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## **TRANSITION YEAR AND EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE**

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### **Introduction**

The 1994 restructuring of the Senior Cycle was intended to “provide maximum flexibility in catering for the different needs, aptitudes and abilities of pupils” (Department of Education 1993a). For the first time, all second-level schools in Ireland were presented with the possibility of offering a Transition Year programme (TYP). In the school year 2000-2001, 67% of second-level schools included a TYP in their provision.

This paper investigates the relationship between the Transition Year and educational disadvantage. Data relating to patterns of uptake of the programme are analysed. The potential of the TY programme to respond to the needs of educationally disadvantaged young people is also examined. The author began teaching on the TY programme in 1986 and from 1995 to 2000 was seconded to the support service for Transition Year. The data presented here was gathered in his role as National Co-ordinator of the Transition Year Curriculum Support Service.

### **A flexible programme**

Since its introduction into schools in 1974, the Transition Year programme has been a flexible one, with schools having extensive autonomy to design their own programmes within the context of providing students with “a broad educational experience with a view to the attainment of increased maturity, before proceeding to further study and/or vocational preparation.” (Department of Education 1993b, p 3). The *Guidelines* published to coincide with the 1994 mainstreaming of the programme state: “Curriculum content is a matter of selection and adaptation by the individual school having regard to these

guidelines, the requirements of pupils and the views of parents”. (Department of Education, 1993b, p.5).

While broad and flexible, the Transition Year mission and aims focus on particular values. The Mission is:

To promote the personal, social, educational and vocational development of pupils and to prepare them for their role as autonomous, participative and responsible members of society. (Department of Education, 1993b, p.4).

Each TY programme should strongly reflect three overall, interrelated and interdependent, aims. These are:

1. Education for maturity with the emphasis on personal development including social awareness and increased social competence.
2. The promotion of general, technical and academic skills with an emphasis on interdisciplinary and self-directed learning.
3. Education through experience of adult and working life as a basis for personal development and maturity. (Department of Education, 1993b, p.4)

The guidelines also encourage learning beyond the classroom - including work experience-, interdisciplinary work, the use of a wide range of teaching/learning methodologies, varied modes of assessment, teamwork among teachers and regular evaluation. (Department of Education, 1993b pps. 6-14).

### **Mainstreaming**

The mainstreaming of the TYP was accompanied and facilitated by a new model of in-service, based on a training of trainers cascade model. 68 teachers with experience of Transition Year or curriculum development were appointed by the Department of Education to implement an in-service programme for schools interesting in offering a TYP. Schools’ reactions to the in-service programme were positive (Lewis and McMahon, 1996) and 459 schools offered a TYP in 1994/95 (Department of Education, 1996). The number of students following a TYP increased from 8499 1993/94 to 21,173<sup>1</sup> in 1994/95, a 150% jump.

The perceived success of this model of training prompted the formation of a 14 person support team of teachers, seconded full-time from their schools from 1995. The model was subsequently used to support other innovations and developments and Hyland (1997, p.183) predicted that “it is likely that this model of inservice will be more widely used in the coming decade”.

## **Evaluation**

In March 1995, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education evaluated the Transition Year programme in 146 schools. The inspectors noted:

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, affording teachers the opportunity to break free of overly compartmentalised subject teaching, and giving pupils space and time to grow in maturity and to develop self confidence’ (Department of Education, 1996 p.1)

Despite being an optional programme, the evaluation made no reference to patterns of uptake related to schools types or geographical regions. Neither did it identify, within individual schools, which students followed a TYP.

## **Patterns of Uptake**

At team meetings, members of the support service reported regularly from their regions on schools’ engagement with TYP. From the outset it became clear that there were great variations in responses: in one county most schools might offer a TYP, while in a neighbouring one it might only be available in a minority of schools; in one school it might be available to a single class group while the adjoining school might insist that everyone follow a TYP. Some schools described their TYP as a critically important intervention for ‘academically weak’ students while others excluded such students, often offering by way of explanation: ‘they would prefer to get through school in five years rather than six’. One pattern that did appear to emerge from early support team discussions was that most fee-paying schools tended to make the TYP compulsory.

## **Data gathering**

Data from the Statistical Section of the Department of Education and Science, based on schools' 'October returns' allows an overview of schools offering the programme, on the basis of geography and school type. The data for 2000-01 is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Schools offering Transition Year Programme 2000-2001

COUNTY	Vol.Sec. Schools			VEC Schools			Comm+Comp. Schools			Totals		
	Tot.	TY	%	Tot.	TY	%	Tot.	TY	%	Tot.	TY	%
Dublin	117	103	88%	44	71	36%	25	19	76%	186	138	70%
Rest of Leinster	93	83	89%	71	31	44%	18	14	78%	182	128	70%
Carlow	5	5	100%	5	4	80%	1	1	100%	11	10	91%
Kildare	14	11	79%	10	5	50%	3	3	100%	27	19	70%
Kilkenny	8	8	100%	8	5	62%	1	1	100%	17	14	82%
Laois	4	4	100%	4	2	50%	3	2	100%	11	8	73%
Longford	5	4	80%	4	0	0%	1	1	100%	10	5	50%
Louth	11	10	91%	5	3	60%	1	0	0%	17	13	76%
Meath	9	6	67%	9	4	44%	2	1	50%	20	11	55%
Offaly	6	5	83%	6	3	50%	1	1	100%	13	9	69%
Westmeath	5	8	80%	4	1	25%	1	1	100%	15	10	67%
Wexford	11	11	100%	7	1	14%	2	2	100%	20	14	70%
Wicklow	10	10	100%	9	6	67%	2	1	50%	21	17	81%
Munster	136	103	76%	72	34	47%	20	18	90%	228	155	70%
Clare	8	6	75%	7	6	86%	3	3	100%	18	15	83%
Cork	52	45	87%	29	15	52%	11	11	100%	92	81	88%
Kerry	18	6	33%	9	3	33%	2	0	0%	29	9	31%
Limerick	23	15	65%	10	2	20%	3	3	100%	36	20	56%
Tipperary	19	18	95%	12	6	50%	1	1	100%	32	25	78%
Waterford	16	13	81%	5	2	40%				21	15	71%
Connacht/Ulster	76	53	70%	58	16	28%	22	12	55%	156	81	52%
Cavan	4	3	75%	4	0	0%	2	0	0%	10	3	30%
Donegal	4	3	75%	11	4	36%	8	5	62%	22	12	55%
Galway	27	17	63%	15	5	33%	6	4	67%	48	26	54%
Leitrim	2	1	50%	5	0	0%	2	0	0%	9	1	11%
Mayo	18	14	78%	8	2	25%	3	3	100%	29	19	66%
Monaghan	6	6	100%	5	4	80%				11	10	91%
Roscommon	6	4	67%	3	1	33%	1	0	0%	10	5	50%
Sligo	9	5	56%	7	0	0%				16	5	31%
Totals	422	342	81%	245	97	40%	85	63	74%	752	502	67%

Compiled from data supplied by the Statistical Section, Department of Education and Science

### Emerging patterns

In 2000-2001, 23,248 students in 507 schools were following a TY programme. Forty-six per cent of these were male and fifty-three per cent female. These figures represent

thirty-nine per cent of the cohort which sat the Junior Certificate Examination the previous summer.

Geographically, a consistent seventy per cent of schools in Dublin, in the rest of Leinster and in Munster offer the programme; this figure drops to fifty-two per cent in Connacht-Ulster. Within this overall geographical trend there are significant variations between adjoining counties. Ninety-one per cent of schools in Monaghan, for example, offer a Transition Year programme while in neighbouring Cavan the corresponding figure is thirty per cent. In Munster the range is from eighty-eight per cent of schools in Cork to thirty-one per cent in Kerry. The data offers no obvious explanation for such unevenness.

A sharper contrast is seen at the sectoral level: eighty-one per cent of voluntary secondary schools, forty per cent of VEC schools and seventy-four per cent of community and comprehensive schools were offering the programme.

### **Educational disadvantage**

Conscious of the policy focus “to provide maximum flexibility in catering for the different needs, aptitudes and abilities of pupils” (Department of Education 1993a), the support service decided in 1999 to examine in more detail the relationship between TYP and disadvantage. The broad patterns of uptake were analysed and the principals in eight schools designated ‘disadvantaged’ were interviewed. Data relating to the uptake of TYP in schools designated ‘disadvantaged’, Table 2, updated to 2000 offers a refinement of the data in Table 1.

Table 2 Schools designated 'disadvantaged' offering Transition Year Programme 2000-2001

COUNTY	V. Sec. schools			VEC Schools			Comm+Comp Schools			TOTALS		
	Tot.	TY	%	Tot.	TY	%	Tot.	TY	%	Tot.	TY	%
Dublin	43	21	62%	18	7	39%	15	12	80%	67	40	60%
Rest of Leinster	11	10	91%	27	9	33%	3	2	66%	41	21	51%
Carlow	1	1	100%	2	1	50%				3	2	67%
Kildare				4	1	25%				4	1	25%
Kilkenny				1	1	100%				1	1	100%
Laois				3	1	33%				3	1	33%
Longford				1	0	0%	1	1	100%			
Louth	4	3	75%	3	2	66%				7	5	71%
Meath				2	0	0%				2	0	0%
Offaly				2	1	50%						
Westmeath	3	3	100%	1	0	0%	1	1	100%			
Wexford	2	2	100%	4	0	0%						
Wicklow	1	1	100%	4	2	50%	1	0	0%			
Munster	22	16	73%	20	2	10%	8	5	63%	50	23	46%
Clare	2	2	100%				1	1	100%	3	3	100%
Cork	8	7	75%	6	2	33%	4	4	100%	18	13	72%
Kerry	1	1	100%	2	0	0%	1	0	0%	4	1	25%
Limerick	4	2	50%	4	0	0%	2	0	0%	10	2	20%
Tipperary	2	2	100%	6	0	0%				8	2	25%
Waterford	5	3	60%	2	0	0%				7	3	43%
Connacht/Ulster	18	12	67%	19	5	26%	15	9	60%	52	26	50%
Cavan				2	0	0%	1	0	0%	3	0	0%
Donegal	1	0	0%	4	0	0%	7	5	71%	12	5	42%
Galway	5	3	60%	6	3	50%	4	3	75%	15	9	60%
Leitrim	1	1	100%	2	0	0%	1	0	0%	4	1	25%
Mayo	8	6	75%	3	1	33%	1	1	100%	12	8	67%
Monaghan	2	1	50%	2	1	50%				4	2	50%
Roscommon	2	1	50%				1	0	0%	3	1	33%
Sligo												
Totals	85	59	69%	85	23	27%	41	28	68%	211	110	52%

Compiled from data supplied by the Statistical Section, Department of Education and Science

In 2000, 110 (fifty-two per cent) of the 211 schools designated as 'disadvantaged' offered a Transition Year programme, a decrease from the 1998 figure of 136 (sixty-four per cent). These 110 include sixty-nine per cent of voluntary secondary schools designated 'disadvantaged', sixty-eight per cent of community and comprehensive schools and twenty-seven per cent of VEC schools so designated.

While 'educational disadvantage' is a frequently used term, it is also a broad and imprecise one. Educational disadvantage can result from a combination of factors, as implied in the definition included in the 1998 Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), and can manifest itself in different ways within schools. According to the Act, 'educational disadvantage' means "the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevents students from deriving appropriate benefit from education" (Government of Ireland, 1998, 32 (9)) One of the difficulties with that definition centres around the vague term 'appropriate benefit'. A more comprehensive description comes from the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA 1998).

'Educational disadvantage' is seen as

...the complex interaction of factors at home, in school and in the community (including economic, social, cultural and educational factors) which result in a young person deriving less benefit from formal education than their peers. As a result they leave the formal education system with few or no qualifications, putting them at a disadvantage in the labour market, curtailing personal and social development, and leading to poverty and social exclusion.

The mention of 'educational factors' - notably absent in the Act's definition - suggests a perspective that sees education provision and experience as itself having the potential to contribute to 'educational disadvantage'. The CPA definition challenges us to interrogate educational practices to see how they contribute to or alleviate 'educational disadvantage'.

### **The quality of the experience**

When disadvantaged students, their principals, co-ordinators and teachers were asked about the benefits of a Transition Year programme, they consistently highlighted the greater maturity that results from an extra year at school. Growth in self-confidence and improved self-esteem figure highly. So also does improved motivation for learning, the development of skills such as those needed for teamwork and the ability to make more informed subject choices. (TYCSS, 1999b)

Measured against the stated purposes of the re-structuring of the Senior Cycle programme, schools claim that TY is providing for 'holistic development' and fostering, "the sense of self-esteem, self-reliance and innovation which will empower them to actively shape the social and economic future of society". (Government of Ireland, 1995, p.50)

Principals' perspectives also highlight some of the issues associated with the implementation of the TYP, and how schools adapt the *Guidelines*. For example, the Principal of a community school, designated 'disadvantaged', where over 80% of students transfer to Transition Year comments:

We feel that the TY programme gives the students, especially those who are disadvantaged, a great boost in confidence. We set out to do that on the programme. We also consciously strive to 'beef up' their knowledge and skills in core areas like English, Irish and Maths - remediation and compensatory education if you like.

The Principal of a girls' school, also designated 'disadvantaged', highlights some of the challenges associated with Transition Year:

In this school the real benefits of TY can be in laying down a more concrete foundation in terms of the core subjects, filling in gaps in English and Maths especially things that might have been missed out at Junior Certificate level. Many disadvantaged students have low-self-esteem and Transition Year can give them a great boost and this can be very helpful in motivating students. In this area when refugees arrive into the school - if they are the right age - then Transition Year can be a wonderful opportunity for them to get to grips with both the language and the way of the school. Because this is an area where people don't have much money we try to run a Transition Year that won't cost a lot. We don't want to put extra burdens on poor families. We try to minimise expensive trips but then fall into the trap of being compared unfavourably with neighbouring schools. I think quite a few schools use their TY programmes as PR exercises for the whole school, laying a lot of emphasis on doing those things which cost extra.



The co-ordinator of an inner-city, girls school, also designated 'disadvantaged', points to the difficulties in getting parental approval:

Parents are still slow to warm to TY. I think in the first few years, in our efforts to 'sell' TY, we were in danger of presenting it as some kind of 'miraculous cure'. Obviously it can't cure all ills.

'Motivation' is a consistent theme running through discussions among those working with disadvantaged students. Principals and co-ordinators point out that people from disadvantaged backgrounds are rarely focused on the intrinsic value of education. 'If the Leaving Certificate milestone can be reached in five years, why should one spend six years?', is a frequently posed question. A pragmatic, utilitarian view often wins out over rhetoric about added-value, enrichment or holistic education. This can be true for both students and their parents. Thus, schools with large numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds often find themselves believing very strongly in the transformative potential of a Transition Year programme but up against the harsh reality of not being able to convince students and their parents to take the programme.

Data from the NCCA longitudinal study has strengthened the evidence base for Transition Year being of benefit to students, particularly those in schools designated 'disadvantaged' (Miller and Kelly, 1999). That study tracked those students who sat the Junior Certificate in 1994 and compared students who sat a Leaving Certificate in 1996 with those who sat it in 1997; the majority in the latter group having followed a Transition Year programme. The '97 group scored significantly higher results in terms of CAO points and were more likely to be more 'educationally adventurous'. As the NCCA commentary points out, a difference of 46 CAO points between the cohorts is of limited significance. Even when adjusted for the variables gender, school type and performance in the Junior Certificate Examination the difference is 26 points, still, according to the commentary of 'limited value'.

However, the commentary does contend that:

One of the most striking features of the data is the positive impact TY appears to have on the progress of boys in both disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged schools. .... Participation in TY appears to have a significant positive impact. But for disadvantaged students, not participating in TY appears to have a significant negative impact. (Millar and Kelly, 1999, p. xxv).

### **Emerging issues**

Within the schools 'designated disadvantage' we have little information as to which students select or are selected for Transition Year programmes. There is anecdotal evidence that in some schools the programme is specifically targeted at those who are not expected to achieve high grades in the Junior Certificate examination. However, in many schools it is often the students who are perceived as 'the least mature' who do not follow the programme. The extent to which disadvantaged students are encouraged or discouraged to take up a Transition Year, overtly or covertly, varies from school to school.

The geographical and sectoral variations in the uptake of TY prompt numerous questions. School size appears to be an important factor in whether a school can offer a Transition Year programme, especially as an option. Small schools face particular problems. For example, with current pupil:teacher ratios a school with a single class group taking a Junior Certificate can only offer students the option of a TYP if all students agree to it.

A pattern is emerging where a small, VEC school in the west or north west, appears the least likely to offer a Transition Year, whereas a school in the east of the country is most likely to offer one. If that school is fee paying, it is more likely to insist that all students follow a Transition Year programme.

There appears to be an anomalous distribution of schools designated 'disadvantaged' and this invites further questions. How much are we comparing like with like? Within the 211 schools so designated, how broad is the spectrum of 'disadvantage'? How is it that there are no 'disadvantaged' schools in County Sligo, even though in June 2000, to use one indicator from the Central Statistics Office website, Sligo's live register

indicated a greater number of people out-of-work than the combined totals of neighbouring Leitrim and Roscommon? How does one explain the fact that none of the VEC schools in Counties Clare or Roscommon 'disadvantaged', even though both counties have community schools and secondary schools so designated? What explanation can there be for the fact that five of the seven schools designated 'disadvantaged' in County Louth offer a TY while only two of the ten, similarly identified, do so in County Limerick?

Perhaps, we underestimate the significance of the choices made at school level. On what bases do school staffs and Boards of Management decide that a school will not offer TYP? How comfortable are school leaders in presenting the TY programme to parents and students? Do schools perceive the supports for such a massive curricular innovation as insufficient?

### **Implications**

In terms of meeting the needs of disadvantaged young people, the flexibility offered by the Transition Year programme would appear to make it both relevant and effective. Among recent curricular initiatives, the freedom given to schools to construct their own programmes to meet students' needs is probably greatest within Transition Year.

### **Listening to the needs**

Ideally, a school staff should begin by identifying students' needs. There are numerous ways of framing such a needs analysis; what is vital is that it takes place. Within the context of adolescents' needs, listening to students about their experiences of schooling can prompt a school staff to think both critically and imaginatively. Such listening is a core contention of Bentley's (1998) analysis and proposals. He contends that:

..... evidence suggests that many people are not coping well with the tasks and challenges of ordinary life. This includes the ability to save money for the future, to understand and persevere in relationships, to plan and manage a career, to recognise and carry out obligations as a citizen, and to cope with stress, change and insecurity.' (Bentley, 1998, p. 9).

That focus on developing competencies, while undoubtedly having limitations, is also evident in the work of Bayliss. She proposes devising a curriculum around five broad categories of competencies: for learning; for citizenship; for relating to people; for managing situations and for managing information. This can also provide a framework for constructing a TYP.

The work of Hannan and Shortall (1991) highlights the need to focus on areas such as personal and social development, preparation for adult and work roles and for civic and political education. Research by Lodge and Lynch (1999) provides sobering insights into young people's views on the quality of the relationships between students and teachers. The *States of Fear* TV documentary and accompanying book (Raftery & O'Sullivan, 1999) is a reminder of how the needs of marginalised young people can be neglected or secondary to the complex needs of the organisation.

### **Structuring a programme**

In the experience of the support service, school staffs can instinctively shape the TY programme in terms of traditional subject categories, despite the *Guidelines*' clear indications to go beyond them. Fifteen 'possible areas of experience' are identified in the appendix. They are:

1. Civic, Social and Political Education
2. Personal and Social Development
3. Health Education
4. Guidance
5. Religion
6. Philosophy
7. Aesthetics Education
8. Language Studies – Irish, English, and Other Languages
9. Mathematics
10. Science Studies
11. Environmental and Social Studies
12. Information technology

13. Practical Studies

14. Business and Enterprise Studies

15. Preparation for Adult and Working Life (Department of Education, 1993b pps 15-33)

These fifteen areas can provide one framework for devising a programme. The list shifts somewhat from traditional examination subject categories but still acknowledges their importance. Some of these areas fit neatly into regular timetable slots while others manifest themselves in 'calendar events', that is, once-off learning experiences such as field trips, classroom visitors, work experience placements or mini-companies. The devising of modules, timetabled imaginatively with some running for half or one third of the school year, has been one of the creative aspects of TY development. This usually ensures that a wide variety of areas of experience can be given sufficient amounts of time so that learning can be facilitated. Many schools develop their programmes by adding a wide range of other modules.

### **Creativity and the problem of time**

Murphy(1999), writing from the perspective of the Inspectorate, draws attention to a very positive dimension of such challenges:

Teachers engaged in the TYP have to devise, develop, resource and assess their own teaching programmes. It is not surprising that some of the most dynamic teachers in the schools are heavily involved in the TYP. They see it as an opportunity to be creative and innovative.

The 1993 *Guidelines* are less prescriptive than the 1986 *Guidelines for Schools* (Curriculum and Examination Board, 1986) from which they evolved. For a school staff to respond creatively to identified student needs by developing an imaginative, relevant Transition Year programme is both time consuming and demanding. Such time can be elusive within the busy day-to-day realities of schools. Despite repeated emphasis on the importance of a whole school approach to the Transition Year Programme (Department of Education 1993b, Doyle et al 1994, Department of Education 1996, Murphy 1999, TYCSS 1999a) individual co-ordinators, or less frequently, a core team of teachers, feel over-burdened with responsibility for the Transition Year. Not surprisingly a recent

survey of co-ordinators identified lack of time to do the job as the greatest single difficulty encountered (TYCSS, 2000). These concerns with time resonate with Hargreaves' (1994, p.95) observation : "Teachers take their time seriously. They experience it as a major constraint on what they are able and expected to achieve in their schools".

A continual tension within the work of a service supporting a curricular innovation centres around encouraging individual autonomy and creativity on the one hand, and the need for relevant, practical, efficient assistance on the other. Developing effective support while avoiding a dependency culture requires sensitivity, skill and practice. Teachers report that structured guidance on constructing a programme, *Writing the Transition Year Programme* (TYCSS, 1999a), is particularly useful in assisting them to articulate the aims and objectives for individual subjects or modules. Such a focus is especially important when responding to the needs of educationally disadvantaged students.

### **Further difficulties with 'disadvantage'**

Patterns of uptake suggest that schools designated 'disadvantaged' are less likely to offer a Transition Year than schools not so designated. The interviews with principals indicate that a variety of factors appear to influence uptake patterns. School size, geographical location, the provision of other programmes – notably the LCA - parental expectations and teacher attitudes can all play a part. Difficulties with the concept of 'educational disadvantage' further cloud any analysis.

Furthermore, official policies and practices in relation to disadvantage are not always consistent. A recent critique of the Department of Education and Science observes:

Much of the Department's involvement in areas such as educational provision, special education and social disadvantage has grown often by unrelated increments so that the Department ends up by operating a multiplicity of schemes with similar objectives, requiring multiple payments and multiple evaluations... Within the Department there is a pressing need to improve the coordination and consistency of policy on educational disadvantage.(Cromien, 2000).

## **Responding**

Just as a complex interaction of factors contribute to educational disadvantage, a varied menu of responses is called for. Because Transition Year is not identified as an intervention targeted at educational disadvantage, do we underestimate its capacity to have a significant impact on it? The flexibility of a Transition Year programme is such that it has major potential to develop schools as more relevant to the needs of disadvantaged young people.

How teachers and policy makers think about Transition Year seems to be critically important. House (1974) draws attention to the difference among educational innovations between 'variations' and 'reorientations'. The restructured senior cycle represents a major re-orientation in schools. House contends that: 'There is a strong tendency for group values to turn reorientation into variations and variations into regular practice'. (House, 1977 p.77). House believes that the success of an educational innovations also depends on 'whether an enthusiastic 'advocacy' develops around it' (p.55), a valuable insight in relation to Transition Year. It is my opinion that, particularly in relation to educational disadvantage, we need to think more in terms of TY as a radical departure rather than merely an 'add-on'.

A report from the Mol an Óige project in North Tipperary offers a strong critique of the 'add-on' perspective:

Additional resources are often seen as an opportunity to compensate for inadequacies in current practices, rather than as an opportunity to improve these practices. In this sense, they become 'add-ons' to current provision, rather than being integrated into that provision. (Condren et al. 2000).

This echoes one of the most vital sentences of the *Guidelines for Schools* (Department of Education, 1993b): "The aims and philosophy of Transition Year should permeate the entire school".

Fullan (1993 p.3) highlights the need for “a new mindset about educational change”. He identifies the fundamentally conservative nature of the education system as a central problem:

The way that teachers are trained, the way that schools are organised, the way that the educational hierarchy operates, and the way that education is treated by political decision-makers results in a system that is more likely to retain the *status quo* than to change. When change is attempted under such circumstances it results in defensiveness, superficiality or at best short-lived pockets of success.

The School Development Planning Initiative (Department of Education, 1999) offers all schools an opportunity to revisit their vision of students' educational development. In such a context the needs of disadvantaged students and the flexible possibilities offered by a TY can be usefully explored. At a wider policy level the advantages of having a Transition Year programme available to all, particularly those who are victims of educational disadvantage, deserves urgent attention.

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