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Transition Year is what you make of it -- just be glad you have the chance

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Recent speculation about the abolition of Transition Year (TY) prompts some critical questions about the value of the programme. This following story illustrates some of the complexity involved.

A researcher working with a policy think-tank in South Korea was trying to re-imagine schooling for the 21st Century. Despite high rankings on numerous international scales, his concern was that the schooling system in his country lacked balance.

He felt that an over-emphasis on rote-learning and on examination achievements was undermining learning how to think independently.

He was also concerned that the system led teachers to 'teach to the test' rather than focus on students' individual growth and development. He became intrigued by this curious Irish innovation, the Transition Year and visited [Ireland](#) in June.

A group of 16-year-olds, who had just completed TY, spoke eloquently to him about what they had learned through work experience and community service.

They talked about how they liked being introduced to a broad range of activities as varied as outdoor pursuits, Japanese studies and film making, about taking responsibility for their own learning, and about how, in contrast to the competitive individualism of much of school life, they had experienced teamwork and learned how to co-operate with each other in project work.

He asked them what they would change about the programme and they spoke about some teachers not taking the year seriously enough, not challenging or stretching them sufficiently, not realising what an important year TY was.

They also said that not all students take the opportunities offered to them.

Afterwards, he was quite enthusiastic about importing some aspects of TY into the South Korean system.

He remarked: "You know, you would never have a conversation like that in any school in my country".

It strikes me that perhaps one of TY's most significant achievements has been in enabling young people find their voices.

One outcome of research presented to the Department of Education and Science in 2007 was how TY classrooms tended to be more democratic. It also reported schools as saying that TY had a very positive impact on the relationship between students and teachers.

Of course, Transition Year is not perfect. For some young people it can change the direction of their lives very positively. For others, its potential is not always realised.

The discussion we need to have should focus on how the excellent practices operating in some schools -- especially practices where the costs are imaginative and pedagogical rather than financial -- can be more widely shared.

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