

TRANSITION YEAR – PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

Learning for the future



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In mid-July 2018, as part of a review of career guidance provision in schools, the economic consultants charged by the Minister with the task invited a cross-section of people to a day-long consultative event in Farmleigh in the Phoenix Park, Dublin. This followed an earlier invitation for public submissions. A striking feature of the day was participants' focus on work experience placements at second and third level. Embedded in those conversations seemed to be a strong recognition by educators and other stakeholders that Transition Year (TY) is widely accepted as a vibrant, integral component of the Irish education system.

And yet doubts linger. For the first twenty years of Transition Year there was little evidence the programme would ever move beyond a quirky, marginal anomaly thought up by a strong-willed Minister for Education who didn't consult anyone about his innovation (Jeffers, 2015, p.97). One of Minister Richard Burke's concerns back in 1974 was the large number of early school-leavers. He also saw the secondary school system as conservative and described the Department of Education as 'demoralised'. He disliked the divisions and inequalities in schooling.

'Something subversive was needed,' he told me in a 2001 interview. And so Transition Year was born.

OFF THE TREADMILL

Richard Burke described the kernel of his innovation as follows:

Because of the growing pressures on students for high grades and competitive success, educational systems are becoming, increasingly, academic treadmills. Increasingly, too, because of these pressures, the school is losing contact with life outside, and the student has little or no opportunity 'to stand and stare', to discover the kind of person he (sic) is, the kind of society he will be living in and, in due course, contributing to, its shortcomings and its good points. The suggestion was made that perhaps somewhere in the middle of the course we might stop the treadmill and release the students from the educational pressures for one year so that they could devote time to personal development and community service. (Burke, 1974)

Prescient words from 1974! The minister was also aware, from his experiences as a teacher, of the potential of Transition Year for teacher development. In 2001 he said:

I had a high regard for the teaching profession in the sense that I knew that if circumstances could be such, they would be delighted to be liberated to do that for which their basically idealistic calling had prepared them. So, it [Transition Year] was, in a sense, an emancipation of the teaching profession to educate as distinct from grind.

He was blunt in his view that teachers can also be victims of ‘the system’. He spoke of ‘the unfortunate teaching profession’ being ‘under such pressure to bring the pupils through the treadmill’, adding that ‘with the exception of a very, very few gifted teachers, there was no opportunity for the teaching profession to actually engage in education in the strictest sense of that term’.

PARTICIPATION

Schools were slow to embrace the notion of an interdisciplinary year promoting intellectual, social, and emotional maturation and free from the pressure of public examinations. The Curriculum and Examinations Board in 1986 produced helpful *Guidelines for Schools* (CEB, 1986) but it was not until 1994, when the programme was ‘re-vivified and expanded’ (Coolahan, 2017, p.139), that participation rates increased dramatically.

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By 2004, an official DES publication stated – some might say overstated – that ‘Transition Year, which has been one of the major innovations in Irish education, is an option which is now firmly embedded in the system’ (DES, 2004, p.13). Participation rates continue to rise. In the school year 2017/18, 92% of schools offered a TY programme, while 72% of students who enrolled in third year the previous year progressed to Transition Year.¹

TENSIONS

An early evaluation (Egan and O’Reilly, 1979) noted numerous tensions in the TY programme and varied views among practitioners. These included tensions between a focus on preparation for the workplace and for the Leaving Cert, between emphasis on practical living and on subjects like philosophy and logic, between what might be called ‘linear’ or ‘core’ subjects such as English, Irish, and Mathematics and ‘new’ subjects: ‘linear subjects were deemed an irritation in many schools and received the minimum possible emphasis,’ the researchers found, and along with Philosophy they were ‘generally seen to be of little importance compared with the other subjects’ (ibid., p.55).

The authors wrote that problems with the conceptualisation of TY were unlikely to derail the project, because:

many of the most enthusiastic and enlightened participants are the same people who have little time for problems of definition. From their point of view the Transition Year, as they are implementing it, is working satisfactorily; and if it does not conform with some blueprint in the Department – well, too bad for the blueprint. (ibid., p.55)

Importantly, Egan and O'Reilly conclude that Transition Year students were more self-aware, more confident in social settings, better informed about the wider world, and surer about career choices.

NEW IMPETUS

Before the national mainstreaming of Transition Year in 1994, new guidelines for schools were published, in a document shorter than its 1986 predecessor. Transition Year was seen more as a whole-school responsibility, with the emphasis on teacher collaboration, teamwork, and staff development. Interdisciplinary or cross-curricular work was more strongly advocated, and any reference to a percentage of the programme being 'academic' was dropped.

At the same time, the new *Guidelines* sought to reassure doubters: 'This is not to say that TY programmes should lack intellectual content; it is essential that they offer a challenge to pupils in all areas of their development' (DE, 1993, p.5). The 1993 *Guidelines* also radically extended the ambition of the programme: 'The aims and philosophy of Transition Year should permeate the entire school' (ibid., p.2). An enormous challenge!

Following the dramatic expansion in the programme in the mid-1990s, the Inspectorate evaluated it in 146 schools. Its report concluded:

The consensus among principals, teachers and pupils is that the Transition Year Programme is a very worthwhile initiative, allowing the school to engage in genuine in-school curriculum development, offering teachers an opportunity to break free of overly compartmentalised subject teaching, and giving students the space and the time to grow in maturity and to develop in self-confidence. (DE, 1996, p.20)

"The Transition Year Programme... gives students the space and time to grow in maturity and to develop in self-confidence."

While praising schools for enthusiasm and innovation, that report also made recommendations. These point back to some issues raised by Egan and O'Reilly in 1979 and will have an uncomfortable familiarity with anyone reading recent DES inspection reports of Transition Year. Those recommendations from 1996 include:

- more attention to interdisciplinary, cross-curricular approaches
- Leaving Cert subject choices to be delayed until the end of TY (some schools were operating what looked very like a 'three-year Leaving Certificate')
- further develop links with the local community
- more compensatory teaching
- more networking between schools for 'improving and revitalising' programmes
- better assessment procedures
- improved evaluation in schools.

VARIATION

A dominant theme in research into Transition Year in 116 schools by Smyth, Byrne, and Hannan (2004) was the variation in practices and perceptions both between and within schools. This diversity persists, one suspects, and

makes generalisations about TY especially problematic. Many people have anecdotal evidence of the programme in School A being 'brilliant' and in neighbouring School B being severely under-realised. Smyth et al. conclude by clarifying the importance of key features for a successful TY, including whole-school commitment, time for coordination and teacher cooperation, diverse content, structured exposure to the world of work, and more innovation particularly in teaching methods, forms of assessment, and ongoing evaluation and redesign.

Subsequent research noted how schools tend to 'domesticate' Transition Year (Jeffers, 2007, p.xxviii). This manifests in how schools adapt the TY guidelines and shape them to fit a school's tradition, values, practices, and context. A shadow side of domestication is that TY's flexibility can be invoked by schools to justify a narrow selectivity that ignores key features of TY: interdisciplinary work, new forms of assessment, and health education, for example, can thus be neglected.

EXPENSE

Another persistent concern in much of the research already cited and in public commentary on TY relates to costs and the socio-economic status of non-participants. 'Transition Year costs can be significant, particularly if a family has more than one child in secondary school,' said Marcella Stakem, social policy officer with the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) to the *Irish Times* recently (Lally, 2018). Transition Year costs, which can vary from €300 to €900 per pupil, have become a significant source of stress for parents, according to the SVP. The organisation acknowledges that TY has 'lots of social and educational benefits' and called on the DES to put measures in place to enable children in low-income families to participate.

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Other TY-related research, for example Moynihan (2013) on work experience and subject choice and Clerkin (2012, 2018) on psycho-social development, has illuminated important features of Transition Year. These works add to a growing evidence base showing how young people mature through the TY experience, how their self-awareness and confidence grow, how their aspirations become more focused, how relationships with classmates and teachers deepen, and how the experience enriches school life. It's also worth noting how insights into 'what works' in Transition Year echo key ideas in *Schooling for Change: Re-Inventing Education for Early Adolescents* (Hargreaves et al., 1996 p.80), especially their focus on relevance, imagination, and challenge.

CURRENT CONCERNS

One window on current challenges for Transition Year is opened through the programme evaluations conducted by the DES Inspectorate and available online (DES, 2018). About ten programmes are evaluated each year,² and at the time of writing (mid-September 2018) eight TY programme evaluations have been posted. These reports are nuanced and, while broadly positive, warrant careful reading. Many of the challenges mentioned resonate with previously expressed concerns as well as issues identified by the support services in the mid and late 1990s (TYST, 1998).

Among the recommendations, there is strong emphasis on the importance of collaborative planning of the Transition Year programme and of committing this to writing. Allied to this is the recommendation, stated in one report, that ‘all teachers in TY need to incorporate teaching methodologies that promote active engagement and help students to take more responsibility for their own learning’. A strong focus on what’s actually happening in classrooms is striking in many recommendations, with calls for more cooperative learning, more differentiation, and more varied content, among other things.

Perhaps in response to the pejorative descriptor of Transition Year as ‘a non-exam year’ (or the more offensive ‘doss year’), the inspectors strongly encourage schools to implement appropriate assessment procedures. In one case there is an explicit proposal to introduce an end-of-year portfolio assessment.

Closely linked to the attention to classroom practice in the reports is a growing recognition of the importance of Transition Year as a place for ‘student voice’ to find expression. Indeed, this, and an awareness of Transition Year as a time when young people’s sense of agency can be deepened, are among the exciting developments in Transition Year thinking.

Tensions between Transition Year and the established Leaving Cert programme also persist in the inspectors’ reports. One illustration is a recommendation that ‘within the academic modules, teachers should diversify the content and ensure that there is greater distinction between the TY curriculum and the Leaving Certificate curriculum’. The school’s response, appended to that evaluation, is frank and robust:

Inspectors strongly encourage schools to implement appropriate assessment procedures.

The Board also acknowledges the recommendation relating to Leaving Certificate content. The line between giving a ‘taster’ course and looking in slightly more depth at the highly pressurised and stressful Leaving Certificate content is a fine one. The Board acknowledges the excellent work done by its teachers in preparing for achievement in the Leaving Certificate. As Module Descriptors are reviewed, the level of Leaving Certificate content will be closely examined.

While learning beyond the classroom has been one of Transition Year’s strengths, schools can, in the opinion of the Inspectorate, overdo it. For example, devoting 20% of the time in Transition Year to work experience placements is regarded as ‘excessive’. There are also occasional recommendations that make one wonder about the level of planning some schools put into Transition Year; for example, that a parent–teacher meeting be introduced! Or that admission to TY needs to be included in the school’s admission policy, that end-of-year evaluations should be conducted, that a community service component should be introduced, or that there should be planning meetings!

REFRESHING

One of the biggest challenges schools face regarding Transition Year is to keep refreshing it, to avoid it becoming stale, predictable, or boring. The need to keep it vibrant was a strong finding among many interviewed for *Transition Year in Action* (Jeffers, 2015). A changed junior cycle, which resonates with many features of TY (Kelly, 2014) should prompt an imaginative rethink of how TY might best build on the learning experiences of the previous three years. Similarly, the current review of senior cycle is an opportunity to rethink Transition Year (Jeffers, 2018).

The evidence that Transition Year can greatly enhance the lives of students and teachers... is compelling.

The disappointment of Brexit directs us to revisit Transition Year's opportunities for learning about the rest of Europe – its history, geography, cultures, and social and political contexts. The 1993 *Guidelines*, while still clear and coherent, predate the technological explosions of the past two decades, and this is a further reason for a new impetus. New guidelines are needed.

Notwithstanding the claim referred to earlier that Transition Year is 'embedded' in the system, the programme continues to have to fight against being marginalised at many levels, including policy and support (financial, professional development, and moral). Transition Year is often marginalised in educational discourse: for example, it appears incidental in the ambitious *Action Plan for Education 2016–2019*.

The contention that Transition Year is a 'bubble' slightly detached from what is 'really important' has not gone away. Yet despite many challenges, the evidence that Transition Year can greatly enhance the lives of students and teachers, particularly through young people's holistic development, is compelling. The review of senior cycle education is an ideal opportunity to refresh this remarkable educational innovation.

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FOOTNOTES

1. 661 of 714 second-level schools offered a Transition Year in 2017-18, with 44,950 students enrolled in the programme. 62,533 students were in third-year junior cycle the previous year (Annual Statistical Report, DES).
2. These refer to specific evaluations of schools' TY programmes. Aspects of TY also feature in other inspections, notably Whole School Evaluations (WSE), and subject inspections.

Youth Volunteer of the Year



Daniella Timperley of St Louis Grammar School, Ballymena, one of two Pramerica "Spirit of Community" Youth Volunteers of the Year, 2018.