Junior Certificate,

- To reinforce and further develop in the young person the knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies acquired at primary level.
- To extend and deepen the range and quality of the young person's educational experience in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies.
- To develop the young person's personal and social confidence, initiative and competence through a broad, well-balanced general education.
- To prepare the young person for the requirements of further programmes of study, of employment or of life outside full-time education.

- To contribute to the moral and spiritual development of the young person and develop a tolerance and respect for the values and beliefs of others.
- To prepare the young person for the responsibilities of citizenship in the national context and in the context of the wider community. (NCCA (3), 1989, p.8)

### **5.3.1 Junior Certificate and Students' Responses**

In response to the question which sought to elicit whether students were enjoying their experience at secondary school, the majority of students (89%) expressed that they were satisfied 'most or all' of the time. A more in-depth examination of the findings reveals that their favourite things in secondary school contributing to this high level of satisfaction were: making new friends (24%), having different teachers for each subject (17%), and changing classrooms (16%). Other elements mentioned included, longer holidays, more sports and shorter classes. It is noticeable from these responses that the factors cited have little or no direct relevance to the objectives of the Junior Certificate programme. When asked their least favourite thing about secondary schooling, some of the more common responses included: strong focus on exams (42%), the rigid timetable (18%), and increase in homework (14%). Other dislikes were the increase in homework and increase in the level of discipline. It is interesting to note that the dominance of examinations and rigid timetabling are causing difficulties at secondary level. By their virtue these elements are in contrast to the child-centred, less formal, individual approach adopted in the primary schools, to which the pupils have been accustomed to for the past 8 years. These same elements are also in contrast to the aims of the Junior

Certificate programme and students' rejection of these superimposed aims. In other words over-riding exam pressure is sending out a strong message.

Questioned regarding the relevance of the Junior Certificate a degree of uncertainty emerged with only 32% of the students believing that the Junior Certificate cycle will have any effect on how they get on in life. The researcher has strong reservations surrounding the role and function of the Junior Certificate programme in a modern context, in particular the purpose it serves in the students' life, and the benefits gained from the way it is currently implemented. This is supported by the fact that 57% of respondents believed the Junior Certificate is not important, giving serious cause for concern considering these pupils were only half way through the Junior Certificate programme and have already concluded to this way of thinking. These figures highlight the lack of accreditation connected to the Junior Certificate programme with its results rarely, if ever, used for selection for further training or employment.

### **5.3.2 Junior Certificate and Teachers' Responses**

In relation to the ability of teachers to meet the aims and objectives of the current Junior Certificate programme, only 16% felt they were achieving the objectives very well. Whilst not stated specifically, this may be attributed to the fact that a large number (66%) stated that they were not familiar in detail with the objectives of the Junior Certificate curriculum. It is the researchers opinion that these statistics give rise to a serious mismatch between what is happening and what actually should be happening within the junior cycle of the secondary school. In short, it would seem that the majority of teachers

are delivering a programme with which they themselves are not fully acquainted. This seems to suggest that the Junior Certificate programme is freewheeling within the school or that teachers have become disempowered, depending on textbooks and publishing companies to interpret curriculum objectives, and bowing to external influences on the curriculum.

41% of the teachers felt the Junior Certificate programme did little to prepare students for the world of work. This is contrary to the objectives of the Junior Certificate, which proposes to "prepare the young person for the requirements of further programmes of study, of employment or of life outside full-time education" (NCCA (3), 1989, p.8). The researcher would question what happens to the pupils who leave school on completion of the Junior Certificate or even before completion. Of the 70,909 students who commenced the junior cycle in 1993 only 67,386 sat the Junior Certificate examination, representing a shortfall of 3,523 students. It is worth noting that of those 3,523 students, 1,500 left school within the 6 months prior to the actual examination (NCCA (4), 1999, p.69). The researcher queries what actual qualification the Junior Certificate bestows on pupils and what recognition this qualification holds. Only 6% of respondents believed the Junior Certificate prepared students very well for today's modern society and addressed the issue of social development very well. This would indicate a further mismatch between the rhetoric and reality of the Junior Certificate objectives in that the programme is supposed to develop the whole child, socially and personally.

## **5.4 Links between the Curricula**

Transferring between primary and secondary education brings with it many changes for the students in question, new subjects, new teachers, and new methodologies. These changes can stimulate varying experiences for the student, from excitement to anxiety. Some of the features pertaining to the Junior Certificate programme highlighted by the NCCA include continuity and progression. "Providing a link between the primary curriculum and senior cycle programme that builds upon and develops the students' skills and competencies acquired at primary level" (NCCA (3), 1989, p.10). This research has identified the mismatches that exist between the curricula of primary and Junior Certificate cycle.

### **5.4.1 Links between the Curricula and Students' Responses**

In response to questions that sought to elicit students' views on the issue of continuity between the programmes of primary and Junior Certificate cycle, 70% believed that subjects are not taught in the same manner at junior cycle as they are in the primary cycle. This is in line with research carried out by Smyth, McCoy & Darmody (2004), who found that "the vast majority of students felt teaching methods were very different at post-primary level" (ibid. p.236). According to Smyth, McCoy & Darmody (2004), a significant proportion of first years did not see the Junior Certificate curriculum as following on naturally from primary level, and the majority saw the teaching methods as quite different between the cycles. Immediately this would indicate a major difference between the two programmes (primary and post-primary), which has potential to distort the continuity for students transferring from primary to post-primary. The Hadow Report (UK), (1931)

argued a strong case that the education process should be envisaged as a coherent whole with no sharp division between the different stages and that transition between the stages should be as smooth as possible. A more in-depth analysis of the findings revealed that 33% of the students noted the focus on examinations at secondary school as the greatest contributor to the differences between curricula. The researcher notes a common trend arising at this moment, in that students continuously cited the effect examinations play on their ability to enjoy or not enjoy education. 42% of students expressed a dislike for the strong focus on examinations at secondary cycle. This points to discontinuity between the curricula where the students are transferring from a primary cycle in which there are no formal examinations, to a Junior Certificate cycle, the penultimate of which is a formal state examination. Dean (1980) states that unless students experience continuity between curricula when transferring between cycles, problems are likely to arise. "Continuity is what is, or is not experienced by the individual child, he is the one who experiences the discontinuity of demands by different teachers and different schools" (ibid, p.51). 30% of students commented on the fact that teachers' methods of teaching changed totally when they transferred to the secondary school, with 61% preferring the teaching methods used in the primary school. Nisbet & Entwistle (1969) concluded that smooth transition to secondary school would benefit children, whilst sharp changes in organisation and teaching methods are likely to be harmful.



#### **5.4.2 Links between the Curricula and Teachers' Responses**

An analysis of the secondary teachers' perceptions on the primary curriculum revealed that only 16% were definitely aware of the content of the 6<sup>th</sup> class primary school curriculum in their subject area. A more in-depth examination of the responses shows that 62% of the teachers felt there was not, or were uncertain if there was, a link between their subject curricula and its counter-part at primary level. In the researcher's opinion these figures awaken serious concerns for the school in question, particularly in light of recent research carried out by Smyth, McCoy & Darmody (2004) that revealed that only 50% of secondary teachers felt that they are familiar with the primary curriculum. In relation to the degree of continuity, which exists between the different cycles of primary and post-primary education, these statistics only add to the researcher's opinion that one of the key problems lies in the fact that the majority of teachers at post-primary level do not have sufficient knowledge of what is happening at primary level. In 1987 Knox points out in her research on transition between schools, that there was strong evidence that neither side showed sufficient knowledge or understanding of the other's school. In Ireland, the Report of the Pupil Transfer Committee (1981), recognised the importance of and called for the provision of in-service training for teachers to familiarise them with syllabi on each side of the transition divide, along with an articulation of primary and second level syllabi in each subject to ensure curriculum continuity. If the majority of teachers are unaware of what is being taught in their subjects at primary level, then how can they feasibly begin teaching the subject to first years? Smyth, McCoy & Darmody (2004) revealed that almost a third of

students say that many subjects in first year just repeat what they have already learned in primary school.

In response to questions which sought to further elicit secondary school teachers understanding of the primary curriculum, 47% expressed they were not aware of the teaching methodologies used in the primary school, but believed the following features are predominant: no formal exams/less pressure (28%), more active learning used (23%), greater emphasis on the individual (15%). Based on the Primary School Curriculum 1971, these perceptions are accurate, as central to the primary curriculum is its recognition of different learning styles and addressing individual needs. Whilst it is possible to engage in cross-curricular activities and team-teaching within the Junior Certificate curriculum, 81% of the teachers questioned, expressed that they did not wish to do so. The researcher notes this with interest in light of the fact that cross-curricular activities and methodologies have, and continue to, become a feature of both the primary and post-primary curriculum. Examples include subjects such as SPHE. With the majority of teachers expressing that they do not wish to partake in cross-curricular activities, the researcher questions how this affects the implementation of the said programmes now and in the future. It seems that the respondents need to address the issue of communication among them within the Junior Certificate curriculum, before they start addressing the issue of continuity of curriculum between primary and post-primary levels. Levels of satisfaction amongst teachers pertaining to the content of their subject curriculum at Junior Certificate level were not very high, with 60% citing they were 'not particularly happy'. The respondents expressed

concerns highlighting the following issues: the curriculum needs modernising (23%), new methods of assessment are needed (19%), and the curriculum doesn't cater for the weaker student (5%). Other factors mentioned included: the curriculum being too long/broad, lack of variety, and that the content at Junior Certificate was not linked to the Leaving Certificate syllabus. There is no doubt that the teachers in question are dissatisfied with the curriculum they are teaching. All of these areas of discrepancies and more, were highlighted in the Junior Cycle Review (1999), some of which have been addressed and others are under current development.

### **5.5 Anxieties Around Transition between Primary and Post-Primary**

Nisbet & Entwistle (1969), Haughton (1997), Gorwood (1986), Smyth, McCoy & Darmody (2004), have all concluded in their research into the transfer of pupils from primary to secondary education, that pupils do experience moments of anxiety around this period. The problems arising from these anxieties vary in depth and nature (social and academic) according to the individual pupil. However, it also seems evident from the literature studied that these problems and anxieties could be short lived if both the primary and post-primary schools in question adhered to simple organisational changes. Like any activity, the more informed the individual is prior to its enactment, the greater the chances of success. All relevant information needs to be circulated to all parties involved in the education process prior to transition and the school needs to develop accompanying integration programmes. The majority of literature reviewed for this study concluded by stressing the importance of liaison between schools prior to

transfer. One of the main conclusions from both the Bullock Report (UK) (1975) and Gorwood (UK) (1975) was that effective liaison between teachers involved in the transition process should be a priority need and that, in general, communication forms the backbone of the curriculum.

### **5.5.1 Transition between Primary and Post-Primary Schools and Students' Responses**

Students were queried to ascertain their perceptions of the transition period between primary and secondary school. When it came to transferring from the primary to Junior Certificate cycle, the vast majority of students (82%) admitted to having felt anxious about the transition. Whilst this figure is extremely high, it is in line with current trends in most other schools (Smyth, McCoy & Darmody 2004). An analysis of the comments made by students identified some of the commonly expressed factors contributing to this anxiety as, an increase in the number of teachers (20%), amount and depth of changes between the systems (17%), loss of old friends (15%), and anxiety about Junior Certificate examinations (12%). Other factors mentioned included, the increase in the amount of subjects to be studied, more homework and in general a fear of the unexpected. Smyth, McCoy & Darmody (2004) found in their research that the main changes experienced by students after they transferred over to the Junior Certificate programme included having more teachers and subjects, loss of friends, being one of the youngest students in the school, having different interactions with teachers, being in a big school and having a longer school day. Of the students who transferred over from the primary school, 64% found that secondary school was not as they expected it would be prior to the transfer.

This would indicate, in the authors' opinion, that the anxieties felt by the pupils prior to transition from primary to post-primary are clearly justified and reinforce the need for a more adequate transition programme to be introduced based on the communication of accurate and relevant information between both schools. 61% of the students felt they were not prepared whilst at primary school for the transition over to the Junior Certificate programme. Smyth, McCoy & Darmody (2004) concluded in their writings that a large number of students felt that their primary schooling did not prepare them adequately for post-primary, hence students are more likely to experience transition problems if they feel the curricula are not inter-linked. One of the key issues arising from this fact, and backed by findings from the report of the Pupil Transfer Committee (1981), is that students who were already experiencing academic problems prior to transfer may face greater disillusionment once they enter the Junior Certificate cycle "now with the prospect of transfer to a school in which for a time they will be strangers, and to a more demanding academic situation, they may well feel beaten before they start" (ibid, p.19).

### **5.5.2 Transition between Primary and Post-Primary Schools, and Teachers' Responses**

In relation to the issues of anxiety around the period of transition between schools, and the capabilities of the secondary school in dealing with the transition process, it would seem that teachers have concerns in this area with 41% of respondents commenting that the school addressed the issue of transition unsatisfactorily. Through this expression alone teachers are admitting that there are existing problems with the current system of transition between the schools in question. Respondents proceeded to cite

the following failures in the transition process: lack of knowledge of 6<sup>th</sup> class students who would be transferring from the primary school (38%), absence of contact with the primary school teachers (22%), too many subjects being offered to the 1<sup>st</sup> years when they transfer over (9%), and much more needed be done in general to ease the transition process (13%). Other factors noted include that the secondary school doesn't deal with the problems arising from transition at all, and that there is no worthwhile link between the primary and post-primary school in question. It is the author's opinion that the question of transition is closely related to the issue of communication. Like any other service industry, without clear lines of communication between all parties involved, particularly between the schools, problems will arise and mistakes will occur. "Close co-operation and understanding between the primary and secondary teachers is perhaps the most effective way of helping children to adjust rapidly to the new environment of secondary school" (Nisbet & Entwistle, 1969. p.8). Only 19% of the teachers in the secondary school have had contact with the teachers of the feeder primary school. This, along with the fact that the majority of teachers stated that they were not aware of the content of their subject at primary level, and the fact that report cards are not transferred over from the primary school to the secondary school, provides a poor foundation upon which the teachers of the Junior Certificate cycle can build.

Secondary teachers need to be familiar with the work which students have previously covered and to acknowledge the value of previous learning and experience, attention to these features will allow secondary teachers to capitalise on the positive expectations that students hold for secondary school (Derricott, 1985, p.24)

Despite the concerns expressed by teachers who believe the current system does not address the issue of transition between the schools satisfactorily, some 13% expressed that they were very satisfied with the process. These respondents identified the following factors that contributed to easing the transfer for the pupils in question: the existence of a good pastoral system (51%), the operation of a 'buddy/mentor' system (13%). Derricott (1985) in his research outlined that liaison procedures may ease transition, but do not ensure curriculum continuity. He found that curricular continuity necessitates the implementation of an agreed curriculum plan, which can be worked at both primary and Junior Certificate level. "Continuity implies agreement about aims and objectives, the selection of content, skills and methods of assessment" (Derricott, 1985, p.16). As we have seen from the research literature and the comments made by students and teachers, there is undoubtedly a degree of tension in the transition process between the primary and secondary school which the author attributes to a lack of communication centred around a structured transfer programme. Overall it appears from the research that there is a strong lack of understanding and knowledge amongst teachers at both primary and secondary level as to what the other is doing. Teachers at secondary level in particular seem to be compounded within their own system, yet, as seen through the research, they admit that it is important to know what is taking place in the primary sector and have a desire to find out. The researcher has strong reservations about the transition process as it stands and feels there is an immediate need for the implementation of a system that will bring the primary and secondary systems together in a united front to dealing with the problems arising from the current process. This unity will have to incorporate social

transition, academic continuity in curriculum and adequate transfer of knowledge.

## **5.6 Attitudes Towards Assessment**

It was initially envisaged that the Junior Certificate would broaden the horizons of achievement for students in the junior cycle. Its concept drew on new teaching methodologies and varying styles of learning. It also proposed to break away from the sole reliance on terminal written examinations. However it seems that little has changed with the terminal written examination still posing as the penultimate measure of success, apart from token acknowledgment given to orals and project work in Home Economics and S.P.H.E. The assessment procedures at Junior Certificate, as they stand, represent a total reliance on academic achievement, excluding the pupil whose forte lies outside the academic arena.

The Government's 1995 White Paper on Education *Charting our Education Future* claims that assessment should,

cover comprehensively all parts of the curriculum and all the various elements of learning – the cognitive, creative, affective, physical and social development of students, their growth in self-esteem, the personal qualities being acquired, and the acquisition of knowledge, comprehension skills, attitudes and values...combine informal teacher assessment with the judicious use of standardised tests, without making disproportionate claims on class-time or activities (*White Paper on Education, Charting our Education Future* 1995, p29).

### **5.6.1 Assessment, and Students' Responses**

In an attempt to ascertain whether the objectives of assessment were actually being met in the secondary school, the author sought to elicit students' perceptions on why they were assessed in the first place. When



asked what they believed to be the objective of examinations during the junior certificate cycle, 35% of students believed exams showed how much one had learned, 27% noted that exams measured one's progress, with only 2% believing exams prepared one for life. In the researchers opinion, according to these statistics, assessment within the Junior Certificate only meets one part of the criteria set out by the Department of Education and Science in its aims and objectives of assessment 'the acquisition of knowledge'. This is affirmed by the fact (which will be referred to later on) that 69% of students felt they had learned something when they could repeat it or have learnt it off by heart. This emphasises the strong credence, which has been placed on repetition by the current system of terminal written examinations, with little or no consideration to the other elements such as self-esteem, personal qualities being acquired, comprehension skills, attitudes and values.

The author notes with interest that 42% of the students cited exams as their least favourite aspect of the Junior Certificate programme; accordingly the same students noted the fact that there were no 'big' exams at primary level as being one of their favourite things about their primary schooling. It would seem that the whole area of assessment is a source of contention in the education process for pupils, in particular at Junior Certificate level where there is an over emphasis on academic achievement. This aspect in turn continues to push apart the primary and secondary systems, contributing to the discontinuity. There is no doubt that assessment is essential and relevant, central to effective teaching and learning, particularly as a diagnostic tool, but the gap between primary and secondary assessment

has grown too wide with students passing over from an integrated individualised learning environment where assessment serves a primarily diagnostic function to the junior cycle where assessment is subject-centred, formative and predominantly summative in purpose.

Despite major developments and innovations in our education system, we still depend heavily on terminal examinations as the prime source of assessment. "Ireland is the only developed country which has a fully externally examined system of written assessment at the end of the junior cycle phase of post-primary education" (NCCA (4), 1999, p.31). Given this fact, the pupils were invited to record their preferences for alternative forms of assessment to the written exam during the Junior Certificate cycle, 27% of students noted a preference for oral examinations, 24% indicated their preference for continuous assessment, and 23% suggested the examination of project work. More interestingly other students noted the possible examination of effort and behaviour. A detailed examination of students suggestions for alternative forms of assessment revealed their reasons for suggesting such, with regard to oral work, continuous assessment and project work as forms of assessment, pupils noted that these forms of assessment would reduce the pressure arising from terminal examinations. They believe that these alternative forms are easier than written exams, 19% of students noted that the pressure associated with terminal sit-down examinations caused them to forget information. It is the author's opinion that these aforementioned factors once again highlight the pressures that the existing form of assessment at Junior Certificate level place on the pupil and on the system, contributing to the culture shock which students

experience when they transfer over from the primary school, and also contributing to the discontinuance between primary and post-primary curricula.

The choice of assessment modes and techniques should serve the purpose of improving learning by exerting a positive force on the curriculum at all levels. It must, therefore reflect the full range of curriculum goals. Modes of assessment must therefore demonstrate a high level of curriculum fidelity and reflect the full range of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes set out in the curriculum objectives (NCCA (4), 1999, p.43)

### **5.6.2 Assessment and Teachers' Responses**

One of the major problems with the assessment procedure is its failure to match objectives of the Junior Certificate with appropriate assessment methods. Government papers and NCCA documents have all recognised and highlighted this fact

The development of teaching methodology seeks to ensure that the methods used are appropriate to the objectives sought. Teaching methods employed are central to the process of innovation and change, the importance of complementing traditional methods with a wider range of teaching strategies is a key element in realising the objectives of the restructured second level curriculum. New strategies will also help to harmonise approaches between primary and second level schools (*Charting our Education Future, White Paper on Education 1995*)

Questioned regarding the relevance of existing assessment methods at secondary level, a degree of uncertainty emerged. 60% of teachers believe that the existing assessment methods used in the Junior Certificate cycle do not meet or address the needs of 'all' students. There is no doubt that in this strong expression of the system's inability to encompass 'all' students, the methods of assessment in place are contrary and mismatched with the aims and objectives of the junior certificate which is based on breadth and

balance, quality, continuity and progression. A further analysis of the information revealed that 84% of respondents were not 'very happy' with the existing assessment methods used within their own subject area. As an alternative means of assessment, teachers expressed a preference for the introduction of: project work (29%), continuous assessment (24%) and oral examinations (21%) in their subject areas. It can be seen from these figures that there is common ground between students and teachers in desires for alternative methods of assessment and in their choices of methods. The author feels that if changes in current assessment procedures were introduced it may lead to greater participation by the students, as alternative forms of assessment would recognise and acknowledge the pupils' achievements across a wide spectrum of activities which would be more in line with the objectives of assessment of the Junior Certificate.

### **5.7 Purposes of Learning**

As the literature review indicates, learning takes different perspectives at the different levels of education. The primary curriculum is noted for its development of individualised learning experiences to suit each child, with the child being encouraged to interpret the problem and suggest solutions, whereas the junior certificate tends to emphasise relative ability above effort and achievement, only honouring certain areas of intelligence. According to the primary school curriculum, (NCCA (1), 1999, p.14) "The impulse for learning is the child's sense of wonder at the complexity of the world, the desire to understand it, and the spontaneous impetus to explore it through play".

### **5.7.1 Learning and Students' Responses**

The pupils were asked to express their reasons for secondary school and the implications of doing so. When asked why they went to school, an impressive 91% expressed that school was relevant/necessary. However, a detailed examination of the reasons given as to why school was necessary revealed some interesting views; 31% of the students believed that attending school was necessary to get into college and secure a good job, 18% believed it was 'to learn', other reasons cited included that they had to attend school because it was the law. A further question sought to elicit why students felt they had to learn whilst they attended school; 62% of the students stated 'preparation for exams' as the most important reason for learning, with only 9% seeing learning as 'developing oneself as a person'. Once again, examinations are coming to the forefront and somewhat suppressing the genuine aims and objectives of the Junior Certificate. This is in marked contrast to the primary system from which the students have just transferred in which there are no formal assessments and certainly none on which the future of the pupil will depend.

The analysis portrays a wide discrepancy amongst students as to what learning actually means. In response to a question that sought to elicit how students know when they have learnt something, 69% felt they had learned something when they could repeat it or had it learnt off by heart, whilst only 6% believed they had learned something when they 'understood' it. It can be seen from these figures that the meaning of learning has been somewhat thwarted at Junior Certificate level, with examinations taking precedence. As can be seen from this research a large percentage of

students learn simply in order to be able to repeat the information attained for examination purposes. According to Anderman & Maehr (UK) (1994), the inability of the Junior Certificate to examine all forms of learning practised by the pupil (as is the case at primary level) has a negative effect on students and can have a lasting effect on students future within education if they are labelled failures/weak/below average from the start. Smyth, McCoy & Darmody (2004) noted at the beginning of first year students are generally positive about school, their teachers, and their academic ability. However by the end of first year this positive attitude has waned.

Active learning plays a crucial role within the primary curriculum and enables the teacher to address a wider range of learning styles amongst pupils such as project work, fieldwork, role play, and text books. The situation is not the same for teachers at Junior Certificate level, with contradictions arising between the rhetoric and the reality of the curriculum's aims, along with the influence of external factors such as parental expectations, society and industry dictating what they want from the Junior Certificate and post-primary education in general. When asked to indicate in which situation they learn best, the predominant answers given were; teamwork (18%), project work (16%) and using role-plays (20%), very little of these elements are assessed in the current Junior Certificate programme. When students were asked what their least favourite subject was in primary school, maths came out on top at 45%, the main reason stated being the teaching methods used in the teaching of the subject. The acknowledgement of different learning styles amongst students and

implementation of a curriculum that addresses these different styles and recognises individuality in each pupil, is a feature of the Junior Certificate curriculum, "a curriculum that recognises and awards differences in abilities" (NCCA (3), 1989, p.10) but it seems according to this research that assessment and, in particular, the Junior Certificate examination, has overshadowed these progressive curriculum aims and become the dominant feature.

### **5.7.2 Learning and Teachers' Responses**

An analysis of comments made by teachers pertaining to their concept of what learning and education are about revealed the following: 36% of teachers felt the main purpose of learning was to develop all aspects of the child, 12% felt it was to teach students life skills, and 10% felt the purpose of learning was to make students think independently. Other replies included, building confidence in the students and preparing them for third level. It can be seen from these figures that the teachers desired outcomes from the education and learning process are in line with the aims and objectives of the Junior Certificate curriculum as stated earlier. However, on closer examination of the research, it was noted that 53% of teachers noted that the existing structures (timetabling, class frequency etc) were not adequate or sufficient for the delivery of their subject curriculum in the junior certificate cycle. So whilst teachers wished to develop the pupils according to the curriculum objectives, over half stated that they were unable to do so because of intrinsic factors placing limitations on the programme. Teachers expressed the following changes needed to be implemented in order to allow them deliver their subject curriculum according to its aims and

objectives; 30% stated that extra classes were needed, 22% required more double periods, and 12% felt that there was no room for diversification within the system. In short, over half of the teachers questioned are partaking in the delivery of a system with which they are dissatisfied and in which they feel oppressed. The researcher feels it is worth noting that 56% teachers in the secondary school have not attended any in-service course pertaining to their subject within the last 5 years, yet 69% feel that there is a need to attend such courses regularly.

## **5.8 Conclusions**

Based on the findings in the literature review and the comments made by teachers and students, it seems that education and curriculum at Junior Certificate level have been diverted by a focus on examinations and assessment. This factor alone has driven a wedge between the curriculum implementation process at primary level and the reality of what is being implemented at Junior Certificate level. It is unquestionable that there is a divide between the primary and secondary curricula but the divide does not rest there, there appears to be a division between the teachers at both levels, the assessment procedures, and the learning processes. In general the whole area of communication and liaison between the cycles seems to have failed with teachers and students suffering the results. Adequate liaison could only serve to enhance the knowledge of all parties involved in the education process leading to a cross understanding of what teachers in the opposite cycle are doing. Transfer of information would allow teachers to ascertain and build a bank of knowledge on their students and the curriculum work they have covered to date and ease any anxieties students



may have around the transition process. It has to be noted that despite having expressed fears about the transfer from primary to post-primary school, the pupils in question seem to be coping well with multi-faceted changes that were thrust upon them in general.

## **CHAPTER 6.**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

In conclusion the author suggests that the process of continuity between the primary and junior certificate cycle is a not an issue to go unnoticed or be taken for granted by any of the parties involved. The process itself is complicated in that it is multifaceted in its nature; it must be structured in terms of student individuality, variances in learning styles, curricular continuity, transition between cycles, modes of assessment, and teaching methods.

#### **6.2 Conclusions**

Transfer presents a time of emotional, social and academic change for many students, but particularly for the academically weaker students. As can be seen from this piece of research, the aims and objectives of primary and junior certificate curricula, pertaining to links between the schools are not being achieved. In particular teachers at post-primary level are not aware in detail of what is taking place at the primary level, in relation to subject content, teaching methodologies and addressing different learning styles. 62% of the junior certificate teachers felt there wasn't a link between their subject content and its counter-part at primary level. This fact does little to develop continuity between the primary and junior certificate cycles, leading to time and effort being wasted as secondary teachers re-cover curricula content already covered in primary cycle. Almost a third of students say that many subjects in first year just repeat what they have

already learned in primary school (Smyth, McCoy & Darmody, 2004). The vast majority of students (82%) indicated that they were anxious before transferring over to the junior certificate programme, yet 64% of these expressed that things were not as they expected them to be after the transfer. This only goes to strengthen the author's opinion that here is a degree of mismatch between the primary and secondary cycles. Not only are these differences academic and curricular, but also the whole psychological perception each side have of the other needs to be examined. In short the monitoring of transition between schools is predominantly the role of the school principals, they must ensure a successful transfer from primary to post-primary to avoid the unnecessary duplication or omission of information. Principals need to maintain continuity with adequate procedures for liaison and the transfer of information safely in place.

Based on reviewed literature and examination of students' comments during this research, the author believes the revised primary school curriculum is a very significant development in education and the culmination of many years of work by all the partners in education. Its introduction and continued development presents all of us with a unique opportunity to effect change and to prepare pupils for the challenges and opportunities of the modern world, relevant to their lives both as children and adults. The implementation of the curriculum ensures that all children are provided with learning opportunities that recognise and celebrate their uniqueness, and develop their full potential.

The Junior Certificate has been successful in that it provides us with a smooth running certification process that measures the academic attainment of the pupil with a reasonable 'standardised' degree of precision. Since its implementation the Junior Certificate along with other state examinations has been widely accepted by parents, industry, society and third level institutes as the most appropriate way to assess pupil's, however, progress in certain areas has not enjoyed such widespread acceptability and credibility, particularly amongst the various parties involved in the education process, areas of issue include the transition between cycles, assessment aims and procedures, curriculum continuity, and the ability to address different learning styles. Noted causes for these areas of failure have been failures in planning, successful opposition and a lack of support for innovation and change. According to the researcher's findings the majority of teachers have expressed dissatisfaction with the Junior Certificate programme in relation to the key issues examined: assessment, curricular content, learning, and continuity. It is the author's opinion that the Junior certificate curriculum in theory epitomised 'breadth and balance' and 'relevance' to the needs of students, however in rhetoric, recognition of varying circumstances, abilities and needs of students flexibility, differentiation and adaptability were only addressed in passing.

Two of the key areas, noted earlier by the author, which continue to prove contentious within the implementation of the Junior Certificate, include 'assessment' and 'learning' in relation to the Junior Certificate. Obviously, if the Junior Certificate is to be certified then there has to be a means of assessment, however, it is paramount that the aims of this assessment are

in keeping with the aims of the curriculum and the education system. During the development of the Junior Certificate the NCCA, and Curriculum and Examinations Board attempted to broaden the basis of assessment and make assessment follow rather than lead syllabus, this proved to be a contentious issue particularly amongst teachers. Teacher interests and in particular the ASTI resisted the whole idea of school-based assessment (CEB, 1985), surely this would seem contradictory to the intended aims of the Junior Certificate and modern day developments within the education system, in particular, recognition of varying learning styles. This leads one to question the validity of the Junior Certificate and its assessment procedures as a whole. Does it measure what it is supposed to measure, and does it do so with a reasonable degree of precision? According to the author this is another of the main areas causing contention within the Junior Certificate and driving it apart from the primary curriculum. "There is an ongoing mismatch between the aims and principles of the Junior Certificate programme and the modes and techniques currently in use for the formal assessment of that programme" (NCCA (4), 1999, p.32). Assessment is supposed to indicate mastery of a subject; hence a construct is needed to identify success within each subject. In designing these constructs recognition has to be given to the individuality of each subject and the individuality of each student, it's not a case of one size fits all, yet we still have a system dominated by standardised written tests at the end of a three year period, which all students must take, regardless of their individual abilities. Again the validity of these tests can be questioned in that do they test 'comprehension' or 'reproduction/repetition'? Curriculum and assessment reform should be undertaken together with planned coherence.

If this does not occur, assessment reform would simply shape and drive the curriculum by default. Curriculum is an evolving process that in the author's opinion must be influenced strongly by the teachers' professional and practical knowledge, skills and experience.

Another of the key issues for discussion in relation to the Junior Certificate in recent times is that of its relevance. Its relevance to the students who endeavour to do well in it, its relevance to external influences on education such as parents, employers, third level colleges, and its relevance to society as a whole. All participants within the education domain, as well as those outside it are aware of the relevance of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however they are also increasingly aware that the less qualified have fewer opportunities now than in the past, with the Leaving Certificate now being seen as the minimum requirement for obtaining a job in most cases. However, where does this leave the Junior Certificate? It must be seen as a means to an end, and not an end in itself. One has to acknowledge that even today, the Junior Certificate will be the highest qualification attained for a considerable number of students, who will leave the education system for one reason or another. What credit will their achievement attain in today's society?

It is the author's opinion, based on experience of St. Mary's Secondary School that in general post-primary teachers tend to base their opinions of work done in primary schools on theoretical knowledge alone. This is mainly due to a lack of liaison and transfer of knowledge between the schools and teachers, 81% of teachers have had no contact with their counter-parts in

the primary school. The pupils transfer from an environment where independence and ability to enquire have been fostered and developed, to an environment where the ideal is students sitting in straight rows soaking up didactic knowledge. However the researcher feels it is important to note that teachers of the junior cycle are as much victims of the system as the students are, and are under constant pressure imposed by the state examinations at the end of the three years, and pressure imposed by external sources such as parents who wish their children to gain third level places. In short the role of assessment has taken credence in the junior cycle and this development does not correlate with the aims and objectives of the junior certificate. The underlying issue is that teachers in the junior cycle are somewhat stuck in the middle, in that, on one hand a large percentage of them are unaware of recent developments and day-to-day operations in the primary system, and on the other hand, they themselves are being dictated to by state examinations and external environmental factors such as third level institutes, parents, industry and society.

### **6.3 Recommendations**

In this section the author will put forward possible recommendations pertaining to the improvement of continuity between the primary cycle and the Junior Certificate curriculum. These recommendations are based on the author's analysis of research findings and related to the literature reviewed for this thesis. The author feels it is necessary to preface these recommendations by noting that, whilst certain recommendations may seem plausible in principle, in reality their introduction would be hindered, based on the predominant role that examinations have come to play within the

Junior Certificate programme. It is the author's opinion that unless the relevant parties (NCCA and Department of Education & Science) reevaluate the issues of assessment and teaching methodologies/active learning, within the Junior Certificate programme, and re-consider the reality of what the Junior Certificate actually represents in modern education as opposed to what its aims and objectives represent on paper, then the introduction of any other changes will only result in token improvements.

- **Exchange of information and documentation about pupils**

Throughout the student's primary school life there is the potential for the school to gather a vast reservoir of information on each pupil. The collation of this data can however be haphazard and piecemeal, as discussed in previous chapters, 54% of primary teachers update the report card records once a month or less (INTO, 1996). Insight can be gained into the pupil's ability, his/her attainment levels, his/her interests and the social and psychological factors which influence his/her progress. Over the eight-year period a complete profile of the student can be established. It is now time for a new look at this aspect of the primary system so that a professional procedure can be put in place to formally register each child's progression and attainments at all levels (academic ability, results of any assessments taken, any special learning requirements, weakness, strengths and social disposition). This information must then transfer with the child to the Junior Certificate cycle, creating a meaningful dialogue between the parties involved in this transition. Of course this will only work if the information is utilised effectively and disseminated to the relevant parties when it reaches the post-primary school.



- **Liaison Between Teachers**

Lack of liaison between the two schools continuously emerged as a factor during this research. It became clear that neither school was clearly or adequately aware of what the other was doing. Whilst the secondary school currently holds an open-day for the incoming first years and their parents, no effort is made to bring together the teachers of both schools. The researcher feels it would be worthwhile and possible to arrange an annual meeting period (day/half day) where the 6<sup>th</sup> class teachers and potential first year teachers meet up. Some of the issues addressed during these meetings could include curriculum covered at primary level, and any issues pertaining to each individual pupil (special needs/social problems etc.). Teachers could also acknowledge the work that their counter parts are doing and learn from them, having presentations based on the different school structures and how they are organised, addressing variances in learning styles, teaching methodologies and so forth. This liaison between teachers does not always have to be on a formal basis, the possibility of organising a social evening off school premises could also be looked at. Staff of both primary school and Junior Certificate programme would benefit from being facilitated with any necessary means so as to encourage discussions/liason about all issues surrounding continuity between the curricula (learning, curriculum content, transition, assessment, learning). It is not a case of the secondary school taking sole responsibility of these issues; it's a concern and responsibility of both schools.

- **Liaison Between Students**

The issue of liaison between the students also has to be addressed. The author would like to see the sixth class students meet with the present first year students who have transferred over from that primary school. First year students could give different presentations pertaining to each subject, school culture, discipline, how to handle the transition period etc. This process should be informal, where the students are relaxed and the 6<sup>th</sup> class students are encouraged to ask questions. Whenever possible, sixth class students should be invited over to the secondary school, to create a sense of familiarity, occasions such as concerts, teen talent competitions, exhibitions, quizzes would be perfect. In return, first year students should be given an opportunity to return to the primary school and talk to the sixth class students. The researcher expresses a preference for these regular informal gatherings as opposed to the annual formal open-day, as they afford the students a view of the Junior Certificate programme in everyday action and as it really is. Hargreaves, Earl & Ryan (1996) erred on the side of caution in regards to induction days. Whilst they do create positive attitudes to transfer and alleviate anxiety to a certain degree, their studies identified a chief danger in that certain students expressed disillusionment after the transfer, with Independent learning losing precedence when dictation and worksheets took over.

- **Staff Consultation and Continuity within Curricula Content**

If any attempt were to be made to address this issue of discontinuity between the curricula in the future it would only make sense that the teachers in both schools be consulted on the plans. Teachers are

experiencing the side effects of discontinuity on a daily basis in their classrooms and know in their professional capacity what they are talking about. Another possibility is the establishment of a panel of teachers (from both schools) for discussions, problem solving, and recommending solutions. This panel should break down divides or barriers, which may exist between the schools. There needs to be a clear process of communication between the principals and staffs, the principal has a central role to play in ensuring smooth dissemination of information so as to allow informed decisions to be made by all and to ensure continuity within and between schools. Subject coordinators in the secondary could ascertain the content and methods of work associated with their particular discipline in the feeder primary school. This information should then be disseminated to the teachers who will be dealing with the incoming first years so as to ensure that courses are continuous, eliminating waste in teaching time and resources. Presently the secondary teachers have no say or input into the primary curricula or its implementation. During this research some of the teachers expressed a concern that they felt primary teachers are somewhat protective of their revised curriculum. Once again this reinforces the need for consultation between both schools in order to ensure the smooth continuity between curricula.

- **Staff Training**

There is also the issue of future training for teachers, as expressed in this research. 56% of the secondary teachers have not attended an in-service course in the last 5 years. When one looks at education in general a lot of changes can take place in 5 years. Only 34% were familiar in detail with the

objective of the Junior Certificate, and only 16% were definitely aware of the content of their subject at primary level. This area needs to be looked into, for if teachers are not fully abreast of what is happening within their subject or developments in education in general, how can there be continuity between the cycles or how can they deal with the problems arising from this discontinuity? Also some degree of training or in-service should be provided for all teachers in dealing with the transition process of pupils from primary to secondary education and the problems that arise during this transition. The possibility of attaching some form of incentive to attending in-service programmes could also be looked into in order increase the number of secondary teachers currently partaking in such programmes ie. Days off in lieu, as is the case in the primary sector.

- **Aims and Objectives of Programmes**

Whilst it seems that the primary curriculum is being successfully executed in accordance with its aims and objectives, from this research it appears that the same cannot be said of the Junior Certificate programme. This research has highlighted various discrepancies between the rhetoric of the Junior Certificate aims and objectives and the realities of what is actually happening. It may be time for a further review of the Junior Certificate programme by the NCCA and Department of Education and Science, in conjunction with teachers, based on the functions of the Junior Certificate programme and its place in developing society. Currently the Junior Certificate lies between the relatively formative, learning-focused primary curriculum, and the results-driven senior cycle (Leaving Certificate) of secondary school, yet it remains dominated by summative terminal

examinations, the results of which according to this research bear little relevance on the lives of the pupils. Hence, is there a need for reliance on terminal written examinations (summative) and their associated pressures at this stage in the pupil's education considering there are no recognisable rewards attached to the same. Currently the NCCA are reviewing the senior cycle in an effort to reduce the over reliance on terminal examinations, suggestions such as a three-year cycle, and formal examinations at the end of each year as opposed to the final year are being investigated. The author feels that these possible developments at senior cycle, whilst extremely positive, may only serve to further highlight the weaker issues within the Junior Certificate as discussed throughout this research. Objectives of the Junior Certificate need to be continuously reviewed and updated to develop a programme that gains credibility and endorsement by teachers, students and community, and to which there is attached a degree of relevance and credibility based upon its objectives.

- **Learning Styles**

Where possible teachers of both primary and secondary schools should be given the opportunity to visit the opposite school. During this period secondary teachers will be able to observe how teachers in the primary cycle address the concept of active learning, whilst working in a system whose strength lies in recognising and developing individuality. This could be taken a step further by the possible introduction of a work placement for teachers in each other's school. In any event, there is a need to provide relevant in-service education so that teachers' expertise in each curricular area may be enhanced. There may also be the possibility of building upon

the already established in-services run by secondary teachers during the summer months in the areas of art and science for primary school teachers. Extending the range of curricula subjects and issues (ie. learning styles, teaching methodologies, assessment procedures) covered, whilst, arranging for primary teachers to conduct similar in-services for secondary teachers.

- **Methods of assessment**

As the research has indicated, one of the greatest factors stunting any future growth of the Junior Certificate is the dominant role that has been bestowed upon assessment and on the Junior Certificate examination in particular. Assessment plays a formative role in the primary sector and a summative one at Junior Certificate level. This indicates a serious mismatch between the aims and reality of assessment at Junior Certificate level. Perhaps it is time to review and evaluate the aims of assessment and methods used at junior cycle level. The Junior Certificate currently stands, as a bridge between the primary curriculum and the Leaving Certificate, is it necessary that assessment and examinations play such a dominant role at this stage? Assessment at this stage needs to be brought back in line with the aims and objectives of the curriculum. With the possible introduction of continuous assessment, project work, and portfolio work, along with a certain degree of written terminal examination. This in turn should relieve the tension and pressure centred on assessment at the present time, and bring back a sense of enjoyment to the learning process at junior certificate level.

- **Consistency**

If changes are to be introduced amongst schools in question in order to maintain some degree of continuity between the different cycles, then the implemented procedures need to be standardised, monitored and consistent, in line with national procedures. Whilst there is currently a system in operation, of separate inspectorates for both primary and post-primary schools, there are grounds for the establishment of an inspectorate to oversee continuity and transition between sixth class and first year of the junior cycle.

- **Transparency**

The author feels that a lot of the issues dominating these research findings are arising from a lack of communication between all parties involved in the education process. This in turn contributes to a degree of confusion and mystery surrounding the whole area of transition between schools, which in turn leads to misconceptions about the whole system. Presently the secondary school does not tend to involve parents in it's everyday operation, the author feels that as a result the school is loosing out on a vast bank of talents. The school's present mission, or vision for the future, must be communicated to all involved in the process not just to teachers and students. This might involve inviting parents to partake in the learning process, making full use of the human and physical resources of the wider community, and utilising the learning potential of information and communication technologies. This will only be achieved through a culture of

collaboration supported by a climate of openness and trust between the school and the external community.



**Appendix 1.**

**Questionnaire One**

**Administered to the teachers of the Secondary School.**

1. To what extent are you aware of the aims/objectives of the Junior Certificate Curriculum?

- Familiar in Detail
- Familiar with Fundamentals
- Vaguely Familiar
- Not Aware

2. To what extent are you aware of the aims/objectives of the Primary Curriculum?

- Familiar in Detail
- Familiar with Fundamentals
- Vaguely Familiar
- Not Aware

3. To what extent do you feel it is important for second level teachers to be familiar with students past learning and involvement in the Primary School?

- Very Important
- Important
- Not Important

4. What is your expectation of 1st year students in respect of 'your' subject area (regarding competency, proficiency, weaknesses and strengths)?

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5. (A). Are you aware of the contents of the 6th class Primary School Curriculum in your Subject?

- Definitely Aware
- Vaguely Aware
- Not Aware

(B). Do you feel it is necessary to be aware of the Primary Curriculum in your subject?

- Yes
- No
- Uncertain

6. Have you had any professional involvement with any of the teachers in the Primary School (apart from as a parent)?

- Yes   
No

7. How satisfactorily do you feel our school addresses the transition from Primary to Secondary?

- Very Satisfactorily   
Satisfactorily   
Unsatisfactorily

Reasons: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. In a sentence, what in your opinion is the chief role of education?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. To what extent do you feel you are achieving the objectives of the Junior Certificate?

- Very Well   
Well   
Not so Well

10. Are you basically familiar with the teaching methodologies used in the Primary School?

- Yes   
No

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

11. (A). Is it possible to engage in cross- curricular/team teaching activities in your subject as secondary level?

	Yes	No
Cross-Curricular	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Team Teaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(B). Does it happen within your subject? Would you like it to happen within your subject?

	Yes	No
Cross-Curricular	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Team Teaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(C). Would you like it to happen within your subject?

	Yes	No
Cross-Curricular	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Team Teaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

12. To what extent does the existing assessment structure meet the needs of 'all' your students?

Very Successfully	<input type="checkbox"/>
Successfully	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not Very Successfully	<input type="checkbox"/>
Very Unsuccessfully	<input type="checkbox"/>

13. To what extent are you happy with the means of assessment used at Junior Certificate level for your subject?

Very Happy	<input type="checkbox"/>
Happy	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not Happy	<input type="checkbox"/>

What would be a better form of assessment for "your" subject?

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

14. To what extent does the existing 'assessment' system address multiple intelligences?

- Large Extent
- Significant Extent
- Don't Know
- Little Extent
- Not At All

15. To what extent does the Junior Certificate prepare our students adequately for:

(A). The World of Work

- Very Well
- Well
- Poorly

(B). Today's Modern Society

- Very Well
- Well
- Poorly

(C). Social Development

- Very Well
- Well
- Poorly

16. Are you happy with the content of 'your' subject curriculum in the Junior Certificate?

- Yes
- No
- Partially

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**17. Is 'your' subject curriculum linked with its 6th class counter-part at Primary level (if relevant)?**

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

**18. Is the Secondary School structure (timetables, class allocation, frequency) sufficient/adequate for the delivery of 'your' subject's Junior Certificate curriculum?**

- Yes
- No

**Comments:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**19. (A). Have you attended an in-service for 'your' subject in the last 5 years?**

- Yes
- No

**(B). Do you feel there is a need to attend an in-service?**

- Regularly
- Occasionally
- Not Sure
- Never

**(C). If you have attended one, do you feel it was relevant?**

- Yes
- Partially
- No

**Any Additional Comments:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix 2.**

**Questionnaire Two**

**Administered to the second year students of the Secondary School.**

**1. Did you enjoy Primary School?**

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

**2. Are you enjoying Secondary School?**

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

**3. Why do you go to school?**

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**4. Is School relevant/necessary for you?**

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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**5. How do you feel after you've sat an exam (at Secondary School)?**

- Relieved
- Satisfied
- Delighted



6. What was your favourite subject at Primary School?

Favourite Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Why? (Please tick the most important one?)

- It was your best subject
- Your own ability
- It's Content
- The way it was taught
- The Teacher

7. What was your least favourite subject at Primary School?

Least Favourite Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Why? (Please tick the most important one)

- The way it was taught
- It's Content
- The Teacher
- Your own ability
- It was your best subject

8. Were you anxious/nervous about moving from Primary school to Secondary school?

- Yes
- No
- A Little

Reasons (For being nervous): \_\_\_\_\_

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9. When you moved from Primary to Secondary, was it as you expected it to be?

- Yes
- No

**10. Were you prepared for the change between Primary school and Secondary school?**

**Yes**

**No**

**Not Really**

**11. What was your favourite thing about Primary school (doesn't have to be a subject)?**

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**12. What was your least favourite thing about Primary school (doesn't have to be a subject)?**

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**13. What is your favourite thing about Secondary school (doesn't have to be a subject)?**

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**14. What is your least favourite thing about Secondary school (doesn't have to be a subject)?**

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**15. Do you think the Junior Certificate will have any effect on how you get on in life?**

**Yes**

**No**

**Don't Know**

**16. Is the Junior Certificate important?**

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

Reason (why it is important): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Reason (why it is not important): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**17. What is the most important reason for 'Learning' in your opinion?**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**18. Which of the following situations do you learn best in?  
(Tick your 3 favourite ways)**

- Role Plays
- Ono-to-One
- Small Groups
- Team Work
- Project Work
- Presentations
- Continuous Tests

**19. How do you personally know when you have 'learnt' something?**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**20. In your opinion why are you given exams?**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**21. Are subjects taught in the same way at Secondary school as they are at Primary school?**

- Yes   
No

**If not, what are the main differences?**

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**Overall, which way do you prefer?**

- Primary   
Secondary

**22. List three ways you would like to be examined other than 'sit-down exams' at the end of the three years?**

1. 

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2. 

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3. 

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**Why?**

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**Any Additional Comments:** 

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**Appendix 3.**

**Letter to Teachers of the Secondary School  
Explaining Questionnaire**

07<sup>th</sup> January 2004

**RE: QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Dear Colleague,**

**As you are aware I am endeavouring to complete a thesis as part of the M.Ed (SL) programme that I am partaking in. The topic I have chosen to research is:**

**“Continuity between the Primary School and the Junior Cycle of Post-Primary”**

**I am writing to seek your help with this research by asking you to complete the attached questionnaire. I understand this is a busy time of year for you and would be most appreciative of your assistance.**

**All information rendered through this questionnaire will be treated in the strictest confidence and you do not have to include your name. I would be grateful if you could return the completed questionnaire in the envelope provided by Friday January.**

**I would like to take this opportunity to thank you in advance for your co-operation.**

***With Thanks,***

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***Derek Ball***

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