NCSE PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH PILOT PROGRAMME

SCHOOL RESEARCH SUMMARY

School name: Sutton Park School
Practising teacher lead: Susan Taaffe
Research theme: Curriculum (Senior cycle Level 2 PLUs)

Research aim: To support mainstream post-primary teachers to embed the Level 2 Learning Programme (L2LP) into senior cycle mainstream lessons.

Methods

Participants included 7 mainstream teachers (subject areas are detailed in Table A below), plus students and parents.

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Subject	Number of participants	Previous experience
Biology	1	No
Geography	1	No
Well-being/*RSE	1	No
RSE/Careers	1	No
Business	1	No
History	1	No
Mathematics	1	No
Learning Support	1 (SNA)	No

Research methods included

- Establishing a professional Learning Community (PLC)
- A focus group discussion
- Reflective diaries
- Post- intervention, Individual semi-structured interviews

*RSE – Relationship and Sexual Education

Other participants involved in the PLC group are outlined in table B below.

These participants are not currently teaching a student following the Senior Cycle L2LP but wanted to upskill in this area to support Junior Cycle/Transition year students, following an alternate curriculum or the Junior Cycle L2LP within mainstream classes.

B. Teachers/management members of the PLC but not actively involved in the classroom-based research (attended the initial PLC meeting or added to the PLU in September 2024).

Role	Number of participants	Previous experience
Head of School	1	No
SENCO*	1	Yes
LRT*/Researcher	1	Yes
Mathematics	2 (TY and 6th Year, year head)	No
SNA *	2	No
Spanish	1	No
English	1	No
Science/biology	1	No

***SENCO:** Special Education Needs Co-ordinator

*** LRT:** Learning Resource Teacher

***SNA:** Special Needs Assistant

Non-participating Student: The fifth-year student central to the study was not an active participant. As he was under 18 at the time of the study and as his mother is very ill, it was deemed inappropriate to involve him in the study directly. However, both his parents were advised of the study and gave their permission for it to focus on their son.

Research findings

The research highlighted the need for mainstream teachers to receive specific training to build an awareness of the Level 1/2 learning programmes that are coming on-stream for senior cycle students. This is important to enable them to include all students, and meet their individual needs, in senior cycle classes. None of the participants, seven subject teachers and one SNA, had previous experience teaching/supporting a student operating at level 1 (L1) or level 2 (L2). This finding reinforced the need for a collaborative approach, for example the use of a PLC team site and regular meetings, so teachers can upskill and work together to support students working at this level. However, both time and resources are needed for this to become a reality.

My top three findings are:

1. Supporting the student's needs prior to the initiative.

Both the focus group findings and the semi-structured interview data revealed that all participants strived to be as inclusive as possible before the draft level 2 PLUs were launched. However, there was unanimous agreement that due to the content heavy level 5 programmes; student and parental results expectations; and the difficult content level, it was challenging to cater for a student operating at L2 in mainstream classrooms.

Apart from numeracy, where previous experience of the Junior Cycle L2 programme by another department member was used to provide resources, participants found it difficult to source subject specific material. Worksheets sourced from Twinkl were widely used, however, teachers felt that these were more suited for younger students and did not align well with the L5 subject content. Mini projects were used in a number of subjects in an attempt to include the student operating at L2, where topics were selected to align with the class material. That said, difficulty with the students ability and concentration, and the need for a team teacher or an SNA in all classes made this approach problematic.

2. Incorporating the L2LP targets into mainstream classes

All participants agreed that provision of the two draft PLUs was very beneficial as it enabled them to focus on a specific weekly target for the student. However, selection of targets that aligned with the L5 content proved difficult and there was a feeling that, despite the draft programme, classes were not as inclusive as they would like.
The numeracy PLU was used to plan weekly topics for the student in mathematics lessons, however, in line with the majority of participants, the teacher stressed that the presence of a team-teacher/SNA is essential in as many classes as possible, as the student needed guidance and support to complete tasks.

There was general agreement that the PLUs made it more possible to assess the cognitive level of the student.
Tracking attainment of targets highlighted that material was often above the student's ability level and 'engagement' was recorded as his achievement level for many targets. It was decided, following assessment of progress, that he was in fact operating at L1 in numeracy and plans were changed to accommodate this.

Subjects such as RSE, where content is more sensitive, proved difficult despite careful selection of a specific target (promoting engagement/relationships). Excellent resources were sourced from 'Therapist Aid' an American website, but support of a second teacher or an SNA was highlighted as required, to facilitate completion of this material in a separate section of the room/other classroom, making inclusion difficult.

3.Barriers to success.

Participants were both generous with their time and highly engaged with the initiative. They were united in their quest to include the student operating at L2 in as far is as possible in all classes. However, all participants stressed that barriers to his inclusion included, time to plan for two separate curricula; the lack of subject specific, age-appropriate resources; access to an SNA or team teacher, when required; lack of Inservice training provided by the Department; and funding to purchase much needed resources to facilitate success. That said, there was overwhelming agreement that the collaborative approach taken to launch the initiative was both successful and supportive as they no longer felt they were trying to cater for the student alone. Moving forward it was suggested that a coordinator is appointed to monitor overall progress of the L2 programme and to prompt teachers when there are outstanding targets to be completed.

Impact of my research

There have been a number of systemic changes at the school following the research initiative.

- The PLC team site set up for the research phase is used regularly for both resources and as a collaborative space.
- Regular meetings have been set up between the senior cycle SNAs and several participants, to discuss the students' progress and future targets, as it was felt that the SNAs have a wide view of progress/needs across many subject areas and extra-curricular activities.
- Participants have expressed an interest in future training initiatives and look forward to the launch of the other senior cycle PLUs and electives modules.

I have found it hugely beneficial as the school now has a central focus on the L2 programme rather than a subject specific one. As I teach numeracy, I have taught the Junior Cycle level 1 and 2 programmes and feel very positive about the development of alternate curricula within the school. However, success is dependent on the correct supports at both school and departmental level. The school's management team are huge advocates of proactive inclusion and as this ethos has permeated throughout the school, it is hoped that the senior cycle L1/L2 programmes can be embedded successfully into the senior cycle curriculum.