The Role of Schools in Developing Responsible and Participative Citizens

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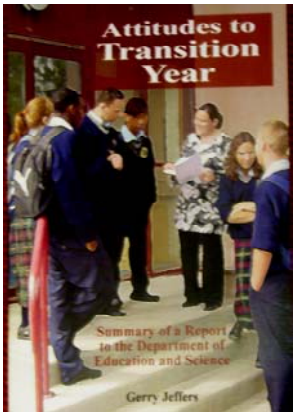
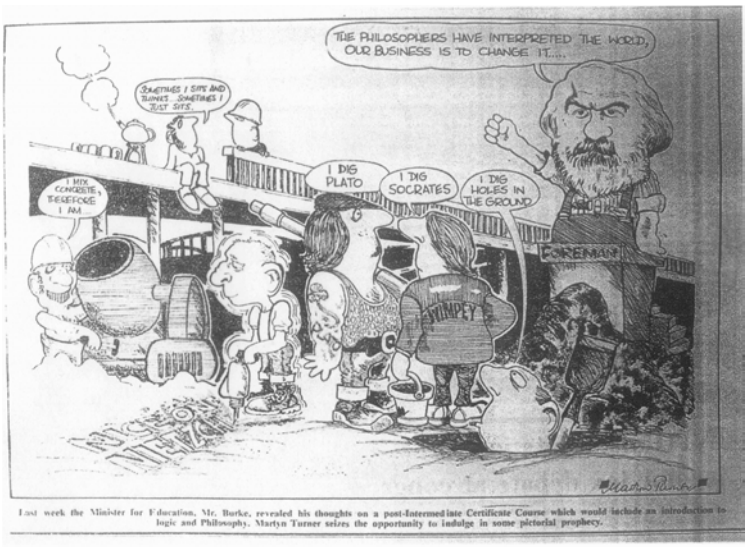


In focusing on some possible ways that schools can nurture responsible and participative citizens, the intention in this presentation is to use Transition Year as a particular lens. The plan is also to identify some of the obstacles within schools that inhibit realizing these aspirations. The selection of issues is informed especially by *Attitudes to Transition Year* (Jeffers, 2007) a research report commissioned by the Department of Education and Science.

At the outset it is worth recording the journey Transition Year has traveled since 1974 and the contribution the programme has made to the development of students, teachers and schools. The TY project was a solo run by the Minister for Education Richard Burke, TD. He launched his proposal on an unsuspecting public in April 1974, suggesting that schools might start TY the following September. A core part of the original vision was articulated as follows:

> Because of the growing pressures on students for high grades and competitive success, educational systems are becoming, increasingly, academic tread-mills. 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 tread-mill 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)

Initial reactions were less than enthusiastic. An early Martyn Turner cartoon from the *Education Times* captures some of the scepticism that greeted the proposal. Only three schools offered a TY programme in September 1974.



Last week the Minister for Education, Mr. Burke, revealed his thoughts on a post-Intermediate Certificate Course which would include an introduction to logic and Philosophy. Martyn Turner seizes the opportunity to indulge in some pictorial prophecy.

The Education Times 2nd May 1974

12 years later, when plans to introduce the Junior Cert threatened the six-year cycle of some schools, many saw offering TY as a lifeline. A new set of guidelines from the forerunner of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (CEB, 1986) also consolidated the programme. However, uptake was very limited until the mainstreaming in 1994 when, for the first time, the Department of Education offered schools practical professional support through the first TY support service. Indeed, the history of TY, some of which is set out in Chapter 1 of *Attitudes to Transition* Year, is an instructive case study of curriculum development. The fact that in the 2007-08 school year 27,760 students, representing 48.3% of the previous year's Junior Certificate cohort indicates the journey traveled since 1974. The data also remind us that a sizeable proportion of students do not benefit from TY.

*Attitudes to Transition Year (*Jeffers, 2007) researched the TY programme in some depth in six schools where the programme was 'well-regarded'. An overwhelming majority of students, teachers, school leaders and parents were of the view that students mature during TY, that they grow in confidence, that bonding between classmates grows and that student-teacher relationships improve. Opportunities to explore adult and working life are appreciated and the general view is that students' personal and social development is enhanced.

Students' enthusiasm for the programme is striking. The following sentiments are not untypical:

> When I look back at my school years, I know one of my best memories will be of TY. That's what I am going to remember about school because it is one of the best experiences that I have had. Definitely.
>
> Barbara, Sixth Year, Oak School

> Friendship was one very interesting thing. I am very close with everyone who did TY. … Also there was a lot of things that I am not afraid to take responsibility for now. That's one thing that I noticed; I do try and help out on a lot of things, even outside of school and in school.
>
> Kenneth, Sixth Year, Sycamore School

Students are quite nuanced in what they have to say about the programme. Positive dispositions to TY are frequently juxtaposed with their memories of Junior Cycle.

> …. in Third year you're underlining things and you're told to learn it, but in Transition Year it's not so much about opening the book and learning it, it's … everyone kind of participates in class and gives ideas. It's not just the teacher teaching; it's us helping each other as well, and we're discussing a lot.
>
> Deirdre, Fourth year, Ash School

Improved student-teacher relationships in TY is a persistent theme. This is frequently linked to learning activities that take place beyond the traditional classroom. For example,

> We went to the Gaeltacht and when we go away for a weekend you interact much more (with teachers). They are like one of the girls. You wouldn't have thought the teachers had a personality. You get on much better with the teachers. You get to know the teachers themselves … They say that themselves and they say that in fourth year they are not going to spoon-feed you.
>
> Margaret, Fourth year, Oak School

Students, teachers, school leaders and parents are very positive about how TY can build links between schools and their local communities. Students rate active learning opportunities highly. Their emphasis on activities such as work experience, community service, trips, plays, musicals and minicompanies often contrasts with their relative silence about more conventional classrooms.

Impact on school climate

Teachers perceive TY as impacting positively on the climate of the school. The thrust of the perceived improvements resonate very much with the vision set out by the NCCA *Developing Senior Cycle, Directions for Development.* (NCCA, 2003). The following remarks from a teacher in one of the two schools in the study that were designated 'disadvantaged' at the time capture this perspective:

> TY brings out facets of students' personalities not brought out by normal academic curricula. This produces a very nice atmosphere in the school. It has matured students and given them confidence. This reduces behaviour problems in Fifth and Sixth year (generally). Teacher 29, Beech School

The consistency of students remarking about improved student-teacher relationships deserves further consideration. At one level it can be seen as confirmation from students about how central relationships are to a good school. At another level it is a further reminder of how poorly these students tend to regard student-teacher relationships within Junior Cycle and how urgent Junior Cycle reform is.

It is commonplace to speak nowadays about living in a fast-changing society. Examples cited often include globalisation, technological innovation, inward migration and changing view of authority. It does appear that many parents over the last quarter of a century in Ireland have a less authoritarian relationship with their teenage children than what they experienced as teenagers. Furthermore, many school students nowadays also work part-time in paid employment. In this capacity some exercise quite responsible roles including supervision of fellow workers. The recent TV programme *My Generation* (RTE, October 7th, 2008) illustrated well the contrasting relationships young people experience at home, among peers, in the workplace and in school. This altered state adds an urgency to schools' need to be more inventive in devising meaningful opportunities for second- level students to exercise real responsibilities.

Power of the co-ordinator

Transition Year co-ordinators are particularly well positioned to promote more participative and challenging activities in schools. A cultural changes in many schools -

emanating directly from TY's mainstreaming - is the growing acceptance by colleagues that the TY co-ordinator plays a key leadership role. For example, teachers identify the work done by the TY co-ordinator as the most important in-school factor that contributes to the success of the programme (Jeffers, 2007, p.121). The main factors and inhibitors are set out below:

In school Factors to contribute to the success of TY	**In school factors that inhibit TY**
The work done by the TY co-ordinator	Lack of sufficient time for teachers to work together in planning the TY programme
The TY programme that we as a school community designed	Limited in-service training
The commitment of the teaching staff to the TY programme	Students' lack of interests in and commitment to the TY programme.
The work done by the core-team	A shortage of finance
The students' interest in and commitment to the TY programme	The absence of regular review and evaluation on the TY programme.
The imagination, creativity and expertise of the teaching staff	

The importance of voice

A consistent finding among senior cycle students across the six schools studied is how much they value classes where their opinions are sought and listened to. A student in one of the schools designated 'disadvantaged;' put it like this:

> In class we would talk with the teacher about whatever was popular and you would just talk about it and that was good because you get to express your own opinions about things that you probably wouldn't in any other way… I think that's what fourth year is for, to get you used to speaking in public. Eric, Fifth year, Beech School

Again, the persistent contrast they make is between their experiences of TY and those during Junior Cycle. Rudduck and Flutter (2004, p.139 sqq) contend that the transformative potential of consulting pupils is considerable. As already mentioned, parent-child relations have altered significantly in recent years. This broad social trend reflects the conceptualisation of child embodied in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. The Convention arose in the 1980s out of a concern to make more explicit the principles of the Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1957) as applied to children. Ireland

ratified this Convention in 1992 and is one of over 190 states that have signed up to uphold children's rights. Once a country has ratified the convention, it is obliged under international law to comply with its principles and standards. In Ireland, a National Children's Strategy (2000) was drawn up, a National Children's Office put in place and an Ombudsman for Children established. There is some evidence that the values of the Convention are reflected in the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) , Educational Welfare Act (2000) the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) (2004) . However, at least one informed commentator believes that the inadequacy of law and policy remains a general barrier to the protection of children's rights (Kilkelly, 2007, p.172). Clearly, structured initiatives to promote children's rights are only beginning. .

Article 12 of the Convention, for example, has particular implications for schools. It presents a major challenge to the cultures that prevail in some schools when it says:

> 1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
>
> 2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

A UNICEF interpretation of this article in 'child-friendly' language states: '***You have the right to give your opinion, and for adults to listen and take it seriously'.*** One indication of how schools might be changing as places of learning would be the growing visibility of this right on notices and posters on school corridors and in classrooms. Resistance to such a relatively simple suggestion might also be indicative.

The Tyranny of Timetables

School personnel often offer the 'limitations of the timetable' as a significant constraint on promoting student participation. An almost obsessive focus on examinations can further inhibit active participation. The following comment illustrates how TY can provide a different perspective:

> (Junior Cert. classes are) forty minutes of work. It's, like, 'Good morning', and then they start writing on the board and then 'This is your homework' and 'Good bye', where you don't talk to them at all; whereas this year you get to know the teachers more in person and you can talk to them and you can interact much better. You get to know each other much more. Iris, Fourth year, Oak School

The insistent organisation of almost every day in school into neat, tidy 40 minute slots prompted Trant and O Donnabháin a decade ago to describe the school timetable as 'a masterpiece of nineteenth century efficiency'. They continued:

> The traditional timetable is still largely unchallenged and not only exerts a constraining influence on the creative life of the school, but is also the official instrument used for purposes of educational accountancy. Whatever is not on the timetable, does not exist. (Trant and Ó Donnabháin, 1998, p.77).

The mainstreaming of TY has resulted in a serious challenge to the traditional school arrangement of time (40 minute units) and space (conventional classrooms). Arguably, one of TY's particular contributions to school development is how it has enabled schools to demonstrate that learning beyond conventional time and space is not only possible but desirable. TY's breakout from over rigid timetabling is driven by a growing belief in the power of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). The limitations of 40 minute learning units are clearly exposed when one is committed to extending the learning environment beyond the conventional classroom and providing sufficient time for de-briefing following an activity. For example, work experience and community service placements, a wide range of learning-focused trips, the growing use of triple and quadruple blocks on timetables indicate that not only can the weekly timetable be varied but that a calendar approach to learning opportunities should complement the weekly timetable. As well as been driven by an appreciation of experiential forms of learning, imaginative timetabling also appears to reflect an implicit adoption of what Hargreaves *et al* (1996) identified as three of the necessary characteristics of curricula for adolescents: they should be 'challenging,

imaginative and relevant' (Hargreaves *et al,* 1996, p.80)

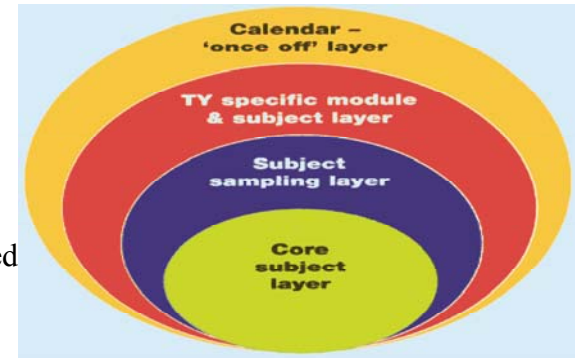
Experiential learning activities such as community service or work experience placements have been among the most visible and dramatic deviations from traditional timetabling. Young people frequently mention these as among the highlights of TY. There is growing evidence that week-long placements can assist young people in making important career related – and at times life-altering - decisions. For example:

> First of all (TY) is really good because of the work experience. If I hadn't done it – I did my work experience with mentally handicapped kids, I wouldn't have found my vocation. That's what I want to do, like. Before I was just thinking generally of nursing but I hadn't even thought of doing anything with the mentally handicapped. Mairéad, Sixth Year, Ash School

There is, however, some anecdotal evidence that not all students are given sufficient opportunities for de-briefing following placements. Not only does this limit the learning possibilities it may leave certain difficult issues encountered during the placement unresolved . At another level, the growing popularity of getting TY students, in particular, to collect substantial amounts of money to fund themselves to visit a developing country is a new development that needs some interrogation. Such experiences offer major possibilities for young people to deepen their knowledge and challenge their attitudes about global inequalities. However, such learning does not happen automatically and, for many, will require extensive supportive scaffolding and structured de-briefing. Otherwise, the activity could degenerate into a form of irresponsible educational tourism.

The Integration Challenge

Whereas TY can offer clear opportunities for young people to participate in a range of responsible activities, the programme is not without its difficulties. Two in particular deserve mention here. Firstly, there is the difficulty that, in some schools, TY can appear internally disjointed and fragmented The Transition Year Curriculum Support



Service (TYCSS, 1998) devised the metaphor of the four layered onion to draw attention to this issue. Too often what happens on the outer 'calendar' layer embodies essential TY values but these diminish as one examines each layer. Thus, while outer layer activities may be highly active and participative, classrooms in core subject may be very similar to those in 3rd year or 5th year with extensive passive, book-focused teaching and limited audibility of students' voices.

The challenge is to ensure that the TY mission statement operates at all four levels of 'the onion':

> **TY mission statement**: 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

Secondly, there is the deep-seated difficulty of TY being regarded as a type of 'parallel universe' (Jeffers, 2007) where what happens during TY is regarded as disconnected with what preceded it or what follows. The image of the first three years of second-level schooling as a journey down a busy motorway, followed by TY as a sort of lay-by where one might view the surrounding scenery, and then 5th year as a return to the fast-paced motorway seems, unfortunately, to persist in some schools. This imagery leads one to pose some disturbing questions: to what extent has the growth in popularity of TY inhibited reform of the Junior Certificate or the established Leaving Certificate? By addressing such a range of personal and social development issues, does TY function as a sort of safety valve for the rest of the pressure-cooker like system? If there was no TY would the JC and eLC have been forced to engage more with work experience, links with local communities, experiential learning and much more?

Teacher development

TY's development of participative and responsible young people has been greatly facilitated by their teachers. The original vision of TY saw the innovation as being developmental for both students and teachers. The former Minister said:

> I could foresee, again extrapolating from my own personal experience, that if you put people into the deep end here (with TY) they would really have to sink or swim; but I knew they would swim because 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 (TY) was, in a sense, an emancipation of the teaching profession to educate as distinct from grind.
>
> Richard Burke, personal interview, 2001

In *Attitudes to Transition Year* 69% of the teachers believed that TY had helped them develop professionally. There is a presumption in the Minister's assertion that teachers would automatically rise to the professional challenges posed by TY. The evidence does not support this. TY values challenge the existing *status quo* and TY is continually in danger of being colonised by the values associated with the established Leaving Certificate and the associated points system. Structured professional development around TY is essential at the personal, cluster and school levels.

Particular concerns

There are other concerns about TY if it is to fulfil its mission. Some are discussed in *Attitudes to Transition Year* so here the intention is to flag them. Firstly, what emerges from the data is a picture of schools *domesticating* TY, that is adapting and shaping the programme to fit with an individual school's view of itself, its history and mission. Domestication also involves schools deciding to ignore particular features of the *Guidelines*. This is somewhat linked to the challenge already mentioned of resisting the trend to be colonised by the established Leaving Certificate and the associated points system. Support - to a greater or lesser extent - for what is sometimes spoken of as 'a three-year Leaving Certificate' varies from school to school but represents a continual challenge. The challenge, already mentioned, of not viewing TY as a 'parallel universe', disconnected from what precedes it or follows it, further complicates the 'three-year LC' issue. Perhaps the 'egg crate' mentality (Lortie, 1975) that reinforces cultures of teacher isolation is what needs to be challenged most of all: good teaching in schools is both an individual and a *collegial* practice. The 'parallel universe' perspective is also evident in a disconnected view of programmes generally and in the proliferation of support services for schools that appear quite independent of each other. TY would undoubtedly benefit from more integrated thinking and integrated practice. Finally, there is the continual need to explain in meaningful terms to students and parents the essence of TY. Resistance to the programme is real. For example,

> I think Fourth year is a waste of time … you just go on trips and all of that and I wouldn't be really interested in them. I find it very hard to study as it is and if they gave me a year practically off I wouldn't be able to start studying in Fifth year and would probably fail (the LC) … I don't see the point.
>
> Cormac, Third year, Chestnut School.

Task Force on Citizenship

Schools' formal and informal mandate from the wider society is complex and multi-layered. There are some signs that some people outside the education system see a need for schools to increase their efforts to in developing participative and active citizens. For example, the Task Force on Active Citizenship (2007) sets out a vision as follows:

> …being an active citizen means being aware of, and caring about, the welfare of fellow citizens, recognising that we live as members of communities and therefore depend on others in our daily lives.

The report lists some of the activities that active citizens engage in, including:

- Support and become involved in different types of voluntary and community activities
- Respect and listen to those with different view from their own
- Play their part in making decisions on issues that affect themselves and others, in particular by participating in the democratic process
- Respect ethnic and cultural diversity and are open to change
- Welcome new people who come to live in Ireland

Furthermore, some of the recommendations have a direct bearing on education, for example:

- Expanding education for citizenship in schools
- Recognising the crucial role of school ethos and social equality Ensuring that every TY student can take part in 'an active community-based project' (such as Young Social Innovators)
- Strengthening CSPE and having senior cycle follow up
- More 'service learning' at 3rd level
- Gaisce type award for three month 'civic engagement' (in Ireland or overseas)
- Ireland to take part in International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2009[1]

[1] The purpose of The International Civics and Citizenship Education Study is to investigate the ways in which young people are prepared to undertake their roles as citizens. ICCS builds on two previous international studies of civics and citizenship education, both carried out by the IEA. The first, Six-Subject Study, was conducted in 1971 when eight countries (including Ireland) participated; the second, CIVED, was conducted in 1999 in 29 countries (Ireland did not participate). It is planned, through the use of common test and questionnaire items, to establish trend data with CIVED

ICCS is a study of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) which is being implemented by a consortium of four institutions: the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER, England), the Laboratorio di Pedagogia Sperimentale (LPS, Universita' Degli Studi, Roma Tre, Italy) and the IEA Data Processing Centre (DPC, Germany). In Ireland, the study is implemented by the Educational Research Centre under the guidance of a national advisory committee.

There are encouraging signals within this report of a growing appreciation of how critically important education for participation and citizenship is for the well-being of society.

Conclusion

When it comes to participation and responsibility, schools teach by *what* they teach, by *how* they teach and, very powerfully, by *the kind of places they are.* Transition Year is increasingly seen as a valuable site for learning about participation and responsibility.

One of the challenges for TY is to develop further opportunities for practical participation and responsibility. I think there are possibilities by identifying the broad parameters of a new form of school service to the community. This thinking is as follows:

In each local community there are many vulnerable people. As well as being supported by various health professionals, many of these people's lives could be greatly enriched by non-specialised help. Think of a child with a disability whose parents might like to avail of time to get out for shopping. Think of older people who have difficulty maintaining their gardens. Think of someone recently arrived in Ireland for whom English is not their first language and who could benefit from conversational practice. Then imagine teenagers volunteering to give freely of their time, say in 30 minutes slots, to provide such services. Next consider the possibility of schools being the focal point in communities through which vulnerable people might access such support. Senior students, with a small amount of teacher support and scaffolding, are well capable of taking responsibility for initiating, organising and delivering such a service. Transition Year is an ideal place for such an initiative to begin.

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