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Implementing the Transition Year Programme

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Young people at age 15-16 in schools in the Republic of Ireland have the option of taking a Transition Year. This is a one- year, 'stand-alone' programme, designed by individual schools within the framework of national guidelines, that builds on the idea that mid-adolescence is very much a time of transition. It occurs after the compulsory three-year Junior Cycle (age 12-15) and Junior Certificate Examination, and before students embark on a Leaving Certificate programme for the final two years of their schooling. In the Transition Year there is a strong focus on the transition from the dependence of childhood towards the relative independence of adulthood. Within school structures, young people at that stage are in transition between the three- year Junior Certificate programme, and a two-year Leaving Certificate programme.

The mission of Transition Year 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, 1993, p.4)

Furthermore, there are three interrelated and interdependent aims:

> *1. Education for maturity with emphasis on social awareness and increased social competence.*
> *2. 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, 1993, p.4)

Individual schools, when devising Transition Year programmes, attempt to respond to a complex rationale, for example:

- To develop a learning structure that promotes maturity.
- To develop a wide range of cognitive and emotional processes.
- To be learning-led, rather than exam driven.
- To provide breadth and balance in the curriculum.
- To co-operate with all educational partners, especially parents, in providing a broad and enriching educational experience.
- To challenge students in all areas of development.
- To develop life skills.
- To encourage variety in teaching and learning.
- To learn through networking with other schools and with social agencies.
- To facilitate interdisciplinary work
- To develop basic competencies in key areas, including remediation.

- To enable students to become independent self-directed, learners.

Origins

The Transition Year (TY) was the brainchild of Richard Burke TD who, when as Minister for Education, launched the idea in 1974. As he saw it at that time, young people's lives had become highly pressurised, particularly in the race for high grades and examination success. He went on:

Comment [J1]: when Minister

> …..*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.'* (Burke, 1974)

The Minister proposed a programme 'to stop the treadmill and devote time to personal development and community service'. Early guidelines emphasised an interdisciplinary programme directed towards developing intellectual, social and emotional maturity. Suggestions for programme content included moral education, education for living, philosophy and applied logic, music and the arts, Irish Studies, 'civilisation' courses for students of continental European languages, media education and communication skills.(Department of Education, 1976).

Uptake of the new programme was slow, with three schools offering it in 1974 and a further five a year later. During its first decade, a disparate group of schools – by geography and school type - offered TY, usually to a single class group, though Newpark Comprehensive School in Dublin had over 100 students following the programme as early as 1975. None of the schools offering TY in the seventies and early eighties was fee-paying.

Further development

Government decisions in the mid-nineteen eighties to introduce a three year Junior Certificate programme to replace the former Group and Intermediate Certificates led, indirectly, to a significant rise in the number of schools offering TY. Many schools that had previously taken a four-year route to the Intermediate Certificate Examination decided to maintain their six-year cycle by inserting a Transition Year. Schools that charged fees often made this year compulsory. The number of students taking TY jumped from 484 in 1985 to 2918 in 1986 and by 1990 was over 6,000[1].

Development of Transition Year was also facilitated when the Curriculum and Examinations Board issued a set of guidelines for schools (CEB, 1986) that contained many practical suggestions for structuring and implementing the programme.

In 1991 the Government proposed that all students should have the option of a six-year cycle in school. In 1994 the senior cycle was re-structured and TY was 'mainstreamed'. This involved issuing a fresh set of *Guidelines* (Department of Education 1993), every school being invited to apply, with participation in a programme of in-service being a condition of participation. As a result of this, there was a dramatic increase in the numbers of young people taking part in TY programmes, for example, numbers jumped from over 8,000 in 1993-94 to in excess of 21,000 the following year. Participation

[1] Based on data supplied by the Statistical Section, Department of Education and Science.

rates over the subsequent decade indicate that more than two thirds of all schools offered the programme with about 40% of the age cohort of students taking the programme. Schools report a variety of reasons for undertaking the TYP. Some highlight the personal and social development opportunities for students. Others point to the benefit of students being a year old when completing school. Some schools state that, when faced with declining enrolments, TY allowed them to maintain teaching staff.

Curriculum guidelines

The *Guidelines* invite each school to shape its own Transition Year curriculum, appropriate to its own particular context:

> *Curriculum content is a matter for selection and adaptation by the individual school having regard to these guidelines, the requirements of pupils and the views of parents. In establishing the curriculum, the school should also take into consideration the possibilities offered by employers and other work-providing agencies and the wider interests of the local community.(*Department of Education, 1993, p.5)

Faithful to the original vision, a central feature of Transition Year continues to be the creation of a space to learn, mature and develop in the absence of examination pressure. Because 'points' generated in the examination at the end of the two-year Leaving Certificate (LC) are so critically important for admission to third-level education, maintaining Transition Year's identity as a stand-alone course, separate and distinct from the LC programme presents schools with major challenges. The guidelines emphasise that a Transition Year should not be seen as an opportunity for spending three years rather than two studying LC material. The guidelines also state that:

> *The programme content for Transition Year, while not absolutely excluding Leaving Certificate material, should be chosen largely with a view to augmenting the Leaving Certificate experience, laying a solid foundation for Leaving Certificate studies, giving an orientation to the world of work and, in particular, catering for the pupil's personal and social awareness/development. Where Leaving Certificate material is chosen for study it should be done so on the clear understanding that it is to be explored in an original and stimulating way that is significantly different from the way in which it would have been treated in the two years to Leaving Certificate.*
>
> (Department of Education, 1993, p.5)

This somewhat tense relationship between the Transition Year Programme (TYP) and the LC programme is a common strand in the evaluations of the programme and one that co-ordinators and school staffs struggle with to ensure 'balance'.

Because personal development and social awareness are so central to the Transition Year project, some, mistakenly, may initially interpret this emphasis as a swing away from an intellectual focus. The *Guidelines* see intellectual challenge as an essential component of all aspects the programme. The goal should be to develop in students confidence, specific study skills and an increased capacity for self-directed learning.

Transition Year is also an attempt to encourage teachers away from the traditional compartmentalized teaching of individual subjects. Interdisciplinary work is encouraged in order to promote a more unified perspective on learning.

Active teaching and learning

The programme guidelines envisage a major shift on the part of teachers to more active forms of teaching and learning.

> *A key feature of Transition Year should be the use of a wide range of teaching/learning methodologies and situations.*
>
> (Department of Education, 1993, p. 8)

Some specific approaches are proposed, including:

- negotiated learning
- personal responsibility in learning
- activity-based learning
- integration of appropriate areas of learning
- team teaching approaches
- group work: discussion, debate, interview, role play
- project work and research
- visiting speakers and seminars
- study visits and field trips
- work experience, work simulation, community service.

Assessment

While removing the pressure that results from external examinations, assessment is still an integral part of the teaching and learning process in Transition Year. Schools are invited to devise their own forms of assessment that are both diagnostic, so as to provide accurate information with regard to young people's strengths and weakness, and formative, so as to facilitate improved performance through programme planning and implementation. Some schools have responded to this opportunity by developing systems of portfolio assessment, often shifting from a traditional reliance on terminal, written examinations towards a greater emphasis on presentations of work, practically and orally. Project work, by individuals and by groups, student journals and log books, as well as reports from work experience and community service placements also feature in some schools' assessment procedures. Despite the opportunities that TY offers teachers for creative approaches in assessing students' work (Humphreys, 1998), various evaluations of TYP suggest that assessment is an area that where practices vary widely from school to school and in many cases could be 'greatly improved'.

Evaluation

Schools are obliged to document their TY programmes, not least so as to facilitate ongoing review within the school and by the Inspectorate. The suggestion is that the programme should be reviewed internally on an annual basis and revised appropriately following each review. Perhaps understandably, many schools express difficulty in getting time to execute such evaluations and revisions thoroughly.

Organisation of the TYP in schools

In practice the day-to-day running of the Transition Year programme depends very much on a core-team of teachers, in particular the person designated as 'co-ordinator'. Indeed, various studies (e.g. Department of Education, 1996; TYCSS, 2000) point to

the centrality of the co-ordinator for the successful implementation of TY programmes. The guidelines continually emphasise the importance of whole staff and whole school involvement at the various stages of design, implementation, assessment and evaluation. Keeping various stakeholders, inside and outside the school, informed about the values and practices of Transition Year is an ongoing challenge.

Individual programmes

Given the emphasis in the Transition Year *Guidelines* on personal and social development, on interdisciplinary work and on active teaching and learning methodologies, an examination of a weekly timetable needs to be augmented by looking at the 'once-off' calendar items that occur at various stages during a TYP. For example, day-long field trips, whether to mountains, woodlands, riverbanks, seashores or busy shopping centers can provide valuable data for numerous classes. Visits to court houses, to county council offices, to prisons, to numerous other workplaces, to theatres and art galleries can offer memorable reference points for learning. This is also true of visitors invited into classrooms. These range across all sections of society: including members of ethnic minorities, sporting heroes, politicians, representatives from various careers and so on. In many schools, the most dramatic and distinctly visible feature of the TY calendar is a work experience or community service placement. These are typically of one or two week's duration and are only possible with the active co-operation of employers and community interests. Many schools report these learning experiences as significant, particularly in terms of fresh perspectives on adult environments, social skills, career clarification, personal motivation and general maturity.

Quite a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), recognizing TY's potential for increased social awareness, have developed curricular materials and projects for the programme. These include agencies working in areas such as human rights, disability awareness and environmental protection. Some innovative interdisciplinary projects such as mini-company, costume design using re-cycleable materials as well as more traditional school events such as school plays, musicals and sporting events can also benefit from the time available during Transition Year. *Transition Times*, a weekly feature in the *Irish Times* has highlighted many of the more innovative dimensions of TY.

An actual TYP timetable usually includes subjects, particularly English, Mathematics and Irish, that represent a continuation of subjects previously learned at Junior Cycle. Indeed, it is in these classrooms where the challenges to implement active teaching and learning strategies appear greatest. Some schools modularise their year into two or three segments and this allows for some imaginative variations within these 'linear' subjects. A modular approach also allows students sample a variety of subjects thus enabling them to make more informed choices of LC subjects. Short courses in a variety of subjects not normally covered in the Junior or Leaving Certificate, usually related to a teacher's particular interests, allows for a great broadening of students' encounters with learning. For example, schools have offered modules in TY on Architecture, Aviation, Egyptian Studies, Development Education, Horticulture, Leisure Studies, Local history, Media Studies and Tourism. Some schools also avail of opportunity in Transition Year to develop and gain accreditation in skills as varied as computing, first aid, refereeing and swimming.

Support for the programme

One of the clear differences between the development of TY from 1993-4 onwards and the earlier years was the putting in place of a structured programme of support for schools. Indeed, a condition of participating in the mainstreaming of TYP in the nineties was that schools *had* to become involved in staff development/inservice education. Initially, this was facilitated by a team of 68 practitioners, released part-time from their schools. This team supported schools locally and regionally in designing programmes and implementing the guidelines. This model of support was deemed so successful (Lewis and MacMahon, 1996) that a dedicated team of 14 teachers was seconded from their schools between 1995 and 1998 to assist schools in developing their TY programmes. This was followed by a six-person team, appointed in 1998, that was succeeded in 2000 by an integration of the team into a composite Second Level Support Service that aids schools across a variety of initiatives. The future of this service, however, seems uncertain.

Evaluation and Inspection

During the initial year of mainstreaming(1994-'95), Department of Education inspectors looked at the TYP in 146 schools. They found that 90% were following the guidelines in a 'satisfactory' manner. They added that:

> *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 compartmentalized subject teaching, and giving students the space and time to grow in maturity and to develop in self-confidence.*
>
> (Department of Education, 1996, p.20)

This report, while echoing many of the points in the *Guidelines* and praising schools for enthusiasm and innovation, also suggested:

- More attention to interdisciplinary, cross-curricualr approaches
- Delay of LC subject choices until the end of TY (some schools had been operating what looked very like a 'three-year LC' programme)
- Further development of links with the local community
- More compensatory teaching
- More informal networking between schools for 'improving and revitalising' programmes
- Better assessment procedures
- Improved evaluation within schools

The report also noted that external evaluation would continue. A Department of Education Inspector (Murphy,1999) reported on 18 TY inspections during the year academic 1998-99. He noted that pupils enjoy TYP, valuing the opportunity to be so active in a creative way, to develop many technical and interpersonal skills and to sample different subjects. He also noted their appreciation of the bonding effects of the TYP on inter-pupil relationships and on pupil-teacher relationships.

Murphy also described TYP as 'a most effective form of teacher in-service training', noting that, 'like the TYP itself, it is a case of learning by doing'. He stated that:

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.

Parents' attitudes to the programme have been tinged with ambiguity from the outset. According to Murphy:

Parents' attitudes to the Programme seem to undergo a significant transformation in the course of the year during which their children are doing TYP. Many of them are quite sceptical about the TYP before the year begins. By the end of the year they tend to be much more positive about its benefits. The change in traditional homework patterns and the perception of parents that the school's role should be exclusively academic are two of the factors contributing to some parents prejudiced view of the TYP. The experience of seeing their children mature through their TYP experiences does much to alter their original perceptions. Needless to say, if pupils do not commit themselves to the TYP, and a number don't, their parents are quite justified in questioning its value for their children. (Murphy, 1999)

The reality in schools

Across the country there are teachers, students and parents who are still far from convinced about TY's merits. Even in schools where the programme appears established, principals and teachers report that convincing each fresh cohort of students and their parents of the value of TY is an annual challenge. Furthermore, whether teachers are enthusiastic, lukewarm or even doubtful about TY's benefits, they find the tasks of designing, implementing, assessing and evaluating a TYP every year very challenging. This is partly because of the extensive demands made by other, more established programmes and partly due to many teachers' limited experience of curriculum development.

Writing the Programme

Both the support service and the Inspectorate noted in their respective work in the late 1990s that many school staffs were experiencing major difficulties in providing written descriptions of their programmes. In many cases, imaginative programmes, or at least components of programmes, were being implemented but the only one who knew in any detail what was going on was the teacher. The weakness of such ad-*hoc* approaches, especially for consolidation and development of the TYP, was clear. Collaborative work between the support service and the Inspectorate resulted in the production of *Writing the Transition Year Programme* (TYCSS, 1999) a guide on how TY programmes might be documented. The basic rationale was that documenting a programme that is school designed and school specific is both professionally responsible and practically useful.

This guide proposes that a TY programme might be written in three parts. The initial section might set out a general introduction to the school's TY programme, relating it to the national guidelines and to the school's overall mission. Ideally the aims should be the result of a process of consultation with all the partners in the school community and should be stated clearly.

The second part of a school's written programme might include the programmes for individual subjects and modules. A format for documenting this is offered:

- Title of subject or module
- Approximate duration of module
- Aims
- Objectives
- Teaching and learning strategies
- Content
- Assessment
- Resources
- Links with other subject
- Evaluation.

Extensive example of aims, objectives and teaching and learning strategies are provided.

The guide proposes that the third part might include organisational details including names of co-ordinator and core-team members, students and the weekly timetable, main calendar features, assessment and certification details, finances, procedures for evaluation. Explanations and examples of technical terms are offered.

Research

A longitudinal study of those students who sat the Junior Certificate Examination (JCE) in 1994 drew much public attention to the TYP (Millar and Kelly, 1999). Comparing those who sat the Leaving Certificate Examination in 1996 with those who took the examination a year later, this research indicated that the latter group – the vast majority of whom had followed the TYP – tended to achieve more CAO points than the former. The raw difference was 46 CAO points and, when adjusted for gender, school type and previous performance in the JCE, amounted to 26 points. The report also noted the positive impact TY appears to have on the progress of boys in both disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged schools. This study also suggests that following a TY, students are more likely to be educationally adventurous with regard to the subjects they select for LC, for example, more likely to take up a subject *ab initio.* The commentary by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) accompanying the report notes:

> *While it cannot be concluded that participation in TY is the cause of this gain in CAO points, the data do point to a strong relationship between enhanced academic performance and TY.* (Millar and Kelly, 1999, p. xxvi).

Perhaps ironically, some schools subsequently found this data more effective at convincing students and their parents about the value of the TYP than extolling the virtues of a holistic educational experience.

Subsequent work by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (Smyth et al, in press) also examined the relationship between Transition Year participation and LC performance and founds results 'broadly consistent with the difference found in the NCCA study'. This report also draws attention to schools where the programme is optional and suggests that 'there is evidence that students with behavioural difficulties may be discouraged from participating the programme'. It notes the funding

implications of specific activities and observes that ‘additional financial resources are particularly relevant in more disadvantaged schools where it may not be appropriate to expect students (or their parents) to fund specific activities’.

Smyth et al (in press) identify ‘lack of time’ as the main resource constraint on the effective management of the TYP. These researchers also state that ‘current timetabling structures within schools militate against the development of interdisciplinary course, for example, in restricting opportunities for team teaching’. They also commented on variations across schools and across students who opt for TY. Their study makes the observation that it is difficult to capture the effects of TY on the development of ‘soft skills’ such as young people’s personal and social skills.

The pattern of uptake of the TY P by school type and geography since 1994 also shows numerous local variations (Jeffers, 2002). In general, the programme has been slightly more popular among girls than boys, on the east coast than on the west coast, in larger schools than in smaller ones and in non-disadvantaged schools than in schools designated disadvantaged. There is some evidence of TY’s potential to make a substantial impact on educational disadvantage but this requires specific targeting, relevant programme development and adequate support.

On-going research by this author suggests that schools adapt the TYP to fit with their own visions of their core missions. For example, schools with strong academic traditions are likely to emphasise the academic benefits of TY while schools designated disadvantaged may see TY as a practical way of increasing the number of their students proceeding to third-level. Schools with a strong commitment to holistic education will highlight personal and social development while schools with low public profiles may find TY an effective vehicle for projecting the school’s image as innovative and progressive to the local community.

Students consistently report that they greatly value the improved teacher-student relationships that emerge through TYP as well as the opportunities for learning beyond the classroom. This research also finds that a tension between an instrumentalist view of schooling – favouring a five-year cycle - and a more developmental perspective – which sees TY as a core component of a six-year cycle – leads to ambiguous attitudes to TY among all stakeholders.

Conclusion

Transition Year represents an attempt to introduce innovative thinking about young people's learning at the critical stage of mid-adolescence. The programme devolves extensive responsibility to individual schools, principals, co-coordinators and teachers to devise, implement, assess and evaluate programmes. Evidence so far suggests that to implement the TYP effectively requires sustained vision, effort, commitment and support, particularly by teachers and educational leaders. The quality of the experience appears to vary widely among students and teachers. Three decades after its inception, Transition Year is well embedded in some schools while in others it is still very much a focus of contention and debate. The aspiration in the *Guidelines* that

> *The aims and philosophy of Transition Year should permeate the entire school.* (Department of Education, 1993, p.4)

still presents a major challenge to most schools. Yet, TY's emphasis on integrated, holistic and imaginative learning experiences, is a very worthy goal for any school.

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