

# Attitudes to Transition Year

*A Report to the Department of Education and Science*

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## Introduction

### Context and background

This research was commissioned by the Department of Education and Science (DES). The brief was to focus on a small number of schools where the Transition Year (TY) programme 'is well regarded', eliciting attitudes to this curricular innovation from students, parents and teachers.

Since its introduction in 1974, attitudes to TY have ranged from the enthusiastic to the sceptical and dismissive. Initially, a very small number of schools offered the programme. Altered arrangements relating to the introduction of the Junior Certificate (JC) resulted in an increase in provision during the late 1980s. However, numbers following TY remained relatively low. In 1990, for example, nine out of ten JC candidates did not proceed to TY. The 1994 mainstreaming of TY increased participation rates dramatically. In 1994-95, 21,085 students in 450 schools followed the programme. This represented 31.3 per cent of the cohort that sat the JC examination that summer, an increase of 148 per cent over the previous year. By 1996, over 500 schools offered TY. The figures for 2006-07 are: 27,090 students in 543 schools, representing 46.7 per cent of the cohort that completed a JC.

Official attitudes to TY have also been mixed. The 1980 *White Paper on Education Development*, for example, despite including a chapter on 'Curriculum Developments' makes no explicit reference whatsoever to TY. In 2001, the DES, in describing the Irish Education System on its website ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)) stated that 'TY is now firmly embedded in the system....' Individual Ministers have tended to articulate support for the programme. In 2005, the current Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hanafin T.D., declared herself to be 'completely, absolutely and positively in favour of Transition Year'. Proposals from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) for a restructured senior cycle have triggered fresh thinking about TY and its future.

While there is much that can be learned from TY's development since 1974, the main thrust of this report is on the experience of schools since the 1994 mainstreaming. Chapter 1 reviews the historical development of TY and introduces some of the programme's main features. The rationale for the approach to the research is set out in Chapter 2. Separate chapters on the attitudes of students, teachers and parents follow. Chapter 6 presents profiles six schools that offer TY. The main themes emerging from the data in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 are selected and distilled in Chapter 7. Finally, Chapter 8 discusses some of the issues arising from the research and locates it in the wider context of school and policy issues in Ireland and internationally. Those seeking a broad overview of the report may prefer to focus on Chapters 7 and 8. A condensed summary is also included.

This report follows an interim report that was submitted to the DES in December 2004. The current report was written, intermittently, since then. Illness, and recovery from that, between September 2006 and February 2007 further delayed the completion of the report.

Thanks is due to numerous people who co-operated in the production of this report. Firstly, thanks to those in the two schools that facilitated the piloting of the research and the those in a third school where the teacher questionnaire was refined further. Particular thanks is due to the students, teachers, parents, principals and co-ordinators in the six schools that volunteered to take part in the main research. Throughout the study, Dr Jim Gleeson of the University of Limerick posed constructive questions and offered challenging proposals and was most supportive. Dr Anne Lodge assisted in the construction of the original questionnaire. She, and my other colleagues in the Education Department, NUI Maynooth, gave generously of their time on many occasions to discuss informally particular aspects of the TY project. Particular thanks is also due to Michael O'Leary, National Co-Ordinator of the Transition Year Programme, for his support. Finally, numerous other students, teachers, co-ordinators and principals shared their opinions about TY with me and such comments, even when challenging, were always welcome.

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## **Abbreviations used in this report**

ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland
CAO	Central Applications Office
CEB	Curriculum and Examinations Board (1982–1986)
CSPE	Civic, Social and Political Education
DoE	Department of Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools
DES	Department of Education and Science (since 1997)
ESF	European Social Fund
ERC	Educational Research Centre
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
JC	Junior Certificate
LC	Leaving Certificate
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
NEC	National Education Convention
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (1986- )
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
RSE	Relationships and Sexuality Education
SLSS	Second-Level Support Service
SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education
TY	Transition Year
TYO	Transition Year Option (1986-1994)
TYP	Transition Year Programme (1994- )
TU	Transition Unit
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
WSE	Whole School Evaluation

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	ii
Abbreviations used in this report.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Summary.....	vii
Chapter 1:   Origins and Development of Transition Year.....	1
Chapter 2:   Methodology.....	23
Chapter 3:   Student Attitudes.....	35
Chapter 4:   Teachers’ Perspectives of Transition Year .....	78
Chapter 5:   Parents’ Points of View.....	129
Chapter 6:   School Profiles.....	143
<i>Ash School</i> .....	143
<i>Beech School</i> .....	159
<i>Chestnut School</i> .....	174
<i>Maple School</i> .....	194
<i>Oak School</i> .....	208
<i>Sycamore School</i> .....	225
Chapter 7:   Synopsis of Attitudes to Transition Year.....	242
Chapter 8:   Discussion of Selected Issues.....	264
Chapter 9:   Recommendations.....	327
Bibliography.....	334
Appendix 1:  Case record material, additional illustrative comments from Students.....	340
Appendix 2:  Interview schedules.....	342
Appendix 3:  Questionnaire.....	350



## Summary

### Background

Mainstreaming Transition Year (TY) in 1994, 20 years after it was first introduced into Irish schools, marked the third stage in the programme's development. Uptake increased dramatically and in the 2006-07 school year, 27,090 young people in 543 schools are enrolled as TY students.

TY offers students 'a broad educational experience with a view to the attainment of increased maturity' (DoE, 1993c, p.3). Schools are given extensive freedom to devise programmes that promote personal, social, intellectual and vocational development. The Transition Year Programme, Guidelines for Schools (DoE, 1993c) lays particular emphasis on developing social awareness, increasing social competence, promoting self-directed learning and learning through experience of adult and working life.

This research was commissioned by the Department of Education and Science (DES). The brief was to focus on a small number of schools where TY 'is well regarded', eliciting attitudes to this curricular innovation from students, parents and teachers. Adopting a case study approach and using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data-gathering techniques, the research centred on TY in six different schools. Having outlined the programme's origins and development since 1974 and explained the methodology used, the report presents separate chapters on students' attitudes to TY, teachers' perspectives and parents' points of view. These are followed by profiles of the six schools, a distillation of the main findings and a discussion chapter.

### Perceptions of outcomes of TY

A consistent thread through the data from all informants is that students are more mature as a result of the TY experience. There is also consensus that TY promotes young people's confidence, improves bonds between classmates and facilitates better relationships between students and teachers. Opportunities to explore adult and working life, particularly through work experience placements, are seen as distinct benefits of TY. Many of the teachers indicate that TY has a positive impact on school climate. Their remarks suggest that TY can be very effective in bringing about the

changes in school culture at senior cycle advocated by the NCCA in Developing Senior Cycle, Directions for Development (NCCA, 2003b).

### **Dominant attitudes to TY**

Interviewed during the course of TY, young people tend to be very enthusiastic about the programme. Frequently, they contrast TY with their experiences in Junior Cycle, which many of them describe as pressurised and examination-driven. They highlight TY activities that involve learning beyond conventional classrooms. They value classes in which their opinions are sought and listened to.

Third year students seem to make up their minds whether to do TY, or not, well in advance of Third year. These decisions are often quite arbitrary. In the two schools designated 'disadvantaged', Beech School and Oak School, evidence suggests that teachers can play a significant role in assisting students in this decision-making process.

Fifth and Sixth year students echo many of the points made by their Fourth Year peers. Some also spoke about TY in terms of personal freedom and becoming more responsible for their own learning. A shift towards more active, engaging forms of learning is detected, though students perceive this as more evident in some subjects/modules than in others. Fifth and Sixth year students sometimes indicate a tension between the emphasis on a broad education for maturity (in TY) and the demands of the LC and the associated points system.

Interviews with parents in Maple School and Oak School revealed that, while relatively comfortable when talking about their own sons' and daughters' experiences of TY, they seemed reluctant to venture far beyond this. In each school, parents identified TY very closely with the co-ordinator, speaking in warm, appreciative terms about these two teachers in particular. Parents highlighted the variety of learning situations outside the classroom – trips, musicals, fund-raising projects etc. – as valuable opportunities that enabled their children to relate to each other and to their teachers in more varied ways than within conventional classrooms.



Parents frequently stated that their knowledge of TY was limited. They would welcome opportunities to hear more about it. Parents' stated desire for more knowledge about TY contrasts with teachers' perceptions, as a majority of teachers believe that parents are well informed about TY.

While generally positive about TY's contribution to their children's development, parents voiced concern about two possible negative outcomes. Firstly, there was apprehension that TY could drift from 'an academic focus'. Secondly, some parents expressed concern that, having undertaken a TY, a student might leave school before completing the LC. In Oak School, parents expressed some frustration, contrasting what they saw as a most worthwhile TY for their daughters with ones of a poorer quality for their sons.

A detailed questionnaire (Appendix 3) elicited the views of 113 teachers on more than one hundred aspects of TY. The evidence points to teachers supporting the aspirations of TY, recognising how many young people benefit from the programme, especially in their personal and social development. Teachers also regard TY as having positive effects on the school climate, but express reservations about aspects of TY in practice.

A majority of teachers indicated that they liked teaching TY classes, appreciating the freedom and flexibility it offers. As to whether teachers would like a prescribed syllabus for their subjects, or prefer a three-year LC programme, opinions were strongly divided. About half those surveyed believe there is a lack of resources for TY, though one third disagree with that statement, suggesting that the shortage may be subject specific.

While a majority believe that the programme is now firmly embedded in the Irish education system, more mixed views are evident in response to the statement: 'Transition Year is well supported by the Department of Education and Science.'

### **Attitudes regarding effective implementation**

The data suggest that a web of factors inter-connect to ensure effective programmes. The breadth of particular programmes appears especially relevant; to be successful

TY needs varied experiences, inside and outside classrooms, that are well-planned, engaging and developmental throughout the year

Across the six schools, teachers identify the most important in-school factors that contribute to the perceived success of their programmes as: the work done by the TY co-ordinator; the TY programme that the school community designed; the commitment of the teaching staff; the work done by the core-team; and, the students' interest in and commitment to the TY programme.

In-school factors perceived as militating against the success of TY include: lack of sufficient time for teachers to work together in planning the TY programme; limited in-service training; students' lack of interest in and commitment to TY; a shortage of finance; and, the absence of regular review and evaluation of TY.

External factors rated by teachers as most important for TY's success are: the work experience opportunities provided by employers; the engagement with the local community, and the involvement and support of parents.

The main external factors impeding TY's development are seen as: negative attitudes of some parents; a perception – among some parents, students and teachers – that it is an 'easy' year; part-time work; costs associated with TY.

Students' suggestions for improving TY programmes include: ensure greater distribution of events throughout the year; undertake more work with students whose motivation and attendance is poor; make the trips beyond the classroom less expensive; schools should learn from the good practice in other schools; JC students and their parents need more specific information about TY.

### **School profiles**

The school profiles illuminate, in some detail, how each of the six schools has shaped and adapted TY. The following are summaries of these profiles.

*Ash School*

Ash School is a voluntary secondary school for girls, founded by a religious order of sisters in the early nineteenth century. Ash School introduced TY in 1990, thus maintaining a six-year cycle. This compulsory programme is clearly structured into three 10-week blocks with a wide range of modules available. Both Principal and co-ordinator were unequivocal about the benefits of a compulsory TY for their students.

Strong levels of teacher commitment and a continuing evolving programme are among the key factors identified in contributing to the success of the programme. It is also clear that the co-ordinator in Ash School has extensive autonomy – the Principal describes him as a ‘mini-Principal’ – and has developed a very distinct profile in the role and is widely respected by students and teachers.

Generally, students in Ash School tend to be very positive about the diversity of the programme and its maturing effects. They contrast TY with the ‘pressure’ of Third year and Sixth year in particular, and see it as a welcome break from exam-dominated schooling. Students speak of developing strong bonds of friendship with fellow TY students during the year. They also value the improved relationships between students and teachers that grow during TY, both inside and outside classrooms. Opportunities for students to voice their opinions during TY classes are seen as engaging and confidence-building. In Ash School, work experience is seen in a very positive light by students.

Teachers in Ash School who completed the questionnaires are unanimous in the view that TY gives students a broad educational experience, advances students’ maturity and enables students to become more confident and more socially aware and assists students clarify their career goals. They also regard their own written programme very positively.

Most teachers in the survey indicate that TY objectives are being met and that LC results are enhanced following participation in TY. As in some of the other schools in this study, areas where teachers express diverging views tend to relate to the academic

dimensions within TY – how much or how little – , appropriate forms of assessment and so on.

Because of the compulsory nature of TY in Ash School and the Principal's and co-ordinator's enthusiasm for the programme, parents of students in Ash School are provided with comprehensive information about TY, even before their daughters enrol in First Year. Information meetings and an impressive booklet about their TY programme are among the strategies aimed at keeping parents in touch. On-going contact with parents is also a feature of the co-ordinator's role in Ash School.

As with the other schools in this study, Ash School has shaped TY to align it with the school's sense of its own mission. In this case the emphasis on the holistic development of students appears to be a fertile area of overlap between the school's overall aims and the goals of TY. Strong leadership, including practical support for the programme, appears to have nurtured TY very effectively in this school.

#### *Beech School*

Beech School is a co-educational community college, designated 'disadvantaged'. Beech School sees its mission unequivocally as improving the life chances of its students, many of whom live in disadvantaged circumstances. The experience in Beech School points to a very direct correlation between taking part in TY and improved maturity, including more informed subject choices and improved motivation for LC. In turn, this improved motivation has led to increased levels of examination achievement and greater participation at third-level. The emergence of positive role-models from within Beech School is regarded as a leaven throughout the school, raising expectations all round.

As in the other schools in this study, TY in Beech School is regarded as enabling the development of more positive relations between students and teachers. At the same time, teachers, co-ordinators and Principal leave no room for doubt about the on-going challenges that they face to maintain a TY programme that is vibrant, engaging and relevant. Shifting a learning focus towards the more sustained, independent work that project work represents is especially challenging. So is maintaining attendance levels and devising appropriate forms of assessment.

Students in Beech School consistently comment on the different relationships between students and teachers in TY and subsequently throughout senior cycle. The students point to trips outside the school and more participative, democratic classrooms as both causes and effects of these developments.

Teachers in Beech School express strong support for many features of TY, for example its contribution to greater student confidence, maturity and social awareness. They also would like more time to plan and work with colleagues as well as more in-service education. Areas where opinions among teachers in this school divide include the quality of the school's written programme, the school's approach to evaluation and the question relating to a prescribed syllabus for their subjects. There are also mixed views concerning resources and class sizes.

Explaining the merits of TY to parents in Beech School – many of whom themselves have limited direct experience of senior cycle schooling – is seen as a particular challenge. The school's policy of insisting that those hoping to pursue the LC must first take TY adds an even sharper edge to this challenge. The strong belief among Principal, co-ordinators and teachers in Beech School in the educational benefits of this approach is striking. Beech School has introduced, developed and sustained a TY programme against considerable odds.

### *Chestnut School*

Chestnut School is an all-boys voluntary secondary school in a suburban location. Each year a majority of students in Chestnut School opt for TY. The school has a strong tradition of high academic results and TY is seen by many students and teachers as enhancing this, not least by strengthening a platform for LC achievement. There is also a strong consensus that TY enhances boys' maturity.

Chestnut School's TY programme is structured clearly into core elements, optional modules that have a strong emphasis on sampling for the LC, and additional modules that emphasise the breadth of possible experiences open to students in Chestnut School.

The TY programme in Chestnut School, like that in Ash School, is arranged into three distinct blocks of approximately ten weeks each. With the exception of Mathematics, TY classes are arranged on a mixed-ability basis.

Teachers in Chestnut School are given extensive latitude to devise and develop individual subjects and modules. The co-ordinating team respect their colleagues' professional autonomy and see their role as encouraging and supporting innovation. The school has a dedicated room for TY co-ordination where a wide range of TY related resources are stored and made available to staff. The Principal leads an annual evaluation of the TY programme's components by the staff. This results in adjustments to TY every year, with additional modules being added or dropped.

Both co-ordinators play a central role in planning, organising and supervising TY activities outside the classroom, including field trips, outings and fund-raising events.

The Principal as well as the co-ordinators encounter a broad spectrum of attitudes to TY among parents. Given the school's strong academic tradition and reputation they are very aware that some need to be convinced of TY's merits. Parental scepticism tends to be either about the benefits of activities designed to advance personal and social development or concerning what is seen as a dilution of an academic dimension. Similar to the other schools in this study, students in TY and Fifth year express particular satisfaction with the more relaxed atmosphere in TY, the 'break' from examination pressure, the improved relationships with teachers, the opportunities to engage in particular projects as well as 'trips' outside the classroom, and the general maturing effects of the experience.

Some Sixth year students in Chestnut School, interviewed shortly before the LC written examinations, while concurring with these views, also felt that they might have favoured more of a 'three-year LC' approach and expressed the view that teachers were noticeably less focused on TY than on their LC classes. This tension between the values of TY such as holistic development, active learning and teaching methodologies, and intrinsic motivation for learning, on the one hand, and the pragmatic realities of the LC as a high-stakes examination, on the other, are perhaps more pronounced in Chestnut School than in the other five schools in this study.

*Maple School*

Maple School is a co-educational VEC school, located in a small town (population less than 2,000) in the west of Ireland. Maple School is an example of a relatively small school offering an imaginative, engaging and effective optional TY programme. There is extensive evidence that students, teachers and parents value highly what has been developed. A wise and enabling Principal, a staff prepared to take risks and a very visionary co-ordinator have combined to develop a programme that appears to meet students' needs well. The Maple School community sees the positive publicity generated by TY activities as enhancing its standing within the wider local community. As a small school with poor physical facilities, building such a reputation has been a priority for the school overall. Thus, as in the other five schools, adapting and, in this case projecting, TY to fit with the school's thinking about itself, 'domesticating' it, is also evident.

Students' views are particularly positive about the programme, especially the opportunities to travel outside the local region and the distinctive form of end-of-year assessment devised by the staff. Particularly striking are the opinions of Fourth, Fifth and Sixth year students that teachers in TY classes engage in active teaching and learning methodologies. The greater opportunities for student participation in class and the improved relationships between students and teachers feature strongly in the Maple School students' comments.

The teachers in Maple School are particularly well disposed towards the school's TY programme. Even though TY is optional in Maple School, there is a strong sense of whole-staff involvement in the programme. Parents express confidence in the programme and appear keenly aware of the effectiveness of the particular co-ordinator.

*Oak School*

Oak School is an all-girls school, designed 'disadvantaged', serving an established urban community. The decision in 1994 to offer TY was partly a pragmatic one in the face of a declining school population. Strong leadership, particularly a forceful co-

ordinating team, appears to have enabled the school to develop a TY that makes a definite difference in the lives of the students who opt for it. Principal and co-ordinator both point to the staff team developing the school's specific programme by regular and frank evaluations, each year dropping 'the bits that didn't work'. Students themselves speak highly of their own personal and social development through the TY experience. Within classrooms, project work and a particular emphasis on active participatory approaches to learning appear to be especially effective and, when linked with the extra-classroom learning activities, contribute to a markedly different character of relationship between students and teachers in Fourth, Fifth and Sixth years compared to that in the Junior Cycle. The opportunity to sample LC subjects during TY is seen by students, teachers and parents as leading to more informed choices of LC subjects.

A keen awareness of the annual difficulty in recruiting sufficient students to make up a single TY class and of the mixed attitudes of students and parents to a six-year cycle is evident. Furthermore, the restrictions imposed on timetabling due to a single class group are also appreciated. A number of significant 'calendar' items complement the weekly timetable and students speak enthusiastically about work experience, community service, musicals, outdoor pursuits, trips inside and outside Ireland. Teachers in Oak School generally indicate positive attitudes to TY.

Notwithstanding the above, Oak School has to work particularly hard to maintain student and teacher morale regarding TY. Real challenges are identified by students, teachers and the school leadership regarding teaching Fifth year classes, where mixed levels of motivation can be evident among those who have completed TY and those who have completed JC.

#### *Sycamore School*

Sycamore School is a community school in a rural location. Partly driven by fears of TY being seen as a 'doss year', Sycamore School put a strong academic emphasis in its optional TY programme from the start. The school would like to increase its intake into TY but senses strong resistance from students and parents. The co-ordinator believes that more boys in particular could benefit greatly from the personal and social development that TY facilitates. Dealing with a predominantly rural population,



the Principal detects strong pragmatic concerns in the community concerning a six-year second-level cycle, especially the potential impact of an additional year on drop-out rates in Fifth and Sixth years.

As with the other five schools in this study, Sycamore School has ‘domesticated’ TY, adapting and shaping a programme that fits with its own vision of itself as a school, its students’ perceived needs and its understanding of the views of the community it serves. In this case the emphasis is unashamedly academic, with students and staff regarding the opportunities to sample LC subjects, to ‘test themselves’ about their capacities for honours levels at LC and to enhance oral language skills as important dimensions. Since TY was introduced into Sycamore School, those who participated in the programme have tended to set academic standards for the whole school and demonstrate positive leadership among the student body. For example, they have been strongly represented among the Sixth year prefect group.

Students in Sycamore schools have positive attitudes, in particular, towards subject sampling, the career orientations within the programme, the bonds that develop among students, the trips and other activities that involve learning beyond the classroom.

TY is an issue of some contention within the staff in Sycamore School. In responding to the questionnaire, a majority of teachers in Sycamore tend to agree with many of the statements about the positive effects of TY. However, in some cases up to a quarter of the teachers surveyed held an opposite view. In particular, the programme’s status within the school, the level of intellectual challenge posed by the programme and views about TY’s relationship with the LC, appear contested. Overall, the teachers in this school indicate a very broad spectrum of attitudes to aspects of the TY programme. Resistance by some parents to TY is put forward as one of the reasons why a majority of students in Sycamore School opt for a five-year cycle, without TY. Peer influence is another.

## **Discussion points**

From the student, teacher and parent data, and from the school profiles, numerous issues arise. Some of these are outlined below.

### **Domestication**

The evidence points to six schools selecting and adapting the TY Guidelines in quite different ways. The individual history of TY within a school – how originally conceived and developed – plays a crucial role in determining its current standing. At its most positive, TY can be viewed as a national programme with sufficient flexibility to enable genuine accommodation to the specific circumstances of individual schools, respecting their particular histories, traditions, values and contexts, playing to the strengths of teaching teams and geared to the developmental needs of students. In this sense, each school domesticates TY. However, the very flexibility that facilitates imagination and innovation can also be invoked by schools to justify a narrow selectivity that ignores key features of TY. In each school in this study there is evidence of the non-implementation of particular features of the Guidelines. Specific omissions in some schools include interdisciplinary work, appropriate modes of assessment and the provision of health education. The more neglected features of the Guidelines point to some interesting challenges, and opportunities, for the NCCA as it constructs Transition Units.

### **Programme construction**

Activities such as work experience placements, community service, outdoor pursuits activities, trips to the Gaeltacht, to museums, art galleries and other sites of learning, musicals and dramas, participation in events such as the Young Scientist Exhibition or in fund-raising activities can capture young people's imagination and engagement. However, programme and timetable analysis suggests that an effective TY needs a lot more than a few high visibility activities. Analysis beyond the nomenclature suggests that it is the breadth and the quality of the teaching and learning experiences throughout TY that is key. Dividing the year into two or three distinct time blocks and using double and triple class periods to promote active learning can be effective. A persistent challenge is to ensure programme coherence rather than fragmentation.

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The evidence suggests that four activities, in particular, can contribute to greater coherence. They are:

- (a) Planning and writing the TY programme, especially in ways that involve the whole school community.
- (b) Communicating openly with parents about TY, preferably from their earliest contact with the school.
- (c) The centrality of good co-ordination for the effective implementation of a TY programme is one of the clearest findings to emerge from this case study.
- (d) The quality of in-school leadership; school leaders wishing to bring greater coherence to TY need to listen to the concerns of all stakeholders, clarify how the values of TY support and challenge the stated and unstated values of the school, encourage a climate that respects innovation, use time in ways that prioritise learning, dialogue and delegate – particularly to co-ordination teams – and play a lead role in telling the school’s TY story with a voice that is authentic and consistent with their own values, both spoken and practised.

### **Teaching and Learning**

While enthusiastic about excursions beyond the classroom and project work, students have much less to say about classroom experiences. In general, students welcome the absence of exam pressure in TY, suggesting that, in some cases, classes are more participative and democratic. A number suggest that the absence of exam pressure can be especially liberating for teachers. However, students, even when pressed, had difficulty in providing examples of the ‘wide range of teaching/learning methodologies and situations’ (DoE, 1993, p.8) envisaged in the Guidelines, especially from the more regular classes. When encountered, experiential learning and well-structured project work is appreciated. The evidence suggests that students want classes that will engage and challenge them. For teachers, the need to widen the range of learning methodologies appears greatest in the ‘linear’ or ‘continuity’ subjects.

### **A change from exam-led learning**

The evidence in this study is that students perceive much teaching in school to be exam-driven. Undoubtedly, the possibility of exam success can be highly motivating for many students. However, such extrinsic motivation does not work for everyone. Indeed, for those who experience limited academic success, the continual use of exam

success as the primary motivating tool can lower self-esteem, reduce motivation for learning, increase student indiscipline, and contribute to school drop-out. In a society that values ‘lifelong learning’ for all its citizens, having young learners leave school with the word ‘learning’ weighed down with negative connotations highlights a gap between the rhetoric and the reality. TY, with its focus on the search for more intrinsic motivation for learning, offers extensive possibilities for young people to discover interests, to nurture strengths and to achieve success in a variety of arenas.

### **Maturity**

While the evidence suggests that TY contributes significantly to young people’s maturity, it is not unreasonable to pose the question that, whether TY was there or not, ‘would they not grow up anyway’? The response has to be affirmative but the question also takes us close to the core of the TY project. A specific educational programme highlighting transitions, from childhood towards adulthood, from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle, seems to capture the developmental nature of mid-adolescence. Critical to maturity is the ability to form adult relationships. The persistent emphasis by students on relationships in this study is instructive and affirming of TY’s orientation.

### **Co-ordination**

Co-ordinators are sometimes identified as the ‘public faces’ of TY. Teachers and parents regard the work done by co-ordinators as critical for successful implementation. The evidence suggests an inclination in some schools towards a single co-ordinator rather than a co-ordinating team. Co-ordinators, comfortable in leading and directing the programme for students, are less enthusiastic about co-ordinating their teaching colleagues. A sense of commitment to students and to the TY programme sometimes leads them to spend extensive additional time co-ordinating aspects of TY. The evidence here echoes many of the findings of the TYCSS survey on co-ordination (TYCSS, 2000). Thus, while a dynamic, charismatic co-ordinator may be a great strength of a school’s TY programme, it can also be a point of significant vulnerability.

**Optional or compulsory?**

The compulsory/optional debate needs to be located in the context of a school's admissions policy and practice in First year. If the majority of students in a year group are highly motivated, a compulsory TY should be relatively easy to sustain; a school with an open intake policy, with sizeable numbers of reluctant learners, may find it almost impossible to maintain TY for everyone. As Smyth et al (2004, p. 24) observe, '... the distinction between compulsory and optional is not as clear-cut as it might at first appear.' Schools operate in very different contexts and a variety of factors impact on young people's choices.. For example, in this study Ash School has maintained a compulsory TY, but Beech School and Oak School, both designated 'disadvantaged', face major challenges each year in convincing students of the merits of TY. Both schools have built support systems to assist and encourage Third years in their choices.

**Tensions**

The first evaluation of TY (Egan and O'Reilly, 1979) identified a number of tensions within the original TY programme. Though some of these were addressed when guidelines were issued in the 1980s and 1990s (CEB, 1986: DoE, 1993c), some tensions and ambiguities remain. Parents' concerns about 'academic focus' highlight unease, that is also evident among some teachers and some Sixth year students, regarding the relationship between TY and the LC examination. Most teachers, however, appear confident that TY strikes a balance between education for personal and social development and intellectual development.

Striking a balance between what might be described as TY values, such as the centrality of personal and social development, intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning, and the pragmatic reality that students will proceed to a LC course immediately after TY, is especially challenging. It appears that, given the high-stakes nature of the LC, TY is in continual danger of being colonised by the LC, if not officially, then in the minds of students, teachers and parents. Despite significant overlap between the values of TY and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), tensions between TY and LCA are also evident. The stand-alone nature of TY goes some way to preserving its integrity, though the tensions serve to draw attention to the importance of each school clarifying how school programmes complement each other.

**Relationships between TY and the school climate**

Teachers across the six schools perceive TY as having a leavening impact on the whole school, often citing the energy, enthusiasm and improved student-teacher relationships as supporting evidence. Greater student maturity, improved student-teacher relationships and more focused approaches to learning appear to be particular benefits from TY during the final two years of senior cycle. At the same time, there is an underlying concern that TY is quite at variance with the dominant emphasis within the other five years, that it represents a sort of ‘parallel universe,’ slightly detached from the more ‘serious business’ of passing examinations. Concentrating learning experiences with strong personal and social development dimensions, e.g. work experience placements, musicals, community service, field trips, mini-company, health education etc, into one year seems to undermine the developmental nature of adolescence. The TY Guidelines appear to be aware of such a danger and make a very ambitious assertion:

The aims and philosophy of Transition Year should permeate the entire school. (DoE, 1993c, p.4)

This perspective recognises that there are transitional dimensions appropriate to each year across a six-year cycle; that programmes from First to Sixth year need to give personal and social development goals greater prominence.

On a specific feature of the overall school climate and programme provision, conflicting evidence emerges regarding the challenges presented in Fifth year classes in schools where TY is optional. A view that differential levels of maturity between students who have completed TY and students who come to Fifth year directly after the Junior Certificate lead to tensions is contrasted with a perspective that sees the variety and diversity as enriching for all.

**Teacher development**

The originator of TY, Richard Burke TD, envisaged the facilitation of teachers’ professional development as a central outcome of the programme (Burke, 2001). He regarded TY as emancipatory, appealing to teachers’ idealistic calling to ‘educate rather than grind’. A majority of the teachers surveyed believe that TY has helped their development as teachers. Also evident is a hunger for further support, particularly regarding active methodologies and varied forms of assessment. This

need seems greatest in the ‘linear’ or ‘continuity’ subjects. The evidence suggests that the potential for TY to promote school-based teacher collaboration and mutual learning has been realised, to some extent.

### **Participation rates, disadvantage and resources**

Previous research has mapped participation trends in TY. Higher levels of uptake among girls, in schools that charge fees and in schools in the east of the country have been identified. There are corresponding lower levels of participation among boys, particularly those from family backgrounds with low levels of formal schooling, and in small and rural VEC schools. In this study, each school has a unique story to tell regarding participation and these stories indicate how a variety of factors influence uptake.

The cost associated with TY is one factor. At the time of the mainstreaming of TY in 1994, a major attraction was the provision by the DoE of an additional grant of IR£50 per student. In its presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science in 2004, the Department highlighted this additional funding as one of the significant features of the mainstreaming process.

Perhaps surprisingly, given inflation and the years of the Celtic Tiger economy, this €50 has not been increased. It remains at €63.49 per student<sup>1</sup>. Those in schools designated ‘disadvantaged’ wonder whether other schools have responded to this situation by requesting more direct payments from students and their parents. In this study, personnel in all six schools expressed concern at the increased costs of supporting particular TY activities. They also expressed reluctance about increasing charges on families. Some also voiced unease at the practice of offering some activities as optional because of costs. They make the point that while that is regarded as ‘normal’ if the activity is a trip to a ski resort or a Premiership football match in the UK, it is more problematic when the trip is to an outdoor pursuit centre or a cross-border one; not only do some students miss valuable learning opportunities, but unfortunate distinctions are highlighted within the TY group, based on the willingness or otherwise to pay.

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<sup>1</sup> Since this report was submitted initially to the Department of Education and Science, the Minister announced that the grant would be increased to €100 per student from September 2007 (<http://ty.slss.ie>)

## **Conclusion**

Six schools' interpretation and implementation of TY offers valuable pointers as to how a broad educational programme aimed at assisting mid-adolescents attain great maturity is realised in different contexts. Students, parents and teachers indicate positive, and at times, enthusiastic, attitudes to TY. Active approaches to learning, especially in situations beyond conventional classrooms, are highly valued by students. Overall, TY appears to improve the quality of student–teacher relationships and the general school climate.

The evidence suggests that while schools adapt the TY Guidelines to their own circumstances, they can also underplay, and even omit, some essential features of TY. Coherent TY programmes appear to require, in particular:

- Involving the whole school community in planning and writing a programme that focuses on learning experiences that are relevant, imaginative and challenging.
- Clear communication with parents about the goals and format of TY.
- Co-ordination that is imaginative and efficient.
- Overt and consistent support for TY from principal and deputy-principal.

Teachers indicate a need for greater support in designing, developing and implementing TY programmes. Support for 'linear' or 'continuity' subjects seems particularly urgent. Low uptake in schools designated 'disadvantaged' may be partly related to perceptions of high costs associated with TY, and the non-increase of the TY grant per student from the DES since 1994.

Finally, perhaps one of the long-term legacies of the mainstreaming of TY is that it has generated, and sustains, debate among students, parents, teachers, school leaders, policy makers and the wider society about the purposes of schooling.



## CHAPTER 1

### Origins and Development of Transition Year

The original idea for TY came from Richard Burke TD, Minister for Education. He first announced his plan to introduce TY at the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) Annual Conference in Dún Laoghaire on 17 April 1974. At the time, few knew what he was talking about. There had been little or no planning within the Department for the initiative. In the hurling vernacular of his native Tipperary, he recalls the experience: 'It was a solo run' ... 'nobody in the administrative or educational sector of the Department of Education had - good, bad or indifferent - anything to do with this idea. It was just sprung upon them and they were just told to go and introduce it.' (Burke, 2001)

Describing his initiative as 'potentially the most important idea to emerge from my Ministry', Richard Burke set out 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 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 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)

Recognising the limited initial enthusiasm for TY, Burke, interviewed in 2001, reckoned that the inclusion of a description of TY in the *Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools* (DE, 1976) was critical to TY's survival. 'That meant that a Minister would have to make a political decision to remove it and then face parliamentary questions to explain his decision,' he observed. In his opinion, such a move was highly unlikely. Burke also identified Seán Mac Cárthaigh as critically important to the early development of TY. This inspector's encouragement of teachers to embrace TY is cited by many early participants in the programme as particularly inspirational.

The relevant section in the *Rules and Programmes* states:

1. The Transition Year Project is a one-year interdisciplinary programme for pupils who have completed an approved course for recognised junior cycle pupils.
2. The Project is directed towards the intellectual, social and emotional maturation of the pupil. It is conceived as an introduction to adult education and to *education permanente*. Transition Year curricula can therefore be designed to meet the needs of
  - a) those for whom the Transition Year will represent the end of formal full-time schooling; and
  - b) those who intend to follow approved courses for recognised senior pupils.
3. The content of Transition Year curricula will include elements of the following: social education; moral education; education for living (including homecrafts and education for parenthood, employment and leisure); philosophy and applied logic; music and the arts; Irish Studies; 'civilisation' courses for students of continental European languages; visual education; media education and communication skills etc.  
(DoE, 1976)

Initially, schools displayed little enthusiasm for the idea. In 1974, its first year of operation, only three schools<sup>2</sup> offered this 'different' programme. A decade later, less than 1,000 students in fewer than 20 schools were following a TY programme. By 1986, the number of schools offering the programme had risen to 95.

An early evaluation of TY (Egan and O'Reilly, 1979) pointed to some clear benefits. It also identified some major tensions. One axis of tension was between the transition from school to work and from junior cycle to senior cycle. Furthermore, the researchers found very diverse attitudes in different schools. They also identified tensions between the emphasis on practical living and the focus on philosophy and logic; between the linear subjects (English, Irish and Mathematics) and the 'new' subjects. While identifying basic problems within the conceptualisation of TY, Egan and O'Reilly observed:

... they have not by any means brought the project to a halt. Nor are they likely to. The reason for this is that many of the most enthusiastic and enlightened participants are the same people who have little time for

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<sup>2</sup> They were St. Joseph's College, Garbally, Co. Galway, the Municipal Technical Institute in Limerick and the Holy Child Comprehensive School, Sallynoggin, Co. Dublin. (*Education Times*, 1974b)

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. (Egan and O'Reilly, p.57)

Egan and O'Reilly also noted that students claimed

... to have become more aware of themselves and others, more confident in social settings, more informed about the world outside school, and surer about the careers they might follow. (Egan and O'Reilly, p.57)

They add that much of the students' claims were confirmed by the teachers, that in some schools TY had 'a definite impact on the climate of the school' and that TY had improved the 'attitude of the school towards early school-leavers'. Finally, they note that TY had introduced the school to the experience of educational innovation as well as the idea of *education permanente*, had increased parental involvement, and had removed some of the barriers between school and the world outside (p.58).

Commenting on the evaluation a decade later, Doyle remarked,

Unfortunately, the most important advice given in this report was not followed, namely that the Evaluation Report would be part of a systematic programme of research that would include the opinions of the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and the evaluators. Such a professional evaluation was a prerequisite of effective continuity and development of the TY. The envisaged programme did not take place. (Doyle, 1990, p.19)

### **An unexpected boost**

Decisions aimed at 'rationalising the structures within education' (Government of Ireland, 1985) led to some schools taking a new interest in TY. In particular, the decision to replace the Intermediate Certificate and the Group Certificate with a three-year Junior Certificate presented challenges to schools that had previously offered a six-year cycle. While the pioneering schools in the first decade were all participants in the 'free education' scheme, including some serving a wide socio-economic spectrum of students, many of the newcomers in the late 1980s were schools that charged fees. Doyle captures some of the motivating forces at play in schools considering the inclusion of TY when she observes:

For the five-year cycle post-primary schools already experiencing falling enrolments, *Ages for Learning* offered a lifeline. Developing a TYO was perceived to be the most secure option, one that would ensure continuation into Senior Cycle of virtually all participants. For the 140 (approximately) post-primary schools already providing a four-year Junior Cycle (as part of a six-year system), TYO was seen to be the only way

forward; ensuring acceptance by the Department of Education therefore became a preoccupation in the interests of retaining pupil numbers. (Doyle, 1990, p. 20)

In 1986-87 permission was granted to 115 schools, including 92 voluntary secondary schools, 11 Community Schools, five Comprehensive Schools and seven VEC schools, to offer the TYO.

### **New Guidelines**

Coinciding with this increased level of participation, the CEB published *Transition Year Option, Guidelines for Schools* (CEB, 1986). In a rich mixture of broad general policy statements combined with a specific focus on key aspects of the programme, these 1986 guidelines added substantial flesh to the bones of TY outlined more than a decade earlier. The original aims are re-stated, with new emphases and developments. The general aim is stated as:

... the preparation of young people for their role as autonomous, participative and responsible members of society.

A more comprehensive rationale for TY is set out. Much of the ambition of the original 1974 vision is maintained and expanded. TY aims to 'facilitate the integrated development of the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, physical, social and vocational development of each individual student through structured learning experiences'. It also aspires to provide young people with 'skills and support necessary to discover their own individual talents, aptitudes and abilities for future educational and/or vocational preparation'. The skills focus is continued with reference to 'skills and support necessary to understand their own particular educational and/or vocational needs', and 'skills and support necessary to develop those skills and competences necessary to cope successfully with their particular stages of development'.

These 1986 guidelines describe TY as offering a 'broad general education that integrates academic study and careers education' noting that 'preparation for work should not have a narrow vocational focus or job-placement thrust'. Remarking that 'decisions on the specific curriculum to be followed in TYO will be largely school-based', the emphasis is on providing 'practical opportunities for learning experiences which are based in the local community.' The guidelines highlight the possibilities regarding assessment, with TY being 'different from other educational programmes

(e.g. Leaving Certificate (LC)) as, freed from constraints of particular kinds of assessment and certification, schools have flexibility to realise in their own way senior cycle aims, with emphasis on intellectual, social and personal development’.

These guidelines stress many organisational features of TY. The responsibilities of school principals receive particular attention. These responsibilities include preparing a programme plan, developing a ‘contract of learning’, appointing a co-ordinator, facilitating regular staff meetings, preparing an annual evaluation report, informing parents of prospective students about TY and providing TY planning time in the timetable. Furthermore, principals are seen as responsible for providing staff with ‘opportunities for continued personal and skills development and an appreciation and understanding of curriculum development’. Additionally, ‘in-service training and the development and improvement of teaching methodologies should be promoted, including interdisciplinary teaching’. The guidelines also encourage networking between schools.

While clear on the responsibilities of school principals, these guidelines state that the overall responsibility for the day-to-day running of TY lies with the co-ordinators.

Central to this 1986 publication are expanded ideas about the TY curriculum. Among the components mentioned are ‘academic, technical, aesthetic, additional studies, social and personal development and careers education’. There is acknowledgement that students’ needs will vary considerably from school to school. In a telling observation, it is suggested that students who intend to pursue LC1 and LC2 ‘will probably need a higher proportion of academic studies’. Then, in what for some became the most distinctive feature of this document, the guidelines state that ‘between 30 per cent and 50 per cent of the time should comprise traditional and/or academic studies’. That said, and possibly attempting to address some of the issues identified by Egan and O’Reilly, while at the same time realising the possible implications of this emphasis, there follows an exhortation that ‘academic and/or traditional school subjects should be seen to be clearly different to that of any other programme at Junior Cycle or Senior Cycle and be directly related to the overall aims of the programme’.

Significantly, ‘the main feature of the TYOs will be the use of a wide range of learning situations, extending beyond traditional classroom practice’. The call is for methodologies that put a greater emphasis on learning as distinct from teaching, on personal responsibility in learning, on contractual learning, on discovery methods, on co-operative learning, on flexibility in methodology, on integration of appropriate areas of learning. While the guidelines suggest that teachers ‘should develop a range of methodologies best suited to their own interests and strengths’, there is a pronounced leaning throughout towards the value of experiential learning.

### **Further developments**

Support for some of TY’s underlying themes came from a variety of other sources. In the late 1980s, a major review of the Irish education system mapped out an agenda for change (OECD, 1991). Resonances with the TY perspective were evident. For example, among the recommendations were the following:

... Increased flexibility and variety in the organisation of teaching and learning are needed in order to break down many of the present rigidities affecting the timetable, length of lessons, homework and so forth. The single, homogenous class and the instructional models associated with it are not conducive to co-operative team work or to innovative approaches to teaching and learning. (OECD, 1991, p.62)

The organisation of the school day and of individual lessons should provide greater scope for more creative and imaginative problem-solving, skills enhancement, and practice-oriented approaches to learning. Students, as they mature, should be shouldering more responsibility for their own learning and at every stage they should be encouraged to display more initiative and independence of mind. (OECD, 1991, p. 63)

With echoes of some of the concerns voiced by Richard Burke when Minister for Education in the early 1970s, the centrality of curriculum reform is signalled clearly.

In secondary schools, the curriculum problem emerges in its most acute form. The weight of the classical humanist tradition is enormous, not least because of its underpinning of high-status occupations and a way of life which is widely admired even though unattainable by the majority. This dominance is likely to prevail unless the authorities are able to develop either a much more powerful parallel system of technical/vocational schools or a restructured general secondary education curriculum. (OECD, 1991, p 69)

A 1991 report from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) had revealed valuable indicators of students’ views of their own schooling. ‘Basic education’ – the

3Rs – were regarded by these young people as very satisfactorily provided for by schools. However, satisfaction levels for Personal and Social Development, Preparation for Work Roles, Preparation for Other Roles and Preparation for Third Level Entry were moderate to low, while satisfaction with Civic and Political Education was particularly low (Hannan and Shortall, 1991, p.3).

The Green Paper *Education for a Changing World* (Government of Ireland, 1992) took up many of the OECD themes and also succeeded in capturing the imagination of the educational community. This document stated that a major objective for the 1990s ‘will be that 90 per cent of the age-group would complete Senior Cycle’ (Government of Ireland, 1992, p.97). In a significant admission, there are strong indications of a need for change at senior cycle, not least at LC level.

The Leaving Certificate results reveal that there are many students for whom the examination, as constituted at present, is unsuitable. (Government of Ireland, 1992, p.97)

One direction of change should be away from rigidity: ‘it is intended that schools should have maximum flexibility and options’ in the way they operate the (3 year) Senior Cycle. (DoE, 1992, p.101) and it was also noted that there should be a greater emphasis on generic skills.

The National Education Convention (NEC) held during October 1993 and the 1995 White Paper *Charting Our Education Future* added further support for an agenda of change. Within the context of change, TY was frequently identified as offering extensive possibilities. For example, while the predominant focus at the NEC was not on curriculum, the report notes:

There was a lot of enthusiasm at the convention for the transition year option. It was noted that students matured during the year and sometimes revised their subject and career choices. Particular benefits, by way of improved self-esteem, seemed to accrue to lower-achieving students. (Coolahan, 1994, p.75)

### **Mainstreaming**

In the early 1990s there was a growing momentum within the DoE towards the possibility of a six-year cycle for all students. Circular letter M31/93, issued in July, heralded a re-structuring of senior cycle and can be seen as a highly significant

enabling document. From the start of the 1994 school year, within the context of a six-year cycle of post-primary education, all pupils were offered the option of spending three years in senior cycle, through a variety of options 'intended to provide maximum flexibility in the senior cycle in catering for the different aptitudes, abilities and needs of pupils' (DoE, 1993a). With the LC remaining as a two-year programme, TY appeared to be on the verge of being 'mainstreamed'.

The following November, a follow-up Circular letter, M47/93 (DoE, 1993b), set out in greater detail the revised structure and content of the Senior Cycle curriculum to operate from 1995. Schools interested in offering either the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) or TY were invited to apply to the Department before 3 December for the school year 1994. According to this letter, the NCCA 'will prepare revised Transition Year Programme guidelines for September 1995 onwards'. The document adds: 'As an interim arrangement, Departmental Guidelines for Schools on the Transition Year for the school year 1994/95 will be issued to all schools shortly.' The response to this new set of opportunities was swift and dramatic, with over 300 schools without any previous experience of TY indicating an interest in offering the programme.

The Department published a new booklet entitled *Transition Year Programme: Guidelines for Schools* (DoE, 1993c). These guidelines effectively replaced *Transition Year Option, Guidelines for Schools*, that the CEB (restructured, in the interim, as the NCCA) had published in 1986, and became the guiding document of the new developments. The thrust of the new document was broadly similar to the earlier version, though some noteworthy shifts are evident. TY was now a 'programme', no longer described as an 'option'; TYP replaced TYO. The 1993 document is shorter, more strategically focused on the broad, integrating statement that gives an overview and so with less attention to details. The 1993 *Guidelines* say much less about the role of the principal in promoting a TYP, and instead emphasise teacher collaboration with references to a core-team and teamwork. The programme is now a whole school responsibility rather than something merely left to individual teachers. The 1993 version represents a more collegial and less hierarchical view of the school.



The emphases from 1974 and 1986 on TY as a holistic programme are continued, with the 1993 version emphasising that TY's aims are interrelated and interdependent. Interdisciplinary work is more strongly advocated in the 1993 document. A significant change in 1993 is that any reference to a percentage of the programme being 'academic' is dropped. All references to a 'repeat LC' as an option within the six-year cycle are dropped. Careers education could be described as having a sharper focus in the 1986 version. The 1993 version explicitly engages, for the first time, the Board of Management when it states:

All aspects of the Curriculum and Organisation should be clearly documented and approved by the school management and staff and by the Board of Management. (DoE, 1993c, p.12)

There are no references to the Inspectorate in 1986. By 1993 this has become an important dimension, perhaps an early indicator of what was to follow with the provisions in the 1998 Education Act, the first mention of performance indicators in the DES strategic plan 2001-04 (DES, 2001) and the Whole School Evaluation (WSE) project. Another important development in the 1993 version relates to staff development; this is a condition of participation:

It will be a condition of participation in TY programmes that schools will become involved in programmes of staff development/in-service education which will be locally and regionally based. In this way, participation by individual schools will be possible in both the formulation, delivery and ongoing development of the programmes for their own benefit. (DoE, 1993c, p.13)

Crucially, the 1993 *Guidelines* extend the ambition of the programme:

The aims and philosophy of TY should permeate the entire school. (DoE, 1993c, p. 2)

This is a new perspective. The 1986 view sees TY as more distinct, even slightly removed, from the rest of the school. Now, from 1993, it appears that TY is expected to act as a kind of transformative leaven across the whole school.

### **Support systems for schools and teachers**

As well as the new *Guidelines*, the re-structuring was accompanied by a travelling 'Roadshow' that visited various parts of the country, explaining to the public the new structures for schooling at senior cycle. The format of these meetings was of presentations followed by questions and answers. Public interest focused strongly on

LCA and LCVP. Schools saw these two programmes as particularly attractive, not least because participation would draw down additional European Social Fund (ESF) funding. In schools this translated into extra money, additional equipment and more teachers. TY did not attract such European financial support, because it was not regarded as sufficiently 'vocational'.

The questions that arose at these roadshow sessions give some indication of attitudes to TY at the time. The most frequent questions concerned funding. Other questions could be grouped into three broad categories. Firstly, TY's distinct separation from the Leaving Certificate and 'points' prompted criticism and concern. Many teachers expressed disappointment at the separation. Secondly, the freedom to devise their own TY programme tended to be seen negatively by many school personnel. Requests for prescribed syllabi were strong. The third area of concern centred on an impression that TY was 'a doss year', that without the target of an external examination students, parents or teachers were unlikely to take TY seriously.

### **Supporting schools**

In November 1993, the DoE recruited a five-person 'Action Team' and subsequently 63 other teachers to develop a national in-service strategy for schools about to offer a TY programme. Working in pairs, regionally-based team members engaged with individual school staffs and facilitated workshops for clusters of neighbouring schools. Much of the material from these sessions was published as a pack of *Resource Material* (Doyle, et al, 1994) that was sent to every school.

Reactions from schools to the in-service were positive (Lewis and McMahon, 1996). For those already offering TY, the benefits were perceived largely in terms of the opportunity afforded for revision and renewal. For the rest the focus was on planning. The evaluation also notes:

... the programme was perceived to provide valuable opportunities for the professional development of teachers, particularly at Action Group and Regional co-ordinator levels...the school-based component was singularly effective in reaching whole-staff groups including principals and was widely appreciated in schools...the non-school-based cluster days were welcomed by participants for the opportunity they afforded to meet, and exchange information and ideas, with colleagues. Finally there were

positive reactions in schools to the dissemination of documentation associated with TY and with the in-service programme in particular. (Lewis and McMahon, 1996, p.viii)

### **Increased participation**

From the original three schools offering TY in 1974, numbers climbed slowly through the 1980s. By 1993, 8,499 students in 163 schools were following a TY programme. This represented 13 per cent of the cohort that sat the JC examination in that year. The dramatic leap in participation in 1994-95 saw the number of schools jump to 450 and students to 21,085, representing 31.3 per cent of the JC examination cohort. Participation widened throughout the 1990s, although some of the original 1993-94 schools did drop the programme. By 2000 participating figures were 507 schools and 23,245 students, or 39 per cent of the JC examination cohort. The figures for 2006-07 are: 27,090 students in 543 schools, representing 46.7 per cent of the cohort that completed a JC<sup>3</sup>.

### **Inspection**

In 1995, teams of inspectors examined TYP in 146 schools. They found that nine out of ten schools were following the guidelines in a 'satisfactory' manner. They added:

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 time to grow in maturity and to develop in self-confidence. (DoE, 1996, p.20)

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

- More attention to interdisciplinary, cross-curricular approaches
- Delay of LC subject choices until the end of TY (some schools had been operating what looked very like a 'three-year LC')
- Further development of links with the local community
- More compensatory teaching

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<sup>3</sup> Statistical data relating to TY's development have been gathered from a variety of sources including Statistics Section, Department of Education and Science, *Key Education Statistics, 1991-92 – 2001-02*; Statistical Reports as well as work by Doyle (1980), Humphreys (1996a), Deane (1997), Boran (2002), and Ward (2004).

- 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.

### **1995 White Paper**

The White Paper *Charting Our Education Future* (Government of Ireland, 1995) devotes three succinct paragraphs to TY. Rather than repeat phrases from the *Guidelines*, it condenses the programme’s essentials to the following points:

- An interdisciplinary programme
- Student centred
- Emphasis on students’ responsibility for their own learning
- Skills for life beyond the boundaries of the certificate examinations
- Opportunities for growth in maturity
- Opportunities for revision of subject and career choices
- Teachers’ grow professionally through programme design
- Active learning methods enrich the whole school
- Links between school, parents and community enrich education for the demands and pleasures of life, work, sport and leisure.
- TY as an opportunity to enjoyably underpin, in a non-examination environment, Irish language and culture, the prospects of our European and world environment, the wealth of creative and performing arts activity and heritage and the equality of women and men in society.

For those familiar with the 1986 and 1993 documents, the absence of any reference to some key ideas such as participation rates, assessment, relationship to LC, practical implementation, evaluation, explicit reference to personal and social development, etc. were striking. The agenda implied in the final point might be interpreted as a set of contemporary concerns and possibilities. Especially striking is the use of the word ‘enjoyably’, suggesting an appreciation of the importance of ‘fun’ in learning.

**On-going support**

Following the success of the concept of seconded teachers working on a regional basis with schools, a full-time team of 14 teachers<sup>4</sup> - the Transition Year Support Team (TYST) – was put in place for 1995-96, then extended for a further year and, in the middle of 1997, for a further year. Commenting on the TY model of teacher in-service, Hyland described the pioneering approach as ‘particularly successful’, noted that similar models were being applied to areas such as Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) at junior cycle, and predicted that ‘it is likely that this model of in-service will be more widely used in the coming decade’ (Hyland, 1997, p.182).

Between August 1997 and June 1998, the TYST conducted 1,108 school visits, an increase of 258 on the previous year (TYST, 1998a). More than half of these involved working with principals, co-ordinators and core teams on aspects of ‘programme planning, timetabling, writing, development, implementation, assessment, evaluation, etc’. The second type of visit, 148 visits (13 per cent), involved workshops with the full staff or with groups of teachers. The third type of visit, accounting for a quarter of the sessions, involved sequential meeting with individual teachers. Evaluation recorded that 97 per cent of principals and 98.5 per cent of co-ordinators were satisfied with these visits. One hundred and one co-ordination workshops took place, mainly in Education Centres. Essentially these workshops provided co-ordinators, school principals and other teachers with structured, practical opportunities to share insights and experiences. An analysis of over 1,000 evaluations from these workshops reveal that 71.5 per cent rated them as ‘Very Helpful’ and a further 28 per cent as ‘Helpful’. The Report notes that:

Provision by the Department of Education and Science of paid substitution and travel costs is acknowledged as contributing to the success of these workshops. (TYST, 1998a, p.24)

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<sup>4</sup> The 14-person team was made up of a core team of Mary Anne Halton, Eilish Humphreys, Gerry Jeffers and Dermot Quish and ten regionally based members : Bridie Corkery (Slieve Bloom), Rachel Keogh (Boyne), Ruth Marshall (Errigal), Alec MacAlister (Liffey), Karl O’Connell (Brandon), Michael O’Leary (Jerpoint), Lynda O’Toole (Helvick), Bill Reidy (Shandon), Geraldine Simmie (Moher) and Patsy Sweeney (Céide). Core team members supported the regions of Martello and Lambay.

The Report also records that more than 20 networks of TY teachers had been developed, mainly around specific innovations, with mini-company trade fairs among the more successful methods for promoting networking. Furthermore, team members attended 53 sessions with parent groups, 9 sessions with students and 14 sessions at which both parents and students were present. A further feature of this team's work was the extensive contacts that had been developed with a variety of social agencies; a number of original resources resulted from such collaboration.<sup>5</sup>

A more restricted arrangement of support operated in 1998-99. The Transition Year Curriculum Support Service (TYCSS) consisted of a single national co-ordinator and five regionally based members.<sup>6</sup> In 2001, a new policy of integrated support for schools across a variety of programmes led to the formation of a Second-Level Support Service (SLSS) which has become a major provider of continuing professional development of second-level teachers ([www.slss.ie](http://www.slss.ie)).

### **Further evaluation**

Murphy (1999) reported on 18 TY inspections during the year 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 observed their appreciation of the bonding effects of the TYP on inter-pupil relationships and on pupil-teacher relationships. He describes TYP as 'a most effective form of teacher in-service training', remarking that, 'like the TYP itself, it is a case of learning by doing'. He stated:

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.

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<sup>5</sup> A selection of the agencies that the team worked with during that year includes: The Incorporated Law Society (Legal Studies module); Department of the Environment (Car Driving module); Conservation Volunteers (Blueprint for a Green School); The Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) (Shaping Space project); National Gallery of Ireland; Society of St. Vincent de Paul; Council of Europe, Amnesty International; Mobil Oil Ireland (Greensight video pack); Irish Congress of Trade Unions (Skills, Work and Youth pack); Schizophrenia Ireland; Dún Laoghaire Youth Information Centre (Information Studies); Tree Council of Ireland, Department of the Marine and Natural Resources, Coillte and Windmill Lane Pictures (Project Forest); *Jeune-Pressé*, Paris'; European Commission (Ar thóir na hEorpa).

<sup>6</sup> The TYCSS team consisted of Lynda O'Toole (Blackwater), Geraldine Simmie (Shannon), Patsy Sweeney (Humbert), Denise Kelly (Lambay), Michael O'Leary (Tuskar) and Gerry Jeffers, National Co-ordinator.

Regarding parents' attitudes, Murphy observes the following:

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)

### **Writing the Programme**

By the late 1990s both the support service and the Inspectorate observed that many schools had evolved some unique modules and activities and that frequently such initiatives were undocumented. Often an imaginative module was being implemented but the only one who knew in any detail what was going on in a particular class was the individual teacher. The TYCSS and the Inspectorate decided that a supportive, scaffolding structure for recording TY programmes was needed. The rationale was that a well-documented programme would be of practical help to schools, consolidate individual schools' sense of their own programmes and contribute to a greater sense of professional responsibility. Collaborative work between the support service and the Inspectorate resulted in the production of *Writing the Transition Year Programme* (TYCSS, 1999a) a guide on how TY programmes might be documented.

*Writing the Transition Year Programme* suggests a three-part structure. Part 1 might include a general introduction to the school's TY programme, relating it to the national guidelines and to the school's overall mission. Aims should be stated clearly and be the result of a process of consultation with all the partners in the school community.

Part 2, it is proposed, would contain 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 offered.

The guide proposes that Part 3 might include organisational details including names of co-ordinator and core-team members, names of students, the weekly timetable, main calendar features, assessment and certification details, finances, and procedures for evaluation. Explanations and examples of technical terms are offered.

### **Longitudinal study**

A longitudinal study of students who sat the JCE in 1994 attracted considerable public attention to TY (Millar and Kelly, 1999). Comparing 1996 LCE candidates with those who took the examination a year later, this research indicated that the latter group – the vast majority of whom had followed a TY – tended to achieve more CAO points than the former. The raw difference was 46 points and, when adjusted for gender, school type and previous performance in the JCE, 26 points. The report 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 students who follow TY are more likely to be educationally adventurous with selecting LC subjects, for example, more likely to take up a subject *ab initio*. The NCCA commentary 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 these data more effective at convincing students and their parents about the value of TY than extolling the virtues of a holistic educational experience.



**Points Commission**

Research commissioned by the Points Commission engaged TY students in eliciting the views of LC students regarding various aspects of their schooling. Tensions between what TY promotes and what the points system seems to value led to the following observation:

Transition Year promotes maturity, independent research and learning, exploration of idea, initiative, teamwork, skills development, the ability to make judgments about their own work and the extension of the learning environment beyond the classroom. It is not always clear how the Leaving Certificate and the points system build on these educational experiences. (Humphreys and Jeffers, 1999, p.36)

The report made the following recommendation:

The set of experiences throughout second-level should be developmental and coherent. Just as Transition Year builds on the Junior Cycle, the Leaving Certificate should follow on, developmentally, from the Transition Year. (Humphreys and Jeffers 1999, p.37)

**Patterns of participation**

While the re-structuring of senior cycle led to a substantial increase in the number of schools offering TY, further interrogation of these figures reveals definite patterns.

An analysis of data from 2000-02 noted:

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. (Jeffers, 2002, p.56)

Geographical anomalies were also identified. For example, while 90 per cent of the schools in County Monaghan offered TY, only 30 per cent of those in neighbouring County Cavan did so. Similarly, in Munster, 88 per cent of the schools in County Cork offered a TY programme, while the figure for neighbouring Kerry stood at 31 per cent. At a sectoral level, the data indicated that 81 per cent of voluntary secondary schools, 40 per cent of VEC schools and 74 per cent of community and comprehensive schools were offering a TY programme. In that year 211 schools were designated disadvantaged and 110 of them (52 per cent) offered a TY programme. The anomalous patterns of uptake suggest that while school type, disadvantaged status and geographical location are factors that have an impact on whether schools do or do

not offer TY, local factors including the choices made at individual school level may be underestimated (Jeffers, 2002, p.57).

### **ESRI evaluation**

The difficulty about making generalities regarding TY is further reinforced by an ESRI report (Smyth, et al, 2004). A dominant theme throughout this extensive review of the programme in 116 schools, including in-depth investigations in seven case-study schools, is the variation in practices and perceptions from school to school and also within schools. The school-specific nature of the TY programme is very evident. Principals regarded the TY programme as broadly successful, especially in its impact on personal and social skills development among students. As in previous studies, the ESRI study found that those who had participated in TY achieved higher LC results and were more likely to go on to higher education than non-participants, all else being equal.

In terms of uptake, these researchers provide further evidence that smaller schools and those serving disadvantaged communities are least likely to offer TY. They found that in the quarter of schools where the programme is compulsory, schools generally relate this to the desire to make the perceived benefits of TY available to all schools. Where TY is optional, student preference was identified as the most important factor influencing access to the programme. The perceived difficulties in having ‘conscripts’ and ‘recruits’ in the one year is cited as an important factor in maintaining TY as optional. The researchers found some evidence that particular students, especially those with behavioural difficulties, may be discouraged from taking part in TY. Reflecting on the kinds of schools that offer or do not offer TY, they found that students from middle-class backgrounds, those with higher educational aspirations and those who are younger than average are more likely to take part in TY than other students. Those less attached to school life are not as likely to enter the programme.

As regards managing the programme within schools, the ESRI study states:

The role of the Transition Year Co-ordinator is pivotal in the successful design and implementation of the programme. (Smyth et al, 2004, p.222)

Time, or the absence of time, is seen as a major constraint on programme planning and on teachers' professional development. The researchers recommend additional resources to facilitate teachers' participation in in-service training, particularly those who are not co-ordinators or core-team members.

They describe the programme in 70 per cent of schools as 'diverse', with the nucleus tending to be composed of six subject areas: academic subjects, cultural studies, sports, computer studies, work-related learning and civic/social studies. In schools providing very diverse programmes, third-level taster courses, personal development courses and practical skills courses also tended to be timetabled. They make some very concrete recommendations for further diversifying TY programmes, including specific in-service training for teachers to provide 'modules' in subjects other than their own specialism. They also recommend that

... the allocation of guidance hours to second-level schools take adequate account of the core mission of Transition Year in facilitating long-term career choices. (Smyth et al, 2004, p.224)

Furthermore, they recommend that schools locate the work experience placement within a broader structured programme of preparation and evaluation. In terms of classroom interactions, they found that fewer than a quarter of teachers reported using textbooks as the main resource (p.121). They observe that

Teachers were more likely to report using a diversity of teaching resources rather than methods *per se*. (Smyth et al, 2004, p.225)

In keeping with the diversity of practices across schools offering TY, three of the seven schools in the ESRI study grouped classes on the basis of students' academic ability while four did not.

Mixed views about whether TY should be optional or compulsory were also evident. Students valued the 'different experiences', the notion of a 'break' after JC and the programme's perceived effect on their maturity. Negative student attitudes were most evident among those who were not highly engaged in school life, in particular less academic students in schools where TY is compulsory.

Positive perceptions among staff and students are linked to some key elements of good practice, including:

- A whole school commitment to the programme

- An effective co-ordinator with time to develop and maintain contact with other staff members
- A diverse programme, with activities and outings seen as particularly important by students
- A more innovative approach to assessment, consistent with the overall objectives of the programme.

The researchers add that there was, however,

... a tension evident for schools in developing these aspects of the programme while at the same time maintaining a level of academic engagement among students, particularly those with lower educational aspirations. (Smyth et al, 2004, p.227)

Launching this report, Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hanafin TD, declared herself to be ‘completely, absolutely and positively in favour of Transition Year’.<sup>7</sup> Reflecting on her own experiences as a teacher and TY co-ordinator she drew particular attention to TY’s potential in terms of community service, and in ‘opening up a space’ where young people could develop. Her speech carried many resonances with Burke’s original vision, 31 years earlier. The Minister also stressed the value of a whole school commitment to TY. She did acknowledge that

... the report also sets out challenges for policy makers to address, including concerns raised by some Principals of disadvantaged schools or small schools about the effectiveness of the programme. (Hanafin, 2005)

### **Proposal for the Future**

In 2002, the NCCA began a consultative process on the future of the senior cycle. They sought the views of students, parents, teachers, schools, educational and social bodies, and other interested individuals and groups. *Developing Senior Cycle Education: Report on the Consultative Process – Consultative Meetings, Seminars and Submissions* (NCCA, 2003a). *Developing Senior Cycle Education: Directions for Development* (NCCA, 2003b) followed.

These directions were grouped into four broad areas: school culture; a restructured learning experience; a re-balanced curriculum and different assessment and certification arrangements. Of particular relevance here is the proposed introduction

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<sup>7</sup> The Minister made these comments at the launch of *The Transition Year Programme, An Assessment* in the Department of Education and Science, Marlborough Street, 5 January 2005.

of Transition Units (TUs). For example, illustrating how a restructured learning experience might look in the year 2010, the document states:

Some students have two years of senior cycle education, others have three. All students participate in at least one Transition Unit (TU). Those following a three-year senior cycle must take up to 5/6 Transition Units, which can be taken together in the first year of senior cycle as part of a full Transition Year, or spread across the three years. These units include: work-related learning, community participation, enterprise preparation, special studies, arts education, ICT literacy, study skills etc. – formerly associated with the Transition Year and the link modules of the LCVP. The TUs also place a strong emphasis on the skills embedded across the senior cycle curriculum. It is a requirement of matriculation that completion of at least one TU is presented on the certificate awarded on completion of, or departure from, senior cycle education. Research is showing that the benefits of TY are spread more equitably across the system. (NCCA, 2003b, p.6)

The document also envisages short courses, in topics such as politics and society, media studies, social personal and health education, science and society and European and global studies. In the future LCA will be composed of some LCA-specific modules and a number of TUs ‘which may be taken with other senior cycle students’. (p.6) Adults learners will be able to present accounts of prior or out-of-school learning as a TU. The overall effect envisaged by these changes will be, according to the NCCA, to make ‘senior cycle education more equitable’.

Responding to the NCCA, Education Minister Hanafin confirmed a particular interest in and focus on keeping TY, as it were, ‘ring-fenced’. She wrote:

I believe that a particular strength of the transition year is that it is a stand-alone year providing dedicated time and space to students to engage in educational experiences that will promote their all-round development. (Irish Times, 1 July, 2005)

Despite the Minister’s apparent lack of enthusiasm for the NCCA proposals, the curriculum agency has continued to develop its ideas for TUs .

## **Conclusion**

The historical evolution of TY, with its initial limited uptake, the various ways in which apparently unconnected policy decisions impacted on the programme and the many issues associated with mainstreaming since 1994, provides an important context and background when considering current practices and future possibilities. The

history serves to underline the non-linear nature of much current educational development, the multi-layered sets of attitudes to the programme as well as the reminder that TY takes place within the context of schools where more established programmes, particularly the JC and LC, carry status and prestige in a way that TY does not. Finally, this overview indicates how, right from the outset, there were students, teachers, parents and policy makers with ambiguous attitudes to the TY project<sup>8</sup>.

Many of the issues identified here will be taken up and explored further in the following chapters, especially Chapter Eight.

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<sup>8</sup> The author is greatly indebted to numerous people for assistance in the compiling of this history, including personnel in the schools that pioneered the programme, colleagues in the Action Team, the TYST and the TYCSS, various inspectors, particularly Chris Connolly, Maura Clancy, Carl Ó Dálaigh, and Ian Murphy. Scholarly work, referred to in the bibliography, was also valuable, especially studies by Hand (1996), Humphreys (1996a), Deane (1997), Boran (2002) and Ward (2004).

## CHAPTER 2

### Methodology

#### Starting points

A number of perspectives emerged in the research for this report, and these perspectives fed into the methodology. Firstly, there was an expectation that students, teachers and parents would manifest different attitudes towards TY. While there might be agreement among stakeholders about some aspects of the programme, considerable anecdotal evidence pointed to TY remaining a contested, controversial topic.

Secondly, Gleeson's (2004, p.105) questioning of an impreciseness in Irish educational discourse in the uses of terms like curriculum *reform*, curriculum *innovation*, curriculum *development* and curriculum *change* 'as if they were interchangeable' is relevant and challenging. Which is TY? Arguably, it can be seen as operating at all four levels as it is a complex, multi-faceted feature of the school system, sandwiched between the Junior Cycle and the LC cycle. TY is also a distinctly Irish example of a 'bottom up' development: while the DES provides a broad framework for the programme, school participation is voluntary and individual schools have extensive opportunities for school-based curriculum development. Thus, bearing in mind Gleeson's concerns, the extent to which TY brings about the 'deep change' at the levels of materials, practice, and practitioners' beliefs and values (Fullan, 1993, p, 32-36) associated with genuine curriculum change was an important focus.

Thirdly, a central thread running through the initial questioning focused on teaching and learning experiences. In particular, what learning activities bring about the personal, social, intellectual and vocational development that is at the core of the TY project? (DoE, 1993c, p.4)

A fourth perspective related to schools as organisations with distinct characteristics and cultures. How does TY impact on such organisations? How do school cultures enable or inhibit the development of TY? Handy and Aitken (1990, p.35), for example, indicate that while sharing some features with other organisations, ‘the pile of purposes’, ‘no time for management’, ‘role-switching’ and ‘the children’ contribute to the uniqueness of schools as organisations. Ball (1997) regards schools as organisations that are ‘complex, contradictory, sometimes incoherent’. Establishing some of the practical, organisational details regarding the daily implementation of TY in a school was seen as important; analysis of programmes and timetables can provide valuable data. At the wider, system level, House’s (1974) point that an innovation like TY can be seen from three perspectives - technological, political and cultural - also informed the framing of some of the early thinking.

Fifthly, an early decision was to ensure that students’ views from Third to Sixth year would be surveyed. The neglect of students’ voices in educational research, as noted by, for example, Rudduck et al (1996), and Lodge and Lynch (1999), is an ongoing concern. Dempsey’s (2001) study demonstrates how young people’s reflections on TY can be particularly sophisticated and insightful.

### **Initial questions**

These initial perspectives were primarily a response to the research brief to examine attitudes to TY in schools where the programme ‘is well regarded’. The central question would be:

- What are the attitudes of the critical actors – students, teachers, parents and school leaders – towards TY?

A number of closely related questions were also prominent at the outset, for example:

- How have schools interpreted and implemented the programme as set out in *Transition Year Programme – Guideline for Schools*?
- What do the various actors regard as the outcomes of TY?
- If schools implement TY differently, what factors are at play, and why?
- What effects does TY have on the life of the school, and, conversely, what impact has the culture of a school on TY?



As time went on there was a progressive focusing on more detailed aspects of these questions. As the data were gathered and analysed, specific issues and further questions began to emerge. Some of these were ethic issues, that is, ones that the researcher was aware of at the outset (Stake, 1995, p.20). Others were emic issues, arising from the perspectives and concerns of actors that had not appeared particularly significant at the start. Furthermore, comparison of the data from the various sources also led to a new focus on particular issues. A sample of the emic issues include the following:

- Students contrasting their experiences in TY with those in the Junior Cycle.
- Co-ordinators' concerns for programme analysis to probe beyond nomenclature.
- Teachers' perspectives on in-school factors that enable/inhibit the successful implementation of TY.
- Parents' apparent reluctance to make generalisations about TY.
- Questions relating to motivation of students, particularly of those who had previously experienced limited academic success.

### **A case study**

Informed by much of the above, it was decided that a case study approach would be a particularly constructive way of approaching the research questions. Sometimes described as 'the study of an instance in action' (Cohen et al, 2000, p.161), a TY case study seemed well suited to the initial brief that had pointed to researching attitudes to TY in schools where the programme 'is well-regarded'. So, the case study would examine how the different actors perceive TY at six different sites, aiming to catch 'its particularity and complexity and coming to understand its activity within important circumstances' (Stake, 1995, p xi).

The case study approach is well suited to an investigation of attitudes. It

... provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles. Indeed a case study can enable readers to understand how ideas and abstract principles can fit together. Case studies can penetrate situations in ways that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis. Case studies can establish cause and effect; indeed one of their strengths is that they observe effects in real contexts, recognising that context is a powerful determinant of both causes and effects. (Cohen et al, 2000, p.181)

A case study approach involves an eclectic use of data-gathering, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. One was conscious at the outset that schools had devised their own programmes and timetables so documentary evidence would be important. A questionnaire could elicit comparable responses to fixed questions and interviews could probe the more subtle dimensions of beliefs and attitudes to TY.

A further attraction of a case study approach to TY is that it is well suited to looking at the overall picture rather than at individual fragments or components. Not only are data both described and analysed but particular instances and issues can be identified and probed so as to catch some of the close-up reality of TY. A case study also appeared to have the potential to capture different perspectives on the same reality. Within a case study, what Bogdan and Biklen (1982, p.59) call a 'funnel approach' enables the exploration of a broad sweep of issues and then a narrower focus on some critical issues. This seemed very appropriate given the range and extent of issues associated with TY.

The case study approach also involves some drawbacks. As will be seen in this study, a massive amount of information can be generated; organizing it coherently is both challenging and time-consuming. The accusation that reporting is selective, biased and personal can be difficult to refute (Cohen et al, 2000, p.184).

Thus reliability and validity are major concerns in case study research. Given the various sources of data, when an interpretation or assertion was made, corroborating evidence was sought. Triangulation derives its name from the kind of physical measurement used in celestial navigation, where location can be inferred partly by measuring the elevation of the stars (Stake, 1995, p.109).

Triangular techniques in the social sciences attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint and, in so doing, by making use of both quantitative and qualitative data. Triangulation is a powerful way of demonstrating concurrent validity, particularly in qualitative research. (Cohen et al, 2000, p.112)

The questionnaire provides teachers' perspectives from six different sites. These data provide an extensive frame of reference throughout the study. Comments from students and parents were coded and analysed, all the time checking for repetition and

re-inforcement. Comments by principals and co-ordinators were also checked against formal publications issued by the schools. To test further the reliability and validity of the school profiles, drafts of the school profiles were circulated to the six schools<sup>9</sup> in the summer of 2006. While all observed that some details of their schools had changed in the intervening time, they confirmed that they regarded the profiles as substantially accurate.

In analysing the data, the thrust was towards a greater understanding of TY. Much of the way this works is through what Geertz (1973, quoted on Cohen et al 2000, p.182) calls *thick descriptions*, relying heavily on how the actors themselves see TY, what they regard as 'normal' and what they see as problematic. In addition to the data and analysis, additional material is included in Appendix 1, as both further evidence and as an invitation towards further interpretations.

Typical, representative data is important in case study research. However, a single incident, event or observation can also illuminate particular issues. Throughout this study, there is a tension between some points that tend towards generalization and others that may be unique to a particular school situation. The value and relevance here is that multiple realities – the attitudes of students, of teachers, of parents and of school leaders and programme co-ordinators – can be presented and interrogated.

### **The piloting stage**

Given that the brief was to research attitudes to TY in schools where the programme was 'well regarded', the guidance of the Transition Year Curriculum Support Service (TYCSS) was sought. Following a meeting in May 2001, team members generated a list of schools where they felt some distinctive good practice characterised their TY programmes. Two schools from that list, an all-boys school in an urban setting and a mixed community school in a medium-sized town, were selected for piloting. Focus group interviews took place with groups of Third year, TY, Fifth year and Sixth year students. The principals and co-ordinators were interviewed and an extensive questionnaire given, in one case by the principal and in the other by the TY co-ordinator, to each staff member.

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<sup>9</sup> By the summer of 2006, four of the principals were no longer in those positions so the feedback was from two principals and four TY co-ordinators.

Particular issues arose during the piloting. Firstly, a number of teachers made explicit reference to the industrial relations climate in schools at the time.<sup>10</sup> Some indicated that, as the study was for the DES, they would not take part. Others added that their colleagues' non-engagement with the process could also be explained by the ongoing dispute. This delayed and limited the data-gathering. Secondly, there were mixed views about the length of the questionnaire. Some stated that it was too long, while others indicated an appreciation of its extent. In the light of the feedback generated, the questionnaire was modified. The adjusted questionnaire was further refined in a third school where those who completed it were specifically asked to nominate questions for elimination. In that school, the dominant view was that a complex questionnaire was respectful of the multi-faceted nature of TY.

Similarly, in the pilot schools, interviews with focus groups, each with four students, assisted in adjusting a set of questions for semi-structured interviews. Typically, these interviews were arranged by the TY co-ordinator and took place during a single class period. Allowing for introductions and explanations, in practice the structure facilitated interviews that lasted approximately 30 minutes.

The original intention was to gather data in the pilot schools, firstly by interviewing the school principal, then engaging in some student interviews, meeting the staff collectively in order to distribute the questionnaire, engaging in more student interviews and finally, interviewing the co-ordinator. The experience in both schools led to the conclusion that

- a) the sequence, even if planned, was likely to be interrupted by the pressure of other demands within the school day;
- b) it would be difficult to conduct all the data-gathering in an individual school within one day.

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<sup>10</sup> During 2001 and 2002 ASTI (Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland) were in dispute with the DES regarding issues of supervision and class substitution. Schools were closed on a number of occasions. Some parents, and in some cases students, as well as some members of the wider public reacted negatively towards the teachers' cause. Media reports then and since have tended to use the term 'acrimonious' to describe relationships at that time.

### **Selecting the six schools**

Studying TY at six different sites is an example of what Stake (1995, p.4) calls a ‘collective case study’. The expectation was that by examining TY at these six sites some distinctive features of TY itself would be revealed – that the uniqueness of particular TY programmes in different contexts would enhance understanding of TY itself.

Numerous considerations informed the selection of the six schools from the list of 30 provided by the members of the TYCSS – schools they regarded as having some distinctive good practice in their TY programmes. As Hannan and Boyle (1987) point out there has been a wide diversity of institutional provision in second-level schooling in Ireland. Among the factors taken into consideration when selecting the schools were:

- geographical location
- school type (voluntary secondary, vocational or community)
- students’ gender (all boys, all girls or co-educational)
- school size
- socio-economic profile of school
- length of history of TY
- whether TY was compulsory or optional
- whether school also offers LCA
- school’s previous history with curriculum development
- duration of principal in post; duration of TY co-ordinator in post
- teachers’ participation in TY-specific in-career education
- school’s previous engagement with the TY support service.

Two other particular considerations were important. Firstly, fee-paying schools were not included. TY is already well-established in that sector with many such schools making TY compulsory. The experience of the support services in citing good practice from fee-paying schools had been mixed. Firstly, there was an understandable tendency for teachers in non-fee-paying schools to dismiss the validity of perceived good practice on the basis of the availability of significant additional resources. Secondly, conscious that schools designated disadvantaged tend to be under-represented among schools offering TY (Jeffers, 2002), it was decided that two such schools should be included.

A fictitious name<sup>11</sup> has been attributed to each school in an attempt to mask identities. The following table gives a brief outline of the six selected schools. Detailed profiles can be found in Chapter 6.

### **Brief description of the six sites where data were gathered for the case study**

**ASH SCHOOL** is an all-girls voluntary secondary school in an urban setting with a strong history of innovation. Prior to the introduction of the Junior Certificate, Ash School had operated a six-year cycle and TY has always been compulsory there.

**BEECH SCHOOL** is a co-educational community college, designated 'disadvantaged'. It also has a strong tradition of introducing innovative programmes including JCSP, LCA and TY.

**CHESTNUT SCHOOL** is an all-boys voluntary secondary school in a suburban location. It has a strong tradition of academic achievement. TY in Chestnut School is co-ordinated by a two-person team.

**MAPLE SCHOOL** Located in a western town, Maple School is a small co-educational VEC school established in the early 1990s. It introduced TY in 1996.

**OAK SCHOOL** is an urban all-girls school, designated 'disadvantaged'. One of the members of the schools' first TY co-ordinating team has become principal in Oak School.

**SYCAMORE SCHOOL** is a community school in a rural location, established in the early 1990s and offering TY since 1996.

### **Ethical considerations**

Intruding into the life of a school is always problematic. Research methodology is both a technical and an ethical process. Following exploratory phone calls, letters to school principals invited their schools to take part in the research and set out, broadly, what would be involved. An emphasis was placed on schools volunteering to take part. Assurances were given that schools' and participants' identities would remain anonymous. All six schools approached agreed to take part, in some cases following consultation with staff and Boards of Management.

In compiling the questionnaire and the schedule of questions for use in the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, respect for the individual's privacy was

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<sup>11</sup> From the outset, it was made clear that volunteering schools would not be identified by name. Native Irish tree types were selected to protect the schools' identities. Assurances of anonymity were also given to participating co-ordinators, students, teachers and parents (see Appendix 2).

paramount. As can be seen in Appendices 2 and 3, care was taken to make sure that students, teachers and parents were giving informed consent. Names were not sought on questionnaire responses and students and parents were told explicitly that their actual names would be not used when reporting.

There was no coercion placed on any teacher to complete a questionnaire. The emphasis was continually on volunteering. Similarly, the co-ordinators who sought students and parents for the interview groups impressed on them the voluntary nature of their participation. At the outset of each interview, the researcher underlined participants' rights to withdraw at any stage of the process. On occasion, principals and co-ordinators revealed details of school life that were 'off the record', sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. The author has attempted to respect that confidentiality. Copies of the schools profiles – as mentioned earlier in relation to reliability and validity – were shown to the relevant parties for comment during 2006.

### **Data gathering and analysis**

Data were gathered intermittently between 2002 and 2005, from four main sources. Firstly, documentary evidence from a range of sources was assembled. While much of this was relevant to the story of TY's evolution as already seen in Chapter 2, it was also crucial in establishing the details of the programme in individual schools as set out in Chapter 7. Brochures, written programmes and timetables were especially sought. Relevant literature, particularly related to innovation and educational change was also consulted. *Transition Year Programme, Guidelines for Schools* (DoE, 1993c) is a critically important reference document throughout the study.

Secondly, an extensive questionnaire was used to elicit teachers' attitudes. While generating numerical data, the main value of the questionnaire was in indicating broad attitudes towards TY among participating teachers. A questionnaire offered a relatively anonymous form of data collection; it seemed more likely to encourage frankness about any sensitive issues relating to TY. It also ensured that a broad spread of opinion could be canvassed relatively efficiently. The use of a Likert scale (Cohen et al, 2000, p.253). facilitated the comparison and differentiation of teachers' views across the six sites. Some of the difficulties encountered in the pilot stage re-surfaced. Teacher questionnaire response rates were, according to two of the co-ordinators,

lower than might be expected; the legacy of the industrial relations climate at the time and the questionnaire's length were cited by way of explanation. In total, 113 questionnaires were returned from the six schools.

Thirdly, semi-structured individual interviews (see Appendix 2), while time-consuming, elicited considerable information from school principals and co-ordinators. The looser structure allowed the interviewees recount aspects of TY that they saw as important. The flexibility also meant that when unexpected dimensions of the topic emerged, they could be pursued (Bogdan and Biklan, 1982, p.135). The piloting proved very useful in refining the interview questions. The interviews were taped and transcribed. Much of the data from these interviews provided foundations on which school profiles could be constructed. In addition to the six principals, semi-structured interviews were held with three co-ordinators in Beech School, two in Chestnut School and one each in Ash, Oak, Maple and Sycamore. Furthermore, there was on-going contact right up to the completion of the study with principals and co-ordinators through telephone, e-mail, letter and face-to-face meetings.

Fourthly, focus group interviews with students and parents resulted in extensive data. In all, 110 students in 26 groups were interviewed. Interviews ranged from 27 minutes to 38 minutes in length. These data are presented in Chapters 3 and 5. Selections for the focus groups were made in each school by the co-ordinators. The co-ordinators were asked explicitly to include a 'mix' of students; 'mix' was described as including such variables as social background, academic achievements, motivation and, in the co-educational schools, gender. The purpose was to widen the range of perspectives on TY. There is no reason to believe that the co-ordinators did other than requested and, in some interviews, the mix was very evident; but neither is there any way of indicating how mixed the groups were. Student groups consisted of four students from Third year, four from TY, four from Fifth year and four from Sixth year. In Oak School slightly different sized groups were formed: six from Third year, six from TY, four from Fifth year and five from Sixth year. In Sycamore school, five Sixth year students who had completed TY formed one group and four who had not taken TY made up another. An additional group of four Sixth Year LCA students was interviewed in Beech School. Focus group interviews were also held with four parents in Oak School and with six parents in Maple School. Again, these were selected by



the co-ordinators, with similar requests for a 'mix' as with the student groups. Both of these sessions lasted more than an hour each.

The questionnaires were tabulated and analysed, and findings were recorded. The taped interviews were transcribed, coded for emerging themes and analysed. Contemporaneous field notes made following the school visits provided valuable frameworks for deciding on the broad themes. Some data, particularly relating to history, programmes and timetables, required a number of other visits, letters, e-mails and phone calls.

This rich mix of qualitative and quantitative data both provides evidence and offers clues that point towards particular interpretations (Bogdan and Biklan, 1982, p.73). The varied data also allow for cross checking and triangulation for reliability and validity. Furthermore, gathering the perceptions of different stakeholders adds to the transparency of the data for the reader, as evident in the next four chapters. Chapter 3 presents the distinct perceptions of young people. The attitudes of their teachers are set out in Chapter 4, and of parents in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 then portrays six different pictures of how each school sees its own realisation of TY.

The reader interested in hard statistical data from this study may be disappointed. While the teacher-data generated some concrete indicators of broad attitudes, the fundamental thrust of this study is towards describing and understanding TY as a mosaic.

### **Researcher's perspective**

In a case study like this, the researcher is central to the collection of the data and its analysis (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p.87; Stake, 1995, p.91 sqq.). Obviously particular attention must be paid to bias (Cohen et al, 2000, p.120). Inevitably, this author's perspectives are coloured by his own experiences. Insights and viewpoints derived from his work as a deputy-principal in a large community college that introduced TY for all students from 1986, as a teacher of various TY modules between then and 1995, as a member of the 1993-94 TY action team, a member of the support services from 1995-2000, and, more recently, teaching in a university teacher education department, inevitably colour this research. Because of the experience, the

author is ‘an insider’, not an outside, ‘objective’ assessor of TY, and brings the strengths and weaknesses of that position to the task. As the research gathered a life of its own, a close familiarity with TY enabled one to see the logic of the inquiry and detect dissonances. There were times, particularly when listening to principals and co-ordinators, when one sensed that what Bogdan and Biklen call ‘observer effect’ may have been at play; participants may have inclined towards describing an ‘ideal’ TY rather than the actual reality.

No doubt, in reporting on a topic as broad as ‘attitudes to TY’, certain features are highlighted and others downplayed, even neglected. The author has attempted to let the data drive the report and has strived for impartiality. Where apparent successes manifest themselves, he has attempted to situate them in context. Similarly, failures, disappointments and problems with TY are identified and attempts made to understand some of the factors at play. All the time, attention has been paid to presenting a report that will be faithful to the experiences of all informants. The intention is also to offer some pointers to those, in particular to school personnel and policy makers, with responsibility for the ongoing provision of appropriate education for young people.

### **Additional consultation**

Emerging data from the study was presented at a number of conferences and meetings and feedback from participants at these events was particularly valuable. Questions and challenges at these sessions provided some of the investigator triangulation and theory triangulation that Stake (1995, p.113) following the work of Denzin, advocates. These included:

- Educational Studies Association of Ireland Annual Conference, Belfast, 11.04.03
  - Teacher Education in the Republic of Ireland, St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, 13.11.03
  - Invitation Consultation and Dissemination Seminar, Drumcondra Education Centre, 8.12.03
  - Educational Studies Association of Ireland, Annual Conference, Maynooth, 2.04.04
  - Research Seminar, Department of Education and Science, Marlborough Street., Dublin, 20.09.04
- Educational Studies Association of Ireland, Annual Conference, Cavan, 30.04.07.

## CHAPTER 3

### Student Attitudes to Transition Year

To elicit students' views about TY, 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted in the six schools: Ash, Beech, Chestnut, Maple, Oak and Sycamore. Typically these interviews consisted of four students from the same year-group, with the researcher posing six or seven broad questions (see Appendix 2) and, depending on the responses, probing the replies. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each. In all, 110 students took part.

Reflecting the way schools are organised, the data in this chapter are presented in three different sections:

- Third year students' attitudes towards TY
- TY students' attitudes towards TY
- Fifth and Sixth year students' attitudes towards TY.

#### **Third year students' attitudes towards TY**

A dominant theme to emerge from the focus group interviews with Third year students is limited knowledge and some vagueness about TY, its purpose and detail. In all six schools, Third year students emphasise how different TY is from the Junior Certificate. Irrespective of the time of year interviewed, these young people indicated, in numerous ways, how preoccupied they were with their current concern, the Junior Certificate Examination. Many of them spoke about it as 'a pressure' and TY was conceptualised by many as a sort of 'recovery year', 'a break', when the current stress would be removed. Indeed, the early stages of many interviews with Third year students were peppered with phrases such as 'a break after the Junior Cert'; 'a rest'; 'relaxed'; 'away from stress'; 'less pressure than in Third year' and 'a year out'. For example:

It gives some space between Third year and the Leaving Cert. It gives you some time to relax between doing one test and doing another test. And then all the work experience, that's good as well.

Kevin<sup>12</sup>, Third Year, Sycamore School

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<sup>12</sup> At the start of the interviews with each student group, the researcher explained that in any reporting of the data, students' actual names would not be used so as to protect participants' anonymity (see

Insofar as they do know about TY, Third year students often articulate a global view of the programme as a complex amalgam of various components. For example:

You get to meet different people and work with different people in Fourth year and work experience and mini-companies and you get to know people and you are kind of older and you are preparing yourself for when you leave school.

Niamh, Third year, Beech School

Sometimes, the attraction of something different is tempered, in varying degrees, by a strongly held belief that studying for the LC is especially demanding. For example:

They say it's, like, in Third year it's all work, and then in Fourth year you do work experience and trips away and everything and then when you go into Fifth year it's all back to work again and some people aren't used of the work then after being in Fourth year.

Paula, Third year Oak School

I just think it is an extra year of study to catch up on things that you might have missed in First, Second or Third year and it is also an extra year of study for the Leaving Cert. so it gets you more prepared for that as well.

Lesley, Third year, Beech School

At the same time, many have clearly grasped some specific features of the TY programme and the specialist terminology associated with it. Frequently occurring phrases during focus groups interviews include: 'trips'; 'modules'; 'outside learning'; 'career guidance'; 'wider range of subjects'; 'greater maturity'; 'sample subjects for the LC'; 'you grow up'; 'teamwork'; 'more ready for university'; 'you get to know the teachers better'; 'work experience'; 'new subjects'.

Some offered specific views as to what they expect from TY. For example:

In Leaving Cert. you will be studying the exact same subjects as Third year but if you go into TY they can introduce a lot more.

Toni, Third Year, Maple School

You are kind of getting older and you are more responsible when you are doing your Leaving Cert. And you kinda have a break from it. If you go straight back into Fifth year you are back at a desk again but if you go to Fourth year, you kinda grow up a small bit. It's only a year of your whole life.

Blathnaid, Third year, Oak School

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Appendix 2). All quotations attributed to students emerged from these interviews; only the names have been changed.

A strong theme running through the discourse among Third year students is the idea that TY is 'soft' or 'easy'. At times it is as if TY is synonymous with 'easygoing'.

I couldn't tell you now why I know, but isn't it strange how almost every student does know that Fourth year is going to be an easy year?

Ciaran, Third year, Chestnut School.

### **Third Year students' attitudes towards choosing to do TY or not**

As is evident from TY's history, schools have the option of offering TY or not.

Among the schools that do offer it, a majority offer it to students as an option. Thus, in the majority of schools in the state, those who finish the senior cycle consist of some who avail of a five-year cycle while others spend six years from first year to the completion of a LC. Deciding whether to do TY or not can be a significant choice in a young person's life.

In the schools in this study, Third year students' articulation of what might be involved in TY, or reasons why they might choose it as an option, were vague. At the same time, many state that they have already made decisions as to whether they will follow the TY programme or not.

The theme of a 'break' or 'recovery, mentioned earlier, feature strongly:

I also think it's a chance, like, you're so stressed out over third year, completely; we've noticed that this year, people get so stressed. At least next year you'll start to get to know the people again, 'cos you don't have the pressure of exams on you anymore. It's kinda time to come back to yourself or change to a different self.

Feena, Third Year, Ash School

Informal impressions of TY as 'more relaxed' can be quite strong:

They (TY students) have days off that we don't have ...

Cormac, Third Year, Chestnut School.

Occasionally, rather than typically, a Third year student voices a more integrated view of TY. For example:

It (TY) is an opportunity to find out what you want to do with the rest of your life. Like, you can go on work experience and you're not going to have time in Fifth year or sixth year to figure out because you're going to be studying for the Leaving Cert and all. I suppose Fourth year is there to figure out what you want to study for and what you want to do with the rest of your life.

Maria, Third year, Ash School

Asked whether they have heard anything negative about TY – or in some cases unprompted – Third year students tend to highlight two particular perceived downsides of the year. Firstly, there is the view that it is at best some kind of unnecessary ‘optional extra’ and secondly that, somehow, after TY, Fifth and Sixth years may be more difficult. Frequent phrases that crop up in the discussions include: ‘hard to get back to study’; ‘a doss year’; ‘a waste of time’; ‘not suited to everyone’; ‘there are no Christmas tests’.

Sometimes, the recurring ideas of ‘relaxation’ and ‘waste of time’ overlap. Awareness of what follows TY is also a persistent theme. For example:

I think the TY is really for career guidance, to let you know what you will be doing when you are older. And it’s a break before you go into your big exam, in Leaving Cert. So, it’s a rest.

Eoghan, Third year, Chestnut School

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.

Where TY is optional, schools operate various combinations of formal presentations about TY, information sessions for parents and individual interviews for Third year students. In addition, students pick up perceptions about the programme from a variety of other sources.

In the one school in this study where TY is compulsory, that fact is often seen as a defining feature of that school. As one student remarked:

I had heard about it (TY) from Primary School because the whole thing about this school is that you *have* to do Transition Year.

Feena, Third year, Ash School

The influences on the decision to do TY or not varies from school to school. Peer group impressions and attitudes can be major influences. When TY is optional, the possible break-up of friendship groups can weigh heavily on the minds of these students:

I wouldn't do TY unless a couple of good friends did it. You are there on your own. You wouldn't know many people.

Orlagh, Third year, Sycamore School.

That's the worst thing about it, what I am scared of, if I do Fourth year and I will be with all the (current) Second years (when I go to Fifth year) and they are very immature.

Lorraine, Third year Oak School

Third year students also recount anecdotes about those who opted for TY and subsequently encountered difficulties. For example:

A friend ... she took the year off basically, which was a doss year in her school, and she couldn't study when she went back to Fifth year and now she is dropping out.

Finn, Third year, Chestnut School

The rush to complete schooling is also a factor for some:

Yeah, I want to do it but some of my friends are going straight into Fifth year and I would be watching them doing their Leaving Cert. a year ahead of me.

Paula, Third year Oak School

Age can also be a deciding consideration:

I am not doing TY because I would be too old. I would be 19 leaving school if I did TY.

Orlagh, Third year, Sycamore School

This idea of getting through the school system as quickly as possible, often articulated as 'finishing my education' is a persistent one among all groups of students interviewed. Such a deep-seated perspective on schooling presents a major challenge to the much-talked about concept of 'lifelong learning':

They want to get out of school; everyone I hang around with who doesn't want to do TY, their justification is that they just want to be out of here as fast as they can. They don't want to spend another year.

Kevin, Third year, Sycamore School

On the other hand, it appears that where there is widespread acceptance within a school that TY is a good thing, then a majority seem to swing towards it without too much analysis. For example:

People who have done it said it was good.

Martin, Third year, Maple School

I have a sister in Leaving Cert. Now my sister did TY and she loved it. She had a brilliant time. She enjoyed the work experience and she settled into everything and she just said it was brilliant.

David, Third year, Chestnut School

However, a sibling's experience is not always a clear indicator:

Yeah, my sister did TY, and she kind of told me that it wasn't that good. She thought it was a waste of a year. But I didn't care what she said. I said I was going to do it anyway. So!

Breda, Third year, Sycamore School

Similarly, parents' role in encouraging or discouraging their offspring to follow TY takes different patterns:

My Mam and Dad want me to do it and the teachers want me to do it but I am not doing it.

Teresa, Third year, Oak School

The complexity of decision-making is reflected in another incident recounted in one of the discussions.

I know a girl, now her parents have to make a decision for her, and her parents are kind of strict. Her parents first said 'go and do it' and the girl said 'good'. Then they changed their minds, and she 'OK'. And then they changed their minds again ... Maybe they think it's a waste of a year or something like that. Her cousin did it too and she said it was a waste of a year, and she told this girl's parents. It's not really fair on her like; they keep on changing their minds.

Breda, Third year, Sycamore School

In the same group, another student suggested that patterns of uptake in TY can be observed across particular families:

There is a very smart person in my class, probably the smartest. His family have never done TY. They would be more into technical subjects. But then there are families like my own family –like my parents – all their children and all my cousins did TY, so it kind of runs in the family.

Kevin, Third year, Sycamore School

As will be seen later in this report, teachers' influence emerges in the two schools designated 'disadvantaged' as potentially quite significant. Initially students' reactions to encouragement are often negative, though, as will be seen later, when followed up, especially by individual interviews, students may reconsider.

My history teacher called me the other day when I was walking down the corridor and she said: 'Teresa I recommend you do TY because you have great ability', but I don't want to do it.

Teresa, Third year, Oak School.



Student folklore about TY builds up within an individual school. For example, asked how he might describe those who don't opt for TY, one student put it like this:

There are the troublemakers, though it's not as simple as that; there are people who think they are too good for it; then people think that they're so cool they don't have to do it.

Kevin, Third year, Sycamore School

Many of the Third year students interviewed recognised that the decision to follow TY may vary from person to person. For example:

I think it depends on the person. Some people could be thinking: 'I will study hard for this test, then I will have a break.' Other people could be thinking: 'I don't want a break. I will study now and I am looking forward to studying for the Fifth year so I can finish my education.'

Ciaran, Third year, Chestnut School

What might be described as 'the folklore of the schoolyard', where students pass on to each other information and impressions about school life in general, sometimes devastatingly accurate but also sometimes seriously inaccurate, appears to be especially relevant in shaping students' attitudes to TY

#### **Fourth year students' attitudes towards TY**

Students interviewed during the course of their TY articulate a great variety of opinions about the programme and about their own learning. In each of the six schools, some of what the Fourth year students said reinforced the perspectives voiced by Third year students. Fourth year students also articulated a range of views that had not been mentioned by Third year students.

As with Third year students, TY as a year that is different from the more examination focused ones and more 'relaxed' is a consistent theme among the Fourth year students. For example:

You get experience and you get to do different subjects that you wouldn't get to do on a normal year. You mix more and you go more places.

Monica, Fourth year, Beech School

Chilled out a bit more, not being worried as much

Thomas, Fourth year, Sycamore School

The awareness of the JC and LC as major features on the educational landscape is also evident with most TY students. For example:

First, it's like a rest year. I mean after your exams, your Junior Cert exams, and then before you start really studying for your Leaving Cert. That's how I see it.

Donna, Fourth year, Ash School

In exam years there is emphasis on exams and it's like 'revise, revise'. In Fourth year it's more relaxed and you get to try new things. You get to try out new subjects for Leaving Cert. and also you get to do projects, and the mini-company and the Irish communication course. I think it's good.

Eamonn, Fourth year, Chestnut School

Students frequently use terms like 'maturing' and 'growing up' in response to questions about the year's purpose and benefits. Sometimes it's at a very fundamental level.

It's a year to grow up if you like because it's too young to leave school at 16.

Brian, Fourth year, Maple School

You become more mature and you get focused on what you want to do for your Leaving Cert., what subjects you are going to do.

Margaret, Fourth year, Oak School

I kind of matured more, because I was kind of childish. And I still am kind of childish, but I have more respect for others now. I respect their opinions and ideas, even though I take on what they say and appreciate what they say.

Tamara, Fourth year, Beech School

The perception of increased maturity is often linked to a growth in confidence, especially in social settings. This can begin within the class group, the year group, within the school itself and also, very significantly, is both nurtured and manifested in situations outside school.

You do gain confidence as well and you need it. ... I remember when they showed the first film that we made to the whole class and they laughed. Yes, they laughed a lot. That (experience) does help you.

Eamonn, Fourth year, Chestnut School

Particularly telling are accounts from young people whose initial disposition towards TY may have been sceptical or even negative. For example:

I was always told Fourth year was a doss. You absolutely did no work. You sit around all day. It is going to be boring. This and that. My brother

did it and he was bored out of his tree. I thought OK, I want to do Fifth year but I don't want to do LCA because I wanted Leaving Cert. to go to college and that sort of stuff. I decided to do Fourth year and I loved it so much I was just want to keep it forever, I enjoy it so much... I am delighted that I did it

Niall, Fourth Year, Beech School

### **Learning beyond the classroom**

Third year students, as has been seen, tend to have a general idea that TY will be different, but don't often articulate the ways in which TY differs from other years. TY students, when asked this question, initially tend to talk about features such as work experience, mini-company, and excursions beyond the classroom. Students in each of the six schools highlight 'trips' as an especially important feature of TY. This learning outside the classroom, often categorised as 'trips', takes many different forms. Some link with specific subjects while others relate to particular – usually developmental – activities. For example:

(The highlights for me were) trips away. We went to a leadership training course. We went down and mixed with ten other schools. We mixed and learned all different work, about the other schools, made friends and stuff. And next year we will come back and take care of the First years.

Monica, Fourth year, Beech School

Other highlights mentioned specifically by these Fourth year students include: work experience placement; trip to the Aran Islands; mini-company; physical education; First Aid; trip to France; trip to the Gaeltacht; Concern debates; GAA coaching courses, a visit to a linked school in Northern Ireland; trip to Prague; Young Scientist Exhibition; trip to the European Parliament in Strasbourg; a Retreat; a weekend trip to Galway; Leadership Training; the Musical (performed in association with another school).

### **Different classrooms: participation and relationships**

While learning outside the classroom emerges as a very distinctive feature of how Fourth year students see TY, many also report that inside classrooms the atmosphere is quite different from what they experienced in Junior Cycle:

Last year the teachers never stopped talking about the Junior Cert. and there is none of that this year. They never mention anything about exams.

It's just where you are going or different things you are doing during the week.

Thomas, Fourth year, Sycamore School

In Third year you are focusing on an exam. In Fourth year, I am not saying that you don't have to work – you have to work – but it's more relaxed and you can go off and do projects and stuff like films, the young scientist and it's just more relaxed.

Denis, Fourth year, Chestnut School

.... 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

Students in each of the six schools consistently talk about a changed relationship between students and teachers and link this with greater time and space for discussion. While this study is focused on TY, one cannot but help observe how TY students describe their experiences in Junior Cycle classes as regimented and non-participative:

(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

We get more input. In Third year and other years you have to learn this and you have to listen to teacher, and note-taking and writing and that, but this year you get a topic and you can debate it and discuss it.

Eamonn, Fourth year, Chestnut School

Asked to explain reasons for such stark differences between the experiences in Junior Cycle classes and Fourth year, most offer 'the exam' as an explanation. Occasionally, other explanations are offered. For example:

(In Junior Cycle) we were childish. We didn't really discuss things because we didn't know about them. This year we have more time for it.

Tamara, Fourth year, Beech School

They (teachers) do try to throw in words like responsibility and say we're independent now. I think they trust us now as well to make decisions.

Brian, Fourth year, Maple School

TY emerges very strongly as a time and space where students can voice their opinions and interact with each other and with their teachers. These do not appear to have been strong features of their Junior Cycle experience. The evidence from all the interviews is that not only do these Fourth year students recognise classroom discussion as a distinctive feature of the TY programmes in their schools, they also appreciate this development very much.

We get on an awful lot better (with the teachers) because we had a lot more time for discussion and debates with them.

Tamara, Fourth year, Beech School

The teacher kind of talks to you in the class. They just talk to you. In Third year they just said 'do this', 'do that'. But now they're kind of talking and giving, and we're giving back answers.

Cáit, Fourth year, Ash School

The change in relationships between teachers and students within classrooms, such a distinctive aspect of Fourth year students' discourse about TY, is sometimes linked with that other distinctive feature of the programme in these six schools: purposeful excursions outside the classroom. Sometimes, it is the interaction with teachers in the extra-classroom situation that enables students to view their teachers in a fresh light:

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

In addition to improved student-teacher relationships, Fourth year students also emphasise the opportunities for improved student-student relationships:

I liked going away, because TY to me was the people I was doing it with. I don't think I would have done some things, if I hadn't done them in TY. So, it's great to go away to places like Dublin, just with friends. And the teachers trust you to do, like to go off on your own. So, I think it was just great to get away.

Mike, Fourth year, Maple School

My main benefit from the year has been in socialising, in getting on with my friends more.

Bláithín, Fourth year, Maple School

The greater interaction between teachers and students in some TY classes in these schools is often associated with what the *Guidelines* describe as a ‘wide range of teaching/learning methodologies’. The students gave some practical illustrations of these:

In geography we don’t sit there and look at the book. We get up and we go into town and we see the streets. We learn the streets.

Wendy, Fourth year, Oak School

We did different types of PE work. We didn’t just do basketball and football, we got to do surfing and kayaking.

Tara, Fourth year, Maple School

Students also report that a shift to more active approaches to learning varies from subject to subject and from teacher to teacher. For example:

In Biology we are doing projects on our heart and our body but for Maths you have got a fixed course work and you have to cover it or you are going to fail, and you can’t debate it, you have to do it.

Eamonn, Fourth year, Chestnut School

The flexibility offered by TY is seen, and welcomed, by some as evident in particular subjects. For example:

In a lot of classes we have open discussion ... We don’t have in Maths ... but in other classes, like in English, it could start on in one direction and lead to something totally different because the teachers are just open to discussions.

Monica, Fourth year, Beech School

Some students are aware that no matter how broad, flexible and well-thought-out a curriculum is, much still depends on the individual teacher. For example:

In English there was a lot of leeway. We had a great English teacher. It was really good because, as well as discussion, we got to write poetry and we studied poetry and it wasn’t just all about covering the novels, the way it was in Third year.

Donna, Fourth year, Ash School

When the interviewer enquired as to what makes this teacher great, the reply, from another student, was succinct and to the point:

He listens to us. And he kind of likes listening to our views and what we want to do... I think that’s good teaching.

Deirdre, Fourth year, Ash School

The opportunity for students to negotiate what topics might be studied and discussed in class is also appreciated:

There's one class, it's social and political studies, and at the beginning of the year, the teacher asked us what we wanted to do. It was really a discussion class like what we wanted to do. We said things like cults and racism and things like that that we wanted to cover. And we had a chance to do it.... and the role of women in society as well.

Cáit, Fourth year, Ash School

As already mentioned, the experience of the Junior Cert. is still an important reference point:

In science you do more experiments. In other subjects you are doing things like surveys. For the Junior Cert. you just study.

Tony, Fourth year, Beech School

Teamwork was also a feature that some students picked up as different:

Say, we would be doing something; we would talk with other people. It's more like teamwork rather than on your own.

Tara, Fourth year, Maple School

Many of the participants in the focus groups were keen to dispel the notion that work in TY was less demanding than in Junior Certificate. They emphasise that the work is quite different. For example:

I have spent more time at work this year than all the other years put together ... spent more hours, getting involved in projects and doing things, like, associated with special big projects and so on.

Pat, Fourth year, Maple School

You learn how to be more organised in your deadlines, to have stuff ready in time. You are not childish anymore; you have all those responsibilities like when we had to do the (named fundraising events) project.

Denise, Fourth year, Oak School

### **Career clarification**

As already seen among Third year students, some see TY as a valuable space for planning for one's future. This is a consistent theme among TY students:

You go to career open days and there's a load of talk about different careers, and you get to look at videos of them. You have career guidance class, so you get to learn all about the subjects you need.

Sandra, Fourth year, Ash School

I think I am more mature. I now know what course I want to take when I get older, I am a lot clearer in my mind now about a career.

Leo, Fourth year, Chestnut School

Work experience placements not only feature on most students' lists of TY highlights, but also are seen by some as very specifically orientated towards career choice.

From First year to Third year you didn't really know what you wanted to do when you left school. This is an extra year to help you to think and to do work experience that will help you.

Monica, Fourth year, Beech School

### **Frustrations**

Students in some of these schools report that working in small groups, rather than as isolated individuals, is a welcome feature of particular classes. However, all are not as enthusiastic about this development. For example:

It does cause arguments within the group because there are always certain people doing the work and others sitting back.

Bláithín, Fourth year, Maple School

Others express frustration about the bad behaviour of classmates who don't appear as engaged with TY:

It's not fair, they don't put in anything and then they say this is boring... they don't get stuck in. It's going to be boring if you are going to be just sitting there every day.

Wendy, Fourth year, Oak School

Another student, when asked to say more about bad behaviour generalises,

Acting stupidly, doing stupid things, saying silly things.

Grace, Fourth year, Sycamore School

### **How Fourth year students choose to opt for TY**

Fourth year students offered a variety of opinions, both personal and more general, to explain why students might, or might not, choose to do TY. While conscious that some students being interviewed may have felt inclined towards giving what they suspect may somehow be a 'right' answer, the power of previous students' experiences in TY to influence younger students' choices is consistently communicated in different ways:

I wanted to do Transition Year.... because I was so immature, and I wanted to mature, because when all the girls were going into Transition Year last year, they were very immature, and when they came out they were mature.... and they seemed to have a lot of fun.

Katie, Fourth year, Oak School

Asked about his friends, one student says his Third year friends decided for or against TY in about equal number. He sees his reason for choosing TY as:



I didn't have any idea about my career, so I decided TY would help me there.

Thomas, Fourth year, Sycamore School

For some, the decision is not an especially difficult one:

I think I knew from before 1<sup>st</sup> year that most people in this school spend six years before the Leaving.

Leo, Fourth year, Chestnut School

A different insight emerges from a student who clearly struggled with the decision (this interview took place in February):

I said from the very start that I was not going to do Transition Year. End of story! And my parents got called in to the teachers. And they said that I would really benefit from this year, doing it, and that I would mature a lot. I had two weeks to decide it and before the Junior Cert and I got called in again. I changed my mind and I said: 'Look, I am going to do it.' I wasn't going to do it because everyone said it was a disastrous year, 'you don't do anything', 'you will be bored', 'you won't get any homework', 'you won't be studying because you will have nothing to do and then when you go into Fifth year you won't be able to get back into studying again and you will just fall behind in your work'. That is why I didn't want to do Transition Year. And so far I am delighted I did it. I think it's great.

Denise, Fourth year, Oak School

Where TY is compulsory and students are not keen to do it, moving school can be an option. One student articulates her reasons for not changing.

My Mam was convinced I wasn't doing Fourth year. My brother did it and he didn't want me to do it .... 'It's your choice,' they said. 'If you want to, you can go to a different school and go straight in and do the Leaving Cert.', but I didn't want to be separated from my friends and stuff and also doing Fourth year, you get an awful lot out of it.

Monica, Fourth year, Beech School

How young people perceive attitudes to TY within their families, especially parents' views, can play a significant role in their decision-making processes:

My Mam didn't want me to do it because she thought that I'd want to end up leaving school (without completing the LC).

Iris, Fourth year, Oak School

They (my parents) were saying not to sit back (during TY) and do nothing really. If you are going to do it, you have to get into everything ... they thought I'd do nothing. They thought it would be a waste of a year. For me.

Leo, Fourth year, Sycamore School

No, my parents were discouraging, because they thought it was a doss year. But they left the decision to me and they know I've benefited from it.

Thomas, Fourth year, Maple School

This student believes that he has benefited from the TY experience (this interview took place in February) and that his parents are pleased with TY so far. He later throws light of a further parental dilemma, that of wanting the child to make his or her own decisions but hoping they will be in particular directions.

... they were kind of pushing me towards it, and then they said make your own decision ... my mother didn't want me to go to college at seventeen; that was the main thing she was worried about.

Thomas, Fourth year, Sycamore School

Some students persist in opting for TY even against parental preferences. For example,

My Mam didn't want me to get lazy and not want to do any work and I didn't want to do it. She said: 'change schools', and then ... we talked it out and I ended up saying I wanted to stay in school but my Mam and Dad didn't really want me to do this year.

Tony, Fourth year, Beech School

One student recounted that her parents 'were called in five or six times' by the teachers and this led to TY being a hot discussion topic at home, revealing various attitudes:

My Mam and my Dad and myself, we were fighting every single night. 'I am going to do it.' 'No, I am not.' The arguments for and against doing it. My aunt said it's up to you but I think you should do TY. ... and the Career Guidance (sic) as well. ... they said if you keep your head above water and keep studying and do what you have to do at school, studying at school when they give you work, and just don't fall behind, and they were saying another year, mature, just grow up, get to know people, get to know the workplace.

Denise, Fourth year, Oak School

Some report detecting a change in parental attitudes during the course of the year.

For example:

My Mam was saying 'you shouldn't do it' and it was just in one ear and out the other and saying yeah, yeah ... and I wanted to do it ... At the start (of TY) she was saying you are not getting any homework, they are doing nothing, but now she is happy with all the work that is going in, all the projects and everything. I am doing more work than I did last year for my Junior Cert.

Wendy, Fourth year, Oak School

Even by the end of the year (the interview was in May) not all parents are convinced about TY's value. For example,

My mother thinks it was waste of time.....She thinks there was a lot of free time and outings in the year. She saw my lack of homework, my lack of studying. My Mam thought there would be a lot of project work.

Eamonn, Fourth year, Chestnut School

The schooling experience of other family members also impacts on decisions about TY. Age is a consistent consideration. For example:

My sister went to college at 16, and she graduated at 19, and that was a mistake.

Mike, Fourth year, Maple School

In the two schools designated 'disadvantaged', it is worth noting that students often report that their decision to do TY was greatly influenced by teacher encouragement. This topic is addressed in more detail in Chapter Eight.

### **What improvements do Fourth year students suggest for TY?**

When invited to recount any particular disappointments about TY, the Fourth year students tended to mention personal ones rather than point towards possible organisational improvements. As will be seen later, older students were often more critical.

Insofar as these students were suggesting improvements, five distinct areas emerge.

#### (a) Timing of events

For some, the spacing of trips outside school can be a cause of irritation. Some suggested more trips at the start of the year and more 'normal' classwork towards the end. This proposal often relates to fears about moving into Fifth year classes.

#### (b) Motivation and attendance

The problems of motivating students with limited interest in TY constitute an issue clearly obvious to some of those interviewed:

If there is someone bogged down in the stuff we do, if they don't find it interesting, they don't bother coming in. Attendance is low in some of the classes. They shouldn't bother doing it.....that pattern, like that continues into Leaving Cert. I know two of my friends that did it last year, they

were missing it all the time in Transition Year because there was nothing to do and stuff. And then this year they go on the hike as well.

Mike, Fourth year, Maple School

Some people are really enthusiastic about TY. It's just some people think TY is a resting period. They just believe it is a waste of time ... For example, one person is working in a bar and he never comes in the next day after working and that kind of thing.

Liam, Fourth year, Chestnut School

### (c) Expenses

While 'trips' emerge as a major highlight of TY for many students, a downside of this is that excursions out of school can be expensive. Not all students have the same disposable income and some students are keenly aware of this. For example, talking about a four-day trip to Paris one student, remarked:

€ 520, yes and that's not all; you need spending money after that.

Tara, Fourth year, Sycamore School

There is often a sense that if these trips are educational and an integral part of the TY programme, students should not have to foot the bill for every event:

We had to pay for everything ourselves.

Eamonn, Fourth year, Chestnut School

### (d) Other programmes

Given the extensive freedom within TY for schools to shape their own individual programmes, it is almost inevitable that students hear reports of projects and events in other schools that catch their imagination. This can lead to a sense of opportunities being missed and disappointment. For example

I think some people in TY classes in other schools received a lot more support than perhaps we had ... Like a film module; they had a specific film teacher and for four days next week they are specifically shooting film all week. This is being done by professionals; they are a professional outfit and all that kind of thing.

Leo, Fourth year, Chestnut School

### (e) Information about TY

Some students say that they had limited information about TY during Junior Cycle and that TY should be promoted more among younger students. For example:

I would like them (the teachers) to publicise the highlights a bit more. A lot of people don't know about TY. When we were in Third year I didn't

know what Fourth year was about. I knew you did work experience. That was about it.

Tamara, Fourth year, Beech School

### **Fifth year and Sixth year students' attitudes towards TY**

Students in Fifth year and Sixth year, engaged in a LC programme, have particular viewpoints on TY. Those who have completed the programme can evaluate it through the lens of experience. Those who, for whatever reason, did not follow TY also have valuable viewpoints, not least regarding its optional status.

It has already been seen that Fourth year students in these six schools generally see TY as a positive experience. They highlight extra-classroom learning as especially engaging, particularly work experience and 'trips'. They perceive TY classes as generally more interactive than in Junior Cycle. Improved relationships between teachers and students are seen by many as major effects of the TY experience. Fourth year students also regard the year as valuable in building confidence and personal effectiveness in social situations as well as helping clarify career possibilities. Hence, central questions to be explored in the data from interviews with Fifth year and Sixth year students concern the extent to which these attitudes persist and, if modified, what factors are at play.

### **LC students reinforcing views of TY students**

At first glance, much of what Fifth and Sixth year students in these six school have to say about TY appears to echo the data that emerge from the Fourth year students. A majority look back favourably on the TY experience. For example,

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

The perception of TY as a 'break' or 'recovery period' after what are seen as the demands of the JC remains strong. Students continue to emphasise features of TY that contrast with those of the JC or LC, in particular, work experience, project work and learning beyond the traditional classroom.

(In Third year) there is so much pressure. The big test. In Fourth year it's, like, just try this and see if you like it, try that and see if you like that instead ... We didn't do any trips up to Junior Cert really. It was, well,

academic stuff mainly. In Fourth year we went on trips and then we had to do reports ... It gave you more of a feel for your work.

Bill, Fifth Year, Chestnut School

As with many TY students, some Fifth and Sixth years are very clear that they themselves benefited, especially in relation to personal and social confidence and competences. These senior cycle students also tend to locate the benefits in wider educational contexts, sometimes indicating valuable insights in relation to their own maturation.

A lot of fun. A brilliant year to do. It really benefited me and I have more confidence in myself and I learned a lot more about people.

Mairéad, Fifth year, Maple School

It easy to be yourself after doing TY ... when I was in Second year or Third year there would be some things you would be afraid to say, like opinions, you know. Now you know you just say it, you feel confident about saying what you want to say.

Kenneth, Sixth year, Sycamore School

(TY) helps you in getting on with your family. I have a big family and it's not easy to get on with all of them. It comes to a stage when you have to bite your tongue. I know you have to do this outside your family as well, but in Fourth year you learn a lot about dealing with people.

Heather, Fifth year, Beech School.

Many indicate that they have observed TY having quite a dramatic effect on some classmates. For example:

It is hard to push someone into it (TY) who is very quiet. I know we had a few girls in our class and I think after the year, you would notice in Fifth year, you would say 'she wasn't like this in Third year'. You come out of yourself an awful lot. You are more confident. You are better. You are more outspoken.

Orna, Sixth Year, Oak School

Many senior cycle students highlight the value of TY as a sort of 'reflective space', a year that has a focus on personal development, that offers subjects and topics beyond what they see as the 'normal' curriculum. They also articulate, in various ways, the opportunities to plan for their future:

I think Third year and TY are big defining moments because up until Third year you are learning all sorts of things but when you get as far as Fourth year you are making decisions whether you are going to stay in school or whether you need to go to college or whether you are going to leave school or whether you are going to get a job.....I think that's what it comes down to ... You can just drift into Fourth year and you can find

yourself just drifting through the system and not knowing what you want to do at the end of it.

Tara, Sixth Year, Maple School

There are strong resonances between what many senior cycle students state about TY and the views set out by Richard Burke TD back in 1974, as set out in Chapter 1. Their comments tend to confirm the extent of the pressures to which the Minister referred. Furthermore, they seem to put a high premium on using the space to equip themselves to deal with the challenges of the system itself, the very metaphorical tread-mill that so concerned the Minister:

I needed an extra year in school because I thought if I went straight into Fifth year I would be too young leaving school and I know now I definitely want to go to college, so it was a good year.

Maria, Fifth Year, Beech School

I have friends who are in college this year they are saying stuff that they are doing. You know you can relate it to TY, all the projects that you have to do and having to meet deadlines and that kind of stuff. So that is the way TY is; it suits that type of person who might be going on towards college.

Laura, Sixth Year, Maple School

While many Fifth and Sixth year students report that TY was both enjoyable and beneficial, they often struggle when asked to identify the key ingredients that contributed to its perceived success. Frequently an impression is given that ‘development’ took place in an unplanned way, that the main benefits were somehow outside the confines of what they see as ‘normal’ school life. Only occasionally are school leaders, TY co-ordinators or teachers credited explicitly with devising imaginative experiences geared towards facilitating personal, social, intellectual or vocational development.

### **Changing student-student relationships and personal and social development**

A consistent strand in the interviews with Fifth and Sixth year students is their focus on how relationships between students themselves improved during TY and subsequently. This is sometimes, though not always, located in the wider context of ‘getting on better with people’. It is frequently cited as effect of particular activities but also as a cause of others:

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

There is some evidence offered by students that the social dimension of schooling – a place where you meet your friends – is strong and that TY's emphasis on working together, on group excursions and on the sharing of certain, once-off experiences, builds on this. Some contrast these experiences with the individual, singular focus that seems to result from having to concentrate on a public examination during Third year. A small number of students made explicit reference to TY as facilitating improved relationships between boys and girls:

The highlight of TY for me was getting to know everyone a lot better. I didn't really know boys in Third year. Now I know everyone a lot better and I can have a proper conversation with them.

Heather, Fifth year, Beech School

(In TY) there is not the divide between boys and girls in the class like in First, Second or Third year.

Tara, Sixth year, Maple School

This emphasis by students on what for many is an enjoyable social dimension within TY is sometimes linked with the idea of TY as 'a doss year'. 'Doss year' is a poorly defined term and students use it in various different ways. Frequently, the connotations seem to include 'enjoyable' and 'socially interactive' as well as 'laid back' and 'lacking in challenge'. One also senses a continual contrast in students' minds between the perceived demands and pressures of examination years and TY.

I enjoyed having another year in school. I kind of like school, though I don't want to stay here forever. I'll be glad to be finished next year but, I am glad that I had, not a doss year, but an extra year with a lot of mixing with everybody else from the school.

Diane, Fifth year, Ash School

Improved relationships between students themselves links with one of the central aims of TY:

Education for maturity with the emphasis on personal development including social awareness and increased social competence.  
(DoE, 1993c, p.4)

Social competence is clearly seen as incremental and the evidence from the senior cycle students in these six schools is that 'getting on better with each other' is seen by



many of them as a central feature and consequence of TY. Furthermore, the *Guidelines* (p.16), while proposing ‘Personal and Social Development’ as a ‘possible area of experience’ within the curriculum, draw attention to the importance of ‘process’:

The Transition Year should help facilitate personal growth and social development as a central concern of the school through active participation in a programme where the approach/process is as important as the content. Suitable cross-curricular learning experiences and a well-structured personal education programme, where pupils will be involved in an active experiential process, will help to :

- foster healthy growth and adjustment, and effective interpersonal communications and relationships;
- increase self-knowledge and awareness;
- develop an understanding and tolerance of others;
- understand how feelings and attitudes affect behaviour;
- enhance the self concept.

(DoE, 1993c, p.16)

While presumably individual timetabled programmes of ‘Personal and Social Development’ made a contribution to such growth, the students themselves are in little doubt that the very ‘process’ of TY, the way they did things, was vitally important. They highlight trips, group project work and the classroom as arenas where the process was enacted. For example,

(In TY) there were always things on and you could volunteer to go and watch a play. Everything. It was just a laugh, I thought; it was good and you got to know everyone else. In Third year, I didn’t get to know or get along with half of them. I didn’t know them. I didn’t talk to them. But in Fourth year I got to know everyone. There are so many things done so you get to know people.

Ashley, Fifth year, Beech School.

That final sentence suggests a student who was aware that activities were clearly planned to facilitate greater social interaction. Some students also acknowledge that the way in which TY classes are arranged, especially where large numbers are involved, can be a very significant part of the process of promoting social interaction among students:

We got changed from our tutor groups in Third year. Because we were changing subjects every module, we were in with different people. You mix a lot more with the whole year... Even though we had been in school with each other for three years, or even before that, there were some people and I didn’t know them at all.

Barbara, Fifth year, Ash School

As with the TY students, trips, especially abroad or at least ones involving ‘overnights’, figure highly on LC students’ lists of ‘highlights of TY’. Frequently, details of visits to outdoor pursuit centres or overseas are recalled, usually with fondness and clarity and offered as examples of defining aspects of TY as well as in the context of improved relationships among classmates. Among the students interviewed here, trips to the Gaeltacht, Northern Ireland, Paris, Manchester, Barcelona, Strasbourg and Amsterdam were all spoken of in very positive terms.

A number of students make the point that improved student relationships also enable more effective project work and classroom discussion.

(in TY) you become comfortable with the group... in the classroom ... through discussions or debates on... certain topics.

Tiernan, Sixth year, Sycamore School

Of course, it would be distorting to imply that TY experiences automatically lead to improved relationships between students. As evident in some of the comments relating to project work and to classroom discussion, not all students engage with the same amounts of enthusiasm and some activities can increase tensions between students. For example:

At the start of the year the co-ordinator said to us, ‘Look, what you will get out of TY depends on what you put into it.’ We had loads of good experiences with work experience and with projects and seashore ecology and all kinds of practical work and some girls just didn’t bother doing their projects and they didn’t get the full benefit. I think they are probably the people that didn’t work in other years.

Barbara, Sixth year, Oak School

Mini-company, for example, emerges as an arena where student-to-student relations were sometimes strained. While some students rated it as a high point of the programme, it was identified as a ‘low’ by others. This leads to some incisive, reflective perspectives:

There was always conflict between groups of people... tension and stress... it was the worst part of TY... I think, looking back on it, that was good really because that’s what a real business is about. There would be two of us left with the pressure to get it done but that’s the way it is in real life.

Marie, Fifth year, Oak School

It's hard to get people to work. Some people are adamant. 'Oh, I am not doing this' or 'we have to do this', or 'this is better for the mini-company' and you can't get your ideas and you can see that you have made a wrong decision but you can't do anything about it if they are set against it.

Bill, Fifth Year, Chestnut School

### **Teaching and learning within classrooms**

As with TY students, Fifth and Sixth year students also demonstrate strong tendencies, at least initially, to talk about TY in terms of activities beyond the classroom, particularly trips, work experience placements and special projects. While undoubtedly these educational excursions enhance the programme and appear to be key factors in developing strong bonds among the students, an important consideration is the simple fact that TY students spend much of their time within school, usually in conventional classrooms. How students perceive the quality of these experiences is a key test for any school that seeks to realise the ambitious goals of the programme.

The *Guidelines for Schools* are unequivocal on this point, noting the following:

A key feature of Transition Year should be the use of a wide range of teaching/learning methodologies and situations. The goals and objectives of the programme can best be achieved by placing particular emphasis on

- 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.

Educational activities undertaken should enable students to have a valid and worthwhile learning experience with emphasis given to developing study skills and self-directed learning.

(DoE, 1993c, p.8)

In the interviews with Fifth and Sixth year students, some of these points feature much more explicitly than others. Some make frequent and consistent references to group work, discussion, project work, trips and work experience. Others, even when pressed, have difficulty in providing examples of this 'wide range of teaching/learning

methodologies'. Furthermore, it is difficult to find any direct references to team teaching, integration of learning or negotiation of learning, though, as will be seen in the chapter dealing with teachers' perceptions, teachers do indicate their use within TY.

In each of the six schools, senior students refer, in different ways, to sensing a shift within TY from a strong emphasis on individual learning within Junior Cycle to working in groups. This shift can also be seen as linked to earlier comments about improved student-student relations and to perceptions that TY is 'more relaxed':

I just think you are so relaxed; you kind of come into yourself more. For the Junior Cert, you're working by yourself and you have to study and you have to work on your own, but in Fourth year, because you're in groups the whole time, you kind of have to integrate more. You become more, I don't know... I suppose you become more exciting as a person.

Lisa, Fifth year, Ash School

It was just the whole thing of working in groups. I really liked that,

Doireann, Fifth year, Oak School

As is strongly evident in the data from Fourth students, the TY classroom as a space where young people can 'find their voice' is also a theme that Fifth year and Sixth year students highlight.

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

There is no pressure on students or teachers because there is no academic exam for the Fourth year so they just have more time to chat around with them.

Roy, Fifth year, Chestnut School

### **Personal responsibility in learning**

While Fourth year students tend to contrast TY classrooms directly with what they perceive as the pressurised, 'hothouse' ones of the JC, Fifth and Sixth year students focus more on issues of personal freedom and responsibility. Many are conscious that teachers deliberately challenge them to engage in what the *Guidelines* call 'self-directed learning' (pps. 3,4,6,8,9 )

(In TY) it's not like the teacher is forcing you to learn. It's like 'We are going to teach you and, if you want to learn, you can learn, but if you don't, just waste your time'. So you are not being forced any more; it's more your own choice.

Odhran, Fifth year Chestnut School

You have a choice of what you want to do from the teachers. They don't just talk and say 'you have to do this' and 'you have to do that'; they let you come up with ideas like in the mini-company and... they don't tell you what you have to do but they advise you.

Laura, Sixth year, Maple School

Some also saw a similar attitude manifested by teachers in their approach to homework. For example:

In Third year the teachers would give you homework and they would always check the work to make sure you had it done. In Fourth year it's like, 'you can do it if you want to; it's your loss if you are not doing your homework.'

Bill, Fifth year, Chestnut School.

Some Fifth and Sixth year students were also reassessing their perception of 'stress' in relation to the JC and seeing it in more relative terms:

We thought (JC was pressurised) at the time. You know, you take it very seriously at the time, but now, when you look back, it wasn't anything like the pressure we feel now (for the LC).

Donna, Sixth year, Sycamore School

Some senior students detect a major change in emphasis within TY towards experiential learning. As will be seen, this is especially true in relation to project work:

There was learning but we were learning in a different way. We were learning through our own experience... We learned by doing rather than just sitting in a classroom and writing and all that.

Noel, Fifth year, Maple School

### **Specific subjects and modules**

Student references to the 'wide range of teaching/learning methodologies' often occurred with specific reference to individual subjects. These provide some indications not only of student perceptions but also of practices and possibilities within individual subject areas. For example, in relation to the teaching of Irish, students remarked:

And I liked the way in Irish we did Irish dancing.

Laura, Sixth year, Maple School

In Irish we got to do a lot of oral work, and I thought that was good.

Peter, Fifth year, Sycamore School

I can remember ourselves in Irish class, we read a bit of the novel that had nothing to do with the Leaving Cert course and we enjoyed it and the teacher had a more relaxed attitude as well.

Tiernan, Sixth year, Sycamore School

Successfully changing teaching methods/approaches is one of the biggest challenges that teachers face within TY. As will be evident in the chapter dealing with teachers' views, numerous factors can impact to maintain the *status quo*. One factor can be students' own expectations and attitudes. They are often comforted by the familiar and predictable, even if dull, and challenged, threatened and intimidated by novel approaches. The following comment from a student shortly before her LC examination captures some of the ambiguous views with which some young people grapple:

Looking back I think they (teachers) could have done a lot more diverse things. They didn't have to teach in traditional methods. They could have done a lot of group work. In Irish communications ... there was always discussion, discussion, discussion. At the start of the year she was getting us to play games together, to bond and come out of our shells. At the time I didn't like the class but, thinking back on it now, it was a great benefit.

Kathy, Sixth year, Sycamore School

### **How LC students view subjects and modules in TY**

When Fifth and Sixth year students reflect on their TY classroom experiences they often distinguish between three kinds of subjects:

- 'new' subjects that had not been studied previously or ones that represent some integration of a number of subject categories;
- subjects that are being 'sampled' with a view to being continued on towards the LC examination;
- 'continuity' or 'linear' subjects, that is those subjects that have already being studied in JC and will be continued on to LC.

Because 'curriculum content is a matter for selection and adaptation by the individual school, having regard to these guidelines, the requirements of the pupils and the views of parents' (DoE, 1993c, p.5) there is a rich variety of 'new' subjects and modules offered in some schools. For example:

Court Studies and the module on Lateral Thinking, they were really good.

Diane, Fifth year, Ash School

We did film studies (in TY). That was good; it was brilliant. We don't do that this year.

Ashley, Fifth year, Beech School.

I like all the different subjects. I really liked woodwork. We got to do woodwork as one of our modules and I had never done anything like that before and I really enjoyed that.

Una, Fifth year, Ash School

I took up Spanish as well in Fourth year. I'd never even thought of doing it. It covers the whole Junior Cert course and you can take it up then for your Leaving if you want to... And I have basic Spanish now.

Mairéad, Sixth year, Ash School

### Sampling subjects

While the *Guidelines* emphasise that

... a Transition Year is NOT part of the Leaving certificate programme, and should NOT be seen as an opportunity for spending three years rather than two studying LC material (DoE, 1993c, p.5),

they also make the point that

Pupils entering the LC programme on completion of a TY should be better equipped and more disposed to study than their counterparts who did not have the benefits of this year.

These nuanced references came into sharp relief when the Inspectorate of the Department of Education conducted an evaluation of the programme shortly after the 1994 mainstreaming. One of the more telling recommendations in that report states:

Pupils' decisions in relation to subject choice for Senior Cycle should be delayed until the end of Transition Year. Transition Year provides an obvious opportunity for the reflection and guidance which facilitates mature and considered choice by pupils. Circular 47/93 from the Department of Education explicitly states that schools will not be permitted to offer a three-year Leaving Certificate programme. (DoE, 1996, p.22)

Some individual Fifth and Sixth year students bear testimony to the value of 'sampling' subjects during TY and how this can lead to more informed decision-making. For example:

You get to do all the new subjects before making choices for the Leaving Cert. So (TY) is good for that.

Roy, Fifth year, Chestnut School

I hadn't done woodwork in Junior Cycle and then sampled it in TY and now I'm doing Construction Studies for the Leaving Cert. I'm pleased that I decided I would do a practical subject.

Dermot, Sixth year, Maple School

While these individual examples point to the benefit of 'sampling' within TY, there is also evidence that many students make up their minds about LC subjects based on the experiences in JC. Sampling in TY may well only effect a change in a minority of students. However, sampling may be especially relevant for promoting 'minority subjects' as well as encouraging students to follow their particular personal interests and aptitudes. On the other hand, some students, as well as teachers, point out that, say, a ten-week module in Physics can be especially challenging when the student has already decided that he/she is not going to continue with that subject through to the LC.

### **Continuity subjects**

As Egan and O'Reilly observed in the one of the first evaluations of Transition Year attitudes to 'linear subjects' in TY can be problematic. They saw it as follows:

The problem here (with linear subjects) is that you cannot realistically expect to send an average class of Transition students into Fifth year with their Maths, Irish, English etc. unimpaired; if they have really devoted the previous year to a broader type of education. On the other hand, if you are determined that the Linear Subjects shall not suffer on account of the Transition Year you may end up with a project which is merely a minor variation on the regular curriculum. (Egan and O'Reilly, 1979, p.55)

The evidence from Fifth and Sixth year students in this study is that when talking about teaching and learning in TY, they are more likely to refer to their experiences of subjects such as Irish and Maths as being more similar to what they encountered in Junior Cycle, 'a minor variation on the regular curriculum'. However, it is also clear that, as students see it, the teacher can be a critical variable especially in relation to 'continuity' subjects:

(In TY) you cover the basics that you learned in First year, basic Irish, English and then it's fun; it's better than Third year because you go places as well.

Ashley, Fifth year, Beech School

There was a module on short stories and I thought that was really good, but mainly it was just the teacher... so much depends on the teacher.

Shane, Sixth year, Chestnut School



Throughout many of the conversations with students, Mathematics was often consciously spoken about in a manner different from other subjects. This was particularly true among those who aspired to higher level in the LC. These students invariably see TY as providing an opportunity to develop a strong foundation in Mathematics in a way that, in practice, seems very like a three-year LC. Because of this, some, therefore, see the choice between doing TY and, say, repeating the LC as an easier one to make. For example:

Definitely TY. One of the main things is doing honours Maths. Without doing TY it would be pretty tricky because you do the algebra and trigonometry which is the basis for all the other topics, so you would be totally lost otherwise.

Daragh, Sixth year, Chestnut School

Another LC student captures some of the ambiguous attitudes of many senior cycle students when, speaking specifically about what are sometimes referred to as ‘core subjects’, he reflects

In English, Irish, Maths and languages it would have kept things moving if I had done more. (I now see) we would have loved to have done stuff to have helped us in LC, but back in TY we didn’t want to do it.

Alex, Sixth year, Maple School

### **Remediation**

According to the *Guidelines* TY also offers opportunities for ‘remediation and compensation’.

A central aspect of Transition Year should be the development of basic competencies in key areas according to the needs of individual pupils, including remediation where appropriate. The aim should be to identify and eliminate weaknesses, and to develop the confidence and attitudes of pupils so that they will be better placed to give optimum consideration to their future study options for Leaving Certificate or other programmes. This will extend to enhancement of their study skills for more effective learning and to the development of their capacities for self-directed and open learning. (DoE, 1993c, p.6)

Few students or teachers made explicit reference to this dimension of TY. On the occasions when it was mentioned, it was usually in a positive light. For example:

In French they took the people who weren’t good at French out of the mainstream French class, and tried to teach us basics again...There was less pressure.

Brigid, Sixth Year, Ash School

### **Project work**

In terms of varying approaches to learning, students in all six schools made frequent references to ‘projects’. ‘Doing projects’ could almost be seen as a defining feature of TY in these schools. By ‘projects’ students appear to cover a range of activities. Some projects are subject specific and may or may not be used for assessment purposes. Other projects can be seen as cross-curricular or interdisciplinary; mini-company and work experience were also sometimes spoken of as distinctive TY ‘projects’. Finally, some projects inhabit a territory between the strictly curricular and the extra-curricular or co-curricular. In the latter category, these ‘big’ projects included musicals, community service projects, composite fund-raising events and an environmentally focused fashion show.

Each school has its own unique approach to project work and tends to have a particular combination of ‘favoured’ projects, such as working co-operatively with particular NGOs or local community organisations, enabling students to take part in national projects such as Concern Debates, Young Scientist Exhibition, Gaisce – The President’s Award, Young Social Innovators, Young Entrepreneurs and so on. Many of those interviewed gave personal testimony that their participation in such projects had been developmental. In fact, one of the emerging patterns associated with TY in some schools seems to be a growing perception that TY is the year when students get involved in such projects – and, by implication, avoid them in the other five years, or at least in Third, Fifth and Sixth years.

Students’ comments indicate various levels of engagement with project work as a way of learning. In general, project work emerges as one of the areas where schools have made real shifts in relation to teaching and learning. It may be worth noting that project work was identified as key area for teacher development by the TYCSS and the title of a publication in 2000. (TYCSS, 2000b)

(In TY) we did a lot of projects and the teachers helped us out with projects and they were involved and it was a big team really.

Orna, Fifth year, Oak School

The Junior Cert was more routine, where there were tests every two or three days. Your homework had to be handed in every night. But in Fourth year, you’re given a main project at the start of the year and you had to have that finished by the end of the year. In most of the subjects

that we did, like you had main projects, and they had to be in by the deadline.

Lisa, Fifth year, Ash School

Involvement in 'big' projects also seems to link, in many cases, with students' own emphasis on social bonding among TY students, already mentioned. For example:

We had never done anything like that (the musical) before, but I did it and I had a lovely time. There were so many rehearsals or whatever and I had plenty of time to do that... I made loads of friends because of it.

Iseult, Sixth year, Ash School

While students are generally positive about group work and project work, many provide evidence that their learning has brought particular insights. For example;

(In mini-company) everything in the world isn't as easy as it looks anyway, and you know you have to put an awful lot of effort to get something out of it, out of what you want to get, like, our ideas went straight down the drain, so I think I learned a lot from that.

Mark, Fifth year, Sycamore School

At the end of the year we have a TY night where all the parents come to see all the projects you have done. There are videos of all the different items that have been carried out through the year so you can see then if one girl had 10 projects and another girl had two; exactly who was working through the year or the involvement they had in each project... and everyone gets a book of certs and... you see some girls had nothing to show for doing the year.

Noelle, Sixth year, Oak School

The commitment of individual teachers to particular students and activities is often cited as a vital ingredient in some students gaining benefit from TY. Students often acknowledge that they 'got involved' in a project, for example, Gaisce, on the encouragement of a teacher and then, when the student's interest wanes, teacher 'persistence' appears to be crucial. Generally, it would appear that, when it comes to attitudes to a programme, many students take their cues from their teachers.

### **Work experience**

As with the Fourth Year students, students in Fifth and Sixth Year talk enthusiastically about their work experience placements. Many state that their placement was the highlight of the year. However, now at a further remove than their Fourth year counterparts, some offer different observations and suggestions that point

to work experience as an aspect of TY that offers great learning potential but cannot be presumed always to be automatically a positive experience:

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

I know some people who didn't enjoy their work experience. A lot of people got stuck making the tea.

Lisa, Fifth Year, Ash School

I was just sitting in an office for 2 weeks and just got bored.

Tom, Sixth Year, Chestnut School

### **Reservations about teaching and learning**

While most students did not use the language of the *Guidelines*, many voiced a clear expectation that teaching and learning in TY should be different from that in Junior Cycle. While generally reluctant to talk specifically about individual teachers, most indicated that they actually encountered quite a broad range of experiences in TY classrooms. There were suggestions and implications that some teachers appear more comfortable with TY material than others. For example:

It depends on the teachers... some teachers can work the class without a specific course. There are some teachers who know how to make it interesting in a practical way; you can see practical applications rather than just reading it from a book.

Kenneth, Sixth year, Sycamore School

Students appear to view teachers' approaches to TY across a broad spectrum, stretching from the negative to the very positive. Some contend that teachers don't regard TY seriously and that such attitudes are evident to students. Pressed on this point, students point to lack of preparation for class, lack of structure, focus, or work ethic. In some schools a perception that there are more 'free' classes in TY was also offered as evidence of 'low priority'. When questioned on this point, students' descriptions of effective teachers in TY tended to emphasise teachers who are 'motivated', who 'treat you as a person'. Some Sixth year students observed that in Sixth year many of their teachers show great dedication, running classes that are very focused and even supplementing timetabled classes with additional ones at lunchtime

or after regular school. Some contrast this high level of commitment with a much more casual attitude to TY:

I think the basic thing is if they (teachers) want to do it (TY) they should take it seriously; don't use students as guinea pigs. Get a syllabus together before you actually start a TY programme. Don't turn such a blind eye to... people just going home and things which you wouldn't get away with in Fifth or Sixth but you got away with a lot easier in Fourth year.

Tom, Sixth year, Chestnut School

### **Student-Teacher relations**

If improved relationships between students and teachers is a strong feature to emerge from comments by Fourth year students, it is arguably even more so among their Fifth and Sixth year counterparts. Indeed, building on good relationships developed during TY is seen by many students as a key feature of a successful final two years in the school system. While improved student-teacher relations in senior cycle may be seen as a very positive consequence of TY, the extent to which so many students describe student-teacher relations in Junior Cycle in negative, authoritarian and oppressive terms must be a matter of concern.

(In TY) you can have a joke with them... They are interested in what you want to do as well and other things about you, not just school.

Ashley, Fifth Year, Beech School

When I was in Third year I felt you were treated like a kid, (but in TY) you could actually get on with the teachers; you could actually talk to them like normal people talk to each other.

Charlie, Fifth year, Maple School.

Some senior cycle students have clearly reflected on the process of the altered relationships between students and teachers. Young people's changing perspectives on teachers through adolescence is occasionally articulated, for example:

(In TY) you get on with them (teachers) a lot better. They treat you a lot better. They treat you like an adult and they expect better behaviour. They expect you to do what you are told... It's probably both the teachers and the students that change. The teachers don't change so much, it's you that change, and your attitude to them changes... Once you get into senior cycle it's just, like, he's there trying to do something important with you. In TY you realise teachers are working hard for you. In Third yr you wouldn't know teachers were working hard for you. You think he's just there to make me do homework. You think he's not a very good teacher, and then it's like he is working hard, fair play to him.

Jim, Fifth year, Chestnut School.

### **Transition from TY to Fifth Year**

In schools where TY is optional, Fifth year and Sixth year classes include a combination of students who have completed a TY and those who have opted to move straight onto the LC course immediately after the JC. Because of the extra year, the former students also tend to be older than their counterparts who have not completed a TY. This situation prompts two particular series of questions. The first concerns how well TY students adjust to the change in focus from a programme emphasising personal and social development to one with a strong academic orientation. The second set of questions relates to the presence of two different cohorts of students within the one classroom and students' and teachers' perceptions of this amalgam.

The evidence from the schools in this study where TY is optional is uneven on this point. While some students report difficulties in adjusting to life as Fifth year students, others contend that TY has given them a new impetus for academic work. Similarly, while some students believe that an enhanced maturity resulting from TY benefits all in the Fifth year class, others indicate tensions between the two groups. Comments about teachers' roles in relation to Fifth year students who have travelled on different educational pathways are inconclusive.

I found it hard to get back into the work. Settling into Fifth year was difficult.

Darina, Sixth Year, Oak School

I remember the shock of the first week in Fifth year; suddenly there was loads of homework.

Kieran, Sixth Year, Chestnut School

I was young enough (doing TY), but I wasn't a mature student. I didn't put much into study or anything like that. After transition Year I went in to Fifth year. I found I was able to study easier and pick up things easier, because I was that bit older.

Eddie, Sixth Year, Sycamore School

Perhaps understandably, given their focus on the LC, some Fifth and Sixth year students view TY in terms of a preparation for Fifth year. This observation also draws attention to the issue of lack of continuity between subjects in Junior Cycle, TY and in the LC.

When you come into Fifth year and you see the amount of work you have to do in two years, you kinda think, why couldn't we have started the Leaving Cert course in Fourth year, or even half way through Fourth year.

Brigid, Fifth Year, Ash School

No, I would leave it (TY) the way it is. They have changed it a bit this year. They are doing more English, Irish and Maths. This is probably good because it gets you prepared for Fifth year.

Eric, Fifth Year, Beech School

As already indicated, students' views of the internal dynamics in Fifth and Sixth year classrooms vary. At first glance, two groups of students arriving in to Fifth year, one immediately following the JC, the other having completed a TY, might look like a recipe for difficulty if not incompatibility. According to the students, much depends on how well people reach out to the other group. One student, echoing the idea of using social capital for 'bridging' and not just 'bonding' as set out by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone*, describes starting out in Fifth year as an opportunity to apply the 'greater maturity' that results from TY.

The people who would have done TY would have a bond anyway. We always sit beside each other. We are all very good friends... And because of TY we are able to mix with the other students who just came from Third year.

Charlie, Fifth year, Maple School

In the same school, the two sixth year students interviewed who had gone into the first year of the LC immediately after the JC stated, without prompting, that they were welcomed by their colleagues warmly and openly. As with many other features of the school, they tend to highlight the small, intimate nature of the school and how 'everybody knows everybody else'. As a classmate points out, initial tensions can be ironed out quickly:

I remember looking at some of the people who had come in from Third year and I thought 'What the hell are you are at?' You should have done TY and got all that out of your system. They were sitting back and literally throwing papers all the time... but after about one or two weeks into it we were all mixed in between each other and everyone was grand.

Noel, Fifth year, Maple School

In larger schools, integration may present bigger challenges. Tensions can persist right on into Sixth year:

To me the worst thing about going from Third year to Fifth year is they take their Fifth year as their relaxing year. They sit back after their exams whereas it's not a relaxing year. Fifth year is where most of the work is done for your Leaving Cert, so they have a wrong frame of mind for that then.

Mairéad, Sixth year, Oak School

One student's remark about a teacher's view of a Fifth year class triggers a similar one from another student about a different subject:

Our Irish (teacher) didn't have any of us in TY. She came in to Fifth year and she said, 'Girls, I can pick out the people who did TY straight away.' She said 'it's obvious to me.'

Darina, Sixth year, Oak School

And I had an English teacher who said it as well. She said, 'You go into a classroom and you know it straight away... The confidence, maturity, your work and your attitude to school'

Barbara, Sixth year, Oak School

### **Choosing to do Transition Year or not**

When asked about their decisions to do TY or not, Fifth and Sixth years reveal an insightful array of views about the programme they experienced, their prior expectations and changes in their perceptions about schooling in general and TY in particular. Quite a number articulate complex levels of ambiguous feelings before, during and subsequent to the programme. For many young people, making a decision to do TY or not appears to be a difficult one:

I was tempted to skip Fourth year because it was so pressurised in Third year. You just have exams, exams. Because of all the exams and pressure, you start to get sick of school. I was just saying I want to get out of this and 'no', I don't want an extra year, but then, when you look back at it, the advantages (of TY) were good. Eric, Fifth Year, Beech School.

For many, completing school in five rather than six years is an important consideration:

I am looking forward to finishing school now and thinking back I just go: 'What would I have done if I was still in school thinking I have got another year to go?' I am happy that I am nearly finished.

Therese, Sixth year, Sycamore School

Another student suggests how the expectations young people have of TY can vary greatly:

I remember in the first few weeks (of TY) there was one girl... and we were saying 'Oh, we love TY. We love it.' And she said, 'I hate all the work. It's unbelievable.' ... I think some people have a fear of doing the year... I think one of the things that gets into a lot of students' heads is, like, 'Oh, get out of school as quick as you can.' I remember in First year, in primary school I hated school... but after TY you don't mind it; you are going in and you are talking to your friends.

Kelly, Sixth year, Oak School



At the same time a few students who opted not to do TY indicate mixed feelings about their decision:

I have some regrets. I see TY as more of a practical way of learning... you do more things like travelling and mixing with people in different places... My parents never wanted me to do it. They said it was an easy year and they thought I wouldn't be able to get back into the study.

Noel, Fifth Year, Maple School

Alex, a Sixth year student in Maple School, says that when in Third year the teachers presented TY as an attractive option, emphasising trips, project work, mini-companies, and different forms of learning. He says that while it made sense he had already decided that he wanted to go straight on to the LC immediately after JC. He emphasises his interest in 'the academic side of things' and his desire to maintain a momentum. In his case, it appears that the decision to do TY or not was made well in advance of Third year. However, especially in cases where parental attitudes towards TY are neither strong nor weak, there is some evidence in these schools that teacher encouragement can play a big part in young people's decisions. For example:

(In Third year) I didn't want to do it and Mr C (TY co-ordinator) came in and he was speaking to us and he said, 'From what people say about TY some parents might have a negative attitude, that it's a waste of a year, you don't do any homework, no study and you feel left behind, but, it's not like that at all; what you get out of it depends on what you put into it.' So I saw it as a challenge. That's what made me do it.

Orlaith, Fifth year, Oak School

It is worth noting that in the two schools designated 'disadvantaged', Beech School and Oak School, extensive time is devoted to interviewing Third year students and their parents with a view to assisting them make decisions about senior cycle options.

In Beech School, where students face choices between TY followed by the established LC on the one hand, and LCA on the other, the amount of time spent in school can be a strong factor:

I didn't really want to do three years after the Junior Cert, so I said I'll just do the Leaving Cert Applied. And I like the way you're assessed all the way through and it's not just one exam at the end, So I said it would be good doing that.

Bobby, LCA year 2, Beech School

Equating TY with an extra year in school can be especially strong among students who see TY as lacking in focus:

What's the point of spending a whole year just messing? And when you have that done you have to go on and do another two years and you are really only when starting really doing your work in the last two years. But when you just do Leaving Cert Applied you just get on with it. It's good, it is. You just get through school quicker.

Darren, LCA year 2, Beech School.

The possibility of going to third level is an important consideration for some:

If you do LCA you can't go to college. If you do TY it opens up a lot more options for you.

Eric, Fifth year, Beech School

Unsurprisingly, LCA students tended to be reluctant to talk about TY, acknowledging that they had made different choices, ones with which, in most cases, they were happy. However, these LCA students did have some relevant observations in relation to TY:

I think you get a lot more attention from the teachers in TY... Because every day they have a teacher. They're never short. Sometimes we're just left with no one.

Diana, LCA, year 2, Beech School

LCA students can also contrast what they perceive as their more structured course with their perceptions of TY's freedom. For example:

(TY) is just basically a doss year where you do nothing. In Leaving Cert Applied, you get more things to do. We did projects and all.

Natasha, LCA Year 2, Beech School

These students are frank about the choices they faced in Third year, especially when they see some of their friends deciding to leave school and start working full-time.

Sometimes, like, your friends are leaving and you see them working and getting money. You probably want to go off and do the same thing as them ... the money is a big pull for leaving school. Yeah, it is.

Natasha, LCA Year 2, Beech School

The decision to remain in school can be appreciated further as one gets close to the completion, whether through LC or LCA. For example:

I don't think there's any point in leaving school, (early) because you're leaving school for nothing... Nowadays you need an education, you need your Leaving Cert. They (those former classmates who decided to leave

after Junior Cert) have nothing now. All they do is hang outside doors... I hope to do a PLC after school.

Ken, Sixth Year, Beech School.

In the discussion with the final year LCA students in Beech School, it emerged that each had a part-time job that typically involved 15 hours per week. They all remarked that they found this combination of school and work attractive and said it was much better than leaving school after the Junior Certificate. In two cases, an older sibling had followed a TY programme and later the LC, but this did not appear to impact significantly on the families' attitudes:

My parents just said it is up to yourself to make whatever choice you would like... It's really up to yourself... They don't really understand about all the credits and all the courses and all that.

Bobby, LCA year 2, Beech School.

### **Views of uptake patterns**

Nationally, the trend has been that uptake of TY has been greater among girls than boys. For example, in 2000-01 46 per cent of TY participants were male and 53 per cent female (Jeffers, 2002, p. 50.) Obviously a complex range of factors are at play in shaping such trends. Invited to comment on this, students themselves indicate varied explanations, for example:

Girls want to do TY and boys want to plough on ahead... They don't want to waste the year.

Noel, Fifth Year, Maple School

I think more boys leave school without doing the Leaving Certificate because they have more choices. I think they can go for apprenticeship. We (girls) can't. Well, we could but there isn't as many apprenticeship mechanics for girls.

Maria, Fifth Year, Beech School

### **Perceptions of parental attitudes**

Decisions in relation to following a TY programme or not can be heavily influenced by views expressed at home. Fifth and Sixth year students, as with their Fourth year counterparts, like to emphasise that the decision was their own. However, further exploration of this suggests that many were keenly aware of what their parents thought of TY in advance of the decision. Secondly, students often report that parental views of the programme shifted during the course of TY.

At the start my Mam didn't want me to do it. She said, 'Oh it's a waste. You shouldn't be going in there at all. You are going to regret it afterwards.' Then she said, 'I can see the change in you.' Now she tells all her friends who have daughters in Third year that they should do TY because its worthwhile... Because I have matured so much; well, from her point of view, she thinks I have.

Maire, Fifth year, Oak School

As students recount stories about their family views of TY, it becomes clear that in a number of cases, parents found themselves engaged in TY in various ways, particularly in family discussions following 'novel' aspects of TY.

(During TY) I was a lot busier than I have been ever before because I had a part-time job and was doing rehearsals (for the musical) and my parents were driving me everywhere all the time. I had to, like, run home and have my dinner and then they would drive me down to work and they were saying that it was great that I was doing so much stuff. They were saying 'take it easy', because I got a bit wrecked in the middle of the year at work experience and stuff... Because there was loads of stuff going on.

Lisa, Fifth year, Ash School

(My mother) didn't really want me to do it, but if I wanted to do it, it was alright. But I knew she didn't want me to do it. But by the end of the year I think she was glad I did do it... Because she just knew that I enjoyed it so much. I would meet new people every day and I would have a different story for her, and she knew I got a lot out of it, and now she even tells everybody that comes to our house how great it was and she thinks it was brilliant.

Charlene, Fifth year, Maple School

How other family members experienced TY also emerges as a significant factor in shaping students' attitudes and decisions:

My brother did it beforehand so I knew what it was all about and I wanted to do it.

Charlie, Fifth year, Maple School

My parents were all for it in Third year. They thought it was good to see me getting away on a trip in Fourth year. The fact that my sister – she's years younger than me – did it, proves that they must have thought it is a good idea even after I had done Fourth year.

Tom, Sixth year, Chestnut School

My brother had done it and when he came into Fifth year he woke up a bit as he had done nothing for the year so he said to me, 'Don't do it, there is no point.' And I didn't do it.

Olive, Sixth year, Sycamore School

However, generalisations about how family experiences impact on decisions relating to the uptake of TY need to be tempered by other voices:

My sister had done TY... She didn't like it. I said I would go and try it myself, for my own experience and see what it is like. We have completely different attitudes to it. She hated it. She thought it was a waste of a year but I loved it. I would do it again.

Noelle, Fifth year, Oak School

### **Comparisons with neighbouring schools**

In the complex social interactions that take place within Irish communities, students and their families hear accounts and rumours and form opinions about the TY programmes in a variety of schools. Some of these Fifth and Sixth year students have gathered distinct impressions of the programmes in other schools. Generally, the interviews tend to confirm a keen awareness on the part of these students that TY does vary quite significantly from school to school. In nearly every case students could readily give examples of stories they had heard about TY being poorly organised elsewhere. For example, the involvement in a musical with a nearby boys' school during TY leads some to form a collective impression that while their TY appears a well-structured, varied programme, this is not so in the neighbouring school. These students seem to regard the amount of homework as an important indicator of how well regarded a TY programme is in the community. For example:

(During TY, the teachers) set (us) a lot of homework and learning and stuff, especially in the core subjects like Maths, English and Irish. In (the other school) they don't get any homework and we were ending up with loads of homework. Sometimes we would have as much homework as in Third year.

Lisa, Fifth year, Ash School

### **Costs**

Whether schools seek an additional once off 'charge' at the start of TY to fund additional activities, or seek bus fares and other charges on an event-by-event basis, Fifth and Sixth year students' knowledge of the costs associated with TY appeared quite limited. Only a small number of the students interviewed made references to finances. There appears to be a widespread acceptance that, because of the more varied activities associated with TY, particularly learning beyond the classroom, extra expenditure is required. In the two schools designated 'disadvantaged', students did

seem to be aware that there was some additional money made available to schools for TY. For example:

You get to go on trips that you wouldn't be able to because there is money put aside for that in Fourth year.

Eric, Fifth year, Beech School.

## CHAPTER 4

### Teachers' Perspectives on Transition Year

The teacher data were elicited through a questionnaire (Appendix 3). This questionnaire took approximately twenty minutes to complete. The questionnaire consisted primarily of ticking boxes in response to statements, using a Likert scale format. There was space after each question to add comments. Six of the 22 questions invited written comments exclusively. Teachers were more nuanced than either students or parents in their comments about TY. Comments accompanying their responses tended to be succinctly focused. For example:

It helps students mature and it encourages them to develop an independent approach to the learning process.

Teacher 3, Maple School

Good team involved; very good year-head co-ordinates well - always open to new ideas.

Teacher 16, Beech School

Time to mature, develop some self-direction, broaden perspectives and social awareness.

Teacher 24, Ash School

Students mature, become more independent and learn to integrate and socialise.

Teacher 43, Oak School

Confidence, higher LC results and more socially aware.

Teacher 60, Chestnut School

Big impact on school life; greater range of activities in the school curriculum ; more access to resources , more scope to be creative.

Teacher 108, Sycamore School

#### Overview of how teachers view TY

As the above comments suggest, teachers' views indicate a broadly positive perspective on TY across the six schools. However, there are significant variations within these schools. Furthermore, teachers' comments touch on a wide range of topics and issues. The final two questions asked for their views about the programme nationally and whether they had any other comments about TY. Having spent twenty minutes completing a lengthy questionnaire, more than half the 113 respondents took time to write replies to these two questions. It seems reasonable to assume that those who responded to these questions were keen to highlight particular points and that the

data from these questions carry particular significance. These final teachers' comments can serve as a useful introduction to some of the teachers' dominant concerns regarding TY.

Some teachers reinforced points made in response to earlier questions, while others drew attention to further issues and perspectives. Many wanted to make the point that they were enthusiastic about TY's philosophy. However, this was frequently qualified, usually to assert that more might be done in a particular direction to ensure more effective implementation. For example:

I think that in general TY is very successful. However, I do feel that a small minority do not benefit from this programme and should therefore be encouraged to go straight into a Leaving Certificate both for their own good and for the common good.

Teacher 22, Ash School

I'm strongly in favour of TY in general. However, re foreign languages I find it a very difficult year to teach.

Teacher 42, Oak School

I support it overall but would like more training and creativity.

Teacher 75, Chestnut School

Whereas some outstanding work is done it is very spotty.' There is a tendency to fall back on traditional material and methods.

Teacher 67, Chestnut School

The idea of unrealised potential surfaces in various ways. It has the potential for being terrific. Lack of in-service hinders.

Teacher 13, Ash School

Practical realities deriving from the school context also emerge as constraining:

I like the philosophy of the programme but the practice is not as wonderful. Our timetable is so constrained that TY has to make the best of it and often has less than willing people teaching.

Teacher 23, Ash School

Difficult to offer a radical educational experience while constrained by school timetable.

Teacher 62, Chestnut School

Not seamless between Junior Cert and Leaving Cert; needs to be more inclusive, less disjointed.

Teacher 73, Chestnut School

Respondents were keen to highlight that TY is very 'school specific' and made some references to their knowledge of TY programmes in other schools:



I have spoken to many teachers and parents of 15-16 year olds in other schools. I think that sometimes (allegedly) it's the school and teachers who think it's a doss year – they're not willing to put in the extra time, effort or cash to develop the programme. The parents don't research the TY option or have input into the school. They then take the option to skip TY and many have told me that they were sorry. We need a good press.

Teacher 31, Beech School

Great programme in this school. From talking to students/teachers in other schools have reached conclusions that programme is (a) school specific, (b) team specific. These two factors determine success/lack of amongst student/parents who identify with the TY programme.

Teacher 85, Oak School

Schools in more affluent areas more inclined to embrace TY.

Teacher 108, Sycamore School

The emphasis on the competence and commitment of the TY team of teachers is also a strong one in these responses. For example:

I'm all in favour but I'm conscious of the fact that a good TY derives almost solely from the willingness of teachers to give freely of their time and talents.

Teacher 99, Oak School

The people in the system dictate its success.

Teacher 106, Sycamore School

Occasionally, respondents issue a broader, more critical interpretation of some of the difficulties associated with TY and, indeed, the school system generally:

I believe the conservatism of some 'older' teachers is very unhelpful in TY. Some Irish teachers are highly conservative and narrow-minded in an academic sense. They are frightened by (the) change which TY offers. They do not see education as a liberating experience! (Cf. Germaine Greer). Our education system is falling apart in some ways. Bored students, bored teachers, emphasis on final exam. TY may be a model for future developments.

Teacher 63, Chestnut School

Even though these questionnaires were completed prior to the NCCA's proposals for a more integrated senior cycle, a number of respondents expressed concerns about the future development of TY.

I think TY needs some tightening up but I fully support its retention. A three-year LC will not have the same impact.

Teacher 78, Beech School

I feel TY should be a compulsory part of the Irish Education System. The fact that some schools have abolished it suggests that it is not educationally beneficial.

Teacher 93, Beech School

### Teachers' perspectives on outcomes, programmes, attitudes and organisation

As the questionnaire generated extensive data, it is presented in the remainder of this chapter under eight headings:

- Teachers' views of outcomes for students
- Teachers' views of outcomes for teachers
- Teachers' views of outcomes for schools
- Teachers' views of difficulties associated with TY
- Teachers' views of programme features and preferences
- Teachers' views of others' attitudes to TY
- Teachers' views of how TY is organised
- Teachers' views of the TY programme nationally

### Teachers' views of outcomes for students

#### Maturity

'Education for maturity' has been a central focus of TY from the outset. The vast majority of teachers surveyed believe that the programme achieves this outcome.

Q.8 (c) TY advances students' maturity	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	66%	28%	3%	3%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	39%	46%	4%	0%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	82%	18%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	94%	6%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	33%	53%	7%	0%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents<sup>13</sup></i>	113	<b>61%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>4%</b>

Comments appended to this question were invariably positive, for example:

It gives great scope for experiential learning and relaxed atmosphere with students.

Teacher 72, Chestnut School

<sup>13</sup> Percentages have been rounded upwards and so in some cases the cumulative total may be slightly in excess of 100%

### Broad educational experience

TY is seen very positively as giving a broad educational experience.

Q. 8 (a) TY gives students a broad educational experience	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	29%	68%	0%	0%	4%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	73%	27%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	60%	33%	7%	0%	0%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>52%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>1%</b>

### Development without exam pressure

One of the motivating concerns that impelled the original TY project in 1974 was that students would develop in the 'absence of examination pressure'. While a majority of teachers agree that students develop well in the absence of exam pressure, an important 21 per cent do not. Furthermore, this figure varies significantly across the six schools.

Q.8 (b) Students develop well in the absence of examination pressure	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	56%	33%	11%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	25%	59%	13%	3%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	21%	36%	32%	7%	4%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	55%	45%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	44%	56%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	13%	60%	27%	0%	0%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>31%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>1%</b>

Those expressing a minority position tended to add comments that indicate concerns about motivation. For example:

It works differently for individual pupils.

Teacher 13, Beech School

I feel the sudden absence of exam pressure leaves the goals of the year obscured and so difficult to re-establish.

Teacher 73, Chestnut School

### TY building foundations for the Leaving Certificate

According to the *Guidelines* (DoE, 1993c, p.5) 'Pupils entering the Leaving

Certificate programme on completion of a Transition Year should be better equipped

and more disposed to study than their counterparts who did not have the benefit of this year'. The broad view among teachers in this study is that an outcome of a TY programme is that students are better equipped for a Leaving Certificate.

Q.8 (d) Students are better equipped for a Leaving Certificate programme after a TY	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	44%	44%	0%	11%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	34%	47%	13%	3%	3%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	25%	54%	7%	4%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	82%	18%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	33%	60%	0%	0%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>43%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>4%</b>

It is worth noting that the media has highlighted research from the ERC and the NCCA (Miller and Kelly, 1999) and more recently from the ESRI (Smyth et al, 2004) that indicates the improved performance of TY students in the LC when compared to their non-TY peers. Indeed, at times it seems that this outcome of the programme is often given attention at the expense of other features of TY, including its core aims. While a majority of the teachers here agree with the 'higher results' effect, it is noteworthy that almost a quarter of them opt to express no opinion. This may echo the observation made by the NCCA in their commentary that 'it appears that TY does have a positive impact on student progress between Junior and Leaving Certificate, but the degree of impact varies considerably between students and between schools'. (Miller and Kelly, 1999, p xxv)

Q. 11 (f) Students who follow a TY programme achieve higher results in the Leaving Certificate than those who don't	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	22%	44%	11%	0%	22%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	19%	28%	13%	0%	41%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	27	19%	56%	7%	0%	18%
<i>Maple School</i>	10	80%	10%	0%	0%	10%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	33%	33%	17%	0%	17%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	13%	47%	20%	7%	13%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	<b>26%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>23%</b>

### Orientation to adult and working life

Orientation to adult and working life is one of the key aims of TY and here again an overwhelming majority of teachers, 90 per cent, agree that the programme in their schools succeeds in achieving this outcome.

Q. 8 (e) TY orientates students well to adult and working life	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	44%	44%	0%	0%	11%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	25%	69%	3%	0%	3%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	11%	61%	4%	0%	25%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	73%	27%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	13%	87%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>32%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>8%</b>

Responses to the trigger 'work experience' in Q.20 tend to confirm teachers' support for this dimension of TY. As will be seen, employers offering work experience is also identified as a major external factor contributing to a successful TY:

A great advantage of TY. Teacher 12, Ash School

Very beneficial; students really enjoy it. An extra week's work experience organised by the pupil should be considered.

Teacher 22, Ash School

Very positive.

Teacher 59, Beech School

However, there are also indications that work experience is a broad term that can cover a wide range of placements. For example:

Needs careful monitoring - beneficial if it challenges students.

Teacher 78, Beech School

OK, if not carried into Fifth year Teacher 22, Ash School

Good experience, but when they get used to money it's hard to give up.

Teacher 25, Ash School

Can be useful but detrimental to academic success.

Teacher 63, Chestnut School

Most have these in TY and are very reluctant to give them up in Fifth and Sixth year.

Teacher 92, Beech School

Good experience in moderation. Teacher 96, Beech School

### Independent learners

In the introductory note to the *Guidelines for Schools* (DE, 1993c, p.3) a central vision is of a bridge 'to help make the transition from a highly-structured environment to one where they will take greater responsibility for their own learning and decision-making'. This aspiration of students becoming more independent learners is a consistent theme through the *Guidelines for Schools*. There are noticeable differences in how teachers in these six schools see TY contributing to 'independent learning'. Furthermore, the relatively high numbers in four of the schools who offer 'no opinion' is worth noting. This may well signal unease with the vagueness of the term 'independent learners'. Furthermore, as one of the additional comments notes:

The goal of independent learning is difficult to achieve.

Teacher 78, Beech School

Q. 8 (f) Students become more independent learners through TY	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	56%	22%	22%	0%	11%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	16%	65%	13%	0%	9%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	11%	43%	21%	4%	21%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	73%	27%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	56%	44%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	13%	67%	0%	7%	13%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>29%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>9%</b>

### Confidence building

The programme's success in building confidence is one of the most unequivocal set of responses across the six schools.

Q.11 (a) Students become more confident	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	44%	56%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	21%	68%	0%	0%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	82%	18%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	189	89%	11%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	33%	67%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>49%</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>3%</b>

One teacher took the opportunity to add the following observation:

I find for the quieter student it gives them a chance to become involved. They often become more vocal and articulate, voice opinions etc. Allows leaders to develop. Both new leaders and students who would normally be cheer leaders become focused and good at delegation.

Teacher 16, Beech School.

### Problem solving skills

TY is also seen as enhancing students' thinking and problem solving skills.

<i>Q.11 (b) Students' thinking and problem-solving skills are enhanced through TY</i>	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	44%	44%	11%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	6%	91%	3%	0%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	18%	39%	25%	0%	18%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	55%	45%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	15	13%	60%	13%	0%	13%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	18	50%	44%	0%	0%	6%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>25%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>7%</b>

### Technical skills

The teachers also rate highly the programme's contribution to the development of technical skills.

<i>Q. 11 (c) Students develop technical skills</i>	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	11%	78%	11%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	16%	63%	9%	4%	12%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	7%	64%	11%	4%	14%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	55%	45%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	22%	44%	17%	0%	17%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	20%	53%	13%	0%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>19%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>11%</b>

### Academic skills

As already indicated, academic development in TY is a concern of some teachers.

Teachers do not rate the development of academic skills through TY as highly as they do technical skills. While 70 per cent are of the view that students develop academic skills during TY, it is the 24 per cent who disagree with this that deserve to be given particular attention. The even higher percentages in three schools – Ash, Chestnut and Sycamore – who have doubts about students' academic development during TY have

to be taken seriously. When more than a quarter of the teachers surveyed in these three schools harbour such reservations about academic development, the emphasis within TY in these schools may need some re-organisation.

Q.11 (d) Students develop academic skills	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	0%	56%	22%	22%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	3%	69%	19%	3%	6%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	11%	43%	25%	11%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	10	60%	40%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	11%	72%	6%	0%	11%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	7%	60%	33%	0%	0%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>12%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>6%</b>

### Social awareness

Increased social awareness is one of the key goals of TY and the teachers in this study believe overwhelmingly that the programme is effective at developing this.

Q.11 (g) Students become more socially aware	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	44%	56%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	22%	75%	3%	0%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	27	15%	67%	7%	0%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	73%	27%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	56%	44%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	13%	53%	27%	0%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>31%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>4%</b>

### Social competence

As with social awareness, teachers' perceptions are that TY also promotes increased social competence.

Q.11 (i) Students become more socially competent	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	44%	56%	14%	0%	14%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	38%	59%	0%	0%	3%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	14%	57%	14%	0%	14%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	82%	18%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	56%	44%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	13%	73%	7%	0%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>36%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>5%</b>



### Motivation

While a majority of teachers in the study agree that TY's effect on student motivation and bringing about greater self-direction as learners is positive, a significant number – more than a quarter of the teachers – in two of the schools disagree with this. As one of the additional comments indicates, motivation is also something highly personal.

Q. 11 (j) Students become more motivated and self-directed as learners	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	27	11%	67%	22%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	9	3%	66%	22%	3%	6%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	32	7%	41%	41%	0%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	73%	27%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	50%	44%	0%	0%	6%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	7%	47%	27%	0%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>20%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>8%</b>

The above question clearly varies from pupil to pupils – ‘you get out what you put in’.

Teacher 66, Chestnut School

### Career goals

While general orientation to adult and working life is identified as one of the overall aims of TY, the specific career guidance dimension was strongly emphasised in the 1986 Guidelines (CEB,1986). Teachers in four of the six schools are unanimous about this dimension being realised through TY.

Q.11 (k) TY assists students clarify career goals	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	33%	67%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	9%	72%	13%	0%	6%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	26	15%	58%	19%	0%	8%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	45%	55%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	39%	61%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	12	20%	80%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	<b>22%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>4%</b>

Additional comments here included:

Great opportunity for doing developmental career work.

Teacher 24, Ash School

Lack of option change at 5<sup>th</sup> year indicates that students have not clarified career goals.

Teacher 34, Beech School

### **Perceived benefits of TY**

The question *In your opinion, what, if any, are the benefits to students from Transition Year?* allowed teachers take a broad view of the programme and its outcomes. These responses also enable triangulation with many of specific responses, reinforcing their validity. The widening of horizons, the thrust towards maturity – even if only by virtue of being a year older– and greater self-confidence feature strongly.

It gives students confidence, their self-esteem improves and generally they are well motivated and settle down to work once they begin the LC programme.

Teacher 3, Maple School

It gives them an extra year to mature. Otherwise many of our students would be very young leaving school.

Teacher 14, Beech School

Maturity, skills development, confidence, opportunity to reflect, relax and renew.

Teacher 27, Ash School

Students become more independent thinkers. They are less satisfied with a spoon-feeding approach to education. Their capacity for critical judgement is enhanced.

Teacher 36, Oak School

Work experience leads to a better focus on reality of work. Group work and mini-company lead to experience of making, selling and exhibiting.

Teacher 51, Oak School

Maturity, more thought-out. Some experiences of the workplace. Skills for adult life plus good CV, keyboard skills, reflection and study interests.

Teacher 72, Chestnut School

Develop self-confidence. Students develop working relationships with classmates rather than academic learning alone. Experience working in a less structured environment - take on more responsibility for their own learning.

Teacher 76, Beech School

Students gain confidence and improve self-esteem. Students learn to work as part of a team. TY advances students' maturity.

Teacher 86, Oak School

Time to reflect on career choice; chance to explore strengths/weaknesses and aptitudes.

Teacher 109, Sycamore School

### Teachers' views of outcomes for teachers

#### Promoting professional development

From the outset of the TY project in 1974, Minister for Education Richard Burke saw involvement in the programme as a form of professional development, an opportunity to get involved in 'real education' (Burke, 2001). A striking aspect of the teacher responses here is the number of 'no opinions' as well as the 16 per cent disagreement.

Q.14 (a) Teaching TY promotes the professional development of teachers	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	0%	78%	22%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	31	16%	68%	7%	0%	8%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	14%	54%	21%	0%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	63%	37%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	11%	39%	22%	0%	28%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	0%	60%	27%	0%	13%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>16%</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>12%</b>

Additional comments were both positive and negative. For example:

No time or resources given for this teacher development.

Teacher 57, Chestnut School

We talk about TY being great for students and their personalities. I feel it works that way for me. I'm 'human' in TY classes, not an information machine.

Teacher 34, Beech School

I have difficulties in 'teachers' – each is different and cannot be stereotyped. There are 70 different views on the staff.

Teacher 92, Beech School

Following the 16 per cent who offered 'no opinion' in Q 14 (a), responses to Q.15 (h) further confirm the reluctance to make judgments about professional development. While a majority is of the view that teaching TY has helped their professional development as teachers, there are 30 per cent who either disagree with this statement or offer no opinion.

Q.15 (h) Teaching TY has helped my development as a teacher	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	7	14%	43%	29%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	9%	69%	9%	0%	12%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	11%	64%	7%	0%	18%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	55%	27%	18%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	28%	22%	17%	0%	33%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	20%	33%	20%	0%	27%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	<b>19%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>17%</b>

### Flexibility

Linked to the notion of teachers' professional development is the freedom and flexibility TY offers to design programmes relevant to young people's needs. The overwhelming view is that teachers respond well to this opportunity.

Q.14 (c) Teachers respond well to the freedom and flexibility to design relevant programmes	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	8	0%	87%	0%	0%	13%
<i>Beech School</i>	31	29%	65%	0%	7%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	7%	79%	11%	0%	4%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	45%	45%	0%	0%	9%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	39%	44%	0%	0%	17%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	13%	67%	13%	0%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	<b>22%</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>6%</b>

### Transferability of skills

Despite the ambiguous response of some in relation to TY's contribution to professional development, replies to specific aspects of that development tend to be more positive. For example, the positive effect of TY-related skills on teaching in other year groups receives strong support.

Q.15 (d) Teachers develop skills in TY which enhance their teaching in other years	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	11%	78%	11%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	31	19%	74%	0%	3%	3%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	11%	64%	14%	0%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	45%	55%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	39%	39%	17%	0%	6%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	20%	47%	13%	0%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>22%</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>7%</b>

### Teamwork

While earlier guidelines tended to accept that teachers operate very much as isolated individuals, the 1993 *Guidelines* are noticeably emphatic on 'a whole-school approach' and on teaching teams. Rather than merely aspiring to teamwork and collaborative planning, the *Guidelines* (DoE, 1993c, p.12) states: 'Time should be formally assigned for the purpose of effective planning. While the planning process should be based on teamwork, each member of the co-ordinating team should have responsibility for developing and documenting specific aspects of the programme.' A majority of those in this survey see TY as promoting teamwork among teachers.

Q.14 (j) TY promotes teamwork among teachers						
<i>Ash School</i>	9	11%	44%	33%	0%	11%
<i>Beech School</i>	31	19%	71%	6%	0%	3%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	27	7%	52%	33%	0%	7%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	55%	45%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	39%	56%	6%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	7%	53%	20%	0%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	<b>21%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>6%</b>

Some respondents used the opportunity here to highlight other perspectives. For example:

It should be but when do you get time to meet? Timetabling has a huge constraining effect on the possibilities of team work/teaching.

Teacher 23, Ash School

Not all teachers are interested in teamwork or the promotion of the aims of TY. Some would prefer a more narrow academic focus.

Teacher 72, Chestnut School

### Teachers' views of outcomes for schools

#### Student-teacher relationships

As has been evident in the chapter on students' views, TY is seen by many students in these six schools as bringing about a qualitatively different relationship between young people and their teachers. Students claim that TY enables them to see a more human side of their teachers, particularly through excursions outside the classroom. TY classrooms, and subsequent class in Fifth and Sixth year, are seen as more participative and democratic, with students and teacher viewed as collaborators in the teaching and learning process. This is often articulated in sharp contrast to young people's experience of Junior Cycle.

Teachers were asked, in Q. 20 to respond to the trigger 'Teacher-Student relationships'. Generally their responses confirm that teachers also observe a qualitative change in their relationship.

A new rapport is established.

Teacher 6, Maple School

More casual. Generally more respectful in Fifth, Sixth year.

Teacher 12, Ash School

Improves because of informal form of education.

Teacher 16, Beech School

Excellent and improves on Third year relationship nearly always.

Teacher 27, Ash School

Helped enormously in TY.

Teacher 60, Chestnut School

Promotes and establishes new and more mature relationships.

Teacher 95, Beech School

Very good.

Teacher 110, Sycamore School

This strong perception among teachers that TY facilitates improved relationships with students is re-inforced by various other responses, notably in Q.21.

### **Impact of TY programme on the life of the school**

TY does not occur in isolation. It takes place, whether as an optional or compulsory programme, in the context of five other year groups within the school, alongside established programmes such as the JC and LC and newer programmes such as the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Teachers who teach TY students are also timetabled for classes with young people following the other programmes. One of the most ambitious aspirations in the TY *Guidelines* is that:

The aims and philosophy of Transition Year should permeate the entire school. (DoE, 1993c, p.4)

Asked, in Q. 21a, about the impact TY had on the rest of the school, teachers were invariably positive in their comments, touching on a wide range of effects. This perceived impact on the whole school community is evident across the six schools studied and is expressed in many different ways. Even many of the teachers who

expressed reservations about aspects of the programme were keen to acknowledge that TY's arrival heralded some transformation in the school's climate. Some of these comments also tend to reinforce and resonate with other conclusions emerging from this study.

Furthermore, the absence of any perceived negative effects in the responses to this question are distinctive and noteworthy in at least two other ways:

- Towards the end of a lengthy questionnaire, respondents were usually keen to write more extensive responses to this question, often longer than responses to any other question.
- Many of the perceived effects are composite or multiple; it is as if teachers did not want to simplify TY's effects on the school into just one or two changes.

Clearly some teachers perceive and appreciate TY's impact on student maturity, sense of responsibility and confidence.

I think it opens up the school more to the outside world. The pupils benefit and learn to take responsibility for projects.

Teacher 26, Ash School

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

Has created students who are more aware/confident and mature. They stand out among the students who have not taken this option.

Teacher 53, Sycamore School

As evident elsewhere in this report, TY's impact on student-teacher relations is invariably seen as positive and one of the clear effects of the programme. For example:

TY has had a very positive impact on the life of the school. It has changed the relationship between the teachers and the senior students very much for the better.

Teacher 78, Beech School

Some evaluations relating to TY have focused on the programme's impact on LC results. Obviously, academic achievement can have a positive impact on school morale. Generally, when teachers comment on improved examination results, they

tend also to comment on other associated but non-examination successes. For example:

Students' results have improved at LC level. They are very mature, co-operative students at senior cycle. Great additional achievements are made through TY creating great publicity for the school. This attracts new students as TY is very well run and parents are pleased with its success.  
Teacher 10, Maple School

In my opinion we have an awful lot more students going on to third level. The students in disadvantaged areas benefit greatly from the extra year and they are more mature about decision-making.  
Teacher 93, Beech School

While a majority of comments relate to student development, some focus on the effect TY can have on teachers:

In early stages encouraged staff development. There are more trips/exchanges in TY so this broadens staff and students alike  
Teacher 12, Ash School

Brought new experiences to students and challenges to teachers. Brought EDUCATION back in to schools.  
Teacher 18, Beech School

Made life more interesting and less boring.  
Teacher 63, Chestnut School

Big impact on school life; greater range of activities in the school curriculum; more access to resources, more scope to be creative.  
Teacher 108, Sycamore School

### **Teachers' views of difficulties associated with TY**

Q.13 asked *In your opinion, what, if any, difficulties or negative features for students result from Transition Year?* The most frequently expressed concern by teachers is a perceived loss of focus on academic development. Often this is stated not so much as a problem in TY but as something that can emerge during 5<sup>th</sup> year. In a variety of ways teachers demonstrate a keen awareness that TY is followed by the LC, universally regarded as a 'high stakes' examination. Teachers also express concern about the image of 'a doss year', poor attendance, poorly motivated students, resources, and the fact that TY means a year more in school. Only a few mention difficulties with the particular subject or modules that they are teaching or with pedagogical matters:



It means an extra year at school; parents are sometimes concerned about homework not taking up as much time in the evenings.

Teacher 3, Maple School.

On returning to Leaving Cert, may become unsettled in respect of core curriculum, in some cases.

Teacher 4, Maple School

Insufficient resources, in-service, textbooks etc. Lead to unimaginative teaching and assessment methods.

Teacher 23, Ash School

Very difficult to motivate pupils in the core subjects – Irish, English, French and Maths. The pupils have difficulty adjusting to a set syllabus in Fifth year

Teacher 26, Ash School

If school doesn't suit a particular student, Transition Year may just prolong the agony.

Teacher 47, Oak School

Some students think it is a lazy 'doss' year, so do some teachers!

Teacher 63, Chestnut School

Some students have their mind made up as to their career after school and some modules don't interest them. This can lead to disruption.

Teacher 70, Chestnut School

Lack of definite structure for certain subjects.

Teacher 83, Oak School

Some pupils are (over) very confident with a small bit of attitude that they could do with losing.

Teacher 101, Sycamore School

Coping with immediate increased workload in Fifth year.

Teacher 113, Sycamore School

Some made global points about TY, suggesting difficulties that arise from the programme's fundamental orientations:

They miss the point that what they bring to the course is 'themselves'. The course allows failure but the pupils react to 'failure' rather than learn from it.

Teacher 13, Beech School.

Sometimes very weak students can become overwhelmed by the amount of self-direction and can be left behind because they don't ask for help or simply ask questions. Due to recent improvements in the course here the problem of students thinking it a 'doss' year had been overcome.

Teacher 16, Beech School.

There are important resonances between these data and the identification by teachers of factors that inhibit the development of TY, in the section on *Teachers' views of how TY is organised*.

### Teachers' views of programme features and preferences

The freedom given to each school to devise its own unique TY is a distinguishing feature of the programme. As the *Guidelines for Schools* state:

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 its curriculum, the school should also take into consideration the possibilities offered by employers and other work-providing agencies and the wider interests in the local community. (DoE, 1993c, p.5)

Asked to comment on their own schools' programmes, the patterns of similarity and differences in teachers' responses throws further light on aspects of how schools are implementing TY. Most regard their individual programmes as well-thought out.

Q.9 (a) Our programme is well-thought out	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	33%	67%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	31	23%	71%	6%	0%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	18%	57%	18%	0%	7%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	55%	45%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	89%	11%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	13%	53%	20%	0%	13%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>39%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>4%</b>

Additional comments suggest that within these broad views, there are also reservations and nuances. A perception of some loose practice in relation to assessment and the need for more regular internal evaluation are quite consistent strands. For example:

I think we probably need a new look. Many staff have gone since we drew up the programme. We haven't accommodated change enough.

Teacher 12, Ash School.

I feel that the assessment area lets us down. The format of reports is poor. The evaluation process is not cross-curricular. I would prefer to see a more overall approach.

Teacher 16, Beech School

Comments above may not be applicable to all subjects, e.g. Irish.

Teacher 20, Ash School

The programme in my view is a bit weak from the intellectual challenge, evaluation and assessment points of view.

Teacher 23, Ash School

Finance and resources are key issues for allowing innovative approaches.

Teacher 57, Chestnut School

Needs to be thought out again. Takes too long for pupils to be self-directed.

Teacher 62, Chestnut School

Initially the programme was well thought out – now due for review.

Teacher 107, Sycamore School

### Students' needs

Broadly speaking, the teachers surveyed see their TY programmes as 'well-tailored to our students' needs'. Again, the accompanying comments indicate shades of opinion within this broad view. For example:

This questionnaire is too broad. Weak students with no drive v. 'good' students. No room here to answer universally on both types.

Teacher 73, Chestnut School

While all schools grapple with different levels of motivation and perceived 'ability', it is worth noting that the two schools designated 'disadvantaged', Beech and Oak, emerge highly in this question.

Q.9 (b) Our programme is well-tailored to our students' needs	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	22%	67%	11%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	28%	59%	13%	0%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	7%	57%	21%	4%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	64%	36%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	83%	11%	0%	0%	6%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	13%	47%	27%	0%	13%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>33%</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>5%</b>

### Breadth and balance

A guiding principle of curriculum development is the somewhat elusive concept of 'breadth and balance'. Generally this is understood to refer to the combined mixture of a range of subjects, modules and learning experiences that foster personal, social, technical and academic development. A majority of teachers in each school are of the view that their programmes have such 'breadth and balance'. Again, a broad endorsement can also be accompanied by qualifying comments. For example:

Well-thought out with breadth and balance thanks to the work of the co-ordinators. Some students are too immature to appreciate that at the time of TY.

Teacher 60, Chestnut School

I would like to see more 'alternative' subjects/activities e.g. Japanese, cooking, social skills and health.

Teacher 75, Chestnut School

Too heavily weighted towards traditional written exam.

Teacher 105, Sycamore School

<i>Q. 9 (c) Our programme has breadth and balance</i>	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	56%	44%	7%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	25%	59%	3%	0%	13%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	18%	57%	18%	0%	18%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	55%	45%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	20%	53%	13%	0%	13%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>35%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>10%</b>

### Extra-classroom learning

A significant organisational and pedagogical shift in TY is that the programme:

'should create opportunities to vary the learning environment and to dispel the notion that learning is something that happens only, or even most effectively, within the classroom'. (DoE, 1993c, p.7)

As has been seen in the comments from students, many value various excursions beyond the conventional classroom. With teachers, while local variations occur, a majority in each school agree that TY presents learning opportunities beyond the classroom.

<i>Q.9 (d) Our programme presents students and teachers with good opportunities for learning beyond the classroom</i>	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	8	50%	38%	13%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	34%	59%	6%	0%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	25%	57%	14%	0%	4%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	73%	27%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	56%	44%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	13%	60%	7%	7%	13%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>38%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>3%</b>

### Intellectual challenge

TY originated from a view that, during mid-adolescence, young people needed to devote time to personal development and community service as a counterbalance to the pressure of the 'academic tread-mill'. Consequently, some presume that TY is somehow intellectually 'light'. However, intellectual development has always been a central aim of TY. The 1986 Guidelines (CEB, 1986, p.6) see TY as distinguished by 'a particular emphasis on the intellectual, social and personal development of the student'. The 1993 *Guidelines*, keen to highlight that a TY programme is not part of the LC programme, continues: 'This is not to say that Transition Year should lack intellectual content; it is essential that they offer a challenge to pupils in all areas of their development.' (DoE, 1993c, p.5). On this issue, teachers' responses in these six schools indicate a broad spectrum of views, with 85 per cent indicating that they believe TY does provide such challenge.

Q. 9 (e) Our programme provides students with intellectual challenge	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	8	0%	75%	13%	0%	13%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	28%	59%	13%	0%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	7%	54%	21%	4%	14%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	55%	45%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	33%	56%	11%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	13%	33%	33%	0%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>25%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>8%</b>

### Assessment

One of the major differences between TY and programmes such as the JC and LC is that assessment is school-based. Furthermore, the *Guidelines* (DoE, 1993c, p.9) suggest a variety of approaches including written, practical, oral and aural assessments; report of work experience; projects, portfolios and exhibition of work; pupil diary/log book to record personal progress; rating scales, record of skills and competencies attained, as well as an overall statement of pupil attainment by the teachers. Clearly, the invitation is to be imaginative and innovative. While the *Guidelines* observe that 'assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process' (DoE, 1993c, p.9), the 1996 evaluation by the Inspectorate observed:

Inspectors found that approaches to assessment varied widely from school to school. In some schools there appeared to be very little extra by way of assessment. (DoE, 1996, p.18).

The Inspectorate recommended :

The involvement of teachers, parents, work-providers and pupils themselves in pupil assessment procedures could be greatly improved upon in many of the schools offering the programme. The Resource Material for Transition Year provided by the Department of Education would be of assistance in the development of appropriate modes and techniques of assessment. (DoE, 1996, p.23)

Five separate questions invited teachers to comment on aspects of assessment in TY. Data from these six schools suggest, initially, that these teachers perceive that assessment has been successfully addressed in Maple and Oak schools and perhaps less so in the four others.

Further exploration of this theme indicates a sizeable group of teachers in these schools who regard assessment as one of the more neglected aspects of TY.

Q. 9 (f) The assessment techniques used in TY are appropriate	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	11%	56%	22%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	13%	69%	9%	0%	9%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	7%	39%	29%	11%	14%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	64%	36%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	33%	61%	0%	0%	6%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	7%	60%	20%	0%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>19%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>8%</b>

Question 14 (i) sought to discover how difficult teachers find the challenge to devise and operate new forms of assessment. The responses here again show varied opinions, with the following accompanying comment indicating some of the concern:

Teachers are asked to teach subjects without much help in preparing a course/assessment.

Teacher 75, Chestnut School.

Q.14 (i) Devising and operating new forms of assessment is difficult	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	22%	56%	22%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	31	3%	65%	29%	0%	3%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	27	26%	52%	18%	0%	4%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	9%	27%	55%	9%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	11%	72%	11%	6%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	0%	60%	27%	7%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	<b>12%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>3%</b>

While Q.14 established that 28 per cent of these teachers believe that teachers in general find devising and implementing new forms of assessment difficult, the responses in Q.15 suggest a more widespread welcome for the thrust towards diversification in assessment.

Q.15 (e) I welcome the varied forms of assessment in TY	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	8	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	9%	62%	9%	0%	9%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	11%	64%	14%	4%	7%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	55%	36%	9%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	28%	39%	0%	0%	33%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	20%	60%	0%	0%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>21%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>12%</b>

In Q.20 the trigger word 'assessment' elicited a range of comments that suggests that teachers recognise it requires additional attention:

Continuous assessment and interviews work well.

Teacher 7, Maple School

I hate the assessment form in our school: AAA or BBB without thinking.

Teacher 12, Ash School

Assessment techniques must be different.

Teacher 20, Ash School

Students should be consulted.

Teacher 74, Chestnut School

Needs training.

Teacher 75, Chestnut School

Needs constant review.

Teacher 78, Beech School

Some elements are more easily open to assessment than others.

Teacher 99, Oak School

Our assessment techniques need to improve.

Teacher 110, Sycamore School

### Evaluation

The Inspectorate's evaluation also observed that some schools were experiencing difficulty in following the *Guidelines'* exhortation for regular internal review of the TY programme. The Inspectors noted that 'Parents, in particular, were seldom asked

to feed into the evaluation process'. They went on to make two specific recommendations in relation to internal evaluation:

10. Schools should evaluate their Transition Year programmes on a regular basis. Such an evaluation should include inputs from whole staff, parents, work providers, others involved in the programme, and pupils. Appropriate evaluation indicators should be developed by individual schools for this purpose. The Resource Material and other sources would be of great assistance in this regard.

11. Evaluation would be greatly assisted by the careful keeping of documentation relating to all aspects of Transition Year in the school. (DoE, 1996, p.23)

Data generated from teachers in this current study suggest that in one school there is a unanimous view that the approach to evaluation is 'progressive'. In the other five, this view is contested, in varying degrees.

Q. 9 (g) Our approach to evaluation is progressive	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	0%	67%	22%	0%	11%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	13%	47%	16%	0%	25%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	11%	46%	29%	4%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	64%	36%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	39%	39%	0%	0%	22%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	7%	33%	40%	0%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>19%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>17%</b>

Again, responses to 'evaluation' as a trigger word in Q.20 enables teachers to elaborate. For example:

Annually we carry out review and evaluation – parents, teachers and students. By incorporating Multiple Intelligence theory into our programme we strive to meet the needs and learning styles of all.

Teacher 6, Maple School

Could be more imaginative.

Teacher 23, Ash School

Evaluation should be in May, not at the beginning of academic year.

Teacher 31, Beech School

Could be tightened.

Teacher 57, Chestnut School

Who should do it? Who has the time?

Teacher 99, Oak School

Need for annual review.

Teacher 107, Sycamore School



So, while a majority regard their approach to evaluation as progressive, the thrust of the associated comments suggest that, like assessment, teachers in five of the schools recognise evaluation as needing more attention and structure.

### **Perceived strengths of the TY programme**

Question 10 was an open-ended one: *What, in your opinion, are the main strengths of this school's TY programme?* The responses also triangulate with many of the other answers. They cover a wide range of areas, often capturing succinctly key features of an individual school's programme, pointing to the importance of internal school structures.

As regards modules, subjects or specific content, examples are extensive. For example:

- |   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Work experience. Computer literacy.                                     | Teacher 12, Ash School      |
| Mini-company.   | Teacher 13, Beech School    |
| Creativity is allowed to flourish in art, craft, gardening and cooking. | Teacher 26, Ash School      |
| Work experience, Charity events.  | Teacher 56, Chestnut School |
| Extra time to explore reading.  | Teacher 81, Beech School    |

However, and this seems a particularly important point, the majority tended to focus not on one individual feature of TY, but on the programme as a whole, its scope, variety, structure and organisation. Teachers tend to emphasise TY as an overall, integrated process, with a range of features being seen as 'strengths'. For example:

It helps students mature and it encourages them to develop an independent approach to the learning process. As a result of the TY programme, they are more confident and have a better idea of what they want to do when they complete the Leaving Certificate.

Teacher 3, Maple School

It is flexible. Constantly reviewed unofficially within individual departments. We have good resources. Teachers are well supported.

Teacher 14, Beech School

Opportunities to work with new groupings; to realise personal non-academic goals; to understand that intellectual difference is only one aspect of life – acceptance of different gifts.

Teacher 23, Ash School

Developing mature attitudes in the students; social development of the students. Allowing students time and experience for subject choice for Leaving Certificate.

Teacher 50, Oak School.

The maturing process – helping students make proper subject choices for their Leaving Certificate – the whole experience – i.e. travel, interpersonal skills, confidence building, leadership skills, presentation skills.

Teacher 53, Sycamore School

Opportunities for non-classroom activities.

Teacher 59, Chestnut School

Student integration through tasks with all aspects of school life and community life.

Teacher 85, Oak School

It allows students to develop and mature in an unpressurised environment. It also exposes students to new educational experiences.

Teacher 93, Beech School

Linked closely to the emphasis on a variety of educationally relevant experiences for students is a focus on supportive, organisational structures as perceived strengths of the programme in these schools. The centrality of a co-ordinator whom teachers trust is very clear. Support from school leaders is also emphasized as is the enthusiasm and commitment of the teaching staff. For example:

Dedicated, motivated team of teachers. Autonomy given to TY co-ordinator by the principal.

Teacher 6, Maple School

Good team involved, very good year-head co-ordinates well; always open to new ideas.

Teacher 16, Beech School

Breadth of programme; structured very strongly; belief in programme.

Teacher 27, Ash School

Teaching staff is co-operative and flexible. Experimental and new learning approaches are encouraged.

Teacher 36, Oak School

A lot of time energy and thought goes into the programme.

Teacher 46, Oak School

Well organised.

Teacher 61, Chestnut School

TY co-ordinator who believes strongly in the benefits of TY. Willing and acceptable staff.

Teacher 76, Beech School

The TY programme is varied. It gives students time to explore new ideas. It is very well organised, well managed.

Teacher 91, Beech School

Occasionally, teacher responses focus on specific features of pedagogy that are distinctive to TY

Teaching staff is co-operative and flexible. Experimental and new learning approaches are encouraged.

Teacher 36, Oak School

The emphasis on active learning. Pupils develop their personal skills such as initiative, problem solving, decision-making, and attributes such as independence and initiative through active learning.

Teacher 49, Oak School

Some teachers respond to the question about the 'main strengths of TY' by focusing on outcomes or perceived effects of the TY programme on young people. TY's role in giving young people an experience that complemented the rest of their overall school experience is evident. For example:

Students mix out of streamed units.

Teacher 57, Chestnut School

It gives both teachers and students an opportunity to work outside the normal curriculum.

Teacher 66, Chestnut School

More students are capable of doing honours and/or ordinary level for LC due to extra year spent revising basics, time on which would not otherwise be spent.

Teacher 68, Chestnut School

Opportunity for students, especially boys, to mature.

Teacher 80, Beech School

The impact of TY on the students' morale is also seen as a particular strength. For example:

It is tailored to the students in this school. The ethos is very affirming and contributes to a very positive experience for the students.

Teacher 78, Beech School

As is evident in responses to various other questions, teachers believe that TY leads to improved student-teacher relations. Some offer this outcome as one of the strengths of TY.

Student-teacher relationship is more adult

Teacher 20, Ash School

The opportunity it gives students and teachers to get to know each other at a different level.

Teacher 77, Beech School

The acceptance of TY among families is also seen as an important indicator, as the following comprehensive comment indicates:

Broad range of subjects. Open to all students and those who would benefit from it are encouraged to do it. Feedback from students who have done it in the past is excellent – their younger brothers and sisters do it. It's well organised. Very good co-ordinator. Programme changes to suit needs of the students.

Teacher 10, Maple School

Teachers' views of the perceived strengths of individual programmes in these six schools might be summarised as giving useful pointers for the basic essentials of any TY programme:

- Programmes that offer variety of content and experience, both inside and outside classrooms.
- Programmes that are well structured and well co-ordinated.
- Opportunities for students to relate to teachers over the course of the programme in co-operative ways that emphasise student responsibility and emerging maturity.
- Teaching and learning methodologies that are active, offering students both stimulation and challenge.

The practical manifestation of these broad descriptors can probably be best understood if one considers what a TY programme without them might look like, e.g. programmes with a close resemblance to existing JC or LC programmes, poorly co-ordinated and with student-teacher relationships along an authoritarian model in classrooms that young people experience as 'boring'.

### Resources

The issue of resources is another where opinions in the staffrooms of these six schools are clearly divided.

Q.14 (h) Teachers find that there is a lack of resources for TY	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	11%	44%	44%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	31	8%	42%	36%	0%	13%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	18%	54%	29%	0%	0%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	0%	46%	37%	18%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	6%	50%	33%	6%	6%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	7%	53%	20%	7%	13%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	9%	48%	32%	4%	6%

'Resources' is a broad umbrella term and can mean different things to different teachers. Some clarification can be obtained through the responses to two related questions. When asked to rank the in-school factors that militate against TY, 'lack of finance' is placed fourth, behind the lack of time for planning, limited in-service and students' interest. In Q.20 responses to the trigger word 'resources' elicit comments such as the following:

Teachers are the best resources.	Teacher 6, Maple School
Needed as textbooks not available in some subjects, nor course outline.	Teacher 10 ,Maple School
Difficult to get good textbooks.	Teacher 12, Ash School
Not good.	Teacher 23, Ash School
Insufficient.	Teacher 29, Beech School
Improving.	Teacher 31, Beech School
Externally insufficient, internally good.	Teacher 35, Beech School
Essential.	Teacher 42, Oak School
Very good, available.	Teacher 83, Oak School
More funds.	Teacher 84, Oak School
A major problem in an 'underprivileged area'.	Teacher 99, Oak School
More needed.	Teacher 53, Sycamore School
Too few.	Teacher 57, Sycamore School
Excellent packs available.	Teacher 72, Chestnut School
Weak area for us.	Teacher 110, Sycamore School

The apparent contradiction in these comments can be partly explained by looking at the subjects or modules taught by these respondents. For example, Teachers 12, 23, 42 and 99 whose comments might be seen as critical, all teach languages, whereas the apparently positive ones such as Teachers 6, 31, 72, 83 tend to teach humanities such as History, Geography and English. TY specific resources in the areas of languages and technical subjects, including the sciences, have not been as extensive as those in the humanities.

### Teachers' views of their own experience

Having commented on teachers' views in general, teachers were then invited to reflect on their own individual experiences. The expectation was that individual views might make useful contrasts with the perceived views of the collective. The first question sought to elicit a basic attitude to teaching TY. A majority of respondents indicate that they like teaching the programme

Q.15 (a) I like teaching Transition Year classes	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	8	25%	50%	25%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	41%	50%	3%	0%	6%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	21%	68%	0%	0%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	10	70%	30%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	50%	22%	11%	0%	17%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	20%	47%	13%	0%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	<b>36%</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>10%</b>

### Syllabus

A majority of these teachers would prefer not to have a prescribed syllabus for their subjects, though there are important variations across the six schools. Further analysis of their responses suggest that teachers in subjects such as Maths, Sciences and Languages are more likely to indicate a preference for prescription, compared, say, to those who teach Geography, English or History. However, given that teachers teach at least two subjects and often more, neat categorisation by subject is problematic.

Q.15 (b) I would prefer a prescribed syllabus for my subject	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	8	13%	37%	37%	0%	13%
<i>Beech School</i>	31	10%	29%	45%	6%	10%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	4%	32%	43%	11%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	10	0%	20%	80%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	11%	28%	39%	6%	17%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	20%	13%	53%	7%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	110	<b>9%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>10%</b>

Responses to Q.15(b) related to subjects taught in the school timetable.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Only those subjects that at least 10 teachers mentioned as being in their teaching timetable were included in this analysis. Obviously, categories overlap so the same teacher may be counted under 'Maths' and 'Sciences' or even 'English'.

<i>Subjects taught</i>	Total	Agree would prefer prescribed syllabus
Geography	17	24%
History	15	27%
English	20	40%
Mathematics	26	54%
CSPE	14	57%
Sciences	13	62%
Languages <sup>15</sup>	17	71%

### Freedom and flexibility

The freedom and flexibility that TY offers teachers is generally well appreciated, though there can be substantial dissent from this viewpoint.

Q.15 (d) I like the freedom and flexibility which TY offers	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	8	12%	50%	38%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	28%	62%	6%	0%	3%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	11%	71%	0%	0%	18%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	63%	18%	18%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	44%	22%	11%	0%	22%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	27%	53%	0%	0%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>29%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>12%</b>

### Active teaching and learning

Applying a variety of teaching/learning strategies is seen as central to advancing TY within the system. Some examples are set out in the *Guidelines* and a further list is available in the TYCSS (1999) brochure *Writing the Transition Year Programme*.

This following is a selection of the proposed variety:

classroom discussion	formal input by teacher	pair work
research	negotiated learning	group work
role-play	interviews	project work
oral presentations	drama in education exercises	field trips
debates	practical work	demonstrations
simulations	use of audio tapes	use of video tapes
visualisation	visiting speakers	computer-based learning

Given this wide range of possibilities, it is perhaps not surprising that responses to Q.15 (f) were mainly positive.

<sup>15</sup> Included here are responses from those who indicated they taught Irish, French, German, Spanish.

Q.15 (f) I like using active teaching and learning methodologies	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	8	25%	63%	12%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	31%	66%	0%	0%	3%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	7%	75%	4%	0%	14%
<i>Maple School</i>	10	50%	40%	10%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	50%	28%	11%	0%	11%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	27%	53%	7%	0%	13%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	<b>29%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>8%</b>

### Teachers' perceptions of others' attitudes to TY Students' interest in TY

The majority of teachers surveyed clearly reject the sometimes voiced perception that students themselves have little interest in TY. However, the differences between the schools is noteworthy. Of particular interest is that in two of the three schools where teachers harbour doubts about the academic dimension of the TY programme, more than a quarter of teachers believe that students show little interest in TY.

Q.11 (e) Students show little interest in TY	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	0%	0%	89%	11%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	0%	13%	50%	31%	6%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	11%	39%	39%	4%	7%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	0%	0%	36%	64%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	0%	0%	50%	50%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	0%	27%	47%	13%	13%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>3%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>5%</b>

Additional comments confirm the complexity of this issue.

Most TY students switch off, especially in core subjects.

Teacher 12, Ash School

Positive outcomes don't apply to all TY students. What they put in is what they get out.

Teacher 48, Oak School

Students' views and attitudes vary greatly; some do not use the opportunities given.

Teacher 57, Chestnut School

It's a beneficial year but students don't see this for the most part.

Teacher 96, Beech School

About 20 per cent of students do not become self-directed or clarify career goals.

Teacher 110, Sycamore School



### A three-year Leaving Certificate?

Contested views within each school about TY also emerge strongly around the idea of having a three-year LC programme rather than TY as a 'stand-alone' year<sup>16</sup>. While the view in five of the six schools is that a majority would disagree with a three-year LC, there is some perceived support for the idea in each school, with it being the majority preference in one school.

Q. 14 (g) Teachers would prefer a 3 year Leaving Cert. programme	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	0%	33%	14%	4%	14%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	10%	19%	65%	0%	6%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	32%	36%	14%	4%	14%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	0%	9%	73%	9%	9%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	6%	17%	39%	17%	22%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	0%	20%	27%	13%	40%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>12%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>15%</b>

These responses from Q 14 (g) make interesting comparisons with the figures from Q. 15 (g) where a similar question was posed, but this time in relation to respondents' personal preferences. The differences suggest that while 60 per cent of these respondents would not prefer a three-year LC programme, some sense that not all their colleagues share this view – hence the 50 per cent.

Q.15 (g) I would prefer a 3 year Leaving Certificate programme	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	8	0%	25%	37%	37%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	6%	19%	56%	13%	6%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	18%	21%	25%	11%	25%
<i>Maple School</i>	10	0%	0%	70%	20%	10%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	0%	11%	56%	6%	28%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	0%	13%	47%	13%	27%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	<b>6%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>17%</b>

Some teachers elaborated further on this issue, both in response to this question and in Q.20 when the questionnaire invited respondents to comment on particular issues by way of trigger words. A complex mixture of views is evident. For example:

TY should be used to boost English, Maths skills and language skills.

Teacher 13, Beech School

<sup>16</sup> These questionnaires were completed prior to the NCCA's publication of *Developing Senior Cycle Education, Consultative Paper on Issues and Options*.

Students have time to grow up, and many feel better prepared to go into Fifth year.

Teacher 26, Ash School

Many immature, low achievers doss the year and regress instead of progress, grow lazy and lose all working habits for the LC course.

Teacher 72, Chestnut School

Some schools use TY as a 3<sup>rd</sup> year to the LC (not on!)

Teacher 85, Oak School

I feel we should be free to cover some LC material.

Teacher 92, Beech School

Some students would do better to follow through immediately to LC programme – ‘waste of time’.

Teacher 103, Sycamore School

### Status of TY among students

The perceived status of any school programme can be a major factor in a new programme taking root within a school. The responses here vary considerably across the schools, with consistency evident among the two schools where a sizeable number believe that students show little interest in TY.

Q. 11 (h) The TY programme has low status among students	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	0%	11%	44%	44%	4%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	0%	28%	59%	13%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	14%	36%	43%	4%	0%
<i>Maple School</i>	10	0%	0%	20%	80%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	11%	6%	56%	22%	6%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	7%	27%	47%	13%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	6%	22%	48%	21%	3%

However, as one of the appended comments noted, students' views can change:

Until students become exposed to TY it has a low status.

Teacher 34, Beech School

### Mixed-ability teaching

The Transition Year Curriculum Support Service had indicated that, from their contact with teachers, many find teaching mixed-ability classes particularly challenging. Respondents here indicate a complex range of opinions. However, attitudes to teaching mixed-ability classes in TY appear to be closely related to teachers' experience of mixed ability in other years. Ash School, where the assertion

that 'teachers find mixed-ability classes difficult' is most strongly rejected, arranges its Junior Cycle classes on a mixed-ability basis. At the other end of the spectrum in Chestnut School where 70 per cent agree with the assertion, Junior Cycle classes are streamed.

Q.14 (b) Teachers find mixed-ability classes difficult	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	0%	11%	89%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	8%	38%	38%	6%	6%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	27	18%	52%	26%	0%	4%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	0%	18%	54%	27%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	11%	44%	39%	0%	6%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	0%	33%	40%	7%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	<b>9%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>6%</b>

A majority of respondents in each school also state, in Q.15 (c), that they themselves like teaching mixed-ability classes.

Q.15 (c) I like teaching mixed-ability classes	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	5	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	9%	63%	16%	0%	12%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	27	0%	59%	26%	4%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	36%	45%	18%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	17%	39%	28%	0%	17%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	20%	40%	20%	0%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	108	<b>12%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>12%</b>

Additional comments appended to Q.14 (b) and Q.15 (c) throw some further light on mixed-ability classes. For example:

A lot depends on the teachers – the more traditional style teachers tends to find TY more challenging.

Teacher 6, Maple School

Mixed ability in languages – good; in Maths – disastrous.

Teacher 24, Ash School

I have found it very useful and have learned through diversity.

Teacher 70, Chestnut School

Opinions vary widely among staff members, depending on subject/module.

Teacher 74, Chestnut School

I have received no in-service.

Teacher 110, Sycamore School

### Prescription or freedom?

As regards whether there should be prescribed syllabi for subjects in TY, a dramatic division of opinions is evident across all six schools.

Q.15 (e) Teachers would prefer a prescribed syllabus for their subjects	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	11%	56%	33%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	31	16%	23%	36%	6%	19%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	27	11%	37%	22%	0%	30%
<i>Maple School</i>	10	10%	30%	40%	0%	20%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	11%	17%	44%	6%	7%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	20%	20%	47%	7%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	110	<b>14%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>19%</b>

A number of the additional comments offer some illumination. For example:

I consider that teachers who prefer a prescribed syllabus for their subjects may not be the best to have teaching the TY programme and as far as possible teachers should be selected for the TY programme who are innovative enough to devise their own programmes.

Teacher 3, Maple School

In some subjects this (syllabus) would definitely help.

Teacher 22, Ash School

### Status among teachers

School differences surface clearly in relation to how TY is perceived among teachers.

In one school the notion that the programme has a low status among teachers is rejected totally while in three others a majority reject this description. However, it is significant that in two schools 'low status' is perceived as the majority view among teachers. The strong correlation between the perceived status of TY among teachers in the individual schools and the programme's perceived status among students is especially noteworthy.

Q.15 (f) The programme has a low status among teachers	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	0%	11%	67%	22%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	31	0%	3%	74%	19%	3%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	7%	46%	39%	0%	7%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	0%	0%	64%	36%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	6%	0%	56%	33%	6%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	7%	47%	20%	13%	13%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>4%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>5%</b>

### Planning

More than a quarter of those surveyed 'agree strongly' that they would like more time for planning TY classes with colleagues.

Q. 15 (i) I would like more time for planning TY classes with colleagues	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	8	25%	37%	37%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	25%	53%	16%	0%	6%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	29%	46%	7%	4%	4%
<i>Maple School</i>	10	30%	40%	10%	0%	20%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	33%	50%	0%	0%	17%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	13%	60%	7%	7%	13%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	<b>26%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>12%</b>

### In-service support

More than three-quarters of all teachers surveyed state that they would like more in-service training specifically for TY.

Q.15 (j) I would like more in-service training for TY	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	8	25%	37%	37%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	31%	50%	9%	0%	9%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	38%	50%	4%	0%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	10	10%	70%	10%	0%	10%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	56%	11%	6%	6%	22%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	33%	33%	7%	7%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	<b>34%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>13%</b>

### Teachers' views of how TY is organised

#### Internal organisation of Transition Year in the schools

In the six schools, teachers are very strongly of the opinion that their TY programmes are well co-ordinated.

Q.16 (a) Our TY programme is well co-ordinated	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	67%	22%	11%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	41%	56%	3%	0%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	21%	71%	7%	0%	0%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	82%	9%	9%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	83%	17%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	33%	47%	13%	0%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>48%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>1%</b>

### Written programme

During the mid-1990s the TYCSS identified the absence of a written programme as a major weakness in schools where TY was perceived to be struggling. In 1999 the TYCSS, in association with the Inspectorate of the DES, produced a brochure *Writing the Transition Year Programme* as a practical support for schools. Each of the six schools in this study had written programmes. Teachers' views of their schools' written programmes are generally very positive.

Q.16 (c) Our written TY programme is very good	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	44%	44%	11%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	12%	47%	9%	0%	31%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	25%	54%	11%	0%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	82%	18%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	50%	33%	0%	0%	17%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	27%	40%	7%	7%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>33%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>17%</b>

A small number of additional comments here indicate how teachers can have very different views on the role of a written programme:

We have a model TY programme, in my opinion.  
Teacher 24, Ash School

The written programme can be as much a hindrance as a help, as flexibility is required to meet the evolving needs of each TY group.  
Teacher 99, Oak School

### Informing parents

These teachers believe that the parents of Third year students are well informed about TY.

Q.16 (b) Parents of 3 <sup>rd</sup> year students are well informed about TY	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	41%	50%	0%	0%	9%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	21%	57%	11%	0%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	91%	9%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	67%	28%	6%	0%	0%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	33%	33%	20%	0%	13%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>46%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>7%</b>

Some took the opportunity here to suggest that making attractive presentation to parents carries serious responsibilities. For example:

Parents open night sets forth a vision which we fail to deliver on.  
Teacher 62, Chestnut School.

The general view is that these six schools keep parents well informed about activities and events during TY. With some slight variations, the views expressed here are broadly consistent with those relating to informing parents of Third year students.

Q.16 (d) Parents are kept well informed about activities and events during TY	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	56%	44%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	25%	50%	6%	3%	5%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	21%	57%	18%	0%	4%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	91%	9%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	50%	39%	6%	0%	6%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	27%	40%	13%	0%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	113	<b>37%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>9%</b>

### Class size

While 30 per cent of teachers surveyed believe that classes are too large, 63 per cent disagree with this statement.

Q.16 (e) Class sizes are too big	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	9	0%	56%	33%	11%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	19%	28%	47%	0%	6%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	27	0%	26%	52%	11%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	0%	0%	55%	45%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	6%	22%	50%	11%	11%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	0%	13%	60%	20%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>6%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>7%</b>

Among the additional comments, respondents tend to focus on specific, individual classroom situations:

Class size limited to 20-22 students, which works very well.  
Teacher 10, Maple School

Smaller classes allow for more flexibility and development of subject area. I find the emphasis moves away from crowd control to true learning.  
Teacher 16, Beech School

Class sizes and complementary courses have been well thought out and co-ordinated.  
Teacher 74, Chestnut School

I teach IT; class sizes are unacceptably big; students have to share PCs and are expected to get ECDL.  
Teacher 96, Beech School

### **Teachers' perceptions of the in-school factors that contribute most to the success of TY**

Q.17 asked teachers to identify three factors within the school that, in their opinion, contributed most to the success of the TY programme. Based on the pilot work, a list of 13 points was offered. There was also space to offer additional factors not mentioned on the list. 'The work done by the TY co-ordinator' topped the list 50 times and was rated either second or third on 33 other occasions.

While there are some variations across the six schools, the top six 'in-school' factors are set out in the chart below:

<b>1</b>	<i>The work done by the TY co-ordinator</i>
<b>2</b>	<i>The TY programme that we as a school community designed</i>
<b>3</b>	<i>The commitment of the teaching staff to the TY programme</i>
<b>4</b>	<i>The work done by the core-team</i>
<b>5</b>	<i>The students' interest in and commitment to the TY programme</i>
<b>6</b>	<i>The imagination, creativity and expertise of the teaching staff</i>

Again, the additional responses to this question point to a strong belief among teachers of the importance of internal organisation, coherence and teamwork:

From day 1 the staff in TY have been great – I can say that 'cos I wasn't always there! But the co-ordination makes all the difference and we've had a couple of inspiring ones.                      Teacher 34, Beech School

If school authorities, teachers, parents and students understood the aim of the programme it would contribute most to its success.  
Teacher 72, Chestnut School.

The positive results published nationally on the effects of TY on future prospects of students.                      Teacher 78, Beech School

The public nature of many aspects – displays, shows, activities.  
Teacher 79, Beech School

Teachers' commitment to staying back after school to aid with projects, and use of internet for research.                      Teacher 94, Beech School

### **Teachers' perceptions of the in-school factors that militate most against the success of TY**

Teachers' views of the in-school factors that contribute most to a successful TY come into even sharper relief when considered alongside what they see as the factors that militate most against TY's success.



1	<i>Lack of sufficient time for teachers to work together in planning the TY programme</i>
2	<i>Limited in-service training</i>
3	<i>Students' lack of interests in and commitment to the TY programme.</i>
4	<i>A shortage of finance</i>
5	<i>The absence of regular review and evaluation on the TY programme.</i>

As might be expected, a number of teachers used this opportunity to add some very specific observations. For example:

Some teachers don't like the challenge of TY, preferring structured syllabus and textbooks etc. Teacher 30, Beech School

It's a long time since there was some decent in-service – a lot of new staff have come on board – even from a supersub point of view there should be 'staff-day' time put by to involve everyone.

Teacher 31, Beech School

I find continuity a problem when teaching languages in TY because students are in and out a lot on various other activities – but this is the nature of TY.

Teacher 31, Beech School

In-service training being impractical, courses and methodologies being aspirational rather than practical in a mixed ability class.

Teacher 68, Chestnut School

I think if students had better training/opportunities to explore what they could offer in TYP and a liaison with other schools it would help. Why does every school have to be so different-stand on its own?

Teacher 75, Chestnut School

Reputation as a 'doss' year.

Teacher 78, Beech School

One of the aims of TY is to promote enjoyment of learning. More effort should be made on this.

Teacher 109, Sycamore School

### **External factors impacting on TY**

Q.19 invited respondents, in an open box format, to state external factors that impact, positively and negatively, on TY. About half the respondents left these boxes empty.

Some teachers listed combinations of factors such as the following:

Trips abroad. Competitions (they give a focus, help teamwork). I went to Manchester with Fourth years at Easter and found they bonded and responded well.

Teacher 12, Ash School

When all the responses are categorised, the 'positive' factors emerge as follows:

<i>Work experience provided by employers x 21</i>	<i>Parental involvement and support x 9</i>
<i>Community involvement x 9</i>	<i>Trips outside school x 5</i>
<i>Contact with outside agencies x 4</i>	<i>Visiting speakers x 3</i>
<i>Achievement of TY students in LC x 3</i>	<i>Competitions x 2</i>
<i>Availability of so much external material</i>	<i>Cross-border programme</i>
<i>Teachers' commitment to staying back after school to assist students with projects, research etc.</i>	<i>Collecting for charities</i>
<i>Stories of achievements from other schools</i>	<i>Lack of emphasis on academic achievement</i>
<i>Experiences of friends/relations of TY</i>	<i>Reputation of our TY vis-à-vis others</i>
<i>The public nature of many aspects of TY – displays, shows, activities etc.</i>	<i>Good economic climate in the country</i>

A similar analysis of the factors listed as 'negative' produces the following table:

<i>Negative attitudes of some parents x 10</i>	<i>The perception that it is an 'easy' year x 9</i>
<i>Part-time work x 8</i>	<i>Costs associated with TY x 4</i>
<i>Ill-informed views about TY among the public x 3</i>	<i>Shortage of resources x 3</i>
<i>Location of school (rural) x 3</i>	<i>Absences x 3</i>
<i>An extra year in school x 2</i>	<i>Quality of some work experience placements; insurance issues x 2</i>
<i>Other schools don't have to do it x 2</i>	<i>Perception that other schools are more creative and innovative x 2</i>
<i>Comments in the national media x 2</i>	<i>Perception concerning reduced homework x 2</i>
<i>Time (lack of)</i>	<i>Shortage of interesting local attractions (museums etc)</i>
<i>Pupils' attitudes</i>	<i>Neighbouring schools not offering TY</i>
<i>Trying to keep numbers up in the school</i>	<i>Lack of clear goals</i>
<i>Exploitation by some employers</i>	<i>Lack of pressure from Department of Education and Science</i>
<i>Lack of good textbooks – photocopying is so expensive</i>	<i>Perception that there is too much free time</i>
<i>Poor publicity for TY in other schools</i>	<i>Experiences of friends/relations of TY</i>

### Teachers' views of the TY programme nationally

While acknowledging that the programme can differ from school to school, the questionnaire attempted to get some picture of how teachers viewed the TY programme nationally, e.g. Question 21.

#### Appropriate stage?

These teachers strongly agree with the location of TY at this stage of young people's development. In four of the schools there is unanimous agreement with the positioning of TY at this stage of the second-level cycle.

Q.21b (a) The TYP is a very appropriate programme for 15-16 year olds	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	7	43%	57%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	41%	53%	6%	0%	0%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	32%	46%	4%	4%	16%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	82%	18%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	66%	28%	0%	0%	6%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	27%	66%	0%	0%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	<b>45%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>5%</b>

#### Embedded

Asked about how well embedded they think TY is into the education system, three quarters of respondents agreed with this statement, though in Beech School the agreement was as low as 59 per cent.

Q.21b (b) Transition Year is now firmly embedded in the Irish education system	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	8	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	0%	59%	38%	0%	3%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	21%	50%	14%	4%	11%
<i>Maple School</i>	11	55%	45%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	44%	33%	11%	0%	11%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	20%	53%	20%	0%	7%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	112	<b>21%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>6%</b>

#### Support

Agreement with the view that TY is well supported by the DES is most pronounced in Maple School (90 per cent), though in the other five schools more than a quarter of respondents disagree with this statement.

Q.21b(c) Transition Year is well supported by the Department of Education and Science	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	8	0%	38%	38%	0%	25%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	3%	31%	44%	3%	19%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	11%	29%	39%	4%	18%
<i>Maple School</i>	10	30%	70%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	6%	39%	39%	0%	17%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	0%	53%	27%	0%	0%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	111	7%	39%	35%	2%	17%

### Well Regarded?

While the overall majority view is that TY is well regarded within the education system, it is only in Maple and Oak schools that this is clearly the dominant perspective within the staffroom.

Q.21b(d) Transition Year is well regarded within the education system	N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
<i>Ash School</i>	6	17%	34%	50%	0%	0%
<i>Beech School</i>	32	0%	50%	41%	3%	6%
<i>Chestnut School</i>	28	11%	32%	29%	7%	21%
<i>Maple School</i>	10	20%	80%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Oak School</i>	18	11%	61%	17%	0%	11%
<i>Sycamore School</i>	15	6%	47%	27%	0%	20%
<i>Total for all respondents</i>	109	8%	49%	28%	3%	12%

Among the additional comments added to the responses to this questions provide further evidence of how individual and varied are teacher attitudes to TY:

The issuing of certificates by the department has helped. This raises the issue of optional-compulsory. Teacher 6, Maple School

Doubts are being cast on how realistic its philosophy is i.e. to develop 'independence' (under various headings) amongst the pupils. Teacher 13, Beech School

Students laughed at a Department Inspector when she said our TY was well regarded. They said they'd hate to see the others. TY badly needs an overhaul. Teacher 12, Ash School

As a strong supporter of TY I feel there hasn't been good press given to TY, enough training to teachers or enough back-up to schools. Teacher 31, Beech School

Need to revisit the model again as a school lacks focus. Teacher 62, Chestnut School

Embedded and supported very well by the department.

Teacher 65, Chestnut School

I often feel Transition Year would be more appropriate after the LC! As a pre-university course.

Teacher 67, Chestnut School

It is a great idea. However, some schools have a great programme. Others don't. Why not?

Teacher 75, Chestnut School

A module in the last term in study skills and techniques should be given to the students to help them in their transition to LC.

Teacher 111, Sycamore School

A synopsis of this chapter is included in Chapter Seven. Some of the issues arising from the data are discussed in Chapter Eight.

## CHAPTER 5

### Parents' Points of View

Focus group interviews with parents were organised by the TY co-ordinators in two of the six schools in the study. Maple School is a small co-educational VEC school and Oak School is a medium sized, urban all-girls school, designated 'disadvantaged'. Initially, in both schools, a number of fathers accepted the invitation to participate. However, on the days scheduled for the interviews, only mothers actually turned up. In contrast to students and teachers, when parents were interviewed in focus groups they tended, at least initially, to resist making generalisations about TY. Many parents appeared more comfortable talking about their own sons' and daughters' experiences of TY and seemed reluctant to venture too far beyond this. Parents also frequently stated that their knowledge of the TY programme was limited and indicated that they would welcome opportunities to hear more about it and to talk about it to students, teachers and each other.

#### Parents' general attitudes to TY

Though unfamiliar with the daily discourse of school life, when these parents talked about TY they often did so in refreshingly frank ways, sometimes illuminating important dynamics within the programme. For example:

For me TY is a transition from a childlike state to a more adult state. That's the whole idea of it. That is my reasoning of what TY is all about. I don't think people grasped the idea that they (students) weren't going to be sitting at a desk, being told what to do. The whole idea was that they would take the responsibility and the initiative for themselves.

Cathy, Parent, Maple School

Taking responsibility and becoming more-independent learners is an emphasis within TY that parents seem to welcome:

They have a lot of responsibility. They have a lot of projects and things to finish. They have completion dates and she was up until half-twelve, one o'clock a few nights, on the kitchen floor doing her projects. She had to have it done. She had her deadline to have it done. So the responsibility was on her to get it finished by that time, and I spoke to the TY teacher and she benefited from it, he thought, and she loved it, absolutely loved it.

Hilda, Parent, Oak School

Parents in both groups expressed a keen awareness of TY's impact on their children's relationships, both with their peers and with their teachers:

... Team working and everything. They weren't just working for themselves. They knew if they didn't do what they were supposed to do they were letting somebody else down as well as themselves. The projects they were involved in, the mini-companies and all that ... it was team work... And the relationship that they build up with the teacher, the teachers they will have when they go on to Leaving Cert., this is important, because they really begin to form bonds.

Maureen, Parent, Maple School

... when they started secondary school ... they looked at the teacher or that person up there at the top of the room that you listen to... but I found with TY... a different relationship. And when they go into Fifth year and Leaving Cert.... I think they realise when they have been working with the teachers, the projects, all the things that they do together, I find that they go up and talk to the teacher because the teacher is a person, like a friend, you know. They kind of got to know that they were just a person trying to help them.

Nora, Parent, Oak School

She loved it because they bond. They learn to look after themselves. They become a very tight-knit group... I mean it's not just a passing friendship. My oldest child now is away in college, just finishing his first year. The crowd that he was with in TY, they are always the ones that are in contact saying I am coming and we'll meet or whatever. Even when they are away they still meet.

Una, Parent, Maple School

A busy programme that offered challenge was seen as important by parents in both schools. For example:

I would look forward to it being a bit demanding as I suppose my main concern about it would be that they would switch off totally from the academics and that they would not be able to focus again in Fifth year. That would be my only worry about it.

Kathy, Parent, Maple School

My first son enjoyed it. The second one seems very negative. Well, he is enjoying it as well, but he says it is too easy; he thinks it is too easy.

Mary, Parent, Maple School

I think he needs the structure of the class situation and I don't know how he'll do on all these project things.

Noreen, Parent, Maple School

One parent in Maple School welcomed TY as a recognition of the diversity of learning needs among students, voicing her opinion in a forthright fashion:

Before there was just this one system and if you didn't fit into that, if you were a round peg in the square hole, you were finished... it wasn't fair because it wasn't actually showing what your ability was, what you had... I think now this is an improvement... I still think the system is absolutely

dreadful and it needs to be changed dramatically, particularly in Leaving Cert.

Mary, Parent, Maple School

### **Specific benefits of TY**

'Maturity' is a consistent theme in the parents' discussion groups. This is sometimes linked with the age of students. There are also resonances with the students' emphasis on TY as a 'break'. For example,

(TY) It's great for them... My daughter was very young. TY gave her another year to mature. Right? She was no way ready (for the LC)... It was terrible trying to get her to study (for the JC). We fought with her... She would go down to the room and that was where she counted the blades of grass rather than study... To get her to study was like trying to extract teeth. And that year in TY did her the world of good... She got away from the whole academic side. I think she needed a break because she was so much younger... She matured. In my opinion it's not just the whole academic thing. Right? She totally and utterly enjoyed it. For us as parents she was a lot more mature.

Una, Parent, Maple School

In addition to associating TY with their children improving relationships with each other and with their teachers, some parents claim that TY also contributes to improved parent-child relationships. TY's varied activities enable lots of discussion about trips, work experience, projects, fund-raising activities and so on:

They have different subjects to talk about. It wasn't just Irish, English and Maths. Before that... she did her homework and I signed it and that was that, but (in TY) she was more open about what she did.

Hilda, Parent, Oak School

This focus on 'relationships' reveals an important pattern. Parents who describe their children as 'very shy', 'a bit of a loner', 'not very assertive', 'introverted', even 'quiet', tend to focus strongly on TY's possibilities for developing bonds between peers and between young people and their teachers. These parents provide particular evidence that trips, especially overnight trips and task focused ones, for example those involving outdoor pursuits, can be very effective in developing relationships. They also appear to indicate that these activities, as well as school-based project work such as musicals, fund-raising activities, mini-companies and team projects, present their children with opportunities to relate to classmates and teachers in ways different to those in conventional classrooms. It should be added that in both schools in question,



trips and project work are key features of their TY programmes and appear well planned and well implemented.

As noted in some of the student comments from Sixth year students, the proximity of the LC exam can cause a revision in opinions about TY. A parent from Maple School, interviewed in May, echoes this perspective:

My first son did TY because he wanted to do it and we agreed with him too as he was that bit on the young side... He said it was very good. He enjoyed the projects and he went on a trip and everything. Now, if you asked him how he feels, if he had the choice again, he wouldn't do it, because he says he is doing his Leaving.... He would rather repeat his Leaving.

Mary, Parent, Maple School

On the other hand, some parents are quite specific about some of the effects of TY on helping students to focus on their studies. For example, one mother talking about her daughter who was studying for the LC at the time of the interview, said:

She is organised. I think she learned that thing about organising in TY, when they were doing their mini-company, when they were doing the managing and that part... It stands to her now.

Bridie, Parent Oak School

In the following rather extended (edited) extract, another parent captures some of the connections between TY-related issues, including prior uncertainty, encouragement from the school, student choices, academic growth linked with personal and social development and motivation for learning. She is talking about her daughter, currently in Fifth year:

Before the TY a friend of mine said, 'Don't let her do it, because it turns children all off and they couldn't get into studying once they went into Fifth year'. So I came up to the school hoping that she wouldn't do the TY, but listening at the meeting, people talking, students who had done the TY... Now she would have been the youngest in the class... After listening to the positive things about TY, KC (co-ordinator in Oak School) came out and said, 'did you make up your mind?'... He said it would be good for her.. I spoke to her about it and she was for it one minute and against it the next. But she decided herself. I left it up to herself to do it. I said it would probably be better in the long run. I felt that she was so young... I think she didn't need it academically ...but I think maturity wise she did need it. She did TY and I have to say it was the best thing she ever did in her life, the best thing... I think it just opened, I felt her mind went from here to out there... Looking back now, she would say, 'I wish I was back in TY again'... I think it developed her. After doing TY she was able to stand on her two feet. Before that she would let people say

what they had to say, tell her what they thought and she probably wouldn't have said anything. She wouldn't let no one get away with nothing now as a result of doing TY. She has her own mind and everything.

Nicola, Parent Oak School

The confidence or assertiveness was also remarked on by parents in relation to what their children told them about certain co-operative learning activities. For example:

I remember when they were doing the projects in TY, the mini companies that they were doing; if there was, let's say, six in a group and if two weren't pulling their weight that left four... they would tell them.

Nora, Parent, Oak School

The mothers in Oak School were particularly keen on TY's contribution in building an ability to speak up for oneself. For example:

Some people could be 80 years of age and they mightn't have made one direct statement in their life... I think it is very essential that they are so opened and that they are able to be direct and able to speak their mind.

Bridie, Parent, Oak School

These parents also valued the sense they have that TY is somehow preparing them for 'the real world', helping them 'wise up'. For example:

I remember going in to a clothes shop with (her daughter) and the shop assistant said, 'That's lovely on you', and she said to me, 'Don't mind her, she has to say that. It's her job', but before (work experience) she would have never said that, you know... if they didn't do TY, how would she know about it?

Nora, Parent, Oak School

A positive disposition among parents towards work experience is a consistent strand throughout both focus group interviews. Generally, this is voiced in terms of career clarification, sometimes in terms of 'maturity' and the development of social skills and occasionally on connecting work experience with motivation for academic achievement. For example:

During that year they were very lucky as they had a great career guidance teacher... and when they went on their work placement he tried to get them into the areas they were interested in... They got a taste of what they were going to go forward for... Those who decided 'this is what I want', went back to school in September and knew exactly the subjects they needed and the results they needed and how to get them, and just worked for it.

Una, Parent, Maple School

**Reservations about TY**

As already indicated, parents in both Oak School and Maple School were very frank about their limited knowledge of TY. In Oak School, for some parents fear of their children not completing the full six-year cycle hung like a cloud over TY. Parents in Maple School indicated that when children they knew – including some of their own – were disappointed with LC results, they often remarked that a year spent repeating the LC would be more productive than TY.

Parents indicated that their reservations about TY were most manifest when their children were in Third year. Many were frank about how little they knew about TY. It is clear that parents depend greatly on their children's schools to inform them. Many indicated an awareness of negative reports about TY in their children's schools and also from other schools. In the absence of definitive information about TY, myths, misconceptions and rumours about the programme can thrive.

Among the parents interviewed in both Maple School and Oak School, public meetings, where TY's rationale and the school's view of the programme were presented, were regarded as especially important. As seen in the extract quoted above from 'Nicola' a parent in Oak School, the meeting can be a pivotal event in the decision of whether a child should do TY or not. It also emerged from both focus group discussions that the format of the information meetings for parents can be important. In particular, school leaders or staff members explaining the school's programme with conviction seems vital but seems to be most effective when backed up by students' own accounts of TY's impact. Parents indicated that when they see a youngster standing up to talk they have immediate expectations as 'this is so-and-so's son or daughter'. Invariably, they report having been impressed by 'confidence', 'self-assuredness', 'maturity', 'blossomed' and 'you could see it made a difference'.

Given the many dimensions to TY, parents' comments also suggest that they often select particular features and highlight these. Whether parents hear the message that schools want to communicate is unclear. For example, as with the students, TY as a 'break' also features strongly in parents' discourse:

There was a big meeting in the school about TY and I went down and I was very impressed with the whole concept of TY. I think it is a very

good idea to have a break between the Junior Cert and the Leaving Cert. It's a very high pressurised exam and there is no point in saying it is not.  
Una, Parent, Maple School

Uncertainly prior to TY is often accompanied by strongly held views:

Oh, I tell you, I was dead against it. No way was she going to do that  
Transition Year.  
Nora, Parent, Oak School

This mother says that her sons contended that if their sister was to do TY she would 'never get back into study'. She was inclined to agree with the view until she attended a meeting in the school during her daughter's third year. She had subsequent meetings with the TY co-ordinator and he assured her that 'it would do wonders for her' (daughter) and they would not regret the decision to do TY. Nora is now of the opinion that the co-ordinator was right as her daughter 'loved every minute of it' and, in her mother's opinion, 'they learned so much'. She mentions trips to places like the Gaeltacht and project work as highlights.

One of the areas where there can be a clear divergence of opinion among parents relates to the linking of 'maturity' and 'academic ability'. Some parents indicate that if, in their opinion, their son or daughter is achieving well academically in Junior Cycle, then maybe it is better to 'maintain the momentum' and allow them move straight into Fifth year. Other parents who express satisfaction with their children's academic progress in Junior Cycle can contrast attainment in school exams with what they see as low levels of personal and social skills. Such parents are likely to see this emphasis within TY as especially attractive.

The choice between a five-year cycle and a six-year one weighs heavily with some parents, particularly those in disadvantaged communities. Parents who themselves left school before completing a LC, appear to have a greater fear that their children might 'drop out' without completing senior cycle. In Beech School, the other designated 'disadvantaged' school in this study, students, teachers and the principal voiced similar concerns.

As already evident from some of the student interviews, choices made by a student's friends about doing or not doing TY can be a big influence on their own decisions.

This factor can also weigh heavily with parents. As mentioned earlier, parents, especially those who describe their children as 'quiet', can be finely tuned to how their children relate to classmates. While seeing TY's potential for personal and social development, they may also be faced with a youngster who has begun to establish friendships with fellow students who are opting to go straight from the JC programme to the LC one. Deciding what's best can be difficult.

These dilemmas are compounded when students themselves indicate reservations about TY. For example:

She was saying 'will it be a waste of a year?' ... I put it to her: Look, you have only one life. We are only passing through. If you don't do it you would probably spend the rest of your life saying they had a great time in TY and I will never be able to do it now because I am after moving on. On the other hand, if you do it and if it's a hames, you lose out on a whole year.

Nicola, Parent, Oak School

In Oak School, one parent suggested that some parents will give in to their daughters who don't want to do TY 'for a quiet life'. The fact that many can get jobs relatively easily after five years in school was also seen as a reason for not pursuing a six-year cycle. Two others, unprompted, suggested that TY should be compulsory. A fourth parent disagreed strongly, focusing on the advantages of optional programmes, while giving further evidence of misunderstandings about TY:

I think if they have to make a choice, they accept it better. Up in Dublin it's kind of compulsory and all their backs are up. They don't want to do it. I think half of them don't go to school. They miss loads of days.

Hilda, Parent, Oak School

A similar discussion with the parents in Maple School takes a different direction, pointing towards how well-informed young people themselves can be about the programme. For example:

I think the kids are far more informed than we give them credit for, they are far better able to make their own decisions.

Una, Parent, Maple School

Some suggest that, rather than abdicating responsibility for their children, parents may be listening respectfully to their children's opinions and valuing them. Others remark that one way of resolving differences of opinions can be to give in to their children's wishes. For example:

My son is doing it now. I didn't want to let him do it because I didn't think he was suitable for it, but, of course, he wanted to do it, so I just let him do it.

Noreen, Parent, Maple School

Maintaining choice, i.e. keeping TY optional, is seen as desirable by parents in both focus groups. A fear that TY classes with 'conscripts' might disrupt the learning of those who volunteered was voiced in various ways. For example:

TY is for some people; it is not for everyone, and if you put people into a class and they don't want to be in, they are going to wreck it for those who do want to do it.

Mary, Parent, Maple School

### Reports from elsewhere

The point has been made elsewhere in this report that, for many young people, what has been referred to as the 'folklore of the schoolyard' can be a factor in shaping attitudes to TY within an individual school. Similarly, parents hear rumours and anecdotes about TY all the time. The women in the Oak School focus group, while having limited formal schooling themselves, indicated a subtle awareness of how much TY can vary from school to school. Nora talks about her 26-year-old son's views about TY. He contends, she says, that he saw many who did TY, left school and 'became a pack of dossers'. But she adds, tellingly, that the TY programme in her son's school wasn't at all like the one in Oak School. She adds:

...a friend of mine, her son should be going into TY in C... but she won't let him do it because they do nothing. Definitely nothing. They have no programme.

Nora, Parent, Oak School

This prompts alternative views.

A neighbour of mine, her daughter is going to St B's and she is almost definite that her daughter will do it. Her daughter is in Junior Cert and she said she has heard good things about it.

Nicola, Parent, Oak School

A friend of mine thinks it's fabulous and she is going to the meeting (here) shortly... I think she has heard good things.

Bridie, Parent, Oak School

There is a general acknowledgement that the quality of the programme can vary greatly from school to school. They say that one of the big differences is that there is a very full TY programme in Oak School:

I think it all comes back to the programme, the programme. They have a fantastic programme... Very full, that's where the difference is.

Hilda, Parent, Oak School

In Maple School, one parent was particularly well placed to appreciate the way programmes can vary between schools.

My eldest son... did TY in another school. He said that was much worse than here. They didn't do half what's done here. The programme here is excellent. He wishes he had been here for it... in that other town the girls school were doing a course and it was absolute rubbish. Most of the parents were saying, 'you are not doing it because it is a sheer waste of time'...

Noreen, Parent, Maple School

As in Oak School, the parents in Maple School acknowledge that informal 'word of mouth' is important in shaping people's opinions of TY. For example, two of the group had no direct experience of children doing TY:

I know very little about TY really. My children haven't reached that stage yet, and therefore I wouldn't know as much about TY as other people... But I presume the school would send out information but I would hear the children themselves and I would hear other parents.

Orna, Parent, Maple School

I also think that the co-ordinator in the school plays a very, very, very important part...I know that from hearing from own son talk. And he hasn't done it yet but they know themselves who they want to be the co-ordinator, that's being honest, .... I am not putting anybody down or anything. They want KE (name of Maple School co-ordinator)... She's just so good.

Cathy, Parent, Maple School

This point about the co-ordinator is reinforced by another parent, recounting her niece's experience in a school that started TY then discontinued it. This girl's mother was a teacher in the school and mother and daughter had indicated that the school's programme had not sufficiently focused on

... work experience or project work or their trips abroad, or trips away... and, as well, the co-ordinator wasn't a KE (name of Maple School co-ordinator) basically.

Mary, Parent, Maple School

In both schools, parents spoke very highly of the co-ordinators. For example:

... she listens to them and I don't know she just finds time for them, she gives them her heart and soul.

Una, Parent, Maple School

Despite the quality or otherwise of a school's programme or co-ordinator, these parents return again and again to the individual needs of each child. This view is

expressed in numerous ways, both in relation to the decision to do TY but also about how they benefit from the programme. For example,

I think it very much depends on the individual children.

Maureen, Parent, Maple School

She is my eldest daughter so I didn't know anything about TY but from what people had told me. But what I learned afterwards is that they are all individuals and it will throw some people off, but it depends on the individuals themselves, I think.

Marion, Parent, Oak School

### **Gender differences**

A discussion developed among the mothers in Oak School about gender differences in attitudes to TY. Some were of the opinion that girls generally are more open than boys about their school experiences. Speaking from her own experience of a son and a daughter, one mother remarked:

... if you ask her how did she get on in school she will tell you everything. I would ask him, 'How did you get on?' 'Grand'.

Bridie, Parent, Oak School

These parents say they would like to see TY helping their sons develop confidence and the ability to speak out. They did not appear to have much faith in the schools where their sons had attended or were currently attending. One parent observed:

Maybe if it was a different programme. Maybe different things might be needed for boys.

Hilda, Parent, Oak School

### **Academic dimension**

While parents in both schools offer further evidence of TY's contribution to their children's personal and social development, a constant strand of unease about academic development in TY runs through the interviews. Parents express a keen realisation that the LC is a high-stakes examination and that to achieve good results young people have to 'put in the work' during Fifth and Sixth years. Obviously, parents have this concern whether their children do TY or not, but, for some, TY seems to add to this anxiety. When asked why they think some parents might not allow their children do TY, a typical response is:

I think some parents possibly have this idea that it's a doss year. They fear that they (students) are going to sit down and do nothing. That they are



just going to get to next June and have nothing done. It will be a wasted year, that would be the attitude of some parents.

Bernie, Parent, Maple School

This parent also recalls a time shortly after the mainstreaming of TY when public discourse about TY was not always positive.

I think you had a lot of parents ringing in to radio stations and giving a negative picture of this TY. And most people would say then, 'oh, my child is not going near that.'

Bernie, Parent, Maple School

### **Wider educational concerns**

In both focus groups there was a tendency to bring in other educational concerns, particularly ones encountered by members of the wider family. For example, a sister's children's experiences in the UK school system, the examination system in Northern Ireland, the points system, subject requirements, and compulsory subjects all surfaced as issues about which participants held strong views. The thrust within both groups was focused on a perceived unfairness of a 'one size fits all' and a plea for a system that is flexible enough to accommodate children's different abilities and interests. It is unlikely that any of these parents had read the OECD (1991) review of the school system or the Green Paper (Government of Ireland, 1992) or the White Paper (Government of Ireland, 1995) but the resonances were striking.

Similarly, in relation to TY, the group in Maple School grappled with the problem of maintaining the programme as optional while at the same time ensuring that all young people's personal and social development needs are addressed. The group was very supportive of one suggestion that echoes NCCA proposals for senior cycle reform. On checking, it was clear that none of these parents was familiar with the NCCA:

We are saying there are so many positive things about TY and we are saying that it is not for everybody. But there is bound to be something in it that would benefit everybody. If, instead of having a complete year of TY in the education system, there was some sort of a module where everybody had this opportunity to do a term of the project work or work experience then they would have more of a positive social thing. I don't know what way it would run.

Orna, Parent, Maple School

A second underlying concern appearing through the interviews in Maple School relates to guidance and counselling. These parents were enthusiastic about the career guidance dimension of TY, especially work experience, but expressed the view that

some guidance is needed by young people in each year. Students in each year group, not just those who opt for TY, should have access to a comprehensive guidance service.

### **Parent–school relationships**

Finally, a distinct phenomenon in both these parents focus groups was that as the sessions developed, participants began to articulate a growing awareness and appreciation that, in these two particular schools, the TY programme had been exceptionally well developed. Perhaps influenced by the presence of an outsider they were keen to show their children's schools in a good light. However, at the same time, there were strong indications that these positive views were well grounded in their children's experiences of TY. Some generalised to a wider point about the relationships between parents and schools:

... Parents are often very quick to complain if something in school is not right... I find if something was good, it's good to go back (to the school) and say it was good, but we never do, do we?

Mary, Parent, Maple School

This led to a discussion about whether there is a distinct orientation towards 'the negative' among Irish parents as regards their children's schooling. The discussion was inconclusive.

A synopsis of parents' views can be found in Chapter 7. Some of the emerging issues are explored further in Chapter 8.

## CHAPTER 6

### School Profiles

#### *Ash School*

Ash School is a voluntary secondary school for girls, founded by a religious order of sisters in the early nineteenth century. Its mission statement describes it as:

... a Catholic school which aims to cherish the uniqueness of each individual and to develop her full potential.

Ash School's general catchment area is urban, with the majority of students coming from the school's own feeder primary school and two other large primary schools in two parishes adjacent to the school. A small number of students who live in towns within a 15-mile radius or so also attend. Ash School's physical location is such that there is a large number of local authority housing in the immediate vicinity of the school. This, combined with a sizeable number of students living in private housing, means that students in Ash School come from a mix of backgrounds. In recent years Ash School's enrolment has been in excess of 800 students. TY in Ash School is compulsory.

#### **Introducing TY**

Both Principal and co-ordinator in Ash School articulated strong convictions about the compulsory nature of the year. Ash School had traditionally offered the Intermediate Certificate at the end of Fourth year, so was always a 'six year school'. The mid-1980s policy change to introduce a three-year Junior Certificate presented the school with some dilemmas. In the words of the Principal, the questions were:

Do you lose the whole cohort of students and lose (teachers') jobs? It might have been a pragmatic decision at one level but we also looked at Transition Year and saw it as a good experience for students. So we thought it was probably going to be worthwhile, but we needed to do a lot of work on it.

The Principal emphasises that introducing TY was seen as an opportunity for students and teachers:

I remember saying to the teachers: here is your chance to devise your own curriculum.

The Principal saw the introduction of TY as a collective staff undertaking. She says the staff always had a culture of innovation and creativity. She refers to 'a great hidden mystery of initiative in the staff' and contends that

I wouldn't be a very creative Principal... I would be a very good administrative Principal. I have plenty of people with creative ideas in the staff and that suits me fine... Let them run with it and I am prepared to support people.

In the early stages, extensive staff time was devoted to planning TY. In the two years prior to introducing the programme 'seven or eight full days' were given to the staff working together. Then each subject department had to devise and write up its own original course. The programme began in Ash School in 1990, four years before it was mainstreamed nationally.

According to the Principal, the decision to make the TY compulsory arises from the school's view of a developmental educational cycle from Year 1 through to Year 6.

This Principal states, frankly:

I believe that if Transition Year was an option in my school, honestly it wouldn't say much for Transition Year. If some students can go from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> year without losing out, does it mean that the others (those who do TY) just have a nice, cosy experience? ... I see it (TY) as an essential part of their development.

### **The TY Programme in Ash School**

For the school year 2003-04, Ash School produced a 22-page booklet on TY. The opening statement is a message, signed by the Principal that reads:

The Transition Year programme in Ash School has been devised for the enrichment of the students' learning experiences, with the purpose of laying a solid foundation for the Leaving Certificate programme. Each girl has the opportunity to develop her own skills and talents, and to apply them diligently in a process of independent learning. I am happy that the staff of Ash School has committed itself totally to this process, and I can assure you that each student will find Transition Year a beneficial experience.

The Mission and Aims from the Department's 1993 booklet *Guidelines for Schools* (DoE, 1993c) follow.

Then there is a school-specific statement relating to the aims of TY in Ash School. Here, the focus is on maturity, specifically in their spiritual, emotional, physical, intellectual, aesthetic and social development.

The aims include specific reference to acquiring

... a better knowledge of themselves and of their world by allowing them time to reflect, relax and renew themselves in an atmosphere free from the pressure of state examinations.

The programme is seen as a one-year interdisciplinary one that is 'broad and flexible'. A specific goal is 'to deepen their understanding of their Christian calling', and finally the aims conclude with an echo of the principal's opening statement:

To lay the foundations for further study in the senior cycle and third level and life-long learning, with reference to their educational and vocational needs.

The booklet restates many of the points made in the *Guidelines for Schools*. For example:

A Transition Year Programme is not part of the Leaving Certificate programme and should not be seen as an opportunity for spending three years rather than two years studying the Leaving Certificate programme.

Ash School operates a 43 period week. 74 per cent of the time is spent on 'Core Subject' material and 26 per cent on optional subjects. The optional subjects run for 10 weeks. Two groupings, column A and column B, take four periods per week while Column C takes three – one treble period. The optional subjects are presented as follows:

<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>
Beginners' Science	Beginners' German	Art Craft
Biology	German to LC *	Art Painting
Chemistry	Spanish (Ab initio) *	Handcraft
Physics	Spanish to LC *	Woodwork
Electronics	Tourism Awareness	Cookery (JC)
Computer Applications	Enterprise Studies	Beginners' Cookery
Media Studies	Youth Leadership	Theatre Studies
Business Studies	Biology	
Philosophy	School Garden Project	
*	Computer Applications	

* Remediation in English is available as an extra option in column A	<p><i>German for LC is taken for two modules (one other selection).</i></p> <p><i>Spanish (ab initio) is taken for the full year (no other selection) .</i></p> <p><i>'Continuation' Spanish (to LC) is taken for one module</i></p>
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The booklet includes a short note on each subject and module. The emphasis on active learning is a striking feature of these descriptions e.g.

- 'Table quizzes and dance form part of the programme.' (Gaeilge)
- '... students undertake a literature project or a 'write -a-book' project and/or produce a class magazine.' (English).
- 'Visits to X hospital, Y hospital, Z 'special School'.' (Religious education)
- 'It is also hoped to include the use of mathematical software.' (Mathematics)
- 'School exchange .....and a week long trip to Paris.' (French)
- 'A visit to the National Art Gallery.' (Art Appreciation)
- 'Link with a school in Germany... exchange of letters and reciprocal visits.' (German)
- 'Students will study nature and ecology in a natural habitat'. (School Garden Project)
- 'Emphasis is on practical skills and the ability to carry out instructions through doing laboratory experiments.' (Chemistry)
- 'The course is conducted with a strong practical emphasis, using the radio and TV studios in the school.' (Media Studies)
- 'Drama games are enacted to build group and individual confidence.' (Theatre Studies)

Additional information in the booklet includes sections on the following:

1. Work experience: two weeks in the second term
2. Special events: This section notes that poets, playwrights, trade union officials, a theatre company, environmental activists, politicians, local historians, development workers and doctors have addressed previous TY students.
3. Main project: Each student must produce a major unit of work on any topic of her choice by mid-March.
4. Overseas trips
5. Other trips
6. Overseas study
7. Gaisce
8. Extra-curricular awards: a wide range including modern dance, social awareness, senior choir, orchestra, folk choir, first aid; TY students can also become involved in the school tuck shop or on catering committees.
9. Certification
10. Important dates for Transition Year

## Timetable

The make-up of the weekly timetable for a particular year group is one of the clearest manifestations of a school's educational values. The TY arrangements in Ash School indicate a range of imagination and innovation as well as the complexity and flexibility associated with devising a TY programme for five base class groups. As indicated above, dividing the year into three distinct blocks facilitates students to encounter a wide variety of learning experiences.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Period 1 38 mins	T1 Religious Ed T1 T2 Career Guid. T2 T3 Soc+Pol St.T3 T4 Soc+Pol St.T4 T5 Religious Ed T5	Cookery T38 Crafts T39 Technology T40 Art T29	T1 Soc+Pol St T17 T2 French T12 T3 English T13 T4 French T11 T5 Soc+Pol St T22	T1 English T16 T2 Media St. T19 T3 English T13 T4 English T14 T5 Soc+Pol St T17	T1 English T16 T2 Religious Ed T20 T3 Physical Ed T41 T4 English T14 T5 English T30
Period 2 38 mins	Irish T6, T4, T7, T8, T9, T10	Cookery T38 Crafts T39 Technology T40 Art T29	German T14 Enterprise St T33 Computer S T34 Gardening T35 Tourism A T36 Spanish T26 Youth Lead T37	T1 Soc+Pol St T31 T2 Soc+Pol St T17 T3 Religious Ed T32 T4 French T11 T5 Research T22	T1 French T11 T2 French T12 T3 Physical Ed T41 T4 Career Gui T2 T5 French T15
Period 3 38 mins	T1 Research T11 T2 French T12 T3 English T13 T4 English T14 T5 French T15	Cookery T38 Crafts T39 Technology T40 Art T29 Theatre St. T9	Irish T6, T4, T7, T8, T9, T10	Mathematics T23, T24, T7, T25, T26, T27	T1 Religious Ed T1 T2 English T5 T3 French T21 T4 Soc+Pol St T4 T5 Thinking Sk T11
Period 4 38 mins	T1 English T16 T2 Thinking Sk T11 T3 Soc+Pol St T17 T4 Religious Ed T18 T5 Media St. T19	Mathematics T23, T24, T7, T25, T26, T27	T1 Thinking Sk T11 T2 Physical Ed T41 T3 Research Sk T13 T4 English T14 T5 English T30	T1 Religious Ed T1 T2 English T5 T3 Art Apprec. T44 T4 Research T14 T5 Physical Ed T41	Biology T42 M.Ed. T31 Computer T37 Business St. T43 Chemistry T27 Philosophy T30 Physics T45 MED T17
Period 5 38 mins	T1 French T11 T2 Religious Ed T20 T3 French T21 T4 Soc+Pol St. T17 T5 Soc+Pol St. T22	T1 Soc+Pol St. T31 T2 Religious Ed T20 T3 Soc+Pol St T3 T4 English T14 T5 English T30	T1 English T16 T2 Physical Ed T41 T3 Religious Ed T32 T4 Thinking Sk T11 T5 Art Apprec. T29	T1 French T11 T2 Art Appreciation T44 T3 French T21 T4 Media St. T19 T5 Physical Ed T41	Biology T42 M.Ed. T31 Computer T37 Business St. T43 Chemistry T27 Philosophy T30 Physics T45 MED T17

	LUNCH BREAK	LUNCH BREAK	LUNCH BREAK	LUNCH BREAK	LUNCH BREAK
Period 6 38 mins	Mathematics T23, T24, T7, T25, T26, T27	Irish T6, T4, T7, T8, T9, T10	T1 Art Apprec T28 T2 English T5 T3 Career Gui T2 T4 Physical Ed T41 T5 Soc +Pol St. T17	T1 Physical Ed T16 T2 French T12 T3 Thinking Sk T11 T4 Religious Ed T18 T5 English T30	T1 Soc+Pol St. T31 T2 Research T12 T3 English T13 T4 French T11 T5 Religious Ed T5
Period 7 38 mins	T1 Career Gui. T28 T2 English T5 T3 Media St. T19 T4 Art Appreciation T29 T5 English T30	T1 English T16 T2 Soc+Pol St. T13 T3 French T21 T4 Religious Ed T18 T5 French T15	T1 Media St. T19 T2 Soc+Pol St. T17 T3 Soc+Pol St. T3 T4 Physical Ed T41 T5 Religious Ed. T5	T1 Physical Ed T16 T2 Soc+Pol St T13 T3 Soc+Pol St T3 T4 Soc+Pol St T4 T5 French T15	German T14 Enterprise St T33 Computer S T34 Gardening T35 Tourism A T36 Spanish T26 Youth Lead T37
Period 8 38 mins	T1 Soc+Pol St T31 T2 Soc+Pol St T13 T3 Religious Ed T32 T4 French T11 T5 Career Gui T28	T1 French T11 T2 English T5 T3 English T13 T4 Soc+Pol St T4 T5 Soc+Pol St T22	Biology T42 M.Ed. T31 Computer T37 Business St. T43 Chemistry T27 Philosophy T30 Physics T45 M. Ed T17	German T14 Enterprise St T33 Computer S T34 Gardening T35 Tourism A T36 Spanish T26 Youth Lead T37	Mathematics T23, T24, T7, T25, T26, T27
Period 9 38 mins	German T14 Enterprise St T33 Computer S T34 Gardening T35 Tourism A T36 Spanish T26 Youth Lead T37		Biology T42 M.Ed. T31 Computer T37 Business St. T43 Chemistry T27 Philosophy T30 Physics T45 M.Ed T17	Irish T6, T4, T7, T8, T9, T10	

Colour Codes : Single period Double period Triple Period Teacher teaches more than one subject or to two class groups

The five base classes are arranged on a mixed-ability basis. The classes for Irish and Maths are set and divided into six rather than five groups. According to the Principal, this enables remediation for those who struggle with the subject while providing challenging classes for those aspiring to higher LC papers. The flexibility of TY is also evident in the way Ash School allocates a single period to some components, two to others, three to some and four to the more ‘core’ features.

Forty-five different teachers teach TY classes in Ash School. However, 21 of these either teach the same group for more than one subject/module or teach two different TY groups. From a teaching perspective, this arrangement of TY, as with the rotating three block, allows teachers to specialise in a particular area, for example T19 teaches



Media Studies to each of the five classes. The Research class is also worth noting as in each case the allocated teacher is also teaching the class group another subject (English, French or Social and Political Studies.) This is a good example of avoiding the fragmentation that can arise when offering a broad range of experiences. Contact with numerous teachers can inhibit the development of the stronger student-teacher relationships that the students and the teachers in this study highlight. In Ash School a typical TY student is likely to be taught each week by approximately 12-13 teachers and by about 18 during the course of the year.

A triple class on Tuesday mornings facilitates practical learning and all the PE classes and one of the LC sampling blocks are timetabled for double periods. However, the majority of classes in Ash are timetabled for single, 38-minute periods.

### **Development**

According to the Principal, it is the creativity and commitment of the teaching staff that has contributed strongly to TY's success.

...an awful lot of this is down to the teacher who comes forward with the idea and has the creativity to do it.

The Principal also describes a programme that was well-planned from the outset, with well structured modules, the expertise of the co-ordinator – 'a mini-Principal' – as key factors in the successful development of the programme in Ash School.

Given a very definite vision at the outset about TY, has the programme been modified or adapted since, and what factors have shaped such adjustments? The co-ordinator observes:

Firstly, at the start we were very idealistic. Secondly, we were very green, as in naïve. For example, one of the first things we did starting out was a textbook, a properly typed and bound textbook for every single subject. And that was a mistake. It was a mistake, because what that was doing was putting us into a rigid subject content and structure, which doesn't hang well with Transition Year. It didn't allow for flexibility. It didn't allow for the fact that you might have mixed ability in Irish, mixed ability in Maths or whatever.

Hence an early adjustment was to get rid of these textbooks. The school also actively encouraged teachers in subject areas to work together, often getting teachers to rotate classes. For example, in core subjects, a class group might have three different

teachers during the year, each focusing on a distinct area of expertise. The co-ordinator points out that, for example, teaching TY Irish to the same group for the whole year can be very demanding. Developing a modular approach gives variety to teachers and students while keeping a clear focus on learning.

Ash School's assessment system is also being continually developed. Reflecting the modular structure, the original idea was that assessment would take place three times during the year. There was a page per subject. However, quickly, there was a consensus that with 14 core modules and three optional modules at any one time, 51 pages represented an overload of assessment and reporting. According to the co-ordinator:

That was totally unreal. Instead we devised a report that focused on six particular things. They were content, effort, initiative, independence, assignments and equipment. One effect of this was that the student who was academically very weak, but tried very hard, could get a positive report. Another development was that in 1997 the school introduced a tutor/pupil evaluation at the end of each module. It's personal, it's personal development, it's attitudes to authority, how I have worked in group work, how I have worked with my friends, and so on, and they have to rate themselves, 1 to 5. The one at the end of the year is sent home.

TY concludes with each student being presented with a folder in which there may be anything from between five to twenty-five certificates. In all 56 or 57 different certificates are available for various parts of the TY programme.

The joint student–tutor assessment form is replicated on the following page.

Transition Year Programme <b>Assessment of Personal and Social Development</b> Joint Student- Tutor Assessment			
Name.....			
		Student's self-assessment	Tutor's assessment
1	Attitudes to the goals of Transition Year		
2	Achievements of goals set for Transition Year		
3	Participation in Transition Year		
4	Attendance		
5	Punctuality		
6	Truthful and effective communication		
7	Personal organisation		
8	Completion of work on time		
9	Dealings with authority		
10	Interest in the welfare of others		
11	Cooperation with others		
12	Willingness to listen to constructive criticism		
13	Acceptance of responsibility for mistakes		
Student's signature .....		<b>Assessment Criteria</b> 5 .....Excellent 4 .....Very Good 3 .....Good 2.....Fair 1.....Poor	
Tutor's signature .....			
Date .....			

**Benefits**

With both Principal and co-ordinator, many responses to questions about TY revert to the compulsory nature of the programme in Ash School. Asked to identify the main strength of the programme, the co-ordinator doesn't hesitate:

I see number one as the fact that it (TY) is compulsory, that every child does it. Every child gets the same opportunity in fourth year, and then, when it comes to fifth year, the importance of it is that they are all starting off from the same level. You don't have some people who have done lots

of stuff in fourth year and are more mature. There's a much greater maturity level amongst some fifth years than there would be if only a small number had done Transition Year. The other thing is that the bonding that has started in Transition Year, and new friendships, tend to continue on into fifth year. Bonding and friendship is important and it all stems from the fact that it's a compulsory year. Another advantage of it being compulsory is that every teacher in the school, because it's a core part of the school, can be involved.

Surely there are some students and their parents who wish to go straight on to a LC programme after the Junior Certificate? Both Principal and co-ordinator state that a small number of students change from Ash School each year in order to avoid Transition Year. They point out that it is a small number and both believe that such a change is the students' loss.

The Co-ordinator believes that the benefits of TY are also seen when teaching students on the LC programme:

Because of the methodology that's been used in Transition Year, it makes teaching fifth years much, much easier because you approach – I think most teachers approach – senior cycle students in a totally different way than they approach Junior Cycle students. The change in approach to senior cycle students in fourth year makes life an awful lot easier. I know in the old days it was much more difficult to go straight from a Junior Cert., spoonfed child, to fifth year where they were expected to do a certain amount of work themselves. Fourth year has facilitated that transition.

The co-ordinator highlights learning how to meet deadlines. Students are given longer time frames to complete project work, essays and other assignments. It is a conscious shift away from giving homework today, 'to be completed tonight'. Of course, there are problems with extended work 'but they kind of sort themselves out as the year goes on', he maintains.

The co-ordinator highlights the quality of the relationship between students and teachers in TY as of major significance. Teachers have time to talk with students and students:

... get to know their teachers much, much better in fourth year... This results in a much better rapport, I think, in Fifth year.

Sampling LC subjects is also seen as an important feature in Ash School. According to the co-ordinator :

We would have a lot less changing subjects during fifth year because they have done taster subjects in fourth year, say biology, physics, chemistry, whatever. The numbers changing in fifth year is an awful lot less than it was and, if it happens, it happens much earlier in the year, because they've at least tasted ten weeks of biology, or whatever, during Transition Year.

### **Organisation within the school**

Asked if, then, the main strengths of the programme arise from the initial time spent planning, the compulsory nature and the modular structure, the Principal acknowledges them as very important but would put 'teacher commitment' ahead of all others. In particular, this Principal draws attention to the crucial role played by the co-ordinator. The goal has been to get a good co-ordinator to work with the team of teachers. Tutors for each class, chosen for their attitudes and skills in relation to TY, are also important. The Principal is conscious of the value of time-tabling tutors and co-ordinator for extensive contact with the TY students.

Because the role of the TY co-ordinator is seen as so demanding, the Principal has tried to keep the co-ordinator's formal class contact time to about 14 hours per week. This enables the co-ordinator to spend more time planning, organising, following up individual students and keeping in touch with teachers. The Principal describes the TY co-ordinator as 'a mini-Principal' for TY, co-ordinating and planning, in particular, the out-of-school part of the programme. For example, Ash School has strong links with a centre for children with disabilities, some of whom are regular visitors to TY religion classes.

The Principal's faith in the co-ordinator is very evident:

(He) is a super organiser. He has everything documented. He has paper work ready for the tutors to hand out to the kids at the beginning of the year, setting their objectives and so on. He has them all filed away. Come May he'll hand them back, get them to evaluate them, do a self appraisal on where they're at... They will do a critique of Transition Year themselves....He will come in, 'there's the finding of what this year's bunch thought about it'...He just gets on with it. He organised the trips, including the ones to France.

The Principal acknowledges that this ‘strength’ of a TY programme also makes it vulnerable. Too much can rest of the shoulders of one individual. The co-ordinator recognises this also:

It’s an issue that I would say probably militates against other people coming in (to TY co-ordination), as they see it as, let’s say, ‘my baby’.

### **Students’ views**

As is evident in some detail in the chapter on students’ attitudes to TY, students in Ash School are keenly aware that the school is partly defined by the compulsory nature of TY. Despite this, the Third year students indicate that they see the year as different and ‘more relaxed’ than the Junior Cycle. They report that a small number of their classmates would prefer to have the option of going directly onto a LC programme, usually with the intention of getting out of school as fast as possible. Perhaps because of its compulsory character within the school, Third students in Ash School appear well informed about the programme and its benefits and, perhaps, less dependent on ‘the folklore of the schoolyard’ as described in the student data in this study. On the other hand, it may be that in Ash School, the ‘folklore of the schoolyard’ is quite positive about TY.

Those interviewed in Fourth, Fifth and Sixth years strongly value the TY experience, with many articulating opinions that they ‘grew up a lot’ and ‘matured’ during the year. As the senior cycle students see it, the rich mixture of traditional classroom experiences, new modules, trips and participation in other events outside the school are offered as part of the explanation of this phenomenon. Quite a number of the more senior students indicate an awareness that Ash School’s programme is more varied than that operating in some other schools. Students speak of developing strong bonds of friendship with fellow TY students during the year. They also value the improved relationships between students and teachers that develop during TY, both inside and outside classrooms. Opportunities for students to voice their opinions during TY classes are seen as engaging and confidence-building. However, many students contrast the more relaxed nature of TY with what they see as the very pressurised life of students in Third year and Sixth year. Work experience was highlighted by many students in Ash School as especially beneficial and the community service focus in some placements is well appreciated.

**Teachers' views**

In Ash School teachers who responded to the questionnaire are unanimous that TY gives students a broad educational experience, advances students' maturity and enables students to become more confident, more socially aware and assists students clarify their career goals. These teachers also believe that the Ash School TY programme is well-thought-out and is well-tailored to students' needs.

As seen in more detail in the teachers section of this study, a majority of teachers believe that the programme has breadth and balance, that it provides students and teachers with good opportunities for learning beyond the classroom, that the programme is well co-ordinated and that Ash School has a progressive approach to evaluation. Most teachers also regard the written programme as very good. Furthermore, a majority of teachers reject the notion that students show little interest in TY. A majority state that they believe that, following TY, students are better equipped for a LC, that students develop well in the absence of exam pressure, that they become more independent learners, develop technical skills, have their thinking skills and problem-solving skills enhanced. In addition, a majority of teachers in Ash School reject that idea that TY had a low status among students or teachers; they also reject the contention that teachers find mixed-ability classes difficult.

A majority also believe that those who follow TY achieve higher LC results, become more socially competent and that TY offers students intellectual challenge and orientates them to adult and working life. More than three-quarters see students becoming more motivated and self-directed as learners, regard TY as promoting teachers' professional development, are of the opinion that teachers respond well to the freedom and flexibility to design programmes, and that skills developed through TY enhance their teaching in other years. Three-quarters of respondents indicate that they like teaching TY classes and an even higher percentage indicate that they like using active teaching and learning methodologies.

Opinions among teachers in Ash School are divided about the merits of a three-year LC programme, about whether TY develops academic skills, about the ease or otherwise of devising and operating different forms of assessment, about whether teachers would prefer a prescribed syllabus for their subject, or whether there is a lack

of resources for TY. Mixed attitudes are also evident in regard to questions about more time for planning TY classes with colleagues or for more in-service training. Divided opinion is evident as to how much TY promotes teamwork among teachers or how much it has helped their professional development or whether class sizes are too big.

A number of teachers wished to acknowledge the pioneering role that they and some of their colleagues had played in spearheading innovations in TY, but also expressed concern about the danger of the programme going 'stale'.

### **Parents**

Ash School communicates to parents about the compulsory nature of TY before their children enter First year and remind them regularly of the implications of a six-year cycle. Parents of Third Year students are invited to a meeting about TY, its rationale and operation, with a full outline of the programme. This has taken place annually towards the end of January or the beginning of February. Ash School also provides students and parents with a 22-page booklet about their TY programme.

During the TY itself, students and parents are invited to an information night at the end of January. The focus is on their subject choices for Fifth year. The Principal states that 'we get a good response, certainly 80 per cent.' The co-ordinator conducts an annual evaluation of TY and the results are presented to the parents. At the meetings for parents, the work-experience co-ordinator talks about placements, explaining what exactly is going on and what to expect.

Throughout the year, the Principal refers enquiries from parents to the co-ordinator. She adds that the co-ordinator puts in a lot of time, on the telephone checking absences. Principal and co-ordinator see on-going contact with parents as a key feature of the co-ordinator's role. In the survey of teachers' views, those in Ash School were unanimous in agreeing that parents of Third year students are well-informed about TY. They also believe that parents are kept well-informed about events during TY.



**Additional issues**

Despite careful planning and development, not all teachers might share the same enthusiasm for the TY project as the co-ordinator and the tutors, according to the Principal:

There would be a few people who wouldn't be totally sold on Transition Year.

The Principal identifies Irish as a subject associated with what she calls 'disenchantment', where students tend not to be motivated unless they are in the Honours LC class. She sees the Honours class as working to a target, say a grade B so as to get into a course like teacher training. Such students are well motivated. But teachers find it difficult to motivate others in relation to Irish.

This school has, for many years, taught a combined History and Geography module with a strong social and political dimension in TY. The Principal observes that some teachers of History and Geography would 'hate to be put in there'. The Principal points out that the school has gathered many resources to support such cross-curricular work, investing time, energy and money, but that some teachers 'just are not comfortable with not having the straightforward textbooks'.

The Principal is very aware of the need to maintain 'a work ethic' in TY. Homework is one indicator of this. She says:

I have a big tradition in saying please, please give them core homework in Irish, English, Maths, French, History, Geography... 4 nights a week out of each of those subjects they should have some sort of written, or learning study, set homework.

The school also engages in a lot of project work during TY. The Principal sees this as an attempt to move away from 'being spoonfed, drip style, that you're always doing something tonight for tomorrow'. In TY the message might be 'now instead of getting two pages, you have to do 50 pages, over eight weeks'. She acknowledges that a task given in September may result in panic in early November but sees this as an important step on the road to developing better time-management skills. This point is put clearly to parents.

As regards the *Guidelines*' emphasis on 'the use of a wide range of teaching/learning methodologies and situations' (DoE, 1993c, p.8) the Principal's view is that 'the creative teachers will use that and they tend to interact a bit with each other'. Her

view is that the more enthusiastic teachers are about TY, the more likely they are to use more varied methodologies. She points to a particular teacher who negotiated a blocked triple period so that she could bring students to a local museum. The time and flexibility is there in TY, notes the Principal, adding, 'it's not as easy to do that in other years.'

### **Charges**

In Ash School in 2004 all students were expected to pay a subscription of €25 for school facilities. About 85 per cent of students pay this. There is also a voluntary contribution towards a Building and Development fund of €60, €80 or €100. About 25 per cent of parents pay this.

There are extra payments, for Transition Year, directly related to subject options and trips, e.g. woodwork charges of €6 to €12 depending on the products they make. Trips away from school are charged on an individual basis. Some activities, e.g. a visiting theatre company are subsidised and the students asked to pay €2 each.

### **Summary**

Ash School introduced TY in 1990, thus maintaining a six-year cycle. This compulsory programme is clearly structured into three 10-week blocks with a wide range of modules available. Interviewed in 2002, both Principal and co-ordinator were unequivocal about the benefits of a compulsory TY for all girls. Strong levels of teacher commitment and a continuing evolving programme are among the key factors identified in contributing to the success of the programme. It is also clear that the co-ordinator in Ash School has extensive autonomy – the Principal describes him as a 'mini-Principal' – and has developed a very distinct profile in the role and is widely respected by students and teachers.

Generally, students in Ash School tend to be very positive about the diversity of the programme and its maturing effects. They contrast TY with the 'pressure' of Third year and Sixth year in particular, and see it as a welcome break from exam-dominated schooling. Students speak of developing strong bonds of friendship with fellow TY students during the year. They also value the improved relationships between students and teachers that develop during TY, both inside and outside classrooms.

Opportunities for students to voice their opinions during TY classes are seen as engaging and confidence-building. In Ash School, work experience is seen in a very positive light by students.

Teachers in Ash School who completed the questionnaires are unanimous in the view that TY gives students a broad educational experience, advances students' maturity and enables students to become more confident and more socially aware and assists students clarify their career goals. They also regard their own written programme very positively.

Most teachers in the survey indicate the TY objectives are being met and that LC results are enhanced following participation in TY. As in some of the other schools in this study, areas where teachers express diverging views tend to relate to the academic dimensions within TY – how much or how little, appropriate forms of assessment and so on.

Because of the compulsory nature of TY in Ash School and the Principal's and co-ordinator's enthusiasm for the programme, parents of students in Ash School are provided with comprehensive information about TY, even before their daughters enrol in First year. Information meetings and an impressive booklet about their TY programme are among the strategies aimed at keeping parents in touch. On-going contact with parents is also a feature of the co-ordinator's role in Ash School.

As with the other schools in this study, Ash School has shaped TY to align it with the school's sense of its own mission. In this case the emphasis on the holistic development of students appears to be a fertile area of overlap between the school's overall aims and the goals of TY. Strong leadership, including practical support for the programme, appears to have nurtured TY very effectively in this school.

### ***Beech School***

Beech School opened its doors in the 1980s. The school was built shortly after extensive local authority houses had been constructed on the outer edges of an expanding city. Beech School is a co-educational community college, designated ‘disadvantaged’. In 2003-04 there were over 600 students enrolled in the school. The mission statement reads:

*In Beech School* we will endeavour to create a stable and affirming environment in which our pupils may improve their life chances. We recognise that through commitment to purpose and self-esteem, the school and its students can help to enrich not only the school environment but also that of the home and wider community.

The Principal, who has been in position since the school’s foundation, describes the teaching staff as exceptionally talented and committed to the welfare of the children they teach. He sees the challenges the community faces as multiple and complex, largely unaffected by simplistic solutions. Beech School has actively engaged with a wide range of curricular and other measures designed to combat disadvantage and offers a variety of interventions and opportunities to its students and their families.

### **Introducing TY**

Transition Year is a central feature of the school’s overall educational provision. In the first eight years of the programme there were three different TY co-ordinators.

The first TY co-ordinator recalls the origins of TY in Beech School:

Around 1993 there had been a lot of conversation about kids being very young doing their Leaving Cert. and too young to make decisions. Because a lot of the youngsters did little (school) work and coming towards the exam time there was an awful lot of frustration around and people (teachers) felt one of the major contributory factors was that kids were very young. A lot of them were 16, just 17 and doing their Leaving Cert they didn’t really know what they were at.

This co-ordinator recalls vivid memories of some LC students during May of their final year at school being more focused on practising for their end-of-year concert than their written examinations.

It wasn’t so much that they had no aspirations, but that they had given up at this point. They had decided that it was a lost cause, that there was no point in doing anything. They were just getting through the weeks to the exams; there was nothing they could do about it. At the same time the Minister, Niamh Bhreathnach, said that every child was entitled to six

years so we decided we would take that on board and introduce Transition Year for everybody who wanted to do the traditional Leaving Cert. So it was compulsory from the start. It was never optional here.

As a result of that decision, students in Beech School at that time could choose between a TY programme and the one-year Vocational and Preparation Training Programme (VPTP 1). Those wishing to take the LC were expected to do TY first. When the LCA was introduced in 1995, the effective choice immediately became between the two-year LCA and a three-year track to the traditional LC, via TY. This continues to be the situation. Approximately 60 per cent of students followed this three-year route in 2003-04.

All Third year students are interviewed about their post Junior Certificate choices. Two lists are then posted in the staffroom and all teachers can make suggestions about whether they think a student's choice has been appropriate or not. Consequent on this a small number of students may be interviewed again, usually by the guidance counsellor and another member of the TY team. The original co-ordinator continues:

The thrust of the interview is around why they chose a particular course and what it means to them. For those with a behavioural problem, the message is clear: you may get this course but you will have to behave; you will have to sign a contract to say you are agreeable to certain things. Every student is interviewed one way or another.

This co-ordinator states that, in the first few years, some insisted on doing TY and the LC, even though teachers might have suggested an alternative. The school's attitude was to make recommendations but also to respect students' and parents' rights. If a parent says 'I want my child to do the Transition Year,' then that's what they do, she adds. In more recent years in Beech School the *LCA* has grown in popularity, with about 40 *per cent* of students opting for it immediately after the JC.

### **Developing TY**

Before introducing TY in 1994 a three-person committee in Beech School visited a number of other schools to listen to their experiences. At an early in-service session, the staff agreed on three core outcomes of TY for their students. They were:

1. To improve self-confidence.
2. To improve interpersonal skills.

### 3. To improve communication skills.

The Principal and many of the staff believe that this simple formula has been very effective and they continue with that emphasis today. Each fresh development is tested against whether it will promote these three core outcomes.

The school's website states:

The Transition Year is an opportunity for students to get a broad educational experience, away from the pressure of formal examinations with a view to increasing the students' maturity before they proceed to further study and/or vocational preparation. It is hoped that students will, during this year, take greater responsibility for their own learning and decision-making and develop a range of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The Transition Year will provide an opportunity for students to reflect on and develop an awareness of the value of education and training in preparing them for the ever changing demands of the adult world of work and relationships.

One of the challenges facing all schools interested in promoting TY among students and their parents concerns language; how to communicate complex ideas in simple, clear language.

Beech School is notable in that it attempts to draw attention to activity-based learning:

The Transition Year will give this broad educational experience in two ways. Firstly, students will be able to study and choose from a big range of subjects (some of which may not be on the school programme already and some of which they have not done before) and also the approach to the subjects will be different from what they have experienced before. A lot of the learning will be activity based. Project work will be very important, emphasis will be placed on team-work, oral work etc. and problem-solving and personal development will be given a high priority.

The website continues, fleshing out the thinking that informs the school's work experience programme:

Work experience forms a vital part of Transition Year. It gives students an insight into the world of work, meeting with people in business and industry, gaining personal confidence and valuable experience in different skills. It gives them a sense of responsibility particularly in the areas of attendance, punctuality and personal grooming.

This theme is developed further on the website

Having built up work-seeking skills, students will be expected to look for their own work experience. In the event of a student failing to find work experience (if the student shows evidence of making a good effort) the College will assist in getting the work experience. Naturally the student is

not only representing himself/herself and their family at their work placement but also the College and consequently we insist on the highest standards of conduct while on work placement. Work experience is an important part of the maturing process and maturity is what is sought through these courses. It is hoped that students will

- 1) Relate better to adults, their teachers and the school authorities.
- 2) Be enthusiastic about their future.
- 3) Improve their prospects at career interviews.

In Beech School, the work experience placement occurs in two one-week long blocks, one in the first term and one in the second term. The website and other documentation from Beech School sets out the way classroom activities are organised. All follows classes throughout the year in English, Irish, Mathematics, Religious Education, Physical Activities, Personal Development/Lifeskills and the European Computer Driving License (ECDL). In addition, all students spend a half-year involved in the formation of a mini-company. Finally, 15 option subjects are available from which TY students can choose six during the course of the year. The options are as follows

*Options:*

Art	Business Studies	Cookery	Development Education	Drama
French	Geography	History	Metalwork	Web Design
Science	Sociology	Spanish	Technical Graphics – CAD	Woodwork

It is also stated on the website that assessment in TY is regular and that ‘the form of assessment will depend on the teaching method being used but may also include end of term examinations’. Parents, it adds, will be informed on a regular basis as to how their children are progressing.

### **Timetable**

One of the most concrete steps a school takes in translating its vision of an ideal TY into reality is through its timetable and the calendar. The latter can be flexible and even opportunistic in that one may not know at the planning stage that a particular possibility for a TY class might arise in the following March or April. Indeed, one of the great flexibilities of TY is that the timetable can be set aside.

The weekly timetable involves decisions about subjects, modules, teachers, and resources, especially the resource of time, that impact throughout the year. The operation of the timetable in Beech School illustrates considerable imagination and flexibility. While students are

registered in their base class, much of the rest of their time is spent following specific choices they have made. For example, each student follows, for half a year each, two of the modules from the line Science or First Aid or Cookery. A similar pattern operates for the block that includes History, Shaping Space and French. The same is true for the block involving block Art, Music and Web Design, though a further variation here is that there is a double class of Music on Mondays and a double class of Drama on Wednesdays for those who make this selection. The same half-year modules offering mini-company and Leisure Studies on Tuesday afternoons ensure that every student participates in a mini-company, and some can choose to do so twice.

The situation is replicated with regard to Computer Studies/Leisure Studies. By setting subjects such as English, Irish and Maths, Beech School sees this as enabling students in these 'core' subjects to be grouped according to their abilities. In Beech School 28 teachers teach TY classes. A typical student is taught by approximately 13 teachers during each week and 19 teachers throughout the course of the year. As with each of the other five schools, the weekly TY timetable in Beech School is complemented by a range of learning opportunities outside the classroom.

The list of possible 'beyond the classroom' activities offered to students in Beech School is striking, especially when one considers the funding situation in a school designated 'disadvantaged'. Events include a Geography field trip to Glendalough, a Science trip to Belfast, an in-school performance and workshop with Calypso Theatre Company, a Religious retreat, a school-based Arts week, participation in a University's science week, a short course in journalism in association with a local newspaper, a visit to a mosque, a designated film day, engagement with the Concern child labour project, participation in an Institute of Technology's web design competition, a visit to an RDS Mathematics lecture, a pen-pals project with Rwanda, specific computer workshops. Beech School also offers a particular programme in youth leadership training, class hillwalks, a residential trip to an adventure centre and a ski-trip to Italy and trips to primary schools where TY students share their scientific knowledge.



	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Reg. 10 mins.	1.Registration T1 2. Registration T2 3. Registration T3	1.Registration T1 2. Registration T2 3. Registration T3	1.Registration T1 2. Registration T2 3. Registration T3	1.Registration T1 2. Registration T2 3. Registration T3	1.Registration T1 2. Registration T2 3. Registration T3
Period 1 - 40 mins	1.English T4 2. English T5 3. English T6	1. Life Sk T T11 2. Religious Ed T17 3. Religious Ed T20	1. Gaeilge T21 2. Gaeilge T22 3. Gaeilge T23	1.Minicompany T24 2. Minicompany T3 3.Drama T25	1.English T4 2. English T5 3. English T6
Period 2 – 40 mins	1.Science T7 2. First Aid T8 3. Cookery T 9	1. Gaeilge T21 2. Gaeilge T22 3. Gaeilge T23	1. Computer St T18 2.Religious Ed T17 3.Computer St T19	1.Minicompany T24 2. Minicompany T3 3.Drama T25	1. Keyboard Sk T18 2.Library 3.Life Skills T19
Period 3 - 40 mins	1.Science T7 2. First Aid T8 3. Cookery T 9	1.English T4 2. English T5 3. English T6	1. Web Design T18 2.Religious Ed T17 3.Computer St T19	1. Gaeilge T21 2. Gaeilge T22 3. Gaeilge T23	1.Library T28 3.Life Skills T11 3 Life Skills T29
Period 4 - 40 mins	1. Religious Ed T10 2. Life Skills T11 3. Library T12	1 Computer St T18 2. Computer St T2 3. Computer St T19	1. Art T16 2. Drama T25 3. Commerce T2	1. Maths T13 2. Maths T14 3. Maths T15	1.Science T7 2. First Aid T8 3. Cookery T 9
Period 5 - 35 mins	1. Maths T13 2. Maths T14 3. Maths T15	1. Maths T13 2. Maths T14 3. Maths T15	1. Art T16 2. Drama T25 3. Web Design T2	1. Life Skills T28 2. Computer St T2 3. Computer St T10	1.Science T7 2. First Aid T8 3. Cookery T 9
	Lunch Break	Lunch Break	Lunch Break	Lunch Break	Lunch Break
Period 6 - 40 mins	1.Art T16 2. Music T17 3. Web Design T2	1.Minicompany T24 2. Minicompany T3 3.Leisure St. T18	1. History T26 2. Shaping Space T3 3.French T27	1.English T4 2. English T5 3. English T6	1. Religious Ed T19 2.Keyboard sk T2 3.Religious Ed T17
Period 7 - 40 mins	1.Art T16 2. Music T17 3. Web Design T2	1.Minicompany T24 2. Minicompan T3 3.Leisure St. T18	1. History T26 2. Shaping Space T3 3.French T27	1.English T4 2. English T5 3. English T6	1. Religious Ed T19 2.Keyboard sk T2 3.Religious Ed 17
Period 8 - 40 mins	1.Computer St. T18 2. Computer St. T2 3. Computer S T19	1.Minicompany T24 2. Minicompany T3 3.Leisure St. T18	1.English T4 2. English T5 3. English T6	1. History T26 2. Shaping Space T3 3.French T27	1. Maths T13 2. Maths T14 3. Maths T15
Period 9 - 40 mins	1 Computer St. T18 2. Computer St. T2 3 Computer T19			1. History T26 2. Shaping Space T3 3.French T27	

Colour Codes : Single period Double period Triple Period Teacher teaches more than one subject

Organisations that benefit from fundraising projects in TY in Beech School include the Order of Malta and The Guide Dogs for the Blind. Extra-classroom activities also include a sea safari, a tour of Croke Park, an animal care project including a visit to a Dog Pound, meetings with local Gardaí, a road safety and driving course in Mondello Park. Finally, TY students can also participate in the Mini Marathon, the Schools Cross Country event in Santry, a safety course with Dublin Fire Brigade, a cultural tour of Dublin, Gaisce – the President’s Award, and, somewhat ominously, a science investigation of ‘a murdered teacher’!

**Funding**

Almost inevitably, that impressive list of activities beyond the classroom raises questions of funding. Firstly, it is worth pointing out that some of these activities do not incur additional costs. However, many do. The school's policy is to ask students to make a contribution to the transport costs (often public transport, i.e. 'pay your own busfare'). Conscious of the economic situation of many of their students, the policy is to flag upcoming events and their likely cost well in advance so that students can save. The Principal feels strongly that schools designated 'disadvantaged', trying to offer TY, face particular challenges regarding funding. The school clearly values the educational possibilities in the activities mentioned above. At the time of the mainstreaming of TY in 1994 an additional £50 per student was allocated by the Department of Education. This allowance has never been updated and stands still at €63.50 per student. With inflation since 1994 it means that, each year, the amount buys less. In a sobering comment regarding this key aspect of TY, the Principal of Beech School remarks,

This is a very limiting factor in our situation because £50 won't get you a whole lot. It is interesting to note that in a non-fee-paying school, not far from us, the TY 'voluntary contribution' for next year (06-07) is €450. Obviously, we try to supplement it by students paying extra for some of the things they are involved in but this is not desirable either. The other option available to some schools of fundraising/voluntary contribution doesn't apply here.

**Choosing to do TY or not**

For Third year students in Beech School, the fundamental choice they face after the JC is whether to do the established LC or the LCA. If they opt for the LC, TY automatically becomes part of the three-year package. Principal and co-ordinators state, with conviction, that TY gives them the time and space to develop students' confidence and social skills as well as building an academic and motivational platform from which they can aspire to high achievement in the LC and beyond. They point out that the evidence is clear within their school situation that since introducing TY, LC achievements and participation at Third level have increased significantly.

Details of the choices are made clear to parents at a public meeting for all Third year students and their parents. Group interviews and interviews with individual children during Third year regarding their own futures are seen as critical components of the school's overall operation, with the guidance counsellors centrally involved.

While convinced that the school's policy is the correct one, the Principal and co-ordinators also acknowledge that there can be casualties. As a former co-ordinator puts it:

...over the years, we would have lost a number of kids between the fourth year and the sixth year. And you wonder if they had only two years would they have finished it out? Was three years just too much for them? And now they have left and haven't a Leaving Cert at all. And the opposite side of that is: what kind of a Leaving Certificate? They might have dropped out anyway. While I favour three years to LC, sometimes I see kids, particularly about half-way through Sixth year and they are weary of school; they have had enough.

### **Benefits**

The Principal and the various co-ordinators in Beech School, as well as many of the teachers, believe that introducing TY has had a marked impact on LC participation and achievement, and consequently on the take-up by students of places on full-time third-level courses.

All three co-ordinators also draw attention to TY's impact on subject choice. They point out that previously, when students had to pick LC subjects in Third year, it was very clear that what one called a 'herd instinct' operated: students selected subjects without much thought. Furthermore, many parents indicated that, as they had not themselves completed a LC, they found it difficult to advise their children on this matter. So, in developing TY, actively seeking to assist students to think about the subjects they might study for LC became an important goal. The school built up a taster programme so that each student in TY can get a flavour of what might be involved in subjects such as History, Home Economics or Engineering for LC. Each of the co-ordinators remark that they are struck by how seriously students now take LC subject selection, discussing the matter with teachers and the guidance counsellors.

This more thoughtful approach to subject choice, the developmental effects of TY, a more focused approach to classwork and study in Fifth and Sixth years and a variety of other factors are seen by the Principal and the three co-ordinators as contributing to an improvement in LC examination results. There is also a marked increase in students going on to Institute of Technology, University and PLC courses. However,

rather than attribute this directly to TY, all four are quick to point to a range of initiatives – many specifically targeting disadvantage – that worked together to enable to school to bring this about. They strongly resist any simplistic single cause-effect explanation of their students' increased participation in higher education.

The Principal and co-ordinators see TY as being particularly effective in promoting maturity among the students. They also link TY very strongly with altered student–teacher relationships. The first co-ordinator contrasts staff relationships with senior cycle students prior to TY's introduction and since.

Introducing Transition Year fundamentally changed the relationship between the senior students and the teachers. Before that students went from Junior Cert. into Fifth year and did the Leaving Cert programme for two years. Teachers were frustrated because the youngsters weren't working. The youngsters were frustrated because they wanted a Leaving Cert but the work that was going with it didn't appeal to them. There was a lot of frustration, a lot of tension. Teachers were pushing and the kids were resisting. With Transition Year the relationship is much easier. The relationship builds up between the students and the teacher (during TY) and remains into sixth year. I think the activities outside the classroom in Transition Year, hill-walking and other trips for example, are important in developing and improving teacher–pupil relationships. Of course, the teachers will still go into the role of trying to make them work but I think they would have seen the students in a different role, and so they have a different relationship with them.

### **The Challenge of project work**

The first co-ordinator states that one of the difficulties with an innovation like TY is 'how to keep the momentum going'. The past decade has seen a variety of new programmes and many of them are on offer in Beech School. TY is seen as one of many innovations or interventions, all with their own needs and demands as programmes. As this co-ordinator sees it, there was 'a head of steam, lots of enthusiasm' at the start. Then it settled down, took shape and became 'normal,' embedded in the system. But it still demands a lot of hard work. She contrasts the effort required, for example to get project work from TY students, with the situation in the LCA where there is 'an outside impetus – there is an examiner coming in'. This theme of getting students to deliver work, especially project work on time and of good quality emerges in the interviews with each of the co-ordinators.

In the early days of TY, many teachers remarked that the standard of project work was poor. The frustration of trying to engage students who seem to be poorly motivated for school with project work is palpable. This co-ordinator talked about some students ‘who never open a schoolbag, in any year, from the time they go home from school to the time when they come back in here again in the morning’. Such an attitude, allied with erratic attendance and part-time jobs after school, makes sustaining the momentum needed for project work very difficult. She adds:

You need nearly super-human energy and commitment to keep this going and follow it through again and again.

The other two co-ordinators also emphasise the challenges of getting students to engage, not just with project work, but with school in general. For TY to work, they contend, goals have to be very clear, and maintaining the momentum can be energy sapping. The third co-ordinator is also in little doubt that in a school designated ‘disadvantaged’ a committed coordinator is crucial. He remarks:

It must have someone who really believes in it and who drives it.

The third co-ordinator has observed a trend among TY students where limited initial engagement can give way to a more enthusiastic, interested disposition as the year develops. He says,

I think they respond very well (to TY) though I think they respond better towards the middle to latter part of the programme, than at the start.

### **Attendance**

In response to poor attendance in TY, Beech School introduced an attendance rule. Students signed a contract stating that they would not miss more than 15 days in a school year. The first co-ordinator says that it did get the message across that the school was seriously concerned that the students come to school. However, when one or two actually missed more than 15 days and were put off the course, many staff members felt bad about it and wondered what, if anything, had been achieved for the students by this policy. Present practice is a combination of careful monitoring of attendance combined with persistent encouragement and cajoling. Commenting on this issue in 2006, the Principal adds that it is the view within the school that ‘the operation of the Education Welfare Act (2000) has had no impact on this matter’.

**Assessment**

The co-ordinators in Beech School see the assessment of learning as a problematic area for TY. Initially Beech School sent home three reports during the year. This was reduced to two when it became 'burdensome' on the staff. Most teachers used a form of continuous assessment based on class work and project work. Exams were not ruled out but were not part of the formal structure. Looking back the first co-ordinator would like to see the assessment system 'sharpened up'. She recognises that assessment systems need constant monitoring. She would like to see more specific reporting on particular skills, what has been developed and what needs attention, not just 'a nine or a ten' the meaning of which is unclear. When students come from families with limited positive experience of formal schooling, devising meaningful systems of assessment and reporting is especially difficult. The co-ordinators state that the school continues to search for appropriate forms of assessment and reporting to students and parents.

**Isolation**

As a school designated 'disadvantaged', Beech School is in receipt of various additional supports. Despite this, one of the co-ordinators point to the difficulties of persisting with an extensive TY programme when neighbouring schools have either never offered it or have dropped it. He talks about a sense of isolation, stating:

Schools are like little islands around here. School Y is only down there and we have virtually no relationship with them. We wouldn't hear much (about what goes on there). All the local schools have given it (TY) up. But I think there are enough people around here (Beech School) positive about it.

He expands on this, recalling the extensive work done by the staff at the time of TY's introduction into Beech School. Lots of hours were put into producing detailed documentation and the effect, he says, was to generate a strong sense of 'ownership' of TY among the teachers. Because of this investment of time, energy and their belief in TY, he believes that, despite the difficulties, the teachers in Beech School will continue with TY.

**Students' views**

The Third year students interviewed in Beech School prior to TY, tend to highlight their expectations of a year that they see as a welcome break from the examination

focus in Third year, the opportunity to engage in a range of enjoyable learning experiences and as strengthening the foundation for LC studies. TY students themselves and the Fifth and Sixth years on the LC track contrast the year with their experiences in the Junior Cycle, in particular what they see as much better relationships with their teachers. Trips away from the school appear to play an important role in these changed relationships. Students also indicate that within TY classrooms there are much greater opportunities to voice their opinions and discuss topics of interest. Students welcome this very much. Many senior cycle students in Beech School state that TY helped them mature.

When interviewed, LCA students in Beech School tended, in the first instance, to talk about their own decisions to opt for LCA. Most articulated satisfaction with these choices and, indeed, indicated that LCA was proving a very positive experience. Some voiced the impression that TY was an 'easy' year. A view also aired was that teachers gave more attention to TY classes than LCA ones.

### **Teachers' Views**

Teachers in Beech School who completed the questionnaire were unanimous on a number of points, for example, that TY gives students a broad educational experience, that students become more confident, 91 per cent of teachers in Beech School state that they like teaching TY classes and 97 per cent like using active teaching and learning methodologies.

A majority of teachers expressed the view that the school's TY programme is well-thought-out, well-tailored to students' needs, has breadth and balance and is well-coordinated. A majority is also of the view that the programme presents students and teachers with good opportunities for learning beyond the classroom, that TY advances students' maturity, and orientates them well to adult and working life, that students develop well in the absence of examination pressure and are better equipped for a LC, that they become more independent learners. A majority is also of the view that the programme in Beech School offers intellectual challenge, developing academic and technical skills, that students' thinking and problem-solving skills are enhanced through TY, that they become more socially aware, more socially competent, and that

TY assists students clarify career goals. Furthermore, a majority in Beech School agree that students become more motivated and self-directed as learners.

There is majority support for the view that TY promotes the professional development of teachers, that teachers respond well to the freedom and flexibility to design relevant programmes, that TY promotes teamwork among teachers and that teachers develop skills in TY that enhance their teaching in other years. According to a majority, teachers in Beech School find mixed-ability classes difficult, though a majority of those surveyed state that they like teaching such groupings.

A majority of teachers in Beech School welcome the varied forms of assessment in TY. The assessment techniques used in Beech School are seen by a majority of teachers as appropriate, though more than half state that devising and operating new forms of assessment is difficult.

In Beech School a majority of teachers believe that parents of Third year students are well informed about TY and that parents are kept well informed about activities and events during the year.

A majority (65 per cent) reject the idea that teachers would prefer a three-year LC or that students show little interest in TY or that TY has a low status among students and teachers in Beech School. A majority of teachers in Beech School would like more time for planning TY classes with colleagues and more in-service training.

The areas where opinions among teachers were particularly divided include the quality of the school's written programme, whether the school's approach to evaluation is progressive, whether teachers would prefer a prescribed syllabus for their subjects, whether there is a lack of resources for TY and whether class sizes are too big.

### **Parents**

Interviews with students, the co-ordinators and the Principal in Beech School serve to highlight a parent population where many have little direct experience of senior cycle education. Teachers remark that parents often point out that they themselves were



working full-time from the age of 14 years and express a wish that their children join the workforce as soon as possible. The third co-ordinator believes that it is not so much a resistance to further education that stops children remaining in full-time education, but the accepted norms within working-class culture that the ideal activity for 16-17 years olds is to be in paid employment.

Other parents, according to the Principal and co-ordinators, have a great openness to education for their children but need the details of pathways and requirements made very explicit. Some students made it clear that their parents understand little about subject choice, the intricacies of the points system or CAO procedures. The third co-ordinator remarked that when interviewing Third year students about doing TY, many tend to be dismissive of their parents' views on the decision, sometimes commenting that 'they just don't know'.

At the information meeting for parents, this co-ordinator says there are very few questions immediately after the school's presentation. However, when the parents are broken up into small groups, a lot of questions emerge: why do they have to do an extra year in school?; will they drop behind?; is it a 'doss year'?; might they drop out of school? would they be better going straight into employment? if they go on work experience will they want to return to school? The co-ordinators and Principal state that a lot of reassurance is required.

When Beech School introduced TY as, effectively, part of a six-year cycle to LC, some parents' resistance was strong. The first co-ordinator recalls:

A couple of them came to us requesting that their children take the year off to work and then return in fifth year. We said 'No, if you do that, they won't be back.' And they did anyway and at the start of fifth year they turned up and said they wanted to come back. And we said, 'No, you can repeat Transition Year if you like. But you can't come into fifth year.'

Such an attitude will seem severe to some, especially when the majority of schools in the country have TY as an optional route to a LC. However, the view in Beech School was that in order to establish the idea of a six-year cycle to the LC, strong measures were called for at the outset. The co-ordinator continues:

Now that was kind of harsh but actually it worked because that didn't happen the next year. Now you can say that we have three victims of this

system, but without doing that I think it would have destroyed the whole thing.

Since then various students have spent the year immediately after the Junior Certificate in paid employment and the school continues to insist that if they wish to follow the established LC, they still have to take part in TY.

### **Summary**

As a school designated 'disadvantaged', Beech School sees its mission unequivocally as improving the life chances of its students, many of whom live in disadvantaged circumstances. The experience in Beech School points to a very direct correlation between taking part in TY and improved maturity, including more informed subject choices and improved motivation for LC. In turn, this improved motivation has led to increased levels of examination achievement and greater participation at third-level. The emergence of positive role-models from within Beech School is regarded as a leaven throughout the school, raising expectations all round.

As in the other schools in this study, TY in Beech School is regarded as enabling the development of more positive relations between students and teachers. At the same time, teachers, co-ordinators and Principal leave no room for doubt about the on-going challenges that they face to maintain a TY programme that is vibrant, engaging and relevant. Shifting a learning focus towards the more sustained, independent work that project work represents is especially challenging. So is maintaining attendance levels and devising appropriate forms of assessment.

Students in Beech School consistently comment on the different relationships between students and teachers in TY and subsequently throughout senior cycle. The students point to trips outside the school and more participative, democratic classrooms as both causes and effects of these developments.

Teachers in Beech School express strong support for many features of TY, for example its contribution to greater student confidence, maturity and social awareness. They also would like more time to plan and work with colleagues as well as more in-service education. Areas where opinions among teachers in this school divide include the quality of the school's written programme, the school's approach to evaluation

and the question relating to a prescribed syllabus for their subjects. There are also mixed views concerning resources and class sizes.

Explaining the merits of TY to parents in Beech School – many of whom themselves have limited direct experience of senior cycle schooling – is seen as a particular challenge. The school's policy of insisting that those hoping to pursue the LC must first take TY adds an even sharper edge to this challenge. The strong belief among Principal, co-ordinators and teachers in Beech School in the educational benefits of this approach is striking. Beech School has introduced, developed and sustained a TY programme against considerable odds.

### ***Chestnut School***

Chestnut School is an all-boys voluntary secondary school in a suburban location. Founded by a religious order of priests more than 50 years ago, Chestnut School defines its aim as:

... to enable each of its pupils to develop his personality and character through religious, academic, social, cultural and sporting activities.

Following some debate, Chestnut School opted to enter the 'free' scheme in the late 1960s. The school offered a four-year Intermediate Certificate until the late 1980s when it introduced a TY alongside the three-year Junior Certificate. Interviewed in 2002, the Principal indicated that from the outset the expectation within the Chestnut School community has been that students would continue right through to the Leaving Certificate and achieve well in that examination. A large number of students then transfer to third-level education. High levels of academic achievement are part of the school's tradition and a wide variety of sporting opportunities is available to students.

#### **Introducing TY**

The introduction of the Transition Year Option (TYO) in the late 1980s not only enabled the continuance of a six-year cycle for the majority of students but ensured that there was no reduction in the school's teaching staff. Staff members were keen to maintain academic standards and so the statement in the 1986 *Guidelines* that between 30 per cent and 50 per cent of the time should 'comprise traditional and/or academic studies', was especially welcome. The TYO was seen within the school as being strengthened by a strong academic core. Many teachers saw this as building a solid platform for the LC and, in some cases, what developed in some subjects was a three-year LC programme. The TYO was also characterised by the addition of new modules such as European Studies and Environmental Studies as well as trips outside the conventional classroom.

Following the publication of the 1993 *Guidelines* and the associated in-service, Chestnut School set about re-working its TY. It was still taken by almost all students, though since the mid 1990s a small number of students, usually for reasons of age, have not followed the TY programme and proceeded directly to Fifth year after the JC. The Principal and the two joint co-ordinators stress that, while they believe

strongly in the value of TY, there may be individual cases where the students will move straight into Fifth year.

### **Distinctive features of TY**

When students start TY in Chestnut School they don the school's senior cycle uniform and so the emphasis on being a senior cycle student, more mature and responsible than at Junior Cycle, is clear from the outset.

The TY programme in Chestnut School has been altered and adjusted every year. This is partly informed by an annual evaluation. This involves the Principal circulating a questionnaire at the start of the third term each year. The questions invite teachers to look at the overall impact of the year as well as at the modules that they have taught, e.g.

- What were the strengths of the year?
- What were the weaknesses?
- What were the strengths and weaknesses about the subject you were teaching?
- How would you improve it next year?

The Chestnut School TY programme can be seen as made up of three types of components: compulsory subjects, optional modules and additional modules.

<b>Compulsory subjects</b>	<b>Optional subjects</b>	<b>Additional modules</b>
Irish, English, Mathematics, Religion, Physical Education, one European language (German, French or Spanish), Guidance, Work Experience	Art, Craft and Design, Biology, Physics, Chemistry, History, Geography, Technical Graphics, Business (including Mini-company), Accounting, Economics	Classical Studies, Drama, Education for Living, Environmental Studies, European Studies, Gender Studies (including Home Economics), Keyboarding and Information Technology, Music, Politics, Psychology, Spatial Studies

In what they refer to as 'core' subjects such as English, Maths and Irish, the two co-ordinators emphasise the autonomy given to subject teachers. They ask each teacher

to give them, in writing, a broad outline of each subject programme, the aims and objectives, the content, how it might be assessed. They both express sensitivity to their colleagues. Their hope is that each teacher will come up with programmes that are ‘appropriate to students’ needs, dynamic, energetic and innovative’.

All classes in TY, with the exception of Mathematics, are arranged on a mixed-ability basis. A modular approach to subjects such as English and Irish is a distinctive feature of the school’s TY programme. This involves dividing the year into three ten-week periods. The Principal sees this as an excellent opportunity for teachers to specialise in particular areas and devise engaging modules. For example, in English, he cites Anglo-Irish literature, drama and media studies as examples. During the course of a year, teachers teach the same module to three different groups of students and so the students are exposed to a richer variety of teaching approaches.

This modular approach also means that teachers are making more informed decisions about the make-up of classes in Fifth year, especially as regards who takes a subject at honours level. Students who may have under-performed in the JC examination can demonstrate, during TY, that they will be able for demanding courses, according to the Principal. He believes that some pressure to continue to perform academically is needed in TY and he encourages a continual emphasis on maintaining high standards. He also believes that parents are reassured when students are kept busy.

Prior to the 1994 mainstreaming of TY, students in Chestnut School selected their optional subjects for LC at the start of TY, thus reinforcing the idea of a three-year LC. The *Guidelines* emphasise TY’s distinctiveness noting that:

A Transition Year is NOT part of the Leaving Certificate programme, and should NOT be seen as an opportunity for spending three years rather than two studying Leaving Certificate material. (DoE, 1993c, p.5)

Furthermore, the inspectors’ evaluation strongly recommended that

Pupils’ decisions in relation to subject choice for senior cycle should be delayed until the end of Transition Year. Transition Year provides an obvious opportunity for the reflection and guidance that facilitates mature and considered choice by pupils. Circular 47/93 from the Department of Education explicitly states that schools will not be permitted to offer a three-year Leaving Certificate programme. (DoE, 1996, p.22)

Consequently, Chestnut School changed its practice, and choices are now made towards the final stages of TY. TY is now seen as an opportunity for students to make better informed LC subject choices. The modular structure of the TY programme also facilitates sampling of LC subjects. Sampling various modules, the work experience programme and the general broadening effects of various TY activities are all seen by the co-ordinators as contributing to students being clearer about their interests, abilities and motivations regarding subjects for the LC.

The Principal believes that, to some extent, TY has also become a type of 'shop window' for optional subjects. He cites the example of a particularly imaginative module in one subject in TY leading to a marked increase in that subject's uptake at LC. He also sees TY as an opportunity to present subjects that might be in decline nationally, e.g. Chemistry, Physics and Economics, as attractive options for students. Furthermore, TY is seen as supportive of subjects where there might be relatively low take-up rates at LC, e.g. Music and Art. The Principal believes strongly that the school should offer a broad range of subjects and that if a subject 'dies' within a school it can be very difficult to revive it.

The additional modules area is the one that allows for greatest flexibility. The two co-ordinators in Chestnut School report that they continually investigate details of programmes that appear to have worked well in other schools. Their disposition is an open one towards newly developed modules. They identify the workshops for TY co-ordinators organised by the support service as a particularly useful network for picking up fresh ideas. Within Chestnut School there is a large, dedicated TY office where extensive files of modules and programmes have been carefully collected and catalogued. The co-ordinators cite the *Exploring Masculinities* programme, *Shaping Space* on architecture, a Computer Aided Design module and one on Community Development as examples of innovative modules. They also indicate that they are quick to jettison modules:

There's a plethora of stuff out there that's coming at you every year. We see it as very important for us to sift through that, and to try and pick out what's good and what's bad, and try it out in the school, and see if it works

Co-ordinator A, Chestnut School

And if it doesn't work, we ditch it.

Co-ordinator B, Chestnut School

And how do you know whether it works or not?

### Interviewer

Well, for example, I did (*names module*) with the students last year. I found it very tough going. In addition, a lot of the material that was in that module was covered by Business teachers and Religion teachers. So, we didn't run it again this year.

Co-ordinator A, Chestnut School

Chestnut School's development of a Gender Studies module and the later adaptation of the *Exploring Masculinities*<sup>17</sup> programme is a particular indicator of the school's willingness to attempt innovation and relevance in its curricular provision. As the programme evaluators observes,

The rationale for *Exploring Masculinities*.... has to do with issues faced by males in modern Irish society. (Gleeson et al, 2004, p.42)

In History an imaginative family tree project, in association with the National Archives, is a further example of innovative thinking.

Fresh thinking is also evident as regards assessment and Chestnut School operates an ongoing assessment during TY using a 'Folders of Excellence'<sup>18</sup> format, though the two co-ordinators would like to see the assessment of learning in TY 'tightened up'.

### Timetable

While all schools offering a TY programme emphasise the once-off calendar items such as visiting speakers, work experience placements, musicals and trips outside the classroom, the formal weekly timetable gives a particular snapshot of how traditional or innovative a school describes its subjects and modules. In Chestnut School, a weekly timetable from 2003-04 illustrates how the options described earlier work out in practice.

The possibilities offered by dividing the school year into three distinct parts are well demonstrated by this timetable. Teachers are timetabled in the normal way for a

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<sup>17</sup> *Exploring Masculinities* has been one of the most commented on of any TY related modules. See, for example, Mac an Ghaill, M., Hanafin, J. and Conway, P.F (2004) *Gender Politics and 'Exploring Masculinities in Irish Education, Teachers, Materials and the Media*, Dublin: NCCA. Gleeson, J., Conboy, P. Walsh, A (2004) *The Piloting of Exploring Masculinities: Context, Implementation and Issues arising, Report of External Evaluation*, Dublin: Department of Education and Science.

<sup>18</sup> See for example, the video, TYCSS (2000) *Introducing Portfolio Assessment in Transition Year*, Blackrock Education Centre, Transition Year Curriculum Support Service and Jeffers, G. (1999) 'Folders of Excellence', in L. Monahan, *Moving Forward with Students*, Marino, Dublin: Irish Association for Pastoral Care in Education.



particular module or subject for the full school year while students can change, for example, to sample Art for ten weeks, then Geography for ten weeks and finally History for ten weeks. At the same time distinct modules in English and Irish run for ten weeks, with teachers developing their own specialisms. In classes like PE, RE and Maths the option is there for both ten-week modules and whole-year programmes. This model of timetabling demonstrates how short ten-week courses and year-long ones can both be accommodated within the one timetable.

The arrangements for Business offer a further refinement of these possibilities. Here, one of the groups has two teachers allocated so that class numbers are halved for that particular module, in this case in order to facilitate mini-companies. Thirty-four teachers are timetabled for TY classes, 13 of them for more than one subject e.g. Business (mini-company) and Geography, Computer studies and Art, Physical Education and History, Technical Drawing and Computer Studies or for more than one group. A typical student in Chestnut School would, in the course of a week, have classroom contact with between 14 and 17 teachers. Throughout the year, the same typical student in Chestnut School, with the rotation of ten-week blocks, could have classroom contact with 27 different teachers.

## Combined class timetable for Module 1, Chestnut School

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8.50	1.Business T1, 2.Business T2, 2.Business T3, 3.Business T4	1.Irish T16 2.Environmental T20 3.Technical Drawing T21	1.Physical Edu T6 2.Physical Edu T7 3.Physical Edu T8	1.French T9 2.French T10 3.German T 11 1.Spanish T12	1.Irish T16 2.Guidance T28 3.Science T20
9.30	1.Art T5 2.Geography T2 3.History T6	1.English T22 2.Environmental Studies T20 3.Technical Drawing T21	1.Irish T16 2.Irish T13 3.Irish T 17	1.Maths T13 2.Maths T14 3.Maths T15	Business T1, Business T2 Business T3 Business T4
10.10	1.Art T5 2.Geography T2 3.History T6	1.Maths T13 2.Maths T14 3.Maths T15	1.French T9 2.French T10 3.German T 11 1.Spanish T12	1.Guidance T28 2.English T22 3.Guidance T18	Business T1, Business T2 Business T3 Business T4
10.50	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK
11.00	1.Physical Edu T6 2.Physical Edu T7 3.Physical Edu T8	1.Science T19 2.Science T18 3.English T16	1.Religious E T 23 2.Religious E T 24 3.Religious E T25	1.Science T19 1.Science T29 2.Equality Studies T26 2.Equality T30 3. English T16	1.Computer St T33 1.Computer St T24 2.Guidance T18 Technical Drawing T21
11.40	1.Physical Edu T6 2.Physical Edu T7 3.Physical Edu T8	1.Art T5 2.Geography T2 3.History T6	1.English T22 2.English T27 3.English T16	1.Science T19 1.Science T29 2.Equality Studies T26 2.Equality Studies T30 3. Science T20	1.Computer St T33 1.Computer St T24 2.Irish T13 Technical Drawing T21
12.20			1.Art T5 2.Geography T2 3.History T6		
13.00	LUNCH BREAK	LUNCH BREAK	LUNCH BREAK	LUNCH BREAK	LUNCH BREAK
13.20	1.French T9 2.French T10 3.German T 11 1.Spanish T12	1.Religious E T 23 2.Religious E T 24 3.Religious E T25		1.Music T31 2.Science T18 3.Computer St T32 3.Computer St T21	1 English T22 2.English T27 3.Guidance T32
14.00	1.Maths T13 2.Maths T14 3.Maths T15	1.Religious E T 23 2.Religious E T 24 3.Religious E T25		1.Music T31 2.Science T18 3.Computer St T32 3.Computer St T21	1.Spanish T 12 1.French T 9 2.French T 10 3.German T 11 3.German T34

14.40	<p>1.Irish T16, 2.Computer St T5 2 Computer St T18 3.Irish T17</p>	<p>1.Classics T26 2.Irish T13 3.Science T20</p>		<p>1.Business T1, 2.Business T2, 2.Business T3, 3.Business T4</p>	<p>1.Guidance T32 2.Science T18 3.Irish T17</p>
15.20	<p>1.Science T 19 2.Computer St T5, 2. Computer St T18 3.English T16</p>	<p>1.Classics T26 2. English T27 3. Science T20</p>		<p>1.English T22 2.Irish T13 3.Irish T17</p>	<p>1.Maths T13 2.Maths T14 3.Maths T15</p>

Colour Codes: Single period Double period Teacher teaches more than one subject

## Benefits

The Principal sees the maturing effect of TY as its most obvious benefit. Prior to his appointment as Principal in 1990 he had worked in another school that had operated a five-year cycle. He recalls:

One of the first things that struck me when I arrived here was that those in Sixth year were so mature, much more mature than the students I had been working with.

He adds that from his visits to schools in Denmark and Germany where it is commonplace for school leavers to be 19 years of age, he is convinced that the transition type experience in school is much preferable to starting university at 16 or 17 years of age. He says it is quite obvious in relation to discipline issues in the school. He remarks:

There is a maturity about them in Fourth year... Of course, in Fourth, Fifth and Sixth years there are the discipline dilemmas; you get inefficiencies: you get kids going in different directions and not knowing what they are up to; but you don't get particular discipline problems in Fourth, Fifth and Sixth years the way you get in Second and Third years.

The Principal adds that TY has had an important developmental impact across the teaching staff. He speaks enthusiastically about the openness of the TY co-ordinating team, their going out to other schools to learn, their willingness to try innovations within the TY programme and their general commitment to improving the quality of students' experiences in the school. Their interest and energy has a positive ripple effect across the school, continually reminding colleagues about possibilities. TY is very heavily identified with the two co-ordinators, and the Principal sees them as highly respected by their colleagues. He also notes that both co-ordinators have

engaged in further educational studies and that this also is good for the school, good for them and good example to their colleagues.

### **Organisation**

Initially, there was one TY co-ordinator in Chestnut School. He was replaced in 1997. In 1998 it was decided to appoint a second person to make a two-person core team. At that time there were between 150 and 160 students following a TYP, so having a second person sharing the workload, particularly visiting students on work experience placements, appeared a sensible and logical development. As one of the co-ordinators observes:

There are schools that have 20, maybe 40 students and they have one coordinator. So our set-up is sort of half way between a single co-ordinator and a team of six or seven, with two people largely responsible for it.

Both co-ordinators volunteered for their positions in that TY duties are separate from their posts as assistant principals, under which heading they have other duties. However, their individual timetables are structured so that they both have three periods less teaching time than colleagues. As one of them says:

That's our 'payment', so to speak, for being involved in the TY.

However, on further investigation it emerges that these three periods are used extensively to organise trips for TY class groups. They mention an extensive list of local and national landmarks, historic sites, museums, activity centres, art galleries, places of scientific or geographic interest that they have visited with the students.

Chestnut School does not have a written job description for TY co-ordination. Both co-ordinators state that they are happy with the flexibility that this arrangement offers, especially as they feel they have a clear understanding of who does what and they work well as a team. They both like the way the TY programme and tasks related to co-ordination have evolved since the programme began in Chestnut School. Each year they have worked together on consciously developing new dimensions of the programme, for example, systematically recording the year's activities on a digital camera one year, and setting up an education forum to hear parents' views the following year. They also reveal, in common with the TY co-ordinators interviewed in the other five schools, enormous commitment to the programme. For example, this

co-ordinating duo suspect that some of their colleagues may regard them as slightly 'weird' in their educational perspectives. One remarks on the contrasting views:

They see the school in their own way. Transition Year is only one part of it, whereas we see Transition Year as perhaps the most distinctive, and most individual, part of the school.

Does this mean that the success or otherwise of the TY programme is dependent on this pair of teachers? The other co-ordinator responds:

Not really; if someone was to take over from us, they should be able to take over and develop TY, partly because we have put structures in place.

As regards writing the programme the co-ordinators are tentative about making demands on their teaching colleagues. Before the publication of *Writing the Transition Year Programme*, Chestnut School had devised a 12-point structure for individual teachers to write their module or subject. The co-ordinators express a tension between wanting to respect the professional autonomy of their colleagues while at the same time encouraging more active teaching and learning methodologies. What happens when the co-ordinators hear that some teachers are not engaging in active methods? The co-ordinators' responses reveal some of the delicate sensitivities around peer monitoring. Indeed, the tentative tone of their remarks serves to underline the fragile ground on which co-ordinators work. As one co-ordinator remarks:

You probably won't get everybody. It's difficult, I suppose, to do anything about it, you know. How do you tell somebody to change? But I think that, if you take time within the, sort of overall structure of the thing, I mean, for example, in Business Studies, they would, they would run a company. I know in Science, for example, they would do a lot more practical work than they would perhaps do in the other years.

The other co-ordinator develops the theme, emphasising the positive efforts of teachers who enter into the spirit of TY:

How we monitor what they are doing? We have the (written) programme, and we feel the programme fits in with the actual aims and guidelines that we wanted... I find all the time that teachers professionally take on board the methodologies themselves, I think, get into the spirit of what's expected in this experiential teaching that's expected in the Transition Year... to a certain extent, some more than others. As C said, if there are others who are not on board, there's very little you can really do.

Given the very strong emphasis throughout the school on the importance of LC classes, both co-ordinators acknowledge that some of their colleagues probably see

them as ‘well-meaning idealists’, with their emphasis on personal and social development and on broadening students’ experiences during TY. Increasingly the co-ordinators have been attempting to record photographically TY’s varying learning as evidence for sharing with colleagues and students’ parents.

### **Informing parents**

Chestnut School organises an information evening on TY for parents of Third year students every March. The main responsibility for these meetings rests with the co-ordinating team. The Principal says that feedback from parents about TY in Chestnut School covers a very wide spectrum of opinions. He remarks:

Some parents say that it (TY) is the worst thing that ever happened to their son, while others say it is wonderful, so you are left wondering at times.

At the information session for parents of Third year students, the co-ordinators present reasons for doing TY. They emphasise the maturing effects and the broad educational experiences on offer. They also highlight the research that indicates a strong correlation between doing a TY programme and attaining higher LC points. They draw attention to what they call the ‘fun’ dimension of learning, citing TY students’ own feedback to support this emphasis.

Throughout the year, Chestnut School issues a newsletter about school activities. This acts as a record and informs parents and others about a variety of school activities. TY features strongly in this newsletter.

One of the features of TY in Chestnut School is a formal, structured meeting between the co-ordinating team and parents. They refer to this as The Education Forum. It began with two evening meetings. Twelve attended the first night, twenty-five the second.

At the first one we set off, very informally, to do a SWOT<sup>19</sup> analysis from the parents’ point of view of the Transition Year, and we, literally teachers and parents, sat down together in groups and we had an open discussion about the strengths and the weaknesses, and the opportunities and the threats within the Transition Year itself. It was a once-off picture of where we stood. From that we got a whole host of recommendations.

Co-ordinator B, Chestnut School

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<sup>19</sup> A SWOT analysis involves inviting participants to list the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats that a person, group or organisation faces.

While the event was open to all parents, it was mainly parents of TY students who turned up. Both co-ordinators are of the opinion that parents are very keen to have the purposes of school policies explained to them. They state, for example, that parents seem keen to vary assessment of learning. One practical partnership between the school and parents that resulted from this forum was a programme of mock interviews, previously located in sixth year, but being seen as more relevant during TY.

During the student interviews, many made it clear that their parents had strongly held views on schooling. The majority stated that their parents had wanted them to do a six-year cycle from the outset. Some, particularly those in Sixth year, indicated that some parents were disappointed with what they perceived as a 'looseness' about TY. Too many 'free' classes and limited homework were cited as examples of this perception.

### **Students' views**

In the focus group discussions in Chestnut School, students' comments about school tend to be in terms of the LC, suggesting a dominant position of the examination in their consciousness. TY is described in contrast to the exam-focused, demanding work of Third, Fifth and Sixth years. Those who dismiss TY as 'a waste' do so, invariably, because they cannot see a clear enough connection with LC achievement. One of the frequently voiced fears among Third year students is that while TY might be enjoyable, settling back into Fifth year – and what some call 'serious study' – might be problematic. For some, TY's value is that it can assist in clarifying both subject choice for LC and more long term study and career planning. Others point to not wanting to be too young doing the LC or moving on to third-level. From Third year right through to Sixth year, students specifically identified TY as being especially important in enabling them to tackle to LC course in Mathematics at higher level.

There are also, as in the other five schools, strands of different discourses among the students. TY as a time to 'recover' from the demands of the Junior Certificate is a recurrent theme. The perception that it is an 'easy', 'more relaxed' year, again in contrast to other years, is strong among the Chestnut School students. Some students

say that they are attracted by this image of a programme that is ‘easy’ and ‘fun’ and involves more than preparing for exams, while others seem to regard such an emphasis as a weakness.

Activities that are different from those experienced in Junior Cycle, such as mini-companies, project work and field trips outside the school, are rated highly by many students. Indeed, in each senior group there were students who vividly recalled visits to events outside the school. Work experience and the satisfaction derived from completing challenging projects are mentioned frequently on students’ lists of TY ‘highlights’. For some, individual modules were especially memorable. As they recall their experiences, senior cycle students regularly reflect on ‘how much I matured’ during TY and, in many cases, how their parents said they ‘grew up a bit’ over the course of the year.

Particularly noteworthy among the students’ comments is the perception that teachers were more relaxed in TY when compared to JC and, because of this, many students said that they got more time and space for discussion and for expressing their own opinions. Many valued this and saw it as one of the distinguishing features of TY. More active student participation in classroom was linked by many with what they saw as qualitatively different relationships between students and teachers during TY. As one student remarked:

In Fourth year it (student-teacher relationship) is more of a level playing field. Each one has respect for the other. You can see that when we contribute ideas in class... I think some teachers prefer it that way and other teachers just don’t want to know; they still want to treat you as the student/pupil.

Liam, TY student, Chestnut School

Students in Chestnut School report their parents as having very mixed views on TY, echoing observations made by the Principal. Those who reported their parents as being critical of the year tended to focus on perceptions of limited homework or the programme not being busy enough (too much time off). Some Sixth year students in Chestnut School, interviewed within a month of their final examinations, expressed some disappointment about TY. For example

I thought the fact that we did too little work probably messes us a little bit for the Leaving Cert....I have known for years what I wanted to do in college, so... I would have preferred to have gone straight through school



and get to college and get out working as early as possible but I mean other than that it wasn't too bad. I just think there wasn't enough emphasis on work. Even the teachers themselves didn't take it too seriously as well as the students.

Shane, Sixth year, Chestnut School

Some saw the main value of TY as being that it introduced them to Honours Maths for the LC, 'particularly the algebra and trigonometry'. Some wondered whether doing the LC twice would have been a more efficient use of their time. However, they felt that the work experience placements were especially useful and helped them develop clearer career plans. Trips outside school, especially the one abroad, were also seen as highlights. They say that while they liked the idea of subjects that were 'new and different', they weren't sure how well prepared the teachers were for teaching those innovations. At the same time, individual memories are recalled, sometimes with intensity. For example one student said that the course on short stories in TY English was good, 'mainly because of the teacher'. These students were keen to point out how dedicated and focused their teachers are, especially with Sixth year students – 'they even take extra classes at lunchtime'.

Perhaps because of such commitments, they say, teachers are less inclined to take TY classes as seriously. This leads to the mention of specific exceptions, teachers whom they regarded as especially motivating and encouraging during TY. They contrast the mood and pace of TY with the start of Fifth year, recalling their shock at the 'loads of homework' during the first week of Fifth year. Asked what advice they might offer to the school about TY, one student reflected his classmates' views when he said:

I think the basic thing is: if they want to do it (TY), they should take it seriously. And don't use students as guinea pigs. Get a syllabus together... before you actually start a TY programme. And don't turn such a blind eye to TY... because there was a bit of a blind eye taken to people just going home and things which you wouldn't get away with in Fifth or Sixth but you got away with a lot easier in Fourth year.

Darragh, Sixth year, Chestnut School

### **Teachers' Views**

Of the six schools in this study, teachers' views on TY in Chestnut School are the most mixed. A majority of teachers agree with statements that 'TY gives students a broad educational experience' (97 per cent), 'advances students' maturity' (85 per

cent) and ‘technical skills,’ ‘that students are better equipped for a LC after TY’, ‘that students who follow a TY programme achieve higher results in the Leaving Certificate than those who don’t’, that the programme ‘orientates students well to adult and working life’, and ‘that students become more confident’.

A majority of teachers in Chestnut School view their programme as ‘well-thought-out’, with ‘breadth and balance’, as presenting students and teachers with good opportunities for learning beyond the classroom and as well co-ordinated. Seventy-nine per cent agree that the school’s written programme is very good. A majority also agree with the view that students become more socially aware, more socially competent and that TY assists students clarify career goals. In Chestnut School, 89 per cent of those surveyed state that they like teaching TY classes and 82 per cent state that they like the freedom and flexibility that TY offers and using active teaching and learning methodologies.

Chestnut School is the only one of the six schools where a majority of those surveyed (68 per cent) are of the view that teachers would prefer a three-year Leaving Certificate programme, though only 37 per cent of these teachers state that they would like this themselves.

In Chestnut School, a majority of teachers agree with the statement that teaching TY ‘promotes the professional development of teachers’. There is also majority support for the ideas that teachers respond well to the freedom and flexibility to design relevant programmes, and that teachers develop skills in TY that enhance their teaching in other years. A majority is of the view that teachers find there is a lack of resources for TY. Similarly, a majority would like more time for planning TY classes with colleagues and 88 per cent would like more in-service training. 73 per cent of teachers disagree with the assertion that class sizes are too big.

As regards assessment, a majority of teachers in Chestnut School agree that devising and implementing new forms of assessment is difficult. However, while a majority welcome the new and varied forms of assessment in TY, views are mixed as to whether the forms of assessment used in TY are appropriate.

A majority believe that parents of Third year students are well informed about TY and that parents are kept well informed about activities and events during TY.

There is an obvious lack of agreement among teachers about whether the programme is well suited to students' needs, whether 'students develop well in the absence of examination pressure' (57 per cent agreement, 39 per cent disagreement), whether students develop academic skills or whether they become more independent learners through TY. Mixed views are also evident about whether the programme provides students with intellectual challenge, whether the school's approach to evaluation is progressive, whether students show little interest in TY, the status of the programme among students and teachers, whether students become more motivated and self-directed as learners, mixed-ability teaching, whether teachers would prefer a prescribed syllabus for their subjects, whether TY promotes teamwork among teachers.

### **Challenging issues**

The Principal acknowledges that some teachers 'loved the three-year route to LC' and he sees some tension between the emphasis on TY as a 'stand-alone' programme and the reality of it being followed immediately by Fifth and Sixth years and terminating in a high-stakes examination. He is also frank that, in his opinion, there are some teachers who don't like the structure of TY and so don't like teaching on the programme. As he sees it:

There are some people who like teaching from the textbook, page 1 to page 57... by their nature they are very structured and therefore inflexible.

Hence, when it comes to timetabling teachers for TY classes the Principal of Chestnut School consults his staff, adding:

In some cases we may say, 'If you don't want to do TY, it's not a problem.' Someone who has just finished teaching a Third year or a Sixth year class can take a First year or a Fifth year the next year.

This means that, in practice, those teaching TY are mainly teachers who really want to be teaching at that level in that way, he adds.

The Principal expresses concern that those who move from Third year directly into Fifth year may 'die academically' without the foundational experience of a TY that

the rest of the class has. Because the majority in a Fifth year class have been through TY together they have matured and are well focused on studying for the LC. He says that during Fifth year some of those who have come straight from Third year express regret at their decision, asking can they go back to TY, or may even decide to leave school altogether. Because of this he sometimes thinks that a change of school might be a better decision for those who don't want to do TY, though adds that no school likes to be losing students.

The two co-ordinators also identify those students who do not wish to do TY as presenting many challenges. As one of the co-ordinators remarks

Often the ones who don't want to do TY want to fly through and get out of school as quickly as possible, because they see school as a bit of a nuisance and they just want to get out. Very often weak students tend to want the fast, fast lane out of it. They see Transition Year as not being particularly applicable to them.

He develops this point by referring to a student in his own class who is one of the few who has come through from Third year. This student is a year younger, has not been part of the class group, has not gone through the wide range of shared experiences with his classmates and does not have the same academic foundation of his classmates:

So he has taken on the role of being the class comedian. This has become the way he interacts socially with the rest of the class... He seems to see everything as a challenge and he seeks attention in a very disruptive way. Not very helpful. And then there is this other guy who went through from Third year, and he is very focused, and very academic, and doing well... so, it's an individual thing.

While the shift in Chestnut School from making LC subject choices at the end of TY rather than before it seems generally welcomed, it is not universally welcomed. One of the co-ordinators points out a downside of the modular, sampling approach, namely the student who is very clear that he is not interested in a particular module. This co-ordinator cites the example of trying to converse with teachers who find themselves in such situations:

I'm trying to encourage more experiential stuff. It's very hard to argue against somebody who'll say to me, 'This guy is not interested. He has made up his mind he is not doing this subject (for LC). So what is his purpose sitting in my class for 8 weeks as a nuisance, as a disruptive factor?' We counter that is by asking, What methods, or what different

techniques, have you brought in to engage this student? ... Of course, some would be happy going back to when they made the choice of subjects in Third year.

The co-ordinators' view is that when modules are seen solely in terms of sampling for LC, they are doomed to failure. This is especially true during the final third of the year when many choices have already been made. Teaching subjects for their intrinsic value is very challenging, they add. As one of the co-ordinators states

I think this is an area that is always going to be problematic. There are teachers who see their role primarily as... producing students to do the public exams.

These co-ordinators also point out that the students themselves will also question the value of studying a module in TY when they know they will not be taking it on at LC level. The co-ordinators monitor attendance as an important indicator of students' engagement with modules. They notice some drop in attendance patterns towards the end of TY each year.

### **Charges**

In Chestnut School in 2003 parents of students were invited to pay a voluntary subscription of €250. Approximately 70 per cent did so. There was an additional charge of €60 for TY. This money is spent mainly on typing and keyboard training and on some materials for Home Economics. There is an additional charge of €30 per student for the adventure activity in TY and another €30 for the First Aid course.

### **Summary**

Each year a majority of students in Chestnut School have opted for TY. The school has a strong tradition of high academic results and TY is seen by many students and teachers as enhancing this, not least by strengthening a platform for LC achievement. There is also a strong consensus that TY enhances boys' maturity.

Chestnut School's TY programme is structured clearly into core elements, optional modules that have a strong emphasis on sampling for the LC, and additional modules that emphasise the breadth of possible experiences open to students in Chestnut School.

The TY programme in Chestnut School, like that in Ash School, is arranged into three distinct blocks of approximately ten weeks each. With the exception of Mathematics, TY classes are arranged on a mixed-ability basis.

Teachers in Chestnut School are given extensive latitude to devise and develop individual subjects and modules. The co-ordinating team respect their colleagues' professional autonomy and see their role as encouraging and supporting innovation. The school has a dedicated room for TY, co-ordination where a wide range of TY related resources are stored and available to staff. The Principal leads an annual evaluation of the TY programme's components by the staff. This results in adjustments to TY every year, with additional modules being added or dropped.

Both co-ordinators play a central role in planning, organising and supervising TY activities outside the classroom, including field trips, outings and fund-raising events.

The Principal as well as the co-ordinators encounter a broad spectrum of attitudes to TY among parents. Given the school's strong academic tradition and reputation they are very aware that some need convincing. Parental scepticism tends to be either about the benefits of activities designed to advance personal and social development or concerning what is seen as a dilution of an academic dimension. Similar to the other schools in this study, students in TY and Fifth year express particular satisfaction with the more relaxed atmosphere in TY, the 'break' from examination pressure, the improved relationships with teachers, the opportunities to engage in particular projects as well as 'trips' outside the classroom, and the general maturing effects of the experience.

Some Sixth year students in Chestnut School, interviewed shortly before the LC written examinations, while concurring with these views, also felt that they might have favoured more of a 'three-year LC' approach and expressed the view that teachers were noticeably less focused on TY than on their LC classes. This tension between the values of TY such as holistic development, active learning and teaching methodologies, and intrinsic motivation for learning, on the one hand, and the pragmatic realities of the LC as a high-stakes examination, on the other, are perhaps more pronounced in Chestnut School than in the other five schools in this study.

### ***Maple School***

Maple School is a co-educational VEC school, located in a small town (population less than 2,000) in the west of Ireland. Its enrolment is just over 300 students. The school was established in 1992 in response to representations made to the VEC by a group of parents who wished to have their children attend school in the town rather than outside it. Prior to 1992, post-primary education in the town had been provided in a school where a group of religious sisters had been the trustees.

#### **Introducing TY**

The Principal, conscious of the need to build a specific identity for the school, says that he was especially impressed by the ideas presented to him by the Transition Year Support Service member serving that region in the mid-1990s. He invited her to address the staff and their response was very positive. She later assisted the school in devising its programme. He also acknowledges that it was particularly helpful having this person speak at a parents meeting, enthusing them and responding to all their questions with confidence.

Maple School introduced TY in 1996. Since then it has become a major energiser of the school's development and an important vehicle for the school's projection of itself to the local community. Maple School has had a single TY class group of about 20 students each year since it introduced the programme.

The Principal highlights the opportunity for students to mature as a major benefit of the year. He also believes that TY enables them to make better subject choices for LC and develop clearer career plans, introduces students to the entrepreneurial world through mini-companies and develops skills so that they can learn and work on their own. He attributes much of the success of the programme in Maple School to a very innovative and highly organised co-ordinator working well with a team of teachers who are not afraid to explore new avenues for student learning.

As the co-ordinator in Maple School sees it, the quality of a TY programme in a school depends very much on the imagination of the staff. For example, she is an enthusiastic advocate of planning a TY programme using a Multiple Intelligence (MI)

framework.<sup>20</sup> She also sees great scope in TY for co-operative learning. In Maple School she cites the example of a paired reading project where TY students work with First Year students ‘who weren’t receiving any support’. She states:

It’s unbelievable the scope you have in TY. The difference is really in imagination, the imagination of the team of teachers involved. We are fortunate here that this is recognised.

### **Distinctive features of the TY programme**

In its written programme, Maple School emphasises its own unique approach to TY. It sees TY as complementing the other five years and introduces students and parents to Howard Gardner’s insights into intelligences. The *Introduction to the TYP* gives a flavour of that approach. It reads:

As teachers and parents we know that our students have many talents and skills. Unfortunately they do not always get an opportunity to develop these because in following both Junior and Leaving Cert. examinations students are tied to their academic work, often being spood-fed by us teachers.

Transition Year changes that. Students get an opportunity to offload the confines of an exam-led curriculum – albeit for a year. In Transition Year they get the opportunity ‘to do things for themselves’ and ‘to learn by doing’. They gain valuable ‘hands-on’ experience - often learning more from their mistakes and defeats.

We recognise that students have more than one or two natural intelligences. In ‘normal’ school life only the logical-mathematical and linguistic intelligences are catered for.

In Transition Year we go further and attempt to develop the other, sometimes dormant, intelligences that a student has. By doing this we unlock a treasure chest of skills and resources that will stay with that student far beyond their school days. We strive to develop skills that will

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<sup>20</sup> Howard Gardner’s work around multiple intelligences has had a profound effect on educational thinking since the mid-1980s. An extract from his introduction to the 1993 edition of one of his books gives a sense of his thinking.

In the heyday of the psychometric and behaviorist eras, it was generally believed that intelligence was a single entity that was inherited; and that human beings – initially a blank slate – could be trained to learn anything, provided that it was presented in an appropriate way. Nowadays an increasing number of researchers believe precisely the opposite; that there exists a multitude of intelligences, quite independent of each other; that each intelligence has its own strengths and constraints; that the mind is far from unencumbered at birth; and that it is unexpectedly difficult to teach things that go against early ‘naïve’ theories that challenge the natural lines of force within an intelligence and its matching domains. (Gardner 1993, p. xxiii)

Gardner, H. (1993) *Frames of Mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition: London: Fontana Press.



see them through well beyond their Leaving Cert. Skills such as responsibility, initiative, time management and social skills. The extra year in school gives them that extra maturity to be ready for what life throws at them.

It is not always while students are ‘in’ Transition Year that they reap the rewards. It is after they have moved on into the Senior Cycle and are far better able to cope with subject and career choices.

The written programme proceeds to outline how their assessment system has been developed to recognise different intelligences. These include:

Project work, pupil presentations, oral presentations, written performance tasks, aural presentations, students self assessment, keeping a portfolio, work experience report, pupil log book, outside agency assessments, e.g. CERT and IHF,<sup>21</sup> year end interview.

The written programme then lists the TY subject areas. These are :

Gaeilge	English	Maths
History	Geography	Mini-company
Science	Music	Career Guidance
Work Experience	Art, Craft and Design	Engineering
Home Economics	Tourism Awareness	Leisure Activities
Media Studies	Personal Development	
Sign Language	French	German
Construction	ECDL*	

\*European Computer Driving Licence

Alongside the subjects listed, the programme highlights the cross-curricular activities that students engage in. These include:

- Gaisce – The President’s Award
- Law Module
- Young Scientist
- T.E.A.C.H (a cancer awareness programme linking Science, Physical Education and Home Economics)
- Co-operation Ireland Civic Link
- Cambridge Delegacy Examination
- First Aid and CPR
- County Enterprise Competition
- Enterprise Ireland
- Irish Hotel Federation
- CERT, Tourism Awareness Programme
- Form and Fusion Fashion Module
- Concern debates

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<sup>21</sup> Irish Hotels Federation

- Buddying – mentor system
- School magazine
- Healthkicks programme.

The programme content as outlined suggests a conscious effort to complement the Junior and Leaving Certificate programmes. For example:

- Home Economics includes Medicine and Diseases;
- History includes the role of women in society,
- Engineering emphasises curiosity, imagination, creativity, responsibility and communication;
- Geography uses continuous assessment for its European Studies module;
- Art Craft and Design includes the architectural module *Shaping Space*;
- The Gaeilge module uses the TG4 produced educational pack *Ros na Rún*;
- English looks at the work of Patrick McCabe and Roddy Doyle.

The approach has been to be open to staff, keeping them informed, inviting them to become involved in new developments, for example the end-of-year assessment interviews with TY students. Surely not everyone was so positive at the outset? The co-ordinator acknowledges this:

No, I suppose there were some who had been teaching for twenty, thirty, even forty years; some of them would have been less open to TY, at least initially, but they have now come on board.

### **Timetable**

Some of the imaginative thinking indicated above finds expression in the weekly TY timetable. Of the six schools in this study, here we see the most conscious effort to present subject/module titles as different from established JC and LC nomenclature. At the same time, these subject/module titles have a close affinity with more established subject titles e.g World History and Local Studies and Folklore with ‘History’, European Studies and Tourism Awareness with ‘Geography’, Civic-Link Programme with ‘CSPE’, Applied Science with ‘Science’, Outdoor pursuits with ‘PE’ and Enterprise with ‘Business Studies’. Furthermore, as already indicated, subjects such as Art, Craft and Design and Home Economics include some features very specific to TY.

The Maple School timetable is also an instructive model of a timetable designed for a single class group. The rotation and variation of modules and teachers, evident in larger schools in this study, is not possible when there is a single TY class group.

As has been seen from other data from Maple School, the students, teachers and principal emphasise the centrality of the particular co-ordinator in developing and sustaining the TY programme there. The timetable reinforces this with the deliberative, indicative first period on Monday morning that operates as a tutor class and the co-ordinator's involvement in teaching German, European Studies and ECDL as well as the Civic Link programme. Involvement with the latter programme also commits students and teacher to considerable work outside the normal weekly timetable, including cross-border visits to the corresponding schools (see <http://www.cooperationireland.org/>).

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
P1-40 mins	Co-ordination T1	Civic Link Programme T1	Gaeilge T7	World History T10	Tourism Awareness T10
P2-40 mins	Applied Science T2	Music T4	Media Studies T3	Local Studies & Folklore T10	Home Economics T4
P3-40 mins	Applied Science T2	Music T4	Maths T6	Maths T6	Home Economics T4
20mins	B	R	E	A	K
P4-40 mins	Media Studies T3	Maths T6	Applied Science T2	Sciences T11	ECDL T1
P5-40 mins	German T1	European studies T1	Guidance T3	Sciences T11	ECDL T1
60mins	L	U	N	C	H
P6-40 mins	Outdoor Activities T5	Gaeilge T7	European Studies T1	Enterprise T9	Art, Craft and Design T8
P7-40 mins	Outdoor Activities T5	Art, Craft and Design T8	Film Studies T3	Enterprise T9	Art, Craft and Design T8
P8-40 mins	Outdoor Activities T5	Enterprise T9	Home Economics T4	Art, Craft and Design T8	Art, Craft and Design T8

**Colour Codes** : Single period Double period Triple Period Teacher teaches more than one subject/module

Engagement with the Civic Link project outside normal class hours and the timetabling of the project for a single period on the timetable also suggests a conscious linking between classroom-based activity and extra-classroom projects, a feature not always evident in TY timetables.

The Maple School timetable is noteworthy in that afternoon classes tend to be very clearly geared towards activity-based learning, with the explicit recognition that such activities benefit from dedicated blocks of time beyond the usual 40-minute class.

### **Benefits**

As already indicated, the Principal highlights increased student maturity as one of the main benefits of the TY programme in Maple School. Both the Principal and the co-ordinator agree that there has been a great positivity associated with TY. It has been a very powerful public relations vehicle for the school. Through visiting speakers coming in to the school, through students going out on work experience, through mini-companies and through engaging with community projects, a new bond has been formed between Maple School and the town. The town and surrounding area is seen as an important resource for the school, according to the Principal, and in turn the community has an increased sense of pride in an achieving school. This is reflected in the numbers of parents opting to enrol children in Maple School rather than send them to schools outside the town.

One of the issues that this co-ordinator sees as arising from a very positive experience in TY surfaces in the LC course and that is the differences between those who have done TY and those who come directly from the Junior Cycle:

They are more mature. They are more settled. There are some that would find it difficult settling in to 5<sup>th</sup> year but that goes with the territory; after a month or so there is no problem there. They are more focused in what they want. They are better informed about their subject choices.

Teacher goodwill in Maple School was evident from the outset, according to the co-ordinator. In the first year of TY, she had wanted a weekly timetabled meeting of the four-person core group. This didn't happen so the group started meeting at lunchtimes and informally with each other. This, she adds, contributed to individuals taking specific responsibility for aspects of the programme such as work experience.

This co-ordinator emphasises consistently how positive the students in Maple School view the programme. Almost all of them have told her how pleased they are to have completed TY. She believes that its success results from the combination of the classes, the friendships, the maturity, the extra year, the shared experience. She points

out that some of the most important learning took place from something like a mini-company failure.

This co-ordinator is highly critical of the failure of the JC and LC programmes to promote interpersonal skills development. She is unequivocal about the need to make this a priority in TY. While relevant for all students, she relates it especially to academically high-achieving students who might study abroad:

We know students that are getting 6/7/8 honours and all the rest of it, but they have no interpersonal skills, no social skills. I know in some universities in England where they now require interpersonal skills before they go... I mean having gotten 600 points but with no bedside manner because you can't speak, can you be a brilliant doctor?

Hence, students are informed at the outset of TY that standing up and speaking in public is going to be a regular feature of the programme. She notes how at the start of the year so many students say, 'I couldn't do that, I couldn't stand up and talk.' She contrasts this with the experience the school has had each following March or April at the information session for parents of Third students. According to the co-ordinator:

They talk to these parents about TY and they do it brilliantly. By that stage they don't think twice about it. That's development.

### **Organisation within the school**

The Principal expressed great faith in the teaching staff to devise and implement an imaginative programme. He acknowledges that he is most fortunate in a small school as having a most resourceful, committed co-ordinator and so many teachers willing to be innovative. He contrasted this richness with the crumbling nature of the school buildings!

The co-ordinator is very clear that her role includes harnessing the expertise of the teaching staff. Highly respected by her colleagues, this co-ordinator encourages teachers to ensure that they get everybody involved, 'not just having the same delighted faces being heard all the time'. She states, with conviction, that practice in speaking in a variety of situations is a key foundation for developing autonomous young adults. She adds that sometimes it is much later, even 'when they have left school altogether that they really realise the advantages of TY'. She encourages teachers to develop classrooms where 'everyone's opinion is valued'. She

acknowledges that it has taken time for this to be appreciated, adding that, as well as addressing these issues at staff meetings, there have also been many informal meetings between teachers ‘over a cup of tea or coffee’.

While the co-ordinator in Maple School clearly believes strongly in TY’s potential for students, irrespective of their academic ability or socio-economic background, she is concerned that some students don’t seem to be able to cope with the increase in freedom associated with TY. In Maple School, there is a recognition that it can take ‘four to six weeks to settle in’. The co-ordinator believes that the adjustment for what she describes as ‘the more academic students’ can be especially difficult and so stresses the importance of an induction programme that addresses these issues explicitly. She contrasts the Junior Cycle experience where:

... for three years they go home with a big bag of books, do their homework, whether half an hour or three hours, and get the work corrected the next day.

with TY’s emphasis:

You give them a project, something they have to research, maybe two or three weeks to do it because we want them to learn how to manage time and meet deadlines

In her experience, students often initially miss the point of this change, seeing the ‘looseness’ rather than the discipline of personal organisation. However, teachers need to persist and in Maple School they believe that by the end of the TY process students are

... a year older, more wise, more mature, more focused, more settled and more able to deal with the demands of Leaving Cert.

A form of portfolio assessment operates in Maple School’s TY. The centrepiece of this process is an end-of-year interview by teachers with students. Data from students and teachers suggest that this distinct form of assessment is seen, in Maple School, as one of the distinguishing features of TY.

### **Students’ views**

An extra year to mature and an opportunity to engage in broader educational activities are among the main attractions of TY highlighted by students in Maple School. Growth in self-confidence and social skills, as well as improved LC results, also

figure prominently in their comments. Activities involving learning beyond the classroom, particularly trips, are seen as distinctive features of TY. A more participatory classroom dynamic, with teachers using more active teaching methods and assessment techniques, is more evident in Maple School students' comments than in any of the other five schools in this study. As in all the other schools, students remark favourably on how TY generates a different student–teacher relationship. Project work is seen as an essential feature of many subjects.

Students voiced some concern about classmates who might not be particularly well disposed to school in general and so don't engage fully with TY and may have a poor attendance record. The possibility of such students dropping out of school before completing a LC was mentioned on a few occasions, echoing concerns heard in particular in Beech School and Oak School, the two designated 'disadvantaged' schools in the study. At the same time, some students expressed a belief that TY can have a stabilising effect on behaviour as well as helping them focus on goals. For example

I'm a year older. All my mates (not doing TY), they're on report every week. They're all getting detentions and I know if I was with them, I'd be having the *craic* too, getting put on detention. I think I'm more settled for doing my Leaving Cert. I have work to do. We had career guidance this year. I want to do more. I want to get better results in my Leaving Cert.

Brian, 4<sup>th</sup> year, Maple School

### **Teachers' views**

Attitudes to TY among teachers in Maple School are the most positive of all six schools in this study. There is the least evidence of negative attitudes to the school's TY programme, though it might be added that Maple School has the smallest teaching staff of the six schools. There is 100 per cent agreement that 'TY gives students a broad educational experience', that 'Students develop well in the absence of examination pressure', that 'TY advances students' maturity', that 'Students are better equipped for a Leaving Certificate programme after a TY', that 'TY orientates students well to adult and working life', and that 'Students become more independent learners through TY'. 'Students become more motivated and self-directed as learners', 'TY assists students clarify career goals'. All of the teachers in Maple School agree that 'TY promotes teamwork among teachers'.

Teachers in Maple are also strongly convinced that ‘Students become more confident’, ‘Students’ thinking and problem-solving skills are enhanced through TY’, ‘Students develop technical skills’, ‘Students develop academic skills’, ‘Students become more socially aware’, ‘Students become more socially competent’(100 per cent agreement in each case).

Similarly, there is strong disagreement with the statement that ‘Students show little interest in TY’, or that ‘The TY programme has low status among students’, (100 per cent disagreement).

As regards the TY programme operating in Maple School, there is also unanimous agreement that ‘Our programme is well-thought-out’, that ‘Our programme is well-tailored to our students’ needs’, that ‘Our programme has breadth and balance’, that ‘Our programme presents students and teachers with good opportunities for learning beyond the classroom’, that ‘Our programme provides students with intellectual challenge’. There is also unanimity that ‘Our written TY programme is very good’, the only school without dissenters to this statement.

While assessment is an area of concern in most of the other schools, teachers in Maple School are enthusiastic. Ninety-one per cent agree that ‘I welcome the varied forms of assessment in TY’ and 100 per cent agree that ‘The assessment techniques used in TY are appropriate’. Thirty-six per cent agree and 64 per cent disagree with the statement that ‘Devising and operating new forms of assessment is difficult’.

As regards evaluation, there is 100 per cent agreement among the teachers in Maple School that ‘Our approach to evaluation is progressive’.

Ninety per cent agree with the statement ‘Teachers respond well to the freedom and flexibility to design relevant programmes’, while 82 per cent agree with the statement ‘I like the freedom and flexibility which TY offers.’

All the teachers in Maple School who completed the questionnaire state that they ‘like teaching Transition Year classes.’



As regards TY's impact on teachers' development, teachers in Maple School are unanimous in agreeing with the statement that 'Teaching TY promotes the professional development of teachers', that 'Teachers develop skills in TY which enhance their teaching in other years'. All of the teachers agree that 'TY promotes teamwork among teachers'. Faced with the statement 'Teachers find mixed-ability classes difficult', 81 per cent disagree while 81 per cent agree with the statement 'I like teaching mixed-ability classes'. Eighty-two per cent agree with the statement 'Teaching TY has helped my development as a teacher.' There is 90 per cent agreement with the statement 'I like using active teaching and learning methodologies.'

Ninety per cent agree that 'Students who follow a TY programme achieve higher results in the Leaving Certificate than those who don't'.

Eighty-two per cent disagree with the statement that 'Teachers would prefer a 3-year Leaving Cert. programme', while 90 per cent disagree with the assertion 'I would prefer a 3-year Leaving Certificate programme'. The idea of a written syllabus for their subjects elicits more contrasting viewpoints among the teachers at Maple School, 40 per cent agreeing, 40 per cent disagreeing with 20 per cent regarding themselves as having 'no opinion'. However, 80 per cent disagree with the statement 'I would prefer a prescribed syllabus for my subject.'

Another clear division of opinion is also evident regarding resources, with 45% agreeing and 55% disagreeing that 'Teachers find that there is a lack of resources for TY.'

As regards TY's standing, 100% of Maple School teachers disagree with the statement 'The programme has a low status among teachers'.

Looking forward, 70 per cent agree with the statement 'I would like more time for planning TY classes with colleagues', and 80 per cent with 'I would like more in-service training for TY'.

All of the Maple school teachers agree that ‘Parents of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students are well informed about TY’ and ‘Parents are kept well informed about activities and events during TY’. No one person surveyed agreed with the statement ‘class sizes are too big.’

### **Parents**

Maple School publishes the findings from its annual evaluation of TY. Parents’, students’ and teachers’ comments are made available to Third year students and their parents to assist them in deciding about following a TY programme. The format is a clear question and answer one, e.g.

Question. *If you could change anything about TY what would it be?*

Sample student responses:

1. Classes like Maths could be made more interesting.
2. More Career Guidance.
3. Nothing. It was brilliant. I wish I could do it again. I wish I paid more attention to the mini-company.

As can be seen in the section of this study that looks at parents’ views, many telling insights emerge from the focus group discussion with six parents associated with Maple School. These parents appeared generally well informed about TY and expressed particular confidence in Maple’s School’s programme, frequently identifying, by name, the co-ordinator as centrally responsible for TY’s energy, variety, relevance and effects. Imaginative out-of-school learning opportunities combined with academic and social development are regarded as contributing to greater all-round maturity, improved LC performances and a more focused approach to career and future planning.

### **Charges**

TY students in Maple school pay €50 in September to cover photocopying, insurance and book rental. The school does not seek any voluntary contribution. Trips during TY are largely funded by the students themselves, with the school subsidising the cost of some of the bus trips while asking students to pay a nominal amount of about €2 each.

TY students organise a non-uniform day and a car wash to raise funds to support TY activities. Approximately €400 was raised in this way in 2005-06.

### **Additional issues**

One of the striking features in Maple School is that some of the difficulties associated with TY are acknowledged as challenges to be overcome. For example, there is a strong consensus that their TY programme is effective in meeting its goals; does this not make it more difficult to teach Fifth and Sixth year classes with their mixture of students, some of whom have not been through a TY experience? The Maple School's co-ordinator, perhaps reflecting the school's small size, sees all classes in terms of 'mixed-ability':

You are going to be teaching mixed-ability anyway. It is not caused by TY. It's just more marked.

This view is echoed in the Maple School teachers' responses to the statement 'Teachers find mixed-ability classes difficult', with 81 per cent disagreeing with it, the highest percentage of the six schools.

The co-ordinator, as indicated above, found that time constraints have militated against a weekly timetabled meeting of the four-person core group. However, the co-ordinator appears to be effective in maintaining a sense of team by lots of short informal meetings with colleagues. In a small school, individual timetables tend to have less flexibility than in larger schools. Principal and co-ordinator continually refer to the staff's willingness to commit beyond the minimum. They also recognise that this can only operate with high levels of goodwill and mutual trust and, over time, could wane and sag.

### **Overall impact of TY in this school**

Principal, co-ordinator and teachers in Maple School are in strong agreement, that TY has been very instrumental in increasing the school's positive profile locally.

According to the co-ordinator 'to say it was good for public relations sounds calculating and it wasn't; it was as if TY just spilled over into the community and of course that community connection is an important feature of TY'. In the teacher questionnaire, one of the teachers echoed many of the individual remarks made by colleagues with the following comment:

Students' results have improved at LC level. They are very mature, co-operative students at senior cycle. Great additional achievements are made through TY creating great publicity for the school. This attracts new students as TY is very well run and parents are pleased with its success.

Teacher 10, Maple School

### **Summary**

Maple School is an example of a relatively small school offering an imaginative, engaging and effective optional TY programme. There is extensive evidence that students, teachers and parents value highly what has been developed. A wise and enabling Principal, a staff prepared to take risks and a very visionary co-ordinator have combined to develop a programme that appears to meet students' needs well. The Maple School community sees the positive publicity generated by TY activities as enhancing its standing within the wider local community. As a small school with poor physical facilities, building such a reputation has been a priority for the school overall. Thus, as in the other five schools, adapting and, in this case projecting, TY to fit with the school's thinking about itself, 'domesticating' it, is also evident here.

Students' views are particularly positive about the programme, especially the opportunities to travel outside the local region and the distinctive form of end-of-year assessment devised by the staff. Particularly striking are the opinions of Fourth, Fifth and Sixth year students that teachers in TY classes engage in active methodologies. The greater opportunities for student participation in class and the improved relationships between students and teachers feature strongly in the Maple School students' comments.

The teachers in Maple School are particularly well disposed towards the school's TY programme. Even though TY is optional in Maple School, there is a strong sense of whole-staff involvement in the programme. Parents express confidence in the programme and appear keenly aware of the effectiveness of the particular co-ordinator.

### ***Oak School***

Oak School is a voluntary secondary school for girls, founded over half a century ago by a religious congregation with a strong educational tradition. The school's student population in 2004 was just below 400, having previously been well in excess of that. The drop in enrolment reflects local demographic trends. The school serves an urban community consisting mainly of local authority houses built in the 1950s. Some additional housing stock was built in the area in the 1990s.

Between 80 per cent and 90 per cent of the students in Oak School complete senior cycle. The Principal believes that the introduction of the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) have contributed directly to this level of retention in a school designated 'disadvantaged'. In the school year 2002-03 the teaching staff consisted of 33.5 whole time equivalents.

In a recent school publication, the Principal described the school as a vibrant one 'with lots of activities taking place on a daily basis involving academic, sport, cultural participation in competitions, fund-raising for deserving charities, preparation for life and the world of work'. He notes that their inspiration comes from the founder of the Order that established the school 'who regarded education as the development of the whole person, that is the academic, spiritual, physical and social growth of the individual'. Oak School does not look for a voluntary contribution from parents. It runs a book rental scheme successfully, with students contributing €45 per annum. Oak School also operates an adult education programme as part of the Department of Education and Science's *Back to Education* initiative.

#### **Introducing TY**

In 1994, when Oak School introduced Transition Year, the Principal was a teacher on the staff. He became the first TY co-ordinator and held that position for three years. His recollection is that TY was an innovation that was generally supported by him and his colleagues:

I suppose it was a general staff decision that we should try it. So we did... Possibly the most common thing would have been retention of numbers. We were in a situation where the schoolgirl population was beginning to

decline... There were other things like the benefits it would have for students. We felt strongly at that time that if we were going to set it up, then we should set up a good programme. This whole business of a 'doss year' was very much in vogue at the time.

When the then Principal asked him to act as co-ordinator he agreed, but on conditions:

I agreed but I did ask that I get two teachers that I could pick as a co-ordinating team, as it was as part of a whole team approach. We did that and we planned the programme.

In order to ensure that the TYP not be seen as a 'doss year', the planning team decided that there would be some focus on preparation for the Leaving Certificate. They wanted students to be able to sample all LC subjects. Activities such as work experience and community work were also considered important. The Principal describes the latter as *high visibility* activities, important for the public image of TY. The planning team also decided that regular homework would be a feature of the programme.

The current co-ordinator was also a member of that 1994 planning and co-ordinating team. He has taught Geography and Mathematics in TY and, in his own words, has 'grown into the role' of co-ordinator. Asked to describe staff attitudes to TY at the time of its introduction, he replied:

I would say definitely enthusiasm among the staff. We have a very enthusiastic staff. We have always taken on new ideas with all the courses that have been thrown open to us. We have always gone for them very enthusiastically, actually getting involved. Maybe when it came closer to actually opting for teaching in TY, there may have been a little bit of difficulty around that. Maybe some people preferred to stay with, let's say the 'straight teaching', that is teaching their own subject rather than getting involved in something new.

The co-ordinator adds that those who got involved initially were people whom he describes as 'joiners, people who would get involved in anything throughout the school'. In his opinion, 90 per cent of the staff could be described as 'joiners'.

### **Programme – distinctive features**

The school's website describes TY as 'a special one-year course available to all students between Junior and Senior Cycle – to help them explore their own potential and develop a responsibility for learning and decision making'.

Initially, Oak School staff decided to put a cap of 25 places on the TYP. Students applied and were interviewed. According to the Principal, 'academic ability wasn't an issue but motivation was; we wanted to ensure that the students themselves were interested in it'. His recollection is that the co-ordinating team 'put a lot of effort' into getting the programme together. Some students in that initial group thought it was 'great'. Others, he recalls, found TY difficult, especially the emphasis on project work and deadlines of two, three or four weeks. He points out that the teaching team was also on a sharp learning curve and there was an element of learning by trial and error. The Principal sees the school as having built on its experiences:

I think we still have the same focus and I think we have definitely got better at it. I feel at this stage that we have a very good co-ordinating team... They are the three key people if you like, but I think all the teachers that are involved in it have bought into it very well and I think the focus has always been more or less the same but we definitely have got better at what we are doing.

Principal and co-ordinator both identify the core-team, with regular scheduled meetings, as a critically important factor in the development of TY in Oak School. The Principal also highlights continuity of vision. Of the three people on the initial core team, the first co-ordinator went on to become Principal, a second succeeded him as co-ordinator for three year before becoming the school's first Home School Community Liaison Officer, while the third became the next co-ordinator.

The co-ordinator notes that the emphasis on 'team' has been an important one from the start and that decisions about TY are team decisions. However, he says that he sometimes feels there is a tendency on the part of the rest of the staff to say: 'We have got a good team. They will do everything. We will just do our bit.'

Oak School evaluates the TY programme regularly. The school has a scheduled staff meeting every Wednesday from 12.30 to 1.00 p.m. and 'a sprinkling of these throughout the year' are dedicated to TY. According to the co-ordinator, each year they 'drop the bits that haven't worked'. His view resonates strongly with that articulated by the Principal:

I suppose at this stage we are very experienced and we have a fair idea of what works and what doesn't.

He adds that feedback from the students highlights the ‘practical hands-on’ dimension: work experience, community work, mini-company, outings, and *Jump for Joy*. The latter is an event that is linked with raising money to support the work of the Children’s Hospital in Crumlin, Dublin.

I suppose it’s a fund raising event, but the preparation that goes into it beforehand and the organisational skills that are developed make it very educational. We hand over responsibility to them, more or less. We give them a bit of guidance and they take it from there. They come up with the ideas.

He expands enthusiastically about the power of learning beyond the classroom and is keen to link it with the sampling of a wide range of subjects.

They are just back from work experience and there is a great buzz around. You can see the difference when they come back from work experience - the confidence they gained in mixing and dealing with adults for a fortnight. The classroom side of things is obviously very important as well because we put all subjects on offer. That’s a very strong point of the course. I feel that it helps them make a decision at the end of TY as to what they want to go on and do in Fifth year because they have tasted all the subjects.

### Timetable

The timetable in Oak School, particularly when compared to that in Ash School or in Chestnut School, illustrates some of the challenges associated with offering TY to a single class group.<sup>22</sup>

This timetable can be seen as built of four distinct layers:

1. The Thursday afternoon Tutor class as a class to assisting students make sense of the TY experience.	2. Twelve of the remaining 40 periods (30%) are given to English (5), Maths (4) and Irish (3), often seen as foundational subjects.	3. Eighteen periods, that is 45% of the additional time, is given to subjects that students might select for the LC, adding a major sampling dimension to this TY programme: French (3) Biology/Geography (3), Business (2), Music (2), History (2), Home Economics (2), Chemistry (2) and Art (2). In addition to sampling, this provision can also be seen as adding to the breadth of the educational experience.	4. Finally, the remaining 25 per cent of time does not have any obvious direct connections with the LC. There is a single period of Guidance, 3 periods of EC DL, <sup>23</sup> a double period of Religious Education, a double period of Dance, and the Wednesday morning session of Community work.
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<sup>22</sup> After more than a decade of single class TY programmes in Oak School, sufficient students have opted for TY in 06-07 to enable the school to have, for the first time, two class groups.

<sup>23</sup> European Computer Driving Licence



	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9.00	Guidance T1	* Biology T8 * Geography	Home Econ T12	* Biology T8 * Geography	Maths T6
9.40	Religious Ed T2	Irish T5	Home Econ T12	Chemistry T13	ECDL T9
10.20	Religious Ed T2	Business T9	English T3	Chemistry T13	ECDL T9
11.00	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK
11.15	English T3	English T3	Community Wk T1	French T10	English T3
11.50	Dance T4	ECDL T9	Community Wk T1	Art T14	French T10
12.25	Dance T4	French T10		Art T14	History T11
Lunch					
13.50	Irish T5	Music T10		Business T9	* Biology T8 * Geography
14.30	Maths T6	Maths T6		Maths T6	Irish T5
15.10	English T3	History T11		Tutor Class T11	Music T10

**Colour Codes** : Single period Double period Teacher teaches more than one subject

\* denotes half year of one module followed by half year of the other.

The sampling layer includes one very distinctive timetabling feature of the TY programme in Oak School, what the co-ordinator describes as ‘a back-to-back system’. This is where students sample one subject (Biology) for half the year and then a totally different subject (Geography) for the second half. For this to work in practice the same teacher has to teach both modules. While this would be unlikely for many subject combinations, the arrangement is a good example of how options can be increased, even when there is a single class group, by imaginative consideration of teachers’ teaching subjects.

Sometimes the criticism is made that promoting TY as a space for sampling LC subjects leads to a ‘turn-off’ by students who believe they already know what subjects they wish to pursue in Fifth and Sixth years. When questioned about this, the co-ordinator’s response emphasised the importance of breadth in learning:

We don’t actually have a problem. I think it’s because we don’t tackle items on the Leaving Cert. course. We stay well away from it. We teach the subject so that it has got a value in itself. Because, tempted and all as

you might be, there is no point as these people might not be doing Leaving Cert Geography.

As in each of the other five schools in this study, Oak School sees the weekly timetable as being complemented by calendar items such as blocks of work experience, outdoor pursuits, a musical, a trip to the Gaeltacht and the *Jump for Joy* project.

### **Teacher–student relationships**

The student data in this study highlight how students see an improvement in the relationships between students and teachers through TY. Excursions outside the classroom appear to have been especially significant in altering young people's perceptions of and attitudes to their teachers. The co-ordinator's views reinforces this from a teacher's perspective.

The teachers get the opportunity to get to know them. The pressure of exams isn't there, I suppose. With the Junior Cert you are going in and you are piling stuff on. There is more opportunity to get to know them as people in TY, again because of all the outings: we have our Gaeltacht trip, a weekend that's a great starter, we have our trips to X Forest Park'

He explains that X is the place where Oak School conducts much of its TY induction programme each September. He regards this as particularly successful. Some initial classroom-based induction is followed by the PE teacher bringing students to X and doing orienteering, some canoeing and other activities to assist the students get to know each other, focus on the year ahead and start building up an *esprit de corps*. The co-ordinator adds that over the years Oak School has worked hard at getting the balance between external, outside-the-classroom, activities and what goes on in classrooms on a day-to-day basis 'reasonably right'.

### **Project work**

The co-ordinator points out that one of the particularly important developments since the introduction of TY in Oak School has been an end-of-year exhibition of student project work. From the outset, students are aware that they will have to make a presentation in front of their parents and teachers at the end of the year. The school has also developed a system of portfolio credits and certificates associated with the exhibition. This exhibition provides an important motivating focus and has become one of the 'high visibility', distinguishing features of Oak School's TY.

In the evolution of the programme some modules were replaced but the Principal thinks that the main development was that teachers got better at managing projects. He cites the regional member of the TY support service and local in-service workshops as being especially helpful:

M (member of the TY support service) would have been in to us on a fairly regular basis. I think teachers learned a lot from that. We would also have had various meetings within the school.

The co-ordinator recounts a particular staff workshop with M that got everyone focused on project work, adding that this support has been very valuable in the development of Oak School's TY and also good at 'keeping us in shape'.

### **Co-ordination**

At the time of the interview, this co-ordinator was five years in this role, having been previously a member of the core team. Asked whether he felt 'burned out' by the demands of the job, he didn't hesitate in responding:

No! No, because it's different than in other schools, because of the team. We share the work. The work is shared. I suppose I would say we are a team rather than one person. Unlike other schools as well, we have somebody (else) looking after the work experience, so I don't have to worry about the work experience which is a huge part of it.

In Oak School the Guidance Counsellor co-ordinates the work experience dimensions of TY, LCA and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme(LCVP). The Guidance Counsellor herself, while acknowledging that this adds significantly to her workload, believes it is a most valuable part of her work and builds a platform for focused career guidance in Fifth and Sixth years.

### **Staff development**

Both Principal and co-ordinator believe that TY has been good for the staff's professional development. They emphasise the broader view of education that TY promotes. They add that the introduction of a co-ordinator for the TY programme was not only a good development in itself but also a good model for subsequent developments such as the LCA and the JCSP.

**Students' views**

Third year students interviewed in Oak School indicated various levels of uncertainty about whether they should apply to do TY or not. On the one hand they had heard stories about maturity, interesting projects, trips away from school, fun with the teachers and they frequently spoke of the need for a 'break' after what they described as a very, examination-focused, stressful year. At the same time, there were fears about being separated from friends who would go straight on to a LC programme, about girls who said it was a waste of time, about spending an extra year in school, and about dropping out of school before reaching the LC. The following comment captures some of the frustration a Third year student can experience.

My Mam doesn't want me to do it. And my Dad is in two minds. He has asked me what it's about and what I would choose and stuff, but my Mam doesn't want me to do it... My sister did it and she never went to do her Leaving Cert, I think that's the major part in Mam's (fears)... She did all of TY. She did all Fifth year, but when she got to Sixth year she couldn't hack it anymore she just said that. So I don't know.

Noleen, Third year, Oak School

As in Beech School, the other designated disadvantaged school in this study, these students and their older counterparts value the encouragement from teachers to consider doing TY.

For the TY students in Oak School, getting to know classmates better and improved relationships with teachers feature strongly in how they see the benefits of TY. They also believe that they have matured, become more organised in working on their own towards deadlines, and developed a greater sense of responsibility. Activities outside the conventional classroom such as work experience, community work, trips to the Gaeltacht, outdoor pursuits and a Céilí appear strongly appreciated, both as activities in themselves and as opportunities for bonding with classmates and teachers. Some said that the most negative feature of the year was that some students opted out of taking responsibility for any work – in class, on projects and when away from the school and then, added one student, complained that TY was boring!

The Fifth and Sixth year students in Oak School who were interviewed expressed very strong opinions about TY. Perhaps more than any other students in this study, they voiced a belief that they themselves had matured, grown in confidence, become more self-aware, more assertive and had developed much better relationships with

their teachers through the TY experience. Asked to suggest which particular components of TY might have contributed to this, their responses were multi-layered. Some emphasised to out-of-school activities such as musical, trips (a prize won by a Sixth year student in an essay competition was a trip for the whole class to the European Parliament in Strasbourg), community service, work experience. Many contrasted their TY experiences with those in Junior Cycle. They tended to describe the latter in terms of stressfulness whereas TY, and subsequently Fifth and Sixth years, were different because the student-teacher relationship was better.

Some specifically spoke about what they called active learning which they understood as involving greater student participation, in classwork, in debating, in expressing opinions, in performing in public, in being given and in taking greater responsibility, in interacting with classmates, teachers and those outside the school community. Practical activities – international cookery, project work, mini-company, the *Jump for Joy* project – were strongly appreciated by many. Some specifically identified the TY co-ordinator and his care for students as a critical factor in making TY a valuable experience.

These Fifth and Sixth year students were also very frank about how uncertain they were when in Third year about whether to follow the TY route or not. They remembered very clearly the mixed messages that came from peers, parents and teachers. A number made particular mention of how they were swayed by the encouragement from particular teachers, a point that has emerged quite strongly in the two schools in this study designated ‘disadvantaged’ (Oak School and Beech School) and not, apparently, very much in the other four.

The senior students in Oak School were also the most critical of classmates who, in their opinion, had not engaged sufficiently in TY. They cited not ‘pulling their weight’ in mini-companies, not completing projects in time (or at all, as evidenced by the varied portfolio of certificates received by some at the TY graduation night) while at the same time ‘moaning that TY was a waste of time’. They also voiced some frustration about the immediate post-TY experience when Fifth year classes, in their opinion, includes highly motivated students who have completed a TY alongside those who have just completed their JC and regard this year as their ‘lull year’. They

indicated that such a wide range of attitudes to schoolwork led to tensions among the students themselves. They added that teachers sometimes commented on the different levels of maturity among Fifth and Sixth year students and that some remarked how easy it was to identify those who had completed TY. The Sixth year students supported this view by remarking that the Debs Committee was composed mainly of former TY students.

### **Teachers' Views**

Seventy-two per cent of the teachers in Oak School who completed the questionnaire state that they like teaching TY classes. 66 per cent like the freedom and flexibility which TY offers and 78 per cent state that they like using active teaching and learning methodologies. These teachers are unanimous that TY gives students a broad educational experience, that TY advances students' maturity, that students develop well in the absence of examination pressure and that students are better equipped for a Leaving Certificate programme after a TY. There is also unanimous agreement with the statements that TY orientates students well to adult and working life and that students become more independent learners through TY.

Teachers in Oak School are also unanimous in the view that their programme is well-thought-out, has breadth and balance, is well-tailored to suit students' needs and is well co-ordinated. All also indicate that their programme presents students and teachers with good opportunities for learning beyond the classroom and that students become more confident.

There is unanimous disagreement with the statement that students show little interest in TY and majority disagreement with the assertion that the TY programme has low status among students or among teachers. There is unanimity that students become more socially aware, more socially competent and that TY assists students clarify career goals.

A majority of these teachers agree with the statements that the programme provides students with intellectual challenge, that the school's written programme is very good and that students who follow a TY programme achieve higher results in the LC than those who don't. A majority also regard Oak School's approach to evaluation as

progressive. There is strong agreement with the statements that students develop academic skills, technical skills, become more motivated and self-directed as learners and that students' thinking and problem-solving skills are enhanced through TY. A majority agree with the statements that teachers respond well to the freedom and flexibility to design relevant programmes, that teachers develop skills in TY which enhance their teaching in other years and that TY promotes teamwork among teachers.

While a majority welcome the varied forms of assessment in TY, 67 per cent agree that 'devising and operating new forms of assessment is difficult'. There is unanimity that the assessment techniques used in TY in Oak School are appropriate.

There is majority agreement with the statements that parents of Third year students are well informed about TY and that parents are kept well informed about activities and events during TY.

Views about some other aspects of TY in Oak School are more mixed. While a slight majority disagree with the proposal that teachers would prefer a three-year LC programme, almost a quarter agree and nearly another quarter choose to express no opinion. Opinions as to whether teaching TY promotes the professional development of teachers vary. There is almost an even split among those who agree and disagree with the statement that teachers find mixed-ability classes difficult, though 56 per cent indicate that they like teaching mixed ability classes. Views as to whether teachers would prefer a prescribed syllabus for their subjects are also divided, with half the respondents disagreeing with this statement. There are diverging views in response to the statement that teachers find that there is a lack of resources for TY.

Eighty-three per cent of teachers in Oak School would like more time for planning TY classes with colleagues and 67 per cent would like more in-service training for TY.

### **Charges**

In Oak School TY students are asked to pay €130 each year towards the cost of all additional TY-related activities.

**Difficulties – issues**

When pressed, the co-ordinator admits, reluctantly, ‘if we were to pick out a problem, a slight problem’ it might be that some teachers might not be quite as serious about certain subjects, for example Irish and Maths, as there is no examination pressure. He illustrates this with a useful example. If there is something else going on during the day in school and teachers need to find time, for a meeting or whatever, a TY class is the most likely one to be hit:

Teachers look up their tabletables to see, ‘Can I manage this; can I manage that,’ and invariably you might hear, ‘Yes, I have TY at that time. I can manage it.’ That attitude tends to lend to a bit of scrappiness in the classroom. You could find students maybe having a free class, occasionally. It doesn’t happen to a great degree but it does happen.

He adds that ‘not rushing to class on time’ is another manifestation of a similar attitude. This opens up the particularly delicate area of the relationship between the TY co-ordinator and his or her teaching colleagues. For example, is part of the co-ordinator’s role to check on colleagues, say in relation to the written programme for TY?

It’s a difficult one for the co-ordinator. I find it difficult because, I mean, I am working with these people everyday, you know. I manage to get a written programme but with some difficulty. I look for these things at the beginning of the year but, once I don’t come on a very regular basis annoying them, they seem to accept my role.

What if there is a written programme but the co-ordinator gets a sense that in some classes the learning is not particularly active or exciting or that the class is not doing what is written down? This co-ordinator sees such issues being addressed at a few levels. Towards the end of each year there is an evaluation of the programme. The core team also makes suggestions for the following year’s programme and passes these to the Principal. The suggestions would include preferences about which teachers might teach particular subjects. He observes that the core team also picks up messages from students:

... about teachers who wouldn’t be turning up on time, a teacher who would be sitting in the staffroom drinking coffee when they are supposed to have whatever. Obviously that’s militating against what we are trying to avoid, this word ‘doss’, I mean this ‘doss year’. People have been talking about this ‘doss year’ a long way back. I think we have finally shaken it off in the last number of years. So I think it is very important to keep the students busy, with very regular timetables.



**Difficulties in Fifth Year**

Students and teachers in Oak School consistently highlight the maturing effects of TY. Improved student-teacher relationships also feature strongly. Asked whether this has any impact on Fifth year classes where only some have completed TY, the responses are frank. The Principal says that ‘it does make it a bit difficult because, to some extent, – inevitably – there are two sets of relationships in the classroom’. He notes that even teachers who haven’t been teaching TY report that they will know almost immediately who has done a TY, because of their increased maturity. Manifestations of such maturity are seen, he says, in a more engaged participation in class, an independence and a willingness to undertake homework assignments.

The co-ordinator talks about a ‘huge gap’ in Fifth and Sixth year classes between the maturity and motivation levels of those who have done TY and those who have not. The latter group often also include students ‘who want to get out as quickly as they can’. He talks about the ‘chemistry’ in any Fifth or Sixth year class:

It depends very much on the balance in the class. It must be awful where in some of the option subjects where you have one or two of the TY students and where they are in the minority. I am lucky in the group that I have in Geography where the TY students are in the majority. That is probably good then for the weaker students because they are pulled along...

**Recruiting students**

As with the majority of schools in the country, TY is optional in Oak School and, organisationally, the Principal indicates that there is an annual headache resulting from uncertainty about numbers opting for TY. There are related consequences for other options at senior cycle, including subjects for LC. He himself thinks all students could benefit from a TY and is keen to emphasise that the year is open to all, irrespective of academic ability. He is very aware of the way students can talk to each other, influencing them to choose or not to choose TY:

I find that no matter how good we think a TY programme is, you still have things going on in the background: people talking to each; other kids asking them what are you doing; it’s almost like it can spring one way or the other.

The co-ordinator also highlights the sense of uncertainty and vulnerability that arises from TY being optional in a community without a strong tradition of formal education:

We need to get a fair sized class group and we have to push for that every year. The worry is that we won't get our 25. The year before last we had two groups. OK, an exceptional year. We could be pushing it hard again this year, unfortunately, to get our 25... there are all sorts of pressures out there, not to mention the pals. Then there may be a troublemaker in a (Third year) class and the word gets out that she is going to do TY and so others will say, 'No, I can't, I won't.'

### **Informing Parents and Students**

Asked how he might present the programme to a sceptical parent, the co-ordinator replies as follows:

One, that it's a very good preparation for the senior cycle as far as we do give them a taste of all the subjects in the Leaving Cert. curriculum. Therefore, they are far better able to make subject choices than they would be, say, at this stage of the year (February) in Third year. I think that the work experience and community work gives them an opportunity to meet with adults in the community. It gives them a better sense of responsibility and better communication skills. The extra year just in itself is a great maturing factor... The teachers will tell me that when they go into a new Fifth year class in September, and it's a mixture of some who have been in TY and some who have been in Third year, they know immediately who has done TY, and it's about maturity.

Early in the second term the school organizes an information night for all the parents of Third year students. The co-ordinators of LCA, LCVP, TY, and the Guidance Counsellor all makes presentations to the parents. There is strong encouragement to do TY, adds the Principal. He estimates that the turnout represents about 60 per cent of the students' parents. The same presentation is made to all the Third year students, during schooltime on the following day. There is also a general staff meeting where the staff goes through each Third year student by name, asking for teacher opinions as to who might benefit from TY. Next the Guidance Counsellor interviews each Third year student about her options. She reports to students what teachers think they should do. Each interview lasts approximately 30 minutes. Both Principal and Guidance Counsellor believe that this is very effective use of the counsellor's time. If the students are opting for Fifth year the school policy is to telephone the parents and invite them to come in to the school to talk to about it, making the point that it is the staff view that the student would benefit from TY. According to the Principal:

In some cases, the parents just say straight away 'No, we don't want her to do TY, end of story.' In other cases they come in and at least talk and in some cases they would change their minds.

One wonders whether in this process, some teachers might put forward reasons why particular students should not do TY. The Principal says that sometimes students with particular behavioural difficulties might be discouraged from doing TY, but academic ability would never be used to exclude anyone. As he recalls the early years of the programme he recounts that ‘we went for more good ability students’. These were not necessarily academic high flyers but they were people whom teachers were confident were motivated and going to work. He acknowledges that there is a real dilemma in assembling a group of TY students. On the one hand if you recognise the maturing effect TY can have it suggests that those likely to benefit most are the least mature. However, on the other hand, too many immature students ‘can wreck a TY’. This Principal believes a school needs a critical mass of motivated students to ensure that the year holds together. He describes this as a mixture of idealism and realism. He says that as a staff they might discourage one particular group from TY: those who might have difficulty staying in school. They would generally direct these students to do the LCA. There might be four or five such students in any year, he estimates, ‘less than five per cent’.

According to the Principal as the school staff’s confidence about TY has grown, especially as they observe the students’ increased maturity. And the attitude of parents has become more positive. He sees a changed attitude at the information nights for parents of Third year students.

I remember the evening information nights... going back, maybe four or five years ago. You would get a lot of negative stuff coming from the floor about the fact that it is a ‘doss year’, that they would get out of the habit of studying, that they are spending an extra year in school which means that the way the parents put it, it is ‘a year’s money gone’. Now I haven’t had that at all, for the last two years certainly.

There is still some concern among parents, he suggests, less now about the programme itself and more about a fear that the student might drop out of school before completing the LC.

The Principal adds a further dimension into the discussion regarding parents’ attitudes:

I am not too sure. One of the problems is that all too often parents will leave the decision to the kids. That is one thing I am always trying to

impress when I meet parents here: ‘Don’t leave the decision to the child. She is only 15, you know. At least talk to her about it. Discuss it with and look at the pros and the cons.’

The co-ordinator also expresses a perspective on parents’ attitudes:

Their attitudes are very good when the year is over. When the year is finished the parents will be telling us what a great year it was. We meet parents again in Fifth year at a parent–teacher meeting or whatever and they tell us what a great year it was and how it benefited their daughter and so on. You know, they speak very highly of it. But trying to get parents’ attitude right before the kids come into TY, that’s tough enough.

He adds that, in some cases:

...they are in a hurry to get their daughters out earning. They are in a hurry to finish school, basically, and this extra year they don’t see as any use... That’s strong around here in the area. We are in a disadvantaged area. It would be very strong.

As noted in the section in this study on parents’ views, the parents from Oak School were keen to talk about the effects of TY on individual students and hesitant about making generalisations about the programme, frequently citing their lack of detailed knowledge about TY. However, they demonstrated a keen awareness that the programme in Oak School was ‘busier... better planned... more varied’ than those on offer in neighbouring schools. The fear that an extra year in school might lead to some students dropping out prior to completing a LC was also a concern for many of these parents. As with the parents interviewed in the other school in this study (Maple School), the views of parents from Oak School point to the importance of parents being convinced that the particular TY which their son or daughter will participate in is taken very seriously by the school.

### **Overall impact of TY of the school**

Looking at the impact of TY on the school as an organization the Principal of Oak School says:

I think it has helped develop a new pool of skills within the staff. It opens up teachers’ minds to new ways of doing things. I think it has very positive benefits for the students who do it. Those who do it know this themselves when they come to Fifth or Sixth year. I think it has a very, very positive impact on the school.

And as one of the teachers remarked:

Very positive. TY activities often energises the rest of the school.

Teacher 47, Oak School

### **Summary**

Oak School is an all-girls school, designed ‘disadvantaged’, serving an established urban community. The decision in 1994 to offer TY was partly a pragmatic one in the face of a declining school population. Strong leadership, particularly a forceful co-ordinating team, appears to have enabled the school to develop a TY that makes a definite difference in the lives of the students who opt for it. Principal and co-ordinator both point to the staff team developing the school’s specific programme by regular and frank evaluations, each year dropping ‘the bits that didn’t work’. Students themselves speak highly of their own personal and social development through the TY experience. Within classrooms, project work and a particular emphasis on active participatory approaches to learning appear to be especially effective and, when linked with the extra-classroom learning activities, contribute to a markedly different character of relationship between students and teachers in Fourth, Fifth and Sixth years compared to that in the Junior Cycle. The opportunity to sample LC subjects during TY is seen by students, teachers and parents as leading to more informed choices of LC subjects.

A keen awareness of the annual difficulty in recruiting sufficient students to make up a single TY class and of the mixed attitudes of students and parents to a six-year cycle is evident. Furthermore, the restrictions imposed on timetabling due to a single class group are also appreciated. A number of significant ‘calendar’ items complement the weekly timetable and students speak enthusiastically about work experience, community service, musicals, outdoor pursuits, trips inside and outside Ireland. Teachers in Oak School generally indicate positive attitudes to TY.

Notwithstanding the above, Oak School has to work particularly hard to maintain student and teacher morale regarding TY. Real challenges are identified by students, teachers and the school leadership regarding teaching Fifth year classes, where mixed levels of motivation can be evident among those who have completed TY and those who have completed JC.

### ***Sycamore School***

Sycamore School is a community school developed in the early 1990s on the site of a former voluntary secondary school. According to the school's mission statement, Sycamore School 'provides an educational setting in which the person is encouraged to grow at every level – personally, academically, spiritually and culturally'. Students come from predominantly rural, agricultural backgrounds. A co-educational school, Sycamore School had, in 2004, an enrolment of over 600 students drawn from about different 18 primary schools.

#### **Introducing TY**

Sycamore School has an advisory Board of Studies elected by the staff that meets on a monthly basis. The decision to engage with Transition Year was discussed initially by this group in 1994. Each member of the eight-person committee then consulted with colleagues – there were about 43 on the staff at the time – and reported back with suggestions about a TY programme. The decision was to 'run with it' but there were reservations. According to the Principal:

There was a lot of feeling against it, that it was going to be a 'doss year'... We went down the line of making it as academic as possible in the sense that we would gear it to students who had high ambitions, who were young, and who weren't sure of their subject options or their career choices at fifteen years of age or sixteen; they would be encouraged to take the TY. And we would make it as academic as possible in the sense that the Irish, English and Maths we would break down into pass and honours and we would concentrate on the languages, especially the oral parts.

The Principal says that they didn't have all the structures they would have liked in place to operate the first TY and that there 'was so much going on at that time', but that he believes this is where leadership comes in:

We decided to go for it, because that's the kind of staff we have; that's the type of guy I am: if I see something good, if I think it's good for the students, then go for it.

Back in 1994 when offering the programme as an option for the first time, no one knew how many students might opt for it. In the first year there were about 45 students, about 40 per cent of the cohort. This percentage has remained fairly constant

in Sycamore School. Two class groups usually emerge from a cohort of about 120 completing the Junior Certificate.

Even though classes at junior cycle in Sycamore School are arranged on a mixed-ability basis, ability-based grouping operates in the core subjects in TY, reflecting the academic emphasis the school wished to give TY from the outset.

Initially, teachers were given autonomy to shape their own courses:

Back in '94 we gave them very, very basic guidelines. The Deputy Principal and myself decided on the core elements of the programme, in the sense that we had an engineering module, a home economics module, a sports module and English, Irish, Maths, Geography, those types of modules. And we left it more or less to the individual teacher to draft up the actual course content.

During 1996, the staff devoted an in-service day to drawing up a specific core element for each subject. This was drawn up by subject departments and the idea was that no matter who was teaching the subject, this material was to be covered.

The Principal recalls that when they initially looked for volunteers to teach TY only two or three came forward. Consequently, teachers were allocated to teach the programme on an availability basis.

### **Distinctive features of TY**

Looking back on the school's experience of TY, the Principal was emphatic that TY has to be taken seriously. He rates project work very highly. 'Learning how to work and research on one's own is a great skill for life', he adds. He states that the ability to monitor students' project work closely is an important consideration when allocating teachers to the programme. If a teacher gives out project work and then waits for, say, six weeks to see what students have done, the Principal believes very little work will result. He says that some teachers don't put as much emphasis on correcting TY students' work as they would for an honours Leaving Certificate class and so he would like to see more continuous assessment in TY. The Principal adds that he has become a great believer in LCVP since its introduction into Sycamore School. He favours particularly its value 'as an eight subject' in the LC.

He also sees age as an important consideration for those considering TY. He points out that in the area served by the school there is a strong tradition of starting children in primary school at four years of age. One consequence is that many are only 17 years old when sitting the LC exam. He adds:

The way I sold the TY to the parents is: they are too young to go and do the Leaving Cert; they need a 2 ½ year Leaving Cert... The NCCA document (*Developing Senior cycle Education, Consultative Paper on Issues and Options*) seems to be moving in that direction.

Recent data relating to participation in TY in Sycamore School are as follows:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of students sitting JC examination</b>	<b>Number opting for TY</b>
2000	104	40
2001	112	37
2002	121	37
2003	127	37
2004	130	48
2005	118	46
2006	134	38

The Principal says that while a strong academic emphasis is a feature of the school's programme, the classroom atmosphere in Fourth year is relaxed. He emphasises the opportunity for students to explore their potential and lay solid foundations for LC:

I think the students would see themselves as testing themselves. Am I able for honours English? Am I able for honours Maths? And at the end of TY they'd either opt for honours Maths or be a very good pass student.

So far, he says, this has not led to difficulties in fifth year classes where teachers are faced with some students who have come straight from third year while others have been through a TY with a strong academic emphasis.

I don't think (it's an issue). The people doing TY are honours standard material in most cases and then they really love going back over things a second time.

Asked if the academic emphasis means that teachers are inclined to stay with a traditional academic approach, the Principal points to a number of in-service days



related to teaching and learning and says that he has been impressed by teachers' openness to change. He cites the use of technology, particularly web design work, field trips in Geography and mini-company as examples of more active learning in action.

Over forty teachers are involved in the TY programme in Sycamore School. In presenting the programme to parents in 2003, the school listed the following features:

1. More informed decisions regarding career
2. Allows student to mature
3. Allows students to prepare for working life – this included an invitation to parents to become involved in the provision of work experience, work shadowing or 'any other initiative you might have'
4. Broaden their outlook on life – school trips, theatre, museum, Newgrange and one major European trip were mentioned
5. 'Catch up' on core subjects
6. TY programmes. The list included the following

Chemistry	Irish	English	French	German	Business Studies
Accounting	Maths	Physics	History	Geography	Art
Communications	Religion	Computers	Music	Mini-company	Keyboard skills
Personal Development	Careers	First Aid	Swimming	GAA Coaching	

As TY has developed, learning activities beyond the classroom such as swimming, football, First Aid, tennis, excursions to third-level colleges as well as trips to other parts of Ireland and abroad have become central to Sycamore School's TY. According to the TY co-ordinator:

Yes, it's a big thing now. I would go as far as saying that if you didn't have a trip you wouldn't have a TY. I suppose it's kind of a group thing; they like going off together as a group.

Many of these more innovative activities are timetabled for Wednesdays and it was clear from the student interviews that they see this day as a distinctly TY one.

### **Timetable**

As has been noted in the other school profiles, a school's weekly timetable is a key manifestation of its vision for the TY programme. The timetable in Sycamore School is a good example of a mix of timetabling strategies. The co-ordinator meets all TY students each morning for a 10 minutes assembly. The presence of two class groups is

used to divide some parts of the TY programme into half-year modules. This can be especially effective when it comes to sampling LC subjects, e.g. History/Geography, Chemistry/Physics, French/German; Art/Home Economics, Music/Business Studies. An extra provision of Learning Support classes for selected students is offered parallel to the French/German modules.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8.50	Assembly T1*	Assembly T1	Assembly T1	Assembly T1	Assembly T1
9.00	TY1 Accounting T2 TY2 Technology T1	TY1 Geography T3 TY2 History T4	TY1 English T19 TY2 Computer Studies T20	TY1 Mathematics T17 TY2 Mathematics T18	TY1 English T19 TY2 English T6
9.40	TY1 Accounting T2 TY2 Technology T1	TY1 Computer Studies T5 TY2 English T6	TY1 Art T21 TY2 Home Economics T22	TY1 French T13 TY2 German T14 Learning Supp T15	TY1 Irish T9 TY2 Irish T10
10.20	TY1 Geography T3 TY2 History T4	TY1 French T13 TY2 German T14 Learning Support T15	TY1 French T13 TY2 German T14 OR * EXEN T15	TY1 Religious Education T24 TY2 Keyboard Skills T25	TY1 SPHE** T28 TY2 Religious Education T24
11.00	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK
11.10	TY1 Computer Studies T5 TY2 English T6	TY1 Communications T6 TY2 Communicatons T16	TY1 Geography T3 TY2 History T4	TY1 Music T7 TY2 Business Studies T8	TY1 Art T21 TY2 Home Economics T22
11.50	TY1 Computer Studies T5 TY2 English T6	TY1 Communications TY2 Communicatons T16	TY1 Mathematics T17 TY2 Mathematics T18	TY1 Irish T9 TY2 Irish T10	TY1 Music T7 TY2 Business Studies T8
12.30	TY1 Music T7 TY2 Business Studies T8	TY1 Mathematics T17 TY2 Mathematics T18	TY1 Accounting T2 TY2 Technology T1	TY1 Career Guidance T1 TY2 SPHE** T26	TY1 Keyboard Skills T25 TY2 Environmental Studies T29
13.10	LUNCH BREAK	LUNCH BREAK	LUNCH BREAK	LUNCH BREAK	LUNCH BREAK
14.00	TY1 Irish T9 TY2 Irish T10	TY1 Chemistry T11 TY2 Physics T12	TY1+2 Physical Education T23	TY1 English T19 TY2 Computer Studies T20	TY1 French T13 TY2 German T14
14.40	TY1 Chemistry T11 TY2 Physics T12	TY1 Irish T9 TY2 Irish T10	TY1+2 Physical Education T23	TY1 Mathematics T17 TY2 Matheamtics T18	
15.20	TY1 Chemistry T11 TY2 Physics T12	TY1 English T19 TY2 Computer Studies T20	TY1+2 Physical Education T23	TY1 Environmental Studies T27 TY2 Career Guidance T1	

Colour Codes : Single period Double period Triple period Teacher teaches more than one subject

- Ten minute daily meeting with TY co-ordinator
- \*\* SPHE = Social, Personal and Health Education

Courses for many other parts of the programme run for the full year with a particular mixed-ability class group, e.g. English, Computer Studies, SPHE, Environmental Studies, Career Guidance etc. Irish and Mathematics classes are grouped together on an ability basis and run for the full year. As already indicated, a triple period on Wednesdays is devoted to a range of activities timetabled as Physical Education. Within the TY programme, 29 different teachers are timetabled and a typical student is likely to be taught by about 19 teachers.

### **Benefits of TY**

Sycamore School operates a prefect system in Sixth year. Every year, the vast majority of those selected are past TY students. The Principal sees this as the fruit of the investment teachers make in TY and the opportunities than there are for taking responsibility, for example with projects, musicals, artwork, PE and so on. He sees TY as contributing not only to the senior cycle but to the life of the school in general.

They (TY students) would be better known to the teachers. Other students in the school look up to them. When they go into fifth year and on into the Leaving Cert. year they are good workers, they are very nice and easy to get on with, they have a nice easy disposition, and they are respected.

This Principal believes that a direct benefit of TY in Sycamore School can be seen in Leaving Certificate results:

I think it has pushed up our results. There is no question but it has increased our Leaving Cert. results.

He sees this operating at a number of levels. Obviously the students are older and more mature. The struggle to stay with an honours course is not as great when students do TY. Those who do, say, ordinary level Maths are more likely to get As and Bs than Cs and Ds. Increased language fluency is evident in subjects like French and Irish. It also boosts their confidence. A culture of achievement builds up. Those who have done TY set an example to others and the achievement level of everybody in the class is, according to the Principal, raised.

The co-ordinator sees the opportunity for students to sample LC subjects as a very beneficial feature of TY. For him a major benefit arises from the time students have to clarify personal goals and career options. He also appreciates the opportunities presented by TY for teachers to be imaginative and inventive.

As already indicated, the Principal in Sycamore School has a strong belief in the power of project work. Among the benefits of this he sees greater independent learning and academic self-confidence. The approach is:

... to get students to fulfil a personal challenge, to come up with a project, to do a project and finish it, to do research... We kind of tell them that if you are going to third-level, no matter what you are going to do, you are going to go into a library yourself, pull down books, get what you want out of them, read an argument for or against something, so coming to be independent learners... I think students who give TY the effort it deserves go into Fifth year and on into Leaving Cert not afraid to tackle an extra textbook in relation to something in biology or geography or whatever.

The co-ordinator identifies improved relationships between students as a further benefit of TY. He describes the TY group as 'small and intimate', adding that trips outside the school seem to have a strong bonding impact, with students developing strong friendships with the group.

### **In-school organisation**

Since its introduction, Sycamore School has had three different TY co-ordinators. The Principal sees the ideal co-ordinator as someone who is a good communicator, someone who can relate effectively to teachers, students and parents. He says that each co-ordinator brings his or her own particular emphasis. For example, he praised the office holder who had been four years in the position at the time of the interview, for bringing a distinct career focus to Transition Year.

This co-ordinator had previously taught various TY classes, all with a practical slant. He is a teacher of woodwork and social studies who has also been involved in teaching mini-company in TY. He believes that he benefited from in-service on mini-company in particular. He believes that practical teachers are especially well-suited to co-ordinating programmes like TY where there is a strong emphasis on active learning. He remarks:

I know at this stage in my life what people are capable of doing in a 40-minute class. All woodwork teachers have got caught over the years, classes carrying over time and things like that. We think we are going to make these lovely, beautiful things and next thing you find a 40-minute class is only 30 minutes. And if it takes me 30 minutes to make something, it might take a student 60 minutes to make it... so, you have to know how to manage time.

This co-ordinator contends that getting the balance between ‘pressure’ and ‘relaxation’ is difficult. He values the more relaxed approach to TY compared to other years as this is appropriate for a programme dedicated to personal and social development. He captures one of the dilemmas of TY when he remarks:

(Students) need time to reflect on school in general and they won’t do that in the pressurized situation.

However, at times the co-ordinator feels that some attitudes are too relaxed. Teachers who are very focused on academic achievements may not always value activities primarily designed to promote personal and social development. The co-ordinator’s feelings that TY is pushed a little to the margins in Sycamore School reflect some of the tensions between a programme with a focus on personal development sandwiched between public examinations that are perceived as ‘academic’. He explains:

In our involvement with TY I am not sure if we are a pure TY, in that we do keep a lot of the academic subjects on board... Maybe we are afraid of it more so than anything; we are afraid to bring in something that is completely off the strict ‘forty minute subject’. Now I feel it is working pretty well from the Leaving Cert. point of view. If nothing else they seem to be more mature. We hear scare stories from other schools where people have lost the study element completely. So you can understand why we stick to the tried and tested timetable system. But sometimes I feel that students might benefit more from a more workforce type environment.

Invited to expand on how ‘being pushed to the margins’ might manifest itself in practice, he cites the school policy regarding homework, where students who don’t deliver homework are pursued. This does not happen in TY. He also remarks that it is a regular sight in Sycamore School to see teachers in the staffroom and elsewhere with large bundles of copies to correct. He suspects that this is rarely work from TY students.

This co-ordinator believes that the relationship between TY and the established LC is a most important issue for all schools. The ambiguous nature of this relationship was identified in the first evaluation of the programme back in the late 1970s (Egan and O’Reilly, 1979) and continues to be a distinctive tension. He says:

I wouldn’t like it to be a three-year Leaving Cert. I am not saying it is or it isn’t. I think there are a lot of things in it... but take Maths: I have spoken to a good few (teachers) and they said they found themselves doing maybe

Leaving Cert. Maths nearly too soon. They said the students were still struggling with Junior Cert, material. So, I would like to see us revisit the Maths programme; maybe for half the year to strengthen the basics.

The co-ordinator, who has a strong belief in the potential of TY, admits to some frustration in getting teachers focused on developing the programme. Subject departments tend not to be involved in designing the components of the programme.

He says:

Definitely, I would say each teacher, as opposed to each department, writes the programme

Furthermore, this co-ordinator is very frank about the obstacles co-ordinators can face when trying to get colleagues to commit to paper what they are doing in TY classes. For example, in response to a question as to whether having two class groups and two different teachers leads to two different programmes in some subjects, he says that 'the short answer is yes'. He would like to see the school move towards more of an agreed programme. He values the document *Writing the Transition Year Programme* (TYCSS, 1999a). Asked whether prior to this there were difficulties getting the programme written down, he responds:

Yes, that was a hassle but I think, in fairness, the reason it was hassle is because we didn't have the core template. If we had the core template it wouldn't be a problem.

As with a number of other co-ordinators in this study, the co-ordinator in Sycamore School appeared much more comfortable when talking about co-ordinating student activities than when responding to questions relating to colleagues and their roles in TY.

### **Charges**

The 2003 brochure distributed to parents included the following statement:

Because of the extra-curricular activities, trips etc. that are organised, additional expenses above the normal school year may accrue. This generally does not come to more than €100 which is distributed throughout the year.

€50 is collected from students in the April prior to TY. A further €50 is collected in September at the start of TY. This fund goes, for example towards the hire of buses

for trips to bowling, visits to universities and other third-level colleges during the year.

### **Students' Views**

Students in Sycamore articulate a broad range of opinions about TY. These are very evident in the chapter on student views. Third year students in Sycamore school tend to emphasise the break from what they see as the pressure of the Junior Certificate and its contrast with the rest of the school cycle. For example:

It's a year in-between. It's different from all the other years. It's a year you do different subjects you have not done before and you get to know the teachers better, and the teachers respect you a bit better. There is an awful lot of projects, and study.

Eamonn, Third year, Sycamore School

TY students themselves speak highly of the programme, in particular the bonds established between each other, the improved relationships with teachers, the opportunities for subject sampling and career exploration, for language improvement in key subjects, the trips abroad and trips to centres like universities and Institutes of Technology. Work experience and mini-company are seen as especially engaging and worthwhile.

Fifth and Sixth year students contribute a rich variety of comments and insights. Their comments resonate strongly with the perspectives articulated by Fourth year students. Some tend to distinguish more sharply between the experiences in some TY classes (activity-based, democratic, with lots of discussion) and others (more traditional approaches, textbooks and 'teacher talk'). Some voice a concern that perhaps the potential of TY was not as well realised as it might have been, particularly within classrooms where, in the opinion of some, teachers tended towards more traditional teaching methods.

Students say that, compared to other years, teachers are not as strict on homework in TY. They suggest more trips or even a greater spread of the trips throughout the year. Some would like more time devoted to learning outside the classroom, particularly Physical Education. Some students mentioned that TY, especially the trips, adds a big extra cost for families.

**Teachers' views**

In Sycamore School the teachers are unanimous that TY orientates students well to adult and working life, that students become more confident and that TY assists students clarify career goals.

A majority agrees with the statements that TY gives students a broad educational experience, that students develop well in the absence of examination pressure and that TY advances students' maturity. There is also majority agreement that 'Students are better equipped for a Leaving Certificate programme after a TY'. A majority agree with the statement that their school's programme is well-thought-out and well-tailored to students' needs. There is also strong support for statements such as 'students' thinking and problem-solving skills are enhanced through TY (67 per cent), 'students develop technical skills' (73 per cent), 'students develop academic skills' (67 per cent), 'students become more socially aware' (66 per cent), 'students become more socially competent' (86 per cent).

Sixty-seven per cent of the teachers who completed the questionnaire indicated that they like teaching TY classes. Eighty per cent agreed with the statement that 'teachers respond well to the freedom and flexibility to design relevant programmes', 67 per cent with 'teachers develop skills in TY which enhance their teaching in other years' and 60 per cent with 'teaching TY promotes the professional development of teachers'. This enthusiasm for the creative possibilities in TY appears to be consistent with the 60 per cent who disagree with the statement 'I would prefer a prescribed syllabus for my subject', though only 53 per cent agree that 'teaching TY has helped my development as a teacher'.

The responses suggest that Sycamore School might be the site for some lively debate among teachers regarding teaching mixed ability classes as 33 per cent agree that 'teachers find mixed-ability classes difficult' while 47 per cent disagree. Furthermore, 60 per cent agree that they like teaching mixed-ability classes. However, 80 per cent of teachers agree with the statement 'I like using active teaching and learning methodologies.' A majority agree with the statement that students become more independent learners through TY.



Sixty per cent of the teachers in Sycamore School disagree with the statements that 'students show little interest in TY' and 60 per cent also disagree with the statement that 'the TY programme has low status among students'

Alongside strong levels of agreement, many of the statements in Sycamore School attract consistent disagreement from about a quarter of the teachers. A telling indicator is that while 54 per cent of teachers believe that TY has a low status among teachers, 33 per cent disagree with such an assertion.

For example, 60 per cent agree with the statement that students who follow a TY programme achieve higher results in the Leaving Certificate than those who don't. While a majority disagree with the statement that teachers would prefer a three-year Leaving Cert. programme, a surprising 40 per cent of the teachers in Sycamore School ticked the 'no opinion' box. When asked a similar question about themselves as individual teachers, 60 per cent disagreed with the statement 'I would prefer a three-year Leaving Certificate programme', 13 per cent agreed with it and 27 per cent ticked the 'no opinion' box. As regards a prescribed syllabus for their subjects, again there is evidence of diverging viewpoints, with 40 per cent agreeing and 47 per cent disagreeing.

Seventy-three per cent of the teachers in Sycamore School regard their programme as having breadth and balance. A similar percentage views the programme as presenting students and teachers with good opportunities for learning beyond the classroom. The question of whether TY provides students with intellectual challenge is one of the most contested ones in Sycamore School, with 46 per cent agreement, 33 per cent disagreement and 20 per cent opting to express no opinion.

Differing viewpoints emerge in relation to whether 'Students become more motivated and self-directed as learners'. Fifty-four per cent agree with this statement while 27 per cent disagree and another 20 per cent opt to express 'no opinion.' 80 per cent disagree that 'class sizes are too big'.

60 per cent agree with the statement that teachers find that there is a lack of resources for TY. At the same time, another 60 per cent are of the view that TY promotes teamwork among teachers.

Divided opinions, thought not as stark, are also evident in relation to assessment. Sixty-seven per cent regard the assessment techniques used in TY as appropriate, with 20 per cent expressing disagreement and seven per cent 'no opinion'. 60 per cent agree that 'devising and operating new forms of assessment is difficult'. Perhaps significantly, 80 per cent of Sycamore School respondents indicate that they welcome the varied forms of assessment in TY, though one of the additional comments was:

Our assessment techniques need to improve.

Teacher 110, Sycamore School

Mixed views among the teachers in Sycamore School are also evident as regards evaluating the school's TY programme. 40 per cent agree that their approach is progressive while 40 per cent disagree with 20 per cent ticking the box for 'no opinion'. One of the teachers (107) added a comment that an annual review is needed.

Looking ahead, 67 per cent of the teachers in Sycamore School agree that 'I would like more time for planning TY classes with colleagues' and 66 per cent would like more in-service training for TY.

### **Parents' views**

As already indicated, the Principal in Sycamore School sees parental resistance to TY as the main reason why there are only two TY class groups. The possibility of dropping out from school before the LC is seen as the main fear.

Sixty-six per cent of teachers agree with the statement that 'parents of Third year students are well informed about TY' while 67 per cent agree that 'parents are kept well informed about activities and events during TY'.

The co-ordinator is of the attitude that parents in Sycamore School, whom he describes as 'good conscientious parents who make their kids do TY in the first place' have not a great record at turning up to parents-teacher meetings; less than 50 per

cent. He thinks that quite a few parents see TY 'as kind of on the margins'. This attitude is passed on in turn to the students, he adds.

The brochure distributed at the TY information night in March 2003 devoted six pages to responding to 'Difficulties perceived by parents in relation to Transition Year'. This includes 'some myths dispelled (it's not a doss year; students don't lose the habit of homework; not too old). Some strong arguments against repeating the LC (as an alternative to TY) are put forward and a newspaper article from the *Irish Independent* 11<sup>th</sup> January 2000 is appended (*Transition Year as good as repeat Leaving for results*). Finally, extracts from a TYCSS brochure 'Some Recent Research', published in 1999 are also included.

### **Other issues**

Initially Sycamore School targeted TY at students who were younger, unclear of their career paths and with high academic ambitions. While emphasising that TY is an option, the message communicated, according to the co-ordinator, is: if you don't know what you want to do or don't feel mature enough, then Transition Year can help you. The data from the student interviews suggest that this broad message does get through.

Both Principal and co-ordinator would like to see numbers in TY increase. Teachers generally indicate a positive view of the programme, though a number emphasise that for some students a direct move from Third year to Fifth year is desirable.

The Principal identifies a variety of factors at play in Sycamore School influencing the TY take-up rate. He cites student peer leadership and parental attitudes as especially influential. For example;

... if one person who is a dominant character in a class decides to do it, they pull a good few with them. But, equally, if such students decide they are not going to do it, they would take a large chunk with them... Parents in rural Ireland, I would say, have to be convinced. They have a question mark over it. We brought in parents to 'sell' it, and we still didn't increase the numbers. We brought in past pupils that actually did the TY and that didn't sell it. It's the fear; number one, the fear that the young boy or girl won't stay in school if they do TY; that they will be bored with it; that they'll go along and do half of Fifth year or maybe not start off Leaving Cert. year. And we had experience of that.

This Principal notes that student and parental attitudes together can generate strong resistance to the extra year in school. This power of the ‘folklore of the schoolyard’ in shaping attitudes to TY is also evident in other schools in this study.

It can be difficult in Sycamore School to get some students to opt for TY. The Principal, in a very frank way, points out that two of his own children went through the school and ‘they didn’t want to know about it’. He reflected (in 2003) that the school had probably been presenting Third year students with the option of TY too late:

We have decided that we will start next year with the present second years before they leave second year. During different talks with parents, even when enrolling, I mention TY, that they are going to have to look at this six-year cycle because to do the Leaving Cert at seventeen they are competing against students taking the Leaving at nineteen and twenty and they have to be aware of that. But we don’t really do anything else about it until three weeks before they have to make their decisions... Even if we went to the Third years last September, we would have probably had low figures.

Interviews with students point towards decisions regarding TY being made, in many cases, prior to entering Third year.

The co-ordinator in Sycamore School also points to parental influence as a factor as regards which students do or don’t do TY. He says that the differences in maturity between boys and girls is quite obvious at this stage. This co-ordinator believes that more boys could benefit from TY:

You have very nice young fellows, very cooperative and everything but lacking a little bit of focus, not focused actually. The girls seem to be more focused... and more likely to take on responsibility.

So far, the various TY classes in Sycamore School have had a good gender balance, according to this co-ordinator. Generally TY is open to all students although he adds:

But if you have a poor track record in Third year, you would be discouraged from doing it. And the reason for that is, basically, they felt that it could mess up things in TY. There is so much freedom that you don’t need people who are going to be loose cannons wandering around.

The co-ordinator points out that they have found inviting Sixth year students to talk formally to Third year students about the benefits of TY can be very effective. He thinks that some of the real benefits of TY become evident in that final year at school.

There hasn't been much collective staff discussion about TY in Sycamore School.

According to the Co-ordinator,

I think a lot of the problem is because only half of the staff are teaching it, so it's very difficult to fit it in to staff meetings. When somebody like L (from the Support Service) is talking to 25 people about TY, what do the other 25 do?... The other reason, I suppose, unfortunately TY is still seen as the tail end of things; it's a year out; it's on the margins. I notice this in the homework, in the attitude by teachers, parents and students to homework.

### **Summary**

Partly driven by fears of TY being seen as a 'doss year', Sycamore School put a strong academic emphasis in its optional TY programme from the start. The school would like to increase its intake into TY but senses strong resistance from students and parents. The co-ordinator believes that more boys in particular could benefit greatly from the personal and social development that TY facilitates. Dealing with a predominantly rural population, the Principal detects strong pragmatic concerns in the community concerning a six-year second-level cycle, especially the potential impact of an additional year on drop-out rates in Fifth and Sixth years.

As with the other five schools in this study, Sycamore School has 'domesticated' TY, adapting and shaping a programme that fits with its own vision of itself as a school, its students' perceived needs and its understanding of the views of the community it serves. In this case the emphasis is unashamedly academic, with students and staff regarding the opportunities to sample LC subjects, to 'test themselves' about their capacities for honours levels at LC and to enhance oral language skills as important dimensions. Since TY was introduced into Sycamore School, those who participated in the programme have tended to set academic standards for the whole school and demonstrate positive leadership among the student body. For example, they have been strongly represented among the Sixth year prefect group.

Students in Sycamore schools have positive attitudes, in particular, towards subject sampling, the career orientations within the programme, the bonds that develop among students, the trips and other activities that involve learning beyond the classroom.

TY is an issue of some contention within the staff in Sycamore School. In responding to the questionnaire, a majority of teachers in Sycamore tend to agree with many of the statements about the positive effects of TY. However, in some cases up to a quarter of the teachers surveyed held an opposite view. In particular, the programme's status within the school, the level of intellectual challenge posed by the programme and views about TY's relationship with the LC appear contested. Overall, the teachers in this school indicate a very broad spectrum of attitudes to aspects of the TY programme.

Resistance by some parents to TY is put forward as one of the reasons why a majority of students in Sycamore School opt for a five-year cycle, without TY. Peer influence is another.

## CHAPTER 7

### Synopsis of Attitudes to Transition Year

Following the brief from the Department of Education and Science (DES) to research attitudes to Transition Year (TY) ‘in a small number of schools where TY is well regarded’, extensive data were generated from students, teachers and parents about the programme. The perspectives of students (Chapter 3), teachers (Chapter 4), parents (Chapter 5) have been presented. These have been followed by six school profiles (Chapter 6) that, collectively, demonstrate the implementation of TY in different contexts. The instruments used in the data gathering can be consulted in Appendices 2 and 3. Reading and interpreting the data can be informed by an account of TY’s origins and development (Chapter 1) and the methodology used (Chapter 2).

This chapter attempts to isolate key data from the previous four chapters, painting, in broad brushstrokes rather than in fine detail, the pictures to emerge from the different perspectives on TY. The intention is to give an overview of the main themes emanating from the data and to set the scene for the discussion that follows in Chapter 8.

Data-gathering was shaped by the original question:

- What are the attitudes of the critical actors - students, teachers, parents and school leaders – towards TY?

and the four related questions

- How have schools interpreted and implemented the programme as set out in *Transition Year Programme – Guideline for Schools*?
- What do the various actors regard as the outcomes of TY?
- If schools implement TY differently, what factors are at play, and why?
- What effects does TY have on the life of the school, and, conversely, what impact has the culture of a school on TY?

Just as curriculum development, school development and teacher development are symbiotically related (Callan, 2006), similarly attitudes to TY, the implementation of the programme and the relationship between TY and the rest of school life are closely related. Hence, while this chapter is arranged partly to reflect the original questions, it also attempts to capture some of the inevitable overlap between the topics and themes.

### **Dominant attitudes to TY**

Overall, the students, parents and teachers in this study indicate predominantly positive attitudes towards TY. However, there are important variations among and within these categories.

Students interviewed during the course of a TY emerge as most enthusiastic about the programme, frequently contrasting their experiences with those of their Junior Cycle years. Their Third year peers tend to be poorly informed about TY and may have made up their minds about participation in TY well in advance of Third year. Young people in Fifth and Sixth years, while sharing many of the positive views of TY students, sometimes reflect an awareness of a tension between the broad education for maturity (in TY) and the demands of the LC and the associated points system.

Parents are also well disposed towards the programme. They tend to be reluctant to make generalisations about TY, often restricting their observations to what they observe in their own sons and daughters. They value, in particular, the perceived effects of greater social confidence and competence brought about by TY. Those interviewed indicated a hunger for more information about the details of, and rationale for, TY programmes.

Teachers were the most nuanced in their comments, frequently tempering their enthusiasm for the *idea* of TY with what they see as major challenges in implementing it. Teachers are particularly positive about the outcomes for students and about the impact TY makes on school life.

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### **Attitudes of Third year students**

The views from Third year students may be regarded as significant because, as yet with no direct experience of TY, their attitudes are most likely to reflect broad public



perceptions about the programme. Generally, across these six schools, Third year students tend to contrast TY with their current reality which they describe, to varying extents, as a highly pressurised year where they perceive teachers as strongly focused on the Junior Certificate examination. Their information about the merits or otherwise of TY tends to be quite impressionistic, though often quite insightful, and shaped by rumour and hearsay – the folklore of the schoolyard – rather than factual detail. Any negative impressions associated with TY can be picked up by JC students and used to support a preference for not following TY. The prevalence of such attitudes can have a direct impact on behaviour, most noticeably the decision whether or not to undertake TY. The majority of those interviewed had already made up their minds about doing TY or not, suggesting that decisions about doing it or otherwise seem to be made by many students earlier than Third year.

Decisions by peers appear to influence some young people's decision to opt, or not, for TY, highlighting the power of 'the folklore of the schoolyard'. However, what individual teachers say, formally and informally, can also be significant in influencing individuals. This was most evident in the two schools designated 'disadvantaged', Beech School and Oak School.

### **Attitudes of TY students to the programme**

The overwhelming message from students interviewed in the six schools during the course of their TY was that it was a very positive experience. Many contrasted TY favourably with the three years of Junior Cycle, often describing Third year in particular as a pressurized, stressful year. Many appreciate the freedom from examination pressure in TY. They believe that they benefit from TY in terms of growth in their own maturity, confidence and ability to perform in a variety of social settings. Students regularly report work experience placements, mini-company and excursions beyond the classroom as among the most significant and most enjoyable features of TY. Indeed, many student comments resonate loudly with the original articulation of the rationale for TY in 1974 by the then Minister for Education, Richard Burke, TD.

TY students offer similar evidence to their Third year peers regarding the influences that shape decisions to undertake or not undertake TY. Again, local folklore –

anecdotes, incidents and broad impressions – are quoted extensively. The reported quality of the experiences of previous TY students within a particular school appears to carry significant weight. The reported role of parental influence on the decision to do TY or not seems to vary quite widely. For example, some students stated strongly that ‘the decision was left up to me’ while others indicated that there were heated discussions and debates within the family prior to deciding on TY. The data support and extend the finding by Smyth et al. as regards reasons for taking TY:

In general, students in the case study schools decided to take the Transition Year programme because it provided a break from exam pressure and allowed them the space to think about their Leaving Certificate options and sample a range of different activities.  
(Smyth et al, 2004, p.45)

### **Attitudes of students in LC classes**

While reinforcing many of the observations made by Fourth year students’, those in Fifth and Sixth years tend also to make a number of additional points about TY.

According to Fifth and Sixth year students, the TY aim of developing personal and social competence is realised quite concretely in perceived improved relationships between students themselves during TY. In particular, excursions beyond the classroom are seen as strengthening bonds between students. Students state that more effective project work and better classroom discussion are among the consequences of these improved relations among students, though some are quick to point to the practical difficulties in working in groups and teams.

Like their Fourth year counterparts, many Fifth and Sixth year students identify TY as a time when they felt their opinions could be expressed freely and where they were listened to by their teachers. Some also spoke more about TY in terms of personal freedom and becoming more responsible for their own learning. A shift towards more active, engaging forms of learning is detected, though students perceive this as more evident in some subjects than in others. Subjects or modules that were regarded as different from those studied in Junior Cycle tended to be well regarded as were opportunities to sample subjects with a view to informing students’ choices for LC. However, ‘continuity’ or ‘linear’ subjects, that is those subjects that have already been

studied in JC and will be continued on to LC, were spoken of by students in all six schools in the least positive light.

### **Parents' points of view**

Parents were interviewed in two of the six schools. They indicated that their knowledge of the programme was limited. This was particularly evident among those parents whose children had not done TY. In contrast, 87 per cent of teachers believe 'Parents of Third year students are well informed about TY', and 81 per cent of them agree with the statement 'Parents are kept well informed about activities and events during TY.' This appears to be a striking difference in perceptions.

While the parents in Maple School and Oak School were positive about TY's contribution to their children's development, some concern about two possible negative outcomes were voiced. Firstly, there was apprehension that TY could drift from 'an academic focus'. Secondly, in Oak School – one of the two schools in the study with 'designated disadvantaged'<sup>24</sup> status – parents voiced concerns that, having undertaken a TY, a student might leave school before completing the LC.

In Oak School, parents also expressed some frustration, contrasting what they saw as a most worthwhile TY for their daughters with ones of a poorer quality for their sons.

Generally, parents expressed confidence in the TY programmes in Maple School and Oak School. They tended to identify TY very closely with the co-ordinator, speaking in very warm, appreciative terms about these two teachers in particular. Both sets of parents highlighted the variety of learning situations outside the classroom – trips, musicals, fund-raising projects etc. – as valuable opportunities that enabled their children to relate to each other and to their teachers in more varied ways than within conventional classrooms.

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<sup>24</sup> In May 2005, the Minister for Education and Science launched a new plan for educational inclusion: *Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS)*. The new School Support Programme prioritises 150 second-level schools. Beech School and Oak School are included in that DEIS list.

### **Teachers' perspectives**

Because there are so many facets to the TY programme within a school it was decided to survey teachers' perspectives across an extensive range of issues. A detailed questionnaire (Appendix 3) elicited views on more than one hundred aspects of TY. The evidence points to teachers generally agreeing strongly with the aspirations of TY, recognising how many young people benefit from the programme, particularly in their personal and social development, but with a sophisticated range of reservations about aspects of the reality in practice. The high levels of agreement regarding particular statements have to be taken in the context of six schools all of whom had TY programmes that were 'well-regarded'.<sup>25</sup> Teachers' attitudes towards student outcomes and towards some features of programme implementation feature in later sections of this chapter. The detailed tables in Chapter 4 and the accompanying narrative further illustrate the range of perspectives.

Fundamental to the TY project is its location mid-way through adolescence and mid-way through second-level schooling. Teachers appear in little doubt about this as 91 per cent agree with the statement 'The TYP is a very appropriate programme for 15-16 year olds.'

Individual respondents' perceptions of their own experience of teaching TY classes indicate variations in enthusiasm for certain facets of TY. For example some statements elicit more than 70 per cent assent.

- I like using active teaching and learning methodologies (87 per cent agree)
- I like teaching Transition Year classes (84 per cent)
- I like the freedom and flexibility which TY offers (81 per cent)
- I welcome the varied forms of assessment in TY (78 per cent)
- Lower percentages suggest more divided opinions. For example:
- Devising and operating new forms of assessment is difficult (70 per cent agree; 28 per cent disagree; 3 per cent no opinion)
- Teaching TY has helped my development as a teacher (69 per cent agree; 16 per cent disagree; 12 per cent no opinion)

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<sup>25</sup> The relatively high levels of agreement with particular statements can be seen as indicative of schools where TY has been implemented with some measure of success. The questions and the data in this report can then be seen as useful and relevant for any school wishing to engage in evaluating aspects of its TY programme (see Appendix 3).

- I like teaching mixed-ability classes (67 per cent agree; 21 per cent disagree; 12 per cent no opinion)
- I would prefer a prescribed syllabus for my subject (36 per cent agree; 53 per cent disagree; 10 per cent no opinion)
- Class sizes are too big (30 per cent agree; 63 per cent disagree ; 7 per cent no opinion)
- I would prefer a 3 year Leaving Certificate programme (22 per cent agree; 60 per cent disagree; 17 per cent no opinion)

These data take on further shades and hues when compared to how the 113 respondents perceive their teaching colleagues' responses to TY, for example:

- Teachers develop skills in TY which enhance their teaching in other years (83 per cent agree)
- TY promotes teamwork among teachers (78 per cent)
- Teachers respond well to the freedom and flexibility to design relevant programmes (77 per cent)
- Teaching TY promotes the professional development of teachers (72 per cent)
- Teachers find that there is a lack of resources for TY (57 per cent agree; 36 per cent disagree; 6 per cent no opinion)
- Teachers find mixed-ability classes difficult (47 per cent agree; 46 per cent disagree; 6 per cent no opinion)
- Teachers would prefer a prescribed syllabus for their subjects (42 per cent agree; 40 per cent disagree; 19 per cent no opinion)
- Teachers would prefer a 3-year Leaving Cert. Programme (35 per cent agree; 50 per cent disagree; 15 per cent no opinion)

As those latter statistics indicate, there are some conflicting attitudes about TY in school staffrooms; a capacity to generate contestation has always been a feature of TY. However, teachers' attitudes towards TY's place and status in the wider educational landscape indicate how perceptions of the programme have changed over 30 years, especially since the 1994 mainstreaming. For example:

- Transition Year is now firmly embedded in the Irish education system (75 per cent agree; 20 per cent disagree; 6 per cent no opinion)

- Transition Year is well regarded within the education system (55 per cent agree; 31 per cent disagree; 12 per cent no opinion)
- Students show little interest in TY (20 per cent agree; 76 per cent disagree; 5 per cent no opinion)
- The programme has a low status among teachers (24 per cent agree; 72 per cent disagree; 5 per cent no opinion)
- The TY programme has low status among students (28 per cent agree; 69 per cent disagree; 3 per cent no opinion)
- Transition Year is well supported by the Department of Education and Science (46 per cent agree; 37 per cent disagree; 17 per cent no opinion)

Thus, teachers' views of the perceived strengths of individual programmes in these six schools can be summarised as:

- Programmes that offer variety of content and experience, both inside and outside classrooms
- Programmes that are well structured and well co-ordinated
- Opportunities for students to relate to teachers over the course of the programme in co-operative ways that emphasise student responsibility and emerging maturity
- Teaching and learning methodologies that are active, offering students both stimulation and challenge.

### **Perceptions of outcomes for students**

#### **Maturity**

A consistent thread through the data from all informants is that students are more mature as a result of the TY experience. Parents highlight growth in maturity as a major outcome. Ninety-three per cent of the teacher respondents believe that TY advances students' maturity. Principals, co-ordinators and students draw attention to the programme's maturing effects.

There is also strong agreement that TY promotes young people's confidence, improves bonds between classmates and facilitates better relationships between students and teachers. For example 97 per cent of teachers believe that students become more confident, 90 per cent that students become more socially aware, 90 per

cent that students become more socially competent, 77 per cent that students develop technical skills.

### **Career Exploration**

TY as a space where young people have time to explore career possibilities is an important dimension of the programme for many students. They value opportunities to sample subjects and modules that might assist in future subject or career choice, though there can be organisational and motivational difficulties associated with this dimension of TY. They see work experience placements as particularly effective in clarifying their thinking about employment. Ninety per cent of teachers believe that TY orientates students well to adult and working life. 88 per cent believe that TY assists students clarify career goals. Parents also value a focus on career guidance, often closely linking increased confidence and maturity with work experience placements.

### **Improved relationships between students and teachers**

In each of the six schools, students consistently talk about TY as improving relationships between students and teachers. Many of the teachers also remark on this phenomenon, indicating that TY can be very effective in bringing about the changes in school culture at senior cycle advocated by the NCCA (2003b).

### **Beliefs about intellectual development**

Parents' concern about 'academic focus' highlights an unease, also evident among some teachers and some Sixth year students, about the relationship between TY and the LC examination. Generally teachers appear confident that TY strikes a balance between education for personal and social development and intellectual development. As regards learning and motivational outcomes, for example, a majority of the teachers surveyed believe that:

- TY gives students a broad educational experience (98 per cent agree)
- Our programme provides students with intellectual challenge (85 per cent)
- Students' thinking and problem-solving skills are enhanced through TY (83 per cent)
- Students develop well in the absence of examination pressure (81 per cent)
- Students become more independent learners through TY (78 per cent)

- Students develop academic skills (70 per cent)
- Students become more motivated and self-directed as learners (70 per cent)

### **Beliefs regarding TY and LC**

In the historical development of TY, as set out in Chapter 1, the ERC/NCCA longitudinal study of 1994 JC examination cohort was an important milestone. That study (Millar and Kelly, 1999) found that those who completed a TY achieved higher CAO points than those who did not.

As pointed out in Chapter 1, ironically, some schools subsequently found this data more effective at convincing students and their parents about the value of TY than extolling the virtues of a holistic educational experience.

Teachers' responses to questions about their beliefs regarding the TY – LC relationship indicate strong beliefs in TY as a foundation for the LC. Two-thirds of teachers believe in the 'higher results' effect, though nearly a quarter decided to express 'no opinion'.

- Students are better equipped for a Leaving Certificate programme after a TY (88 per cent agree)
- Students who follow a TY programme achieve higher results in the Leaving Certificate than those who don't (64 per cent agree; 13 per cent disagree; 23 per cent no opinion)

### **Teacher development**

Student learning in school contexts depends greatly on the development of their teachers. When introducing TY in 1974, Richard Burke also saw engagement with the programme as a form of teacher development. The data here suggest that, for a majority of teachers, an important outcome of TY in a school is the impact it has on teachers' own personal and professional development. 83 per cent of teachers believe that they develop skills in TY which enhance their teaching in other years, and 72 per cent believe that teaching TY promotes their professional development as teachers.



## **Respondents' perceptions about effective implementation of TY**

### **Breadth and balance**

Thus, in these six schools, TY can be said to be succeeding in offering young people the 'broad educational experience with a view to the attainment of increased maturity' that is set out in *Transition Year Programmes, Guidelines for Schools* (DoE, 1993c, p.3). How have these schools interpreted and implemented these guidelines? It appears that the *breadth* of the particular programmes is especially relevant; to be successful TY needs varied experiences inside and outside classrooms that are well-planned, engaging and developmental throughout the year. Students regularly report work experience placements, mini-company and excursions beyond the classroom as among the most significant and enjoyable features of TY. Within classrooms, they appreciate lessons that are more participative than what they encountered during Junior Cycle, lessons where their voices and opinions are sought and listened to.

### **In-school factors**

TY emerges from the data as a complex programme that, to be implemented successfully, requires imagination, careful planning and effective co-ordination. Teachers are keenly aware of this. Across the six schools, teachers identify the most important in-school factors that contribute to the perceived success of their programmes as:

- The work done by the TY co-ordinator
- The TY programme that we as a school community designed
- The commitment of the teaching staff to the TY programme
- The work done by the core-team
- The students' interest in a commitment to the TY programme

The same teachers view the following five in-school factors as the ones that militate most against the success of TY:

- Lack of sufficient time for teachers to work together in planning the TY programme
- Limited in-service training
- Students' lack of interest in and commitment to the TY programme
- A shortage of finance
- The absence of regular review and evaluation of the TY programme.

**External factors**

Moving to external factors that support the development of TY in a school, teachers rate as most important:

- The work experience opportunities provided by employers
- The engagement with the local community, and
- The involvement and support of parents.

On the other hand, the external factors that these teachers see as most impeding the development of TY include:

- Negative attitudes of some parents
- A perception – among some parents, students and teachers – that it is an ‘easy’ year
- Part-time work
- Costs associated with TY.

**Learning beyond the classroom**

As mentioned above, ‘breadth’ as a characteristic of the six individual programmes appears to be especially significant. This is noticeably evident in what might be called ‘calendar items’, that is, once-off learning experiences that complement the weekly timetable. Students consistently refer to learning experiences beyond the classroom as the highlights of TY. Activities such as work experience placements, community service, outdoor pursuits activities, trips to the Gaeltacht, to museums, art galleries and other sites of learning, musicals and dramas, participation in events such as the Young Scientists or in fund-raising activities can capture young people’s imagination and engagement. When these activities are directly linked to formal timetabled classes, the learning appears to be enhanced. Projects that extend over a number of weeks, involve a cross section of students and teachers, and conclude with some kind of demonstration event or performance, appear very effective. In particular, such projects seem to engage students’ imagination, boost their morale and motivation for learning and contribute to TY’s distinct identity within the school community. Of course, these outcomes depend greatly on significant input of time and energy by teachers. There can also be additional expenses associated with some projects.

### **Teaching and Learning**

However, while there is great student enthusiasm for excursions beyond the classroom and project work, students have much less to say about classroom experiences. In general, students welcome the absence of exam pressure in TY, suggesting that, in some cases, classes are more participative and democratic. A number suggest that the absence of exam pressure can be especially liberating for teachers. However, students, even when pressed, had difficulty in providing examples of the ‘wide range of teaching/learning methodologies and situations’ (DoE, 1993, p.8) envisaged in the *Guidelines*, especially from the more regular classes. When encountered, experiential learning and well-structured project work is appreciated. It may well be that it is actually the quality of the teaching and learning interactions within subjects/modules that are key to the effective implementation of TY. The evidence suggests that students want classes that will engage and challenge them. Those who spoke about being ‘stretched’ by the demands of TY whether in terms of time and effort, socially or intellectually, valued these challenges and were particularly resentful of any suggestion that TY was a ‘doss’ year. At the same time, students indicate that they can distinguish between those teachers with strong commitments to TY and those for whom they think it may not be a priority. Furthermore, students in Fifth and Sixth years, while valuing the TY experience, tend to look back at missed opportunities, sometimes suggesting that the school might have done more, sometimes being critical of their own limited engagement, sometimes of their teachers or the TY programme.

### **Significant omissions**

While each school interprets the *Guidelines* in a distinct way, selecting and adapting particular features of TY, some aspects of the programme receive limited attention. While students indicate some use of the ‘wide range of teaching/learning methodologies and situations’ envisaged by the *Guidelines*, the evidence suggests that limited implementation of these in the more regular, timetabled 40-minute classes. Further omissions become obvious when weekly timetables in the six schools are analysed. For example, only a small number of cross-curricular modules are offered. Indeed, in all six timetables what might be called ‘traditional subjects’ dominate, perhaps reflecting the need to maintain subject continuity between the JC and the LC. There is very little evidence of schools embracing the perspective in the *Guidelines* that asserts ‘An interdisciplinary approach would help create that unified perspective

which is lacking in the traditional compartmentalised teaching of individual subjects' (DoE, 1993c, p.6). Traditional 'balkanisation' (Hargreaves, 1996) relating to teacher and subject domain isolation and insulation appears to survive well within TY. This points to some interesting challenges, and opportunities, for the NCCA as it constructs Transition Units.

### **Student suggestions**

Asked for suggestions about enhancing the programme, TY students' suggestions for improving TY programmes cluster around five major themes and can be summarised as follows:

- Ensure greater distribution of events throughout the year
- Undertake more work with students whose motivation and attendance is poor.
- Make the trips beyond the classroom less expensive
- Schools should learn from the good practice in other schools
- Junior Cycle students and their parents need more specific information about TY

### **Teachers' perspectives on school organisation**

As indicated earlier, teachers' perspectives on TY in the schools where they work are broadly positive. For example:

- Our TY programme is well co-ordinated (93 per cent agree)
- Our programme presents students and teachers with good opportunities for learning beyond the classroom (90 per cent)
- Our programme is well-thought-out (88 per cent)
- Our programme has breadth and balance (86 per cent)
- Our programme is well-tailored to our students' needs (81 per cent)
- Our written TY programme is very good (75 per cent)
- The assessment techniques used in TY are appropriate (74 per cent)
- Our approach to evaluation is progressive (63 per cent)

These data tend to confirm that the relatively successful implementation of TY is, therefore, closely associated with ensuring that basic features such as programme planning, breadth, assessment and evaluation receive attention. However, such high

levels of agreement suggest that some of the contested aspects, as indicated at the start of this chapter, are especially significant. As these include attitudes to a prescribed syllabus, a three-year LC and teaching mixed-ability classes, it is clear that, even in schools where TY is well regarded, some major divergence of teacher opinion on crucial aspects of the programme can persist.

### **School leadership**

Responsibility for the practical implementation of TY within a school context falls heavily on the shoulders of principals, deputy principals and programme co-ordinators. Teachers show a keen awareness of this and, as seen above, identify ‘The work done by the TY co-ordinator’ as the most important in-school factor that contribute to the relative success of these programmes.

As is evident in the school profiles, good working relationships between principals and co-ordinators contribute significantly to TY’s coherence. While all six principals delegated real authority to co-ordinators (most explicitly in Ash School and in Maple School), they also maintained a strong interest in and commitment to TY. For example, they tended to be publicly associated with explaining TY to parents. They were also well disposed towards including TY on staff meeting agendas, towards allocating time for planning and evaluation, and towards facilitating co-ordinators and teachers to engage in in-service education.

### **Timetabling**

Evidence of attitudes to programme implementation is reflected in the weekly TY timetables operated in these six schools. Imaginative use, for example of restructuring the school year, of novel modules, of the use of double and triple periods and of co-ordinator contact time with students can all be seen. Less positively, there is also evidence of teachers being timetabled for limited contact with TY students. In some cases this is as low as a single class period per week. In some of the schools, students encounter more than twice the number of classroom teachers during TY as compared to a typical Third year or Fifth years. Such practices seem to undermine the development of the enhanced relationships that both students and teachers appear to value and are questionable timetable practices.

### **Challenges to school organisation**

While the evidence suggests that many of the challenges associated with TY are ones of imagination and courage, the issue of finance is real. In the two schools designated ‘disadvantaged’, there is a belief that ‘the playing field is uneven’, that other schools can, with relative ease, seek payments and voluntary subscriptions from parents to support TY activities. Given the importance attached by students to excursions beyond the classroom, funding is a crucial issue. As is evident in the school profiles, each of the six schools takes a different approach to the funding issue. As the Principal of Beech School notes, it is remarkable that the original grant of £50 (€63.49) per TY student, introduced in 1994, has never been increased despite inflation and the ‘Celtic Tiger’ years.

### **Co-ordination**

In each of the six schools, TY co-ordinators emerge as pivotal in the daily functioning of TY. They are a focal point for students and their parents, sometimes strongly identified as the ‘public faces’ of TY in a school. Frequently, the co-ordinator organises many of the extra-classroom activities and ‘once-off’ calendar items that students value so highly. Through commitment and hard work these co-ordinators have earned the respect of students, parents and, critically, given the hierarchical nature of many school cultures, their colleagues.

However, while co-ordinators are key players in the construction of a successful TY, this is also a potential weakness. Many of the issues, especially relating to the demands on time, found in the TYCSS (2000b) survey of co-ordinators are reinforced in this study. While one school, Chestnut School, operates an effective dual system of co-ordination, and another, Beech School, had a policy of rotating co-ordinators, an image emerges from the school profiles of TY being heavily dependent on a single, highly committed co-ordinator. The *Guidelines* notion of a co-ordination team of ‘four or five teachers’ (DoE, 1993c, p.11) appears difficult to organise.

While co-ordinators are comfortable in leading and directing students, they are much more reticent when it comes to their teaching colleagues. As people who tend to ‘want to get things done’, co-ordinators admit that they often prefer to undertake a task themselves rather than ask a colleague. Strong traditions of teacher independence and

autonomy in relation to their own classrooms present particular challenges for TY, where ideally the programme needs to be integrated, with components complementing each other. At a very practical level, this is illustrated by the difficulties some schools have encountered in writing the programme. While obviously the curriculum as experienced by students is most important, a written version can contribute to coherence and continuity. A written programme can also facilitate evaluation.

The *Guidelines* advocate whole-school involvement in planning TY, and in its annual evaluation. Little evidence was found to indicate that this happens, or that all stakeholders are consulted with any regularity. In practice, subject departments have had limited involvement in the planning and evaluation of particular subjects/modules, with responsibility often devolving to the individual teacher timetabled for a subject or module. While some teachers respond imaginatively to such opportunities, co-ordinators sometimes express frustration at the difficulty in establishing what other colleagues actually do in their TY classrooms. Such loose arrangements can lead to disjointed, fragmented modules, subjects and programmes. Such lack of structure can make teaching TY even more daunting, particularly for those coming to teach a TY class for the first time; what looks like autonomy becomes isolation.

### **Teachers' needs**

Teachers indicate an awareness of the pitfalls of isolation. Three-quarters of them concur with the statement 'I would like more time for planning TY classes with colleagues' (75 per cent agree) and 'I would like more in-service training for TY' (76 per cent). Limited in-career education for teachers has been, as seen in Chapter 1, a feature of TY's history. When the support services were put in place, in 1994 and subsequently, strategic decisions were made to prioritise co-ordinators for professional development. Co-ordinators in this study indicate an appreciation of this service. However, while this approach has undoubtedly been effective in many cases, a consequence has been that other teachers can feel neglected. Some informants contrasted the limited provision for teachers of TY with the programme of support for LCA in its initial years of development. The data point to a need for more extensive support for teachers of TY. At school level, time for teachers to learn from each other might be generated through the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). At

local, network levels, the potential for Education Centres and Subject Associations to support TY's ongoing development seems obvious. Finally, co-ordinators and some principals recall that in the early days of mainstreaming (1995-1998) there were 14 teachers on secondment dedicated to supporting TY. While the current SLSS structure is different and aims for more integrated support across a range of programmes, co-ordinators tend to talk of the support service as 'being down to one person now'.

### **School differences**

As is evident in the school profiles, Ash School, Beech School, Chestnut School, Maple School, Oak School and Sycamore School conceptualise and implement TY in quite different ways. In terms of attitudes to the theory and practice of TY as set out in the *Guidelines*, the most positive perspectives are found in Maple School, the smallest of the six schools. Strongly positive attitudes are also very evident in Ash School, the one school in the study where TY is compulsory, and in Beech School and Oak School, both of which are designated 'disadvantaged'. While positive attitudes to the programme predominate in Sycamore School and Chestnut School, TY is more contested in these schools, as is evident in the data from students, teachers and principals and co-ordinators.

### **Distinct identities**

Each TY programme has a particular identity which distinguishes it from every other TY. In shaping and adapting the TY curriculum, each school tends to play to its own particular strengths, consolidating an aspect of an established identity or responding to a perceived need.<sup>26</sup> The vision of individual principals, co-ordinators or teachers can be important shapers of these programmes. For example, in Beech School, a designated 'disadvantaged' co-educational community college, TY is regarded as important in increasing students' chances of advancing towards Third level education. Maple School, a relatively new school, discovered that TY opened up valuable connections with the local community and heightened the profile of the school. In Oak School and in Ash School, the two-all girls-schools in the study, a very clear commitment to education for personal and social development is evident in how they conceptualise the programme. Of course, in all six schools, the reality of the LC

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<sup>26</sup> In the interim report to the DES, the term *domestication* was used to describe schools' selection and adaptation of the TY *Guidelines*. This idea is explored further in Chapter 8 of the current report.



examination looms, at times like a dark shadow, over TY. All recognise TY's role in 'laying a solid foundation for Leaving Certificate studies' (DoE, 1993c, p.5), though this manifests itself quite differently across the six schools. An emphasis on high academic achievement is particularly evident in Ash School, Chestnut School and Sycamore School.

### **Promoting TY: compulsory or optional?**

Clear indicators of school differences emerge when discussing questions of student uptake of TY. In Ash School, the rationale for making TY compulsory is well argued, though clearly challenges exist in such contexts. The two schools designated 'disadvantaged', Beech School and Oak School, are keenly aware of scepticism among students and their parents about TY and talk frankly about the challenges this presents. Data from the parents in Oak School is especially revealing in this regard. Chestnut School enjoys high rates of participation in TY while Sycamore School and Maple School speak about the need to convince each new cohort of students and parents of the benefits of the programme. Patterns of uptake, as well as decisions by schools whether to make TY optional or compulsory, underline the uniqueness of each school's context. As already mentioned, the costs associated with TY is particular consideration and the lack of any increase in the £50 (€63.49) per student grant impacts most negatively on schools designated 'disadvantaged'.

### **Relationship between TY and the rest of the school**

Two of the consistent themes highlighted throughout the data are improved student-teacher relationships and the positive impact TY has on school life in general. At the same time, the evidence is also clear that TY, sandwiched between the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate programmes, with their associated high-status terminal examinations, is constrained by these realities.

### **Improved relationships**

Students regard the experiences of interacting with teachers in situations outside the traditional classroom setting, for example on outings and trips away, as major contributors to the improving relationships. Students also point to teachers being more relaxed, inside and outside classrooms, when, as a number of them remarked, the

teachers are freed from the pressure of examinations. More participative classrooms also appear to facilitate improved relationships.

### **Relationships between TY and the school climate**

Teachers across the six schools perceive a leavening impact of TY on the whole school community. A recurring theme among students is how they perceive TY as more engaging – and less stressful – than their JC experience. The perceived improvement in student-teacher relationships observed by students, teachers and parents, is frequently identified as enhancing the whole school climate.

Teachers who express reservations about facets of the programme were keen to acknowledge that TY's arrival heralded some transformation in the school's climate, with student maturity, sense of responsibility and confidence as persistent themes. Indeed, at times it seemed that these six schools are well advanced on the journey envisaged by the NCCA towards a vision of 'a different school culture for senior cycle students' (NCCA, 2003b, p.4). In Sycamore School, to give one particular example, the Principal observed that those who participated in TY tend to set academic standards for the whole school and demonstrate positive leadership among the student body. To support this point, he cited the strong representation of former TY students among the Sixth year prefect group.

On the other hand, as evident throughout the data, TY lives in the permanent shadow of the LC. When talking about TY, principals, co-ordinators, teachers, students and parents use the LC exam, and the associated points system, as a sort of ultimate reference point. Timetable nomenclature resonates with LC subjects. There are both positive and negative facets to this TY-LC relationship. There is evidence that

Pupils entering the Leaving Certificate programme on completion of a Transition Year should be better equipped and more disposed to study than their counterparts who did not have the benefit of the year.  
(DoE, 1992, p.5)

The LC provides a very clear motivational focus for many students, teachers and their parents. Furthermore, some evaluations relating to TY have focused on the programme's positive impact on LC results. Clearly, improved academic achievement can have a positive impact on school morale.

On the other hand, there is also evidence that, in some subjects, the LC has effectively colonised TY, so that in those subjects something very close to a three-year LC programme operates. One of the main themes coming from the data is that the TY – LC relationship can be an uneasy one. There can be a tension between the TY focus on personal and social development and the demands for LC points. In Chestnut School, for example, some Sixth year students expressed regret that more time had not been spent during TY starting the LC course in particular subjects. In the same school 39 per cent of the teachers indicated that they would like a three year LC. Similarly, TY's drive towards promoting intrinsic motivation for learning can sit uncomfortably in a school with the strong emphasis on external motivation that the LC seems to engender.

### **The Fifth Year challenge**

When TY is optional, newly formed Fifth year class groups can present particular challenges. A group of students fresh from their TY experience may not gel immediately with those who have come straight from completing the JC. Perceptions of different levels of relative maturity/immaturity can cause tensions. Co-ordinators confirm that some teachers remark that, when they have taught a group of students in TY, a bond develops that strengthens through the LC years and is not necessarily as strong with those who did not do TY. That said, some are quick to point to many students who went straight from Third to Fifth year and thrived, intellectually and socially.

### **Overall effect**

Arising from the questions posed at the outset of this chapter, the dominance of positive attitudes towards TY in six schools where the programme is well regarded have been illustrated. Students, teachers and parents indicate strong beliefs in the programme's contribution to young people's maturity, increased confidence and more mature relationships with their peers and with adults. Some specific pointers towards practical implementation have emerged from the data.

One of the most ambitious aspirations in the *Guidelines* is that

The aims and philosophy of Transition Year should permeate the entire school. (DoE, 1993c, p.4)

Perceptions among participants in this research suggest that TY is perceived as a significantly different experience to the other five years of schooling. There has been some percolation of TY values throughout the school community but also some resistance to such values. Even in these six schools where TY is 'well regarded', areas of contestation remain.

Many of these themes are discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 8

### Discussion of Selected Issues

Data from students, teachers and parents provide evidence of how six particular schools have, in varying degrees, realised the Transition Year (TY) goal of providing ‘a broad educational experience with a view to the attainment of increased maturity’ (DoE, 1993c, p.3). Experiences within these six schools can offer indicators to other schools wishing to develop TY programmes further. The study also prompts a range of questions for policy makers, school leaders, teachers, students, their parents and the wider public. Some of these relate to the relatively simple mechanisms of the day-to-day implementation (or non-implementation) of the TY programme while others touch on fundamental issues concerning the purpose and role of second-level schooling in Ireland at the start of the twenty-first century.

Following on from the previous seven chapters, this chapter attempts to map emerging issues, conscious that the data, extensive and at times contradictory, can be interpreted in various ways. A focus on student outcomes, then the identification of key factors in the successful implementation of TY is followed by explorations of some of the less resolved issues associated with the programme. Attempts are made throughout to see TY in context, rooted in the practical realities of contemporary schooling.

#### **Student outcomes**

Students, parents, and teachers in this study are very clear that increased maturity is one of the results of the TY experience. They also point to greater confidence, improved social competence and better relations between students and teachers as outcomes. However, it is notoriously difficult to measure how much is due to TY compared to other factors. One of the most difficult areas has to do with students’ age: the point is sometimes made that students are a year older at the end of TY, that ‘they would grow up anyway’. Perhaps this latter point gets close to the centre of the TY rationale. While physical maturation is highly visible at age 15-16, personal and social development is not automatic. Indeed, some young people clearly struggle with the transition from childhood towards adulthood. TY can be seen as a planned, structured

response to the state of mid-adolescence, with the explicit goal of increasing maturity. Critical to maturity is the ability to form adult relationships (Erikson, 1969). Within the school context, student-teacher relationships are vitally important. Senior students in this study consistently identify TY as bringing about a qualitative shift in how they relate to their teachers. They point to experiences outside the conventional classrooms, particularly on trips and on ‘big’ projects like musicals, as contributing to such improvements. Students also suggest that teachers, when freed from the constraints of examination pressures, relate to them in more relaxed ways. Linked to this are TY classes that appear to be more engaging, participative and democratic than what they experience in Junior Cycle; having their opinions sought and their voices listened to nurtures the relationship.

### **Implementation and domestication**

The evidence points to six schools selecting and adapting the TY *Guidelines* (DoE, 1993c) in quite different ways. These schools have devoted considerable time and energy to develop coherent programmes. Each, to a greater or lesser extent, has given the programmes a distinct identity, often through imaginative and creative features. Given the extensive freedom that the *Guidelines* give schools, this is not altogether surprising.

The individual history of TY within a school – how originally conceived and developed – plays a crucial role in determining its current standing. The school profiles show how each school has, in effect, adapted the TY *Guidelines* to suit its own vision of what it sees as most appropriate for its students as well as for the school as an institution with its own distinct ethos and culture. This may be seen as each school’s *domestication* of TY. While the term ‘domestication’ refers, literally, ‘to make fond of home life’, it is used here in the sense that schools adapt and shape TY to integrate it into their existing priorities and practices; they tend to emphasise those aspects of TY that ‘fit’ with their tradition and sense of identity. Furthermore, domestication also implies ‘taming’ and the evidence points to schools tending to downplay or even omit aspects of TY that are particularly challenging.

Ash School, an all-girls school and the only one of the six where TY is compulsory, has a programme that has been driven by a principal and co-ordinator who believe strongly in its developmental value for students and teachers. In the two schools designated ‘disadvantaged’, Beech School, a co-educational community college and Oak School, an all-girls voluntary secondary school, the leadership in each school see a clear relationship between TY’s promotion of personal, social and intellectual development and increased participation by their students in third-level education. In Sycamore School, a co-educational community school, and in Chestnut School, an all-boys voluntary secondary school, the emphasis when talking about TY tends to be on how, as well as promoting all-round maturity, TY also appears to contribute strongly to the school’s academic achievement. Finally, in the smallest and most-recently established school, Maple School, the extra-classroom activities within TY, in particular, have enabled this school to connect in new ways with its immediate community.

This adaptation or domestication of TY can be seen as each school putting its own distinctive local shape on the TY programme, of power devolving from the DES to the local school. At its most positive, TY can be viewed as a national programme with sufficient flexibility to enable genuine accommodation to the specific circumstances of individual schools, respecting their particular histories, traditions, values and contexts, playing to the strengths of teaching teams and geared to the developmental needs of students. However, as mentioned earlier, *domestication* can also be viewed less favourably. The very flexibility of TY that facilitates imagination and innovation can also be invoked by schools to justify a narrow selectivity that ignores key features of the TY programme. In each school in this study there is evidence of the non-implementation of particular features of the *Guidelines*. Specific omissions, as can be seen in the school profiles in Chapter 6, include interdisciplinary work, appropriate modes of assessment and the provision of health education. Thus, the freedom for individual schools for ‘selection and adaptation’ regarding TY is both a strength and a weakness.

### **Clarity of purpose**

Contrasts in these six schools regarding the introduction and initial development of TY are instructive. In some cases, most noticeably in Ash School, extensive time was

devoted to devising and planning the programme. Discussion among the teaching staff facilitated a crystallisation of the purposes of TY. In Beech School and in Maple School, external facilitation by the TY Support Service enabled staff to clarify particular goals for the schools' programmes. In each school, initial implementation was followed by internal evaluations that were characterised by strong doses of pragmatism; 'if it didn't work, we threw it out', as one co-ordinator remarked. At times, it appears that such pragmatism may override the aspirations in the *Guidelines*, especially if teacher attitudes dominate the evaluations and if students' and parents' views are not considered. As the evidence suggests, students' and parents' attitudes regarding TY tend to highlight what is different, innovative and exciting while teachers indicate an awareness of limited time, energy and resources to make practical ideals with which they have some sympathy. For example, student and parental enthusiasm for learning opportunities beyond the classroom contrast with teachers' concerns with the practical issues such activities pose in a system that is strongly dominated by regular, timetabled, class-based teaching and learning. To maintain momentum, ongoing evaluation of TY assists in clarifying, for all stakeholders, the purposes of TY.

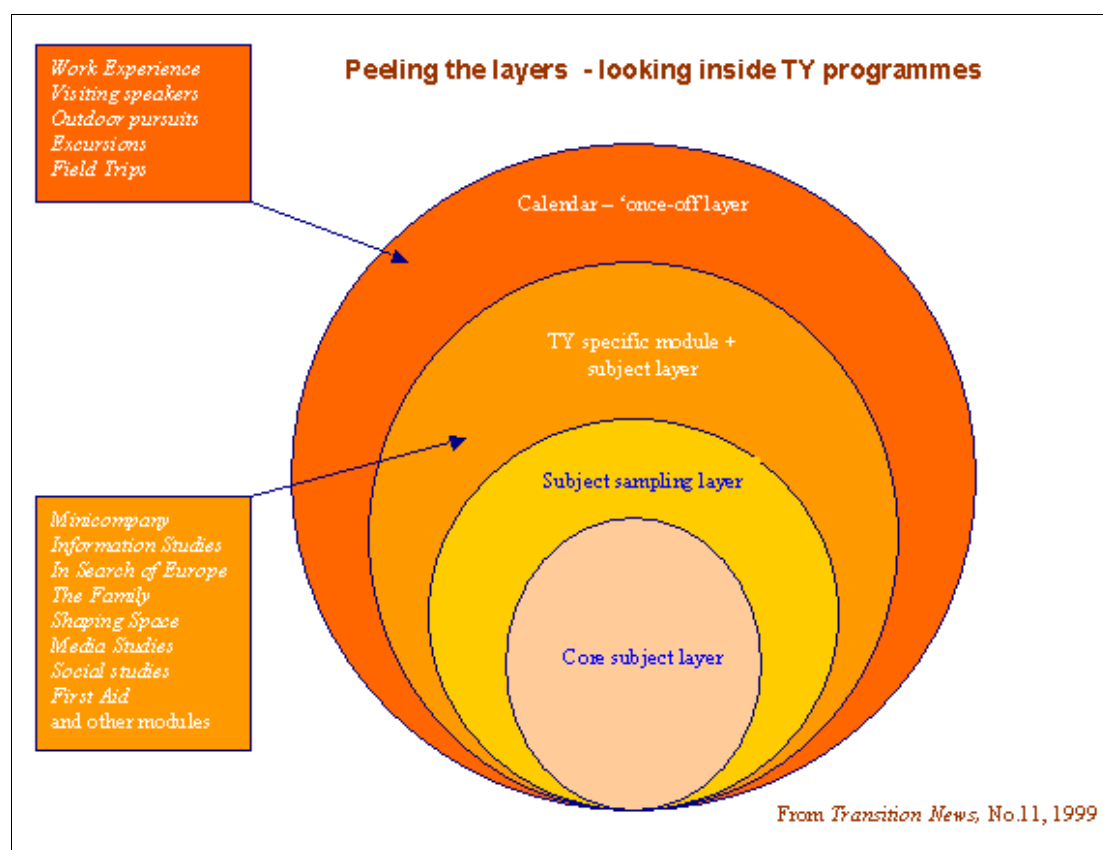
Attitudes that reveal tensions and ambiguity also point to the need for clarity of purpose. One of the most noticeable features in the data is how students contrast TY with their experiences of Junior Cycle. While the study set out to look at TY, one cannot but be struck by how negatively students across the six schools regard their JC programme; the dominant view emerges of an experience that is boring, exam-driven and lacking in engagement. For some, TY was their first encounter with learning experiences that captured their imaginations. This was especially true of activities such as work experience placements, trips beyond the classroom and specific experiential learning projects such as mini-company. While there are undoubted lessons here for shaping TY programmes, there are also uncomfortable questions regarding the apparent passivity of students in conventional classrooms. This emphasis within the student data also poses questions about expectations of TY as 'novelty', about what, within schooling, can be regarded as 'normal' or 'mainstream' and whether deviations from such understandings are somehow 'abnormal'.



## Tensions

As already noted in Chapter 1, Egan and O'Reilly's (1979) evaluation pointed to a number of tensions within the original TY programme. One was between the emphasis on philosophy and logic on the one hand and the demands of practical living on the other. A second one was between what they refer to as the 'linear' subjects (English, Irish and Mathematics) and the 'new' subjects. These authors posed the question about how much is TY a curriculum project and how much is it an administrative arrangement where schools are given certain liberties for a year, noting that schools were able to 'switch perspectives' in order to defend their preferred practices (p.56). The evidence in the current study points to the persistence of such tensions more than twenty years later.

In the late 1990s, the TY Support Service developed a four-part model for constructing and de-constructing various strands within a TY programme. This became known as the TY Onion. (TYCSS, 1998). Five questions were posed aimed at assisting schools to look at breadth and balance within TY.



They were as follows:

- Is there a coherence between the layers so that they integrate into one programme?
- Is the image of TY primarily shaped by the outer layer?
- Are active teaching and learning approaches applied in all four layers?
- Is there relevant assessment within each layer?
- Do students, parents and teachers appreciate the value of each layer's activities?

When addressing a meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science in 2004, Doreen McMorris, an assistant chief inspector in the Department of Education and Science, cited the onion analogy and expanded the examples within the 'transition year specific modules' layer:

There is a broad range of modules from which to choose. It tends to cover areas such as computer skills, first aid, self-defence, personal development, car mechanics, road safety and interior design. These are called modules as they do not cover the full year.

(Joint Oireachtas Committee, 2004)

The examples cited lean strongly towards the practical and the utilitarian; the omission of philosophy and logic, a central feature in both the original TY programme and the 1993 *Guidelines*, is perhaps noteworthy.

In their analysis of TY programmes, Smyth et al (2004, p.72) also apply the idea of 'layers'. They grouped diverse responses to their postal survey into 10 categories: academic (traditional subjects), third-level taster (academic subjects more commonly provided at third level), personal development, sports and leisure, cultural, computer/IT studies, civic/social awareness, practical skills, work-related learning and other skills/activities. They note that 'the average number of subject areas or "layers" with the Transition Year programme is seven'. They see a persistent nucleus of six layers across schools, viz. academic subjects, cultural studies, sports/leisure, IT studies, civic/social studies and work-related learning. This model is effective especially in drawing attention to missing features of a school's programme. However, as the authors acknowledge, other subjects may be used to achieve the goal of 'personal development'. Thus, the title of a TY subject or module offers limited information about the nature of the learning experiences. Analysis has to probe

beyond the nomenclature. As is evident in Chapter 4, it is the quality of the teaching and learning interactions within subjects/modules that are of critical importance.

Students want classes that will engage and challenge them.

Evidence from the six schools confirms the concerns that underpinned the five questions posed by the support service in relation to the four layers. The inner layer of academic, linear subjects is often the least visible, the least talked about and, where active teaching and learning is concerned, the least evident. In their official documentation and websites, for example, these and other schools tend to highlight the outer layers of the 'TY onion'.

While practice across these six schools varies, the evidence tends to confirm the view that active forms of teaching and learning are more difficult to implement the closer ones moves towards the centre of the onion. Furthermore, assessment, or the lack of it, is a pervasive concern across the four layers. Finally, the challenge of reconciling the different stands of TY into a coherent programme is a major one. The data point to a tendency towards fragmentation, to seeing TY as a series of disconnected activities.

More positively, however, arising out of the data, four activities seem, in particular, to contribute to a sense of TY as a coherent rather than a fragmented programme. They are:

- (a) planning and writing the programme;
- (b) communicating with parents;
- (c) the role of the co-ordinator;
- (d) the quality of in-school leadership.

#### **(a) Planning and writing the TY programme**

One way of bringing greater coherence to a TY programme is for the whole school community to become involved in planning and writing the programme. Ash School and Maple School demonstrate this most clearly. Extensive time was given for teachers to identify students' needs, to focus teachers' interests and to devise an original programme, and then to write both a rationale and the detail of individual components. This process clearly gave the programme focus and impetus. But, if writing the programme is seen as a 'once-off' event, then it can become fossilised;

vitality demands ongoing evaluation, which is time-consuming. Indeed, each school in this study indicated the value of developing TY in a way that ensures that something new is added each year.

Those involved in the various support services for TY – TYST, TYCSS and SLSS – have from the outset taken to heart the exhortation in the *Guidelines* that:

A clearly documented programme is essential for ongoing review and for effective internal evaluation of the programme in the school. The programme should be reviewed annually and revised appropriately following each review. A copy of the programme, approved by the Board of Management, should be retained in the school for inspection by the Department's Inspectors.

(DoE, 1993c, p.13)

However, various reports (DoE, 1996; TYST, 1998a; Murphy, 1999; TYCSS, 2000b), indicate the need for time to plan and write the programme. Such proposals were driven by concern that some programmes were neither comprehensive nor coherent. While the co-ordinators and some principals were aware of *Writing the Transition Year Programme* (TYCSS, 1999a), and in some cases even enthusiastic about its format and content, there is very little evidence that it has significantly broken down the resistance to writing the TY programme.

Reluctance to write the programme deserves some attention. The reports cited above tend to offer 'lack of time' as the main explanation. While this is undoubtedly a constraint, some co-ordinators offer additional considerations. Firstly, they voice a fear that too much written detail might inhibit the flexibility that has enabled schools to develop creative TY programmes. Secondly, they point out that, in many cases, the situation has evolved where individual teachers are seen as having the freedom to devise and implement a TY module or subject and so a formal, school-endorsed programme might undermine such creativity. Put more bluntly, some say that even when there is a written programme teachers will still 'do their own thing'. Some co-ordinators report that they find it almost impossible to get teachers to write their own TY subjects or modules. As one remarked, 'They just won't do it.' There is also a view that 'all this emphasis on writing down the programme' smacks of increasing bureaucracy; teachers see themselves as resisting this following a perceived UK trend where teachers spend extensive time engaged in 'paper work'. Ultimately, writing a

programme heightens the transparency of TY and individual modules for colleagues, students, parents and the DES Inspectorate. The written programme can also become a focal point for in-school development and refinement of TY. The School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) provides a most appropriate context for planning and writing TY programmes.

Such attitudes towards committing TY to paper, while not always verbalised, may be relevant for the emerging Transition Units (TUs). Any perceived ‘straitjacketing’ of the programme may be resisted. On the other hand, there are perceptions that TY has been characterised by a certain looseness or lack of structure and that some teachers struggle as a consequence of the absence of a more defined programme. The co-ordinators in this study confirm that both views are often found side by side in the one staffroom. A great challenge for in-school co-ordination is how to negotiate a coherent TY programme while respecting teacher autonomy.

#### (b) Communicating with parents

Focus group interviews with parents in Maple School and in Oak School indicate that many parents would appreciate more information about TY. The evidence shows how warmly parents respond to TY’s focus on young people’s maturity, improving of relationships and increase of confidence. They demonstrate an astute awareness of how TY can differ from school to school and appear to value programmes that are both busy and challenging. These focus groups also confirm the power of rumour and anecdote to fuel uncertainty and myths about TY.

In some families the decision whether a young person should undertake TY or not can be the cause of struggle and debate. In such situations a lack of familiarity with the detail of a school’s TY programme can put a parent at a distinct disadvantage. Parents can be well supported when schools arrange informative public meetings about TY. The support service developed a framework for such presentations.<sup>27</sup> Fears need to be addressed. Parents welcome frank, open question and answer sessions. Hearing students talking about their own TY experiences can also offer, in authentic and unique ways, insights into the benefits of the programme. It may also be that the

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<sup>27</sup> Available at [http://ty.slss.ie/resources\\_parentsInfo.html](http://ty.slss.ie/resources_parentsInfo.html)

coherence of a school's programme, and the school leadership's belief in TY, is most vividly tested at these public information sessions.

Among some parents, a fear that the additional year might lead to students not finishing out the six-year cycle appears quite strong, particularly in schools designated 'disadvantaged'. Individual interviews with students and their parents during Third year and direct encouragement by teachers can be important in assisting some families arrive at their decisions.

Furthermore, the data also suggest that there can be issues about keeping parents informed during TY. By Fourth year, parents have developed a familiarity with school practices regarding formal written reports and parent-teacher meetings; changes to such rhythms need to be considered carefully. Arguably, the use of novel forms of assessment during TY as well as the focus on personal and social development should prompt innovative forms of school-parent contacts. Parents would welcome opportunities for parents to see examples of their children's work in exhibition, demonstration and public performance. They also have very positive attitudes to the formal closure of TY programmes, such as graduation events to which family members are invited.

Finally, the focus groups confirm that parents, irrespective of their own level of formal education, value invitations to contribute to the evaluation of a TY programme, individually and collectively, in writing (e.g. evaluation forms) and by conversation.

### **(c) Co-ordination**

The centrality of good co-ordination for the effective implementation of a TY programme is one of the clearest findings to emerge from this case study. Teachers see 'the work done by the co-ordinator' as the single most important in-school factor contributing to the success of TY. Each of the co-ordinators encountered expressed deeply-held beliefs about TY's potential for enriching young people's learning. On occasions these views were articulated in strong emotional terms, indicating that TY represented values close to their core motivations for entering and remaining in the teaching profession. As well as being a clear focal point for the programme and giving

it energy and direction, the co-ordinator brings about a practical coherence on a day-to-day basis for students, parents and colleagues. Hence, TY's ongoing vitality requires committed, competent and confident co-ordinators.

In practice, a number of contentious issues can simmer below the surface of this assertion. Firstly, while the *Guidelines* make it clear that a designated teacher should co-ordinate the programme, they also highlight the importance of a core team.

All members of the Transition Year team should be committed to the philosophy, aims and successful implementation of the Transition Year programme. One member of the team should be nominated to act as Co-ordinator of the Transition Year, he or she to be assisted in the work of co-ordination by a core group of four or five teachers. Ideally the members of this core group should be drawn from distinct curricular areas so that each in turn may act as stimulator, co-ordinator, and rapporteur of activities in his/her area. (DoE, 1993c, p.11)

This emphasis appears to recognise the workload involved in co-ordination and the fact that relying on a single co-ordinator is rarely sustainable. However, the evidence suggests that co-ordinators, especially when very committed and competent, can be left to operate without the support of core teams. A TYCSS (2000b) study found that less than 20 per cent of schools had regular timetabled meetings of core-teams. Two of the recommendations from that study on co-ordination remain especially relevant. Core teams should be established in all TY schools so as to help to manage the programme successfully and to develop it in a whole school manner, to allow for effective delegation and to facilitate professional turnover.

Time should be allowed for co-ordination and planning and timetabling should enable core teams to meet. (TYCSS, 2000b, p.32)

Some resistance to teamwork in schools is hardly surprising. Proposals about working more closely together may be seen as undermining deeply held traditions that value teachers' autonomy and independence. Teamwork also cuts across a perspective that highlights the 22-hour class contact per week within a teaching contract but is vague on other dimensions. This contrast draws attention to structured/scheduled time and unstructured/unscheduled time in teachers' lives and the related issues as discussed by

Hargreaves (1994, p.95 sqq). Indeed, teamwork not only challenges school cultures but also how teachers' work is defined.<sup>28</sup>

While the guidelines for LCA and LCVP also emphasise the value of teamwork, there are few directions as to how the practicalities of regular meetings are to be accommodated within the tight structure of a typical school day. Without such clarity being negotiated, the desired teamwork is likely to remain an aspiration in many schools. Indications from this study suggest that co-ordinators, rather than impose on colleagues to attend meetings and share workloads, are more likely to do the work themselves. Linking this with the TYCSS study (2000b, p.29) finding that co-ordinators identified 'lack of time' as their greatest single job related difficulty, some of the stress and pressure felt by those in this role is more easily understood.

Shortage of time is not the only problem co-ordinators face. Status can also be crucial, in particular the status of the programme in the school and the status of the co-ordinator among colleagues. While co-ordinators were comfortable with co-ordination regarding students and parents, they are often more tentative in regard to colleagues. Here again, cultural traditions that value autonomy and often rate length of service above particular competences can inhibit collegiality. While neither age nor gender necessarily restrict co-ordinators in their work, the micro-political culture of some schools may present them with additional challenges, especially if they are younger rather than older and female rather than male. Getting colleagues to be more open to active teaching methodologies, assessment techniques, student feedback, collegial planning, committing their modules to writing and generally opening up the 'sacred space of their classrooms' present exacting challenges.

Evidence from students, parents, teachers and principals makes it very clear that the co-ordinators in this study were respected as both hard-working and committed. They were usually closely identified with TY and regarded as enthusiastic and effective advocates of the programme. While at one level the presence of an inspirational co-

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<sup>28</sup> Suggestions on how school principals and deputy principals can promote a teamwork culture within schools by example in the interests of teaching and learning is developed in 'Conversations on Teaching and Learning: a challenge for school leadership', Jeffers, G (2006c), in *Oideas* 52, Winter 2006.



ordinator can be a great bonus for a school, Evans' warning about programme advocates is germane. He contends:

Having a strong commitment to a particular reform, even having the authority to force people to adopt it, does not guarantee successful innovation. On the contrary, it can prove counterproductive. The conviction of an advocate, even a powerful one, inspires resistance if it simply dismisses the inevitable dilemmas of implementation. Being heavily committed makes one less likely to establish the lengthy procedures vital to implementation, less amenable to modifications and less tolerant of the unavoidable delays and setbacks that ensue as others struggle to adopt the change. (Evans, 1996, p.16)

One of the paradoxes of the current study is that, while the work done by individual co-ordinators is seen as vital for the development of TY, there is also a strong sense in some of the six schools that without these particular co-ordinators, the programme might, if not quite crumble, be significantly weakened. Thus, a critical challenge for school leadership is to ensure *sustainable co-ordination*.

#### **(d) The quality of in-school leadership**

The six principals in this study voiced strong beliefs in the values that underpin TY; holistic education, the focus on personal and social development, active student engagement in learning, the possibilities of learning beyond the classroom, intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation, school-based curriculum development, the possibilities of teacher creativity, building bridges between schools and their local communities were all highlighted.

Each was also keenly aware of the tensions between striving for these goals and the pragmatic realities associated with perceptions of students' measured achievements in public examinations.

A burgeoning literature on school leadership provides some framework for leadership in relation to TY. While Fullan (2005) warns against reducing educational leadership to a series of checklists, he himself contends that leaders will increase their effectiveness if they concentrate on five components of leadership. One of these he

describes as ‘coherence making’<sup>29</sup> which includes ‘learning to tolerate ambiguity’. Leithwood et al (1998) see transformational school leadership as involving building school vision, establishing school goals, providing intellectual stimulation, offering individualised support, modelling best practices and important organisational values, demonstrating high performance expectations, creating a productive school culture and developing structures to foster participation in school decisions. Sergiovanni (1996) offers a similar emphasis and talks about the leader’s role in ‘explaining’, that is, ‘linking to the bigger picture’.

A distinct programme like TY presents principals and deputy principals with particular opportunities and challenges. The rest of the school community will often take their attitudinal cues from these leaders. As Evans asks, why should anyone take an initiative seriously if the leader doesn’t? He also contends that:

Leaders who are followed are authentic; that is, they are distinguished not by their techniques or styles but by their integrity and their savvy. Integrity is a fundamental consistency between personal beliefs, organisational aims, and working behaviour. (Evans, 1996, p.184)

These points manifest themselves in numerous ways but four seem particularly important in the TY context. Firstly, the principal and co-ordinator sharing a broadly common perspective is a vital dynamic in giving TY a profile and status among students, teachers and parents. Secondly, the leaders in all six schools recognise, in varying degrees, that TY is a contested area; they see their role as including micro-political dimensions, of having to work to win over hearts and minds to the value of TY. Each indicated a sensitivity to the relationships that are peculiar to schools as organisations, echoing Ball’s observation:

In no other institution are notions of hierarchy and equality, democracy and coercion forced to co-exist in the same close proximity. (Ball, 1987, p.15)

These principals had few illusions about how difficult it can be to bring about change, especially regarding teaching methodologies. A number alluded to teachers being

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<sup>29</sup> The other four are: ‘acting with moral purpose’; ‘understanding the change process’; ‘relationship building’ and ‘knowledge building’. He sees the five components united in the personal characteristic that he calls the ‘the energy-enthusiasm-hopefulness constellation’.

slow to venture far from their ‘comfort zones’, often carrying echoes of Eisner’s observation that

... familiar teaching repertoires provide economy of effort; hence changes in schools that require new content and repertoire are likely to be met with passive resistance by experienced teachers who have defined for themselves an array of routines they can efficiently employ.  
(Eisner, 1998, p.159)

However, among the leaders in these six schools, this realism was usually in tension with their own characteristic dispositions. They tended to display features of what Fullan calls the ‘energy-enthusiasm-hopefulness constellation’; the possibility of change often wins out over any resignation to mediocrity.

Thirdly, the leaders in the six schools worked at maintaining a focus on ‘learning’ as the important characteristic of their leadership, though each also expressed frustration at how often other demands can conspire to push learning concerns down the daily agenda. They expressed an awareness of what Leader and Boldt observed in Irish secondary schools more than a decade ago, that principals generally involve themselves directly with ‘low value’ tasks and that ‘many of these tasks are maintenance and janitorial in character’.(Leader and Boldt, 1994, p.95). Perhaps significantly, these principals were aware of this occupational tendency and keen to resist it.

In relation to maintaining a focus on learning, MacBeath (2006) developed a set of five ‘leadership for learning’ principles from a project where participants professed to profound changes in their thinking and practice. These are:

- Leadership has a learning focus.
- Leadership creates conditions favourable for learning.
- Dialogue is central to leadership for learning.
- Leadership for learning practice requires a sharing of leadership.
- Leadership for learning means being accountable.

MacBeath’s penultimate point reflects a growing appreciation of ‘distributed’ leadership within schools. The reality of schools as organisations is that teachers exercise considerable leadership on a daily basis, particularly, though not exclusively, within classrooms, and principals and deputies who ignore this do so at their peril. The challenge is to harness the leadership potential throughout the school. TY offers

unique opportunities for this, most dramatically in the case of co-ordinators and co-ordination teams but also among other teachers, students and parents. In the context of TY, 'strong' leadership demands dialogue and delegation. The following warning from Fullan and Hargreaves has a particular relevance:

Heads who control all the decisions, who obstruct initiative, who choose blame before praise, who see only problems where others see possibilities, are heads who create discouraged, dispirited teachers.  
(Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992, p.111)

Callan, in mapping many of the issues associated with curriculum-focused leadership, highlights the importance of developing mature professional relationships between principal and staff. These relationships need to be nurtured and

... must be capable of absorbing anxieties, tensions, uncertainties and misgivings that are naturally experienced by people when they confront change; they must provide resources of a material and psychological kind in the provision of guidance, critical appraisals, confirmations, and affirmations. Learning new ways of thinking and new practices requires such a supportive, critical and analytical environment that is conducive to professional growth. We need, in a word, a professional community of learners in which it is acceptable to admit of uncertainty, to seek guidance, to express creative ideas, to challenge other ideas, to be bold in one's contributions, and to push out the frontiers of acceptable behaviour.  
(Callan, 2006, p.130)

Evidence from each school in this case study suggests that school leaders – including principals, deputy principals and TY co-ordinators – have, through their support of TY, contributed towards generating such contexts

Thus, school leaders wishing to bring greater coherence to TY need to listen to the concerns of all stakeholders, clarify how the values of TY support and challenge the stated and unstated values of the school, encourage a climate that respects innovation, use time in ways that prioritise learning, dialogue and delegate – particularly to co-ordination teams – and play a lead role in telling the school's TY story with a voice that is authentic and consistent with their own values, both spoken and practised.

### **The programmes**

A distinguishing feature of TY, in contrast to other school programmes, is the freedom individual schools have to shape the curriculum. The *Guidelines* state:

Curriculum context is a matter for selection and adaptation by the individual school having regard to these guidelines, the requirements and the views of parents. (DoE, 1993, p.5)

Presented with such liberty, one might expect great variety and diversity among school programmes. At first glance, programmes and school timetables tend to show remarkable similarities to what is on offer in the other five years of schooling. As reported in Chapter 6, the blend is one of well-established, traditional subjects spiced with occasional innovative modules. While it is a ‘stand-alone’ year, schools are keenly aware that TY’s context is sandwiched between programmes that terminate with high prestige examinations, particularly the LC. To deviate very far from the thrust of these programmes could be seen as unwise, even foolhardy. At the same time, each school offers distinct, and, at times, unique, features. For example:

<b>Ash School</b>	<b>Beech School</b>	<b>Chestnut School</b>	<b>Maple School</b>	<b>Oak School</b>	<b>Sycamore School</b>
Theatre Studies	Web Design	Equality Studies	Local Studies and Folklore	Dance	Environmental Studies

Interpreting school timetables can be a very subjective activity. Within TY, little has yet been established as to what might be regarded as ‘good practice’. Firstly, the range of subjects/modules, the teachers allocated and the amount of time given to each subject or module can be a starting point. For example, a timetable might be indicative of the breadth and range of subjects and the variety of experiences on offer. However, excessive fragmentation with too many disjointed classes could be a feature of the very same timetable.

Secondly, there is the teaching team. Deploying a wide range of teachers can add to the variety, but may also restrict relationship building between students and teachers and bring about further fragmentation. All school timetable construction involves pragmatic compromises between competing demands. TY timetables are constructed alongside those for JC and LC programmes and some of the values outlined in the previous section, if taken seriously, can confront school leaders with stark choices. One would expect that teachers allocated to TY – indeed to any group of students – would be willing enthusiasts rather than reluctant conscripts. Furthermore, anyone timetabled for a TY class should be clear on how their subject/module fits into the wider programme goals. Thirdly, particularly because the typical TY week is often

interrupted by once-off calendar events – especially learning trips beyond the classroom – each teacher needs sufficient contact time with a TY class group to establish rapport. Furthermore, the school culture - ‘the way we do things around here’ – establishes norms and status; if teachers tend to typically teach JC and LC class for between three and five periods per week, an TY allocation of one or two class periods may suggest – or be interpreted – as ‘low priority’.

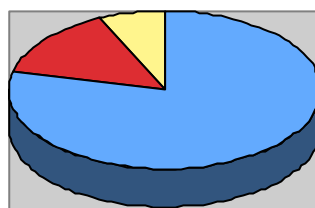
Fourthly, with active learning so central to TY, traditional 40-minute class periods can, at times, be quite restricting. In many schools, it is established practice to allocate double periods to JC and LC subjects with active, practical components (e.g. Science subjects, Home Economics, Art, Materials Technology – Wood and Metal, Engineering, Construction Studies etc.). This is in contrast to languages, in particular, where teachers frequently request as many single periods as possible.<sup>30</sup>

An analysis of single, double or triple class periods in TY across the six schools is far from conclusive.

School	Single periods	Double periods	Triple periods
<b>Ash</b>	79%	14%	7%
<b>Beech</b>	41%	52%	7%
<b>Chestnut</b>	62%	38%	0%
<b>Maple</b>	53%	32%	15%
<b>Oak</b>	66%	34%	0%
<b>Sycamore</b>	70%	23%	7%

For example, the distribution of double periods varies across the schools, with the most marked differences being evident between Beech School (52 per cent) and Ash School (14 per cent).

**Ash School Timetable**



**ASH SCHOOL**

Single periods	<b>79%</b>
Double periods	<b>14%</b>
Triple periods	<b>7%</b>

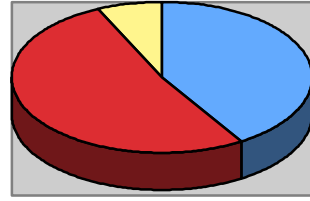
■ Single periods ■ Double periods ■ Triple periods

<sup>30</sup> This assertion is based on eleven years experience as a deputy principal, constructing annual timetables in a context that consciously sought teachers’ opinions about their preferences.

**BEECH SCHOOL**

Single periods	<b>41%</b>
Double periods	<b>52%</b>
Triple periods	<b>7%</b>

**Beech School Timetable**

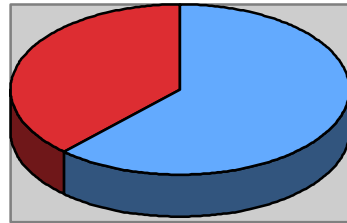


■ Single periods ■ Double periods  
■ Triple periods

**CHESTNUT SCHOOL**

Single periods	<b>62%</b>
Double periods	<b>38%</b>
Triple periods	<b>0%</b>

**Chestnut School Timetable**

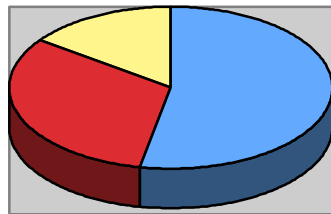


■ Single periods ■ Double periods ■ Triple periods

**MAPLE SCHOOL**

Single periods	<b>53%</b>
Double periods	<b>32%</b>
Triple periods	<b>15%</b>

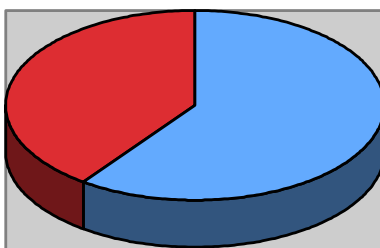
**Maple School Timetable**



■ Single periods ■ Double periods ■ Triple periods

### Oak School Timetable

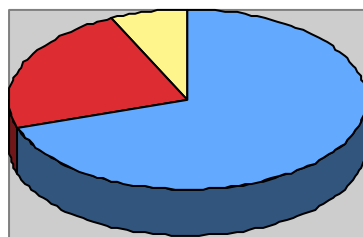
OAK SCHOOL	
Single periods	<b>66%</b>
Double periods	<b>44%</b>
Triple periods	<b>0%</b>



■ Single periods ■ Double periods ■ Triple periods

### Sycamore School Timetable

SYCAMORE SCHOOL	
Single periods	<b>70%</b>
Double periods	<b>23%</b>
Triple periods	<b>7%</b>



■ Single periods ■ Double periods ■ Triple periods

While inconclusive, some indicators that might contribute to greater understanding about timetabling in TY emerge.

Arrangements, e.g. in Ash School and in Chestnut School, where the school year is divided into three, distinct ten-week blocks, with an individual teacher teaching the same subject or module to three different groups of TY students, is a manageable variation on standard timetabling where a teacher normally teaches the same class group for the full year.

Double periods present teachers and students with opportunities for more than an hour of uninterrupted learning. Such structures appear well suited to active learning where initial instructions and later debriefing are time-consuming. Double and triple classes also minimise the time students spend on corridors, moving from room to room.

Triple period blocks are used in a variety of ways. For example, in Sycamore School timetabling Physical Education for a full afternoon facilitates a variety of sports-



related activities and students regard this very positively. In Beech School, a triple period for mini-company illustrates how timetabling policy follows the logic of the learning experiences implied in the mini-company concept.

The number and duration of classes, the range of teachers that an individual student encounters during a week/month or school year can also be indicative. Co-ordinators warn against two extremes:

1. Fragmenting the timetable, either by having too many different modules/subject in any week or by having teachers only timetabled for one of two periods; a minimum of three class contact sessions per week seems necessary to establish the kind of rapport associated with TY.
2. Placing responsibility for teaching TY on a small group of teachers; as well as being particularly demanding on those teachers, such an approach can reinforce the idea of TY as ‘non-mainstream’ and even give some other teachers the idea that they can opt out of teaching TY classes.

The table below indicates some features of teacher deployment in the six schools

<b>School</b>	No. of TY class groups	No. of teachers involved in teaching TY programme	Estimated number of teachers encountered in class during the year by a typical TY student	Estimated number of teachers encountered in class during a week by a typical TY student	Number of teachers with either one or two class contact periods per week
<b>Ash</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Beech</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Chestnut</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Maple</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Oak</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Sycamore</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>9</b>

While the nomenclature used in programmes and on timetables may provide some pointers, it can also mask important educational realities. In addition to probing timetables, interrogating activities through the lens of the rationale for TY can be revealing. The student interviews, in particular, suggest that what young people experience in TY classrooms under a heading like ‘Maths’ or ‘English’ can vary greatly.

The *Resource Materials* (Doyle, et al, 1994, p.4) includes a 10-point ‘basic rationale’. These criteria offer a further framework for examining aspects of TY and, indeed, informed the construction of the teacher questionnaire in this study. The 10 points are:

1. To provide a learning structure that promotes maturity.
2. To develop a wide range of cognitive and emotional processes.
3. To be learning-led rather than exam-led.
4. To provide breadth and balance in the curriculum
5. To provide experiential learning.
6. To learn through networking with other schools and social agencies.
7. To encourage variety in teaching and learning styles.
8. To develop life skills.
9. To encourage a more professional use of assessment.
10. To lead the student to the point where self-regulated learning takes place.

(Doyle et al., 1994, p.4)

### **Schools devising their own curricula**

In shaping distinctive TY programmes, these six schools regard themselves as having been imaginative. When asked to identify the in-school factors that contribute to a successful TY, teachers consistently highlight this work. As seen in Chapter 5, the main in-school factors are:

1. The work done by the TY co-ordinator
2. The TY programme that the school community designed.
3. The commitment of the teaching staff to the TY programme.
4. The work done by the core-team.
5. The students’ interest in and commitment to the TY programme.
6. The imagination, creativity and expertise of the teaching staff.

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, there are both positive and negative dimensions to schools designing programmes, to domesticating TY. While shaping, selecting and adapting the TY curriculum to their particular vision of their own schools, domestication has also involved underplaying or even omitting certain features of the *Guidelines*. The prevalence of traditional subject-bound categories indicates a failure, with a few notable exceptions,<sup>31</sup> of the cross-curricular approach to capture teachers’ imagination. As already mentioned, the application of ‘a wide range

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<sup>31</sup> During the second-half of the 1990s a number of resources were produced with a particular emphasis on a cross-curricular approach, reflecting the aspiration in the *Guidelines* (DoE, 1993c, p.6) that ‘an interdisciplinary approach would help to create that unified perspective which is lacking in the traditional compartmentalised teaching of individual subjects.’ While co-ordinators usually spoke glowingly about these resources, they indicated that teachers were, at most, eclectic in their use and often ignored them, preferring subject specific resources. Examples of such resources are *Family Awareness*, *In Search of Europe*, *Shaping Space*, *Information Studies*, *Tourism Awareness*, *Staying Alive (Road Safety)*, *Exploring Masculinities*, *Ros na Rún*, *Project Forest*, *Safe Food for Life*, *Mental Health Matters*.

of teaching/learning methodologies' is more apparent in some subjects/modules than others. Similarly, there is little evidence of the use of 'appropriate modes of assessment' in order 'to complement the variety of approaches used'. Closer analysis of the detail of each programme also reveals particular omissions.

Superficially, it may seem contradictory to point to the omission of particular subjects from programmes as such comments might seem to undermine schools' autonomy regarding curriculum content. The TY *Resource Material* pack (Doyle et al, 1994) identifies 'breadth and balance' as an important consideration in curriculum construction. Furthermore, the *Guidelines*, while not being prescriptive, do suggest 'possible areas of experience' (DoE, 1993c, p15). This is an instructive list, especially when compared with the explicit content of the six programmes in schools in this study.

#### Possible 'Areas of Experience' and examples from the six schools

1	Civic, Social and Political Education	Social and Political Studies in Ash School; Equality Studies in Chestnut School; <i>Civic Link</i> programme in Maple School;
2	Personal and Social Development	Thinking Skills and Youth Leadership in Ash School, Life Skills in Beech School; Equality Studies in Chestnut School; Dance in Oak School; Community Work in Oak School; Communications in Sycamore School; Social Personal and Health education in Sycamore School.
3	Health Education	Life Skills in Beech School; Social Personal and Health Education in Sycamore School.
4	Guidance	Explicit in Ash School, Chestnut, Maple, Oak and Sycamore Schools.
5	Religion	Explicit in Ash, Beech, Chestnut, Oak and Sycamore Schools.
6	Philosophy	Philosophy in Ash School.
7	Aesthetics Education	Art in Ash, Chestnut, Oak and Sycamore schools; Music in Chestnut, Maple, Oak and Sycamore schools; Media Studies in Ash and Maple School; Art, Craft and Design, and Film Studies in Maple School; Drama and <i>Shaping Space</i> in Beech School; Dance in Oak School; Classics in Chestnut School; Art Appreciation and Theatre Studies in Ash School.
8	Physical Education	Physical Education in Ash, Chestnut and Sycamore Schools; Leisure Studies in Beech School; Outdoor activities in Maple School; Dance in Oak School.
9	Irish	Explicit in Ash, Beech, Chestnut, Maple, Oak and Sycamore schools..
10	English	Explicit in Ash, Beech, Chestnut, Maple, Oak and Sycamore schools.
11	Other languages	French in Ash, Beech, Chestnut, Maple, Oak and Sycamore Schools; German in Ash, Chestnut, Maple and

		Sycamore Schools; Spanish in Ash and Chestnut Schools.
12	Mathematics	Explicit in Ash, Beech, Chestnut, Maple, Oak and Sycamore Schools.
13	Science Studies	Physics, Chemistry and Biology in Ash School; Science in Beech and Chestnut Schools; Applied Science and Sciences in Maple; Biology and Chemistry in Oak School; Physics and Chemistry in Sycamore School.
14	Environmental and Social Studies	History in Oak and Sycamore Schools; Geography in Chestnut and Sycamore Schools; Environmental Studies in Chestnut and Sycamore Schools; Tourism, Social and Political Studies in Ash School; <i>Shaping Space</i> in Beech; European Studies, Local Studies and Folklore, World History in Maple School.
15	Information Technology	Computer Studies in Ash, Beech, Chestnut and Sycamore schools; ECDL in Maple and Oak schools; Keyboard Skills in Beech and Sycamore Schools; Web Design in Beech School.
16	Practical Studies	Home Economics in Maple, Oak and Sycamore schools; Cookery in Ash and Beech Schools; Crafts, Technology and Gardening in Ash; First Aid and <i>Shaping Space</i> in Beech School; Technical Drawing in Chestnut; Technology in Sycamore School.
17	Business and Enterprise Studies	Enterprise Studies in Ash and Maple Schools; Business Studies in Ash and Sycamore schools; Mini-company in Beech School; Business in Chestnut and Oak Schools; Accounting in Sycamore School.
18	Preparation for adult and working life	Work experience placements feature in all six programme, though not timetabled as such; Community service explicit in Oak School timetable. Life Skills in Beech School.

The term ‘explicit’ is important in the above analysis; many educators would argue, for example, that there is an inherent ‘personal and social development’ or ‘aesthetic education’ dimension to many subjects. Indeed, this analysis has to be treated with caution as many TY activities defy neat categorisation.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, principals and co-ordinators point to calendar items – once-off events such as performing a drama or musical, taking part in outdoor pursuits, field trips, inviting in visiting speakers, etc, though not explicit on a timetable – can be very rich in realising TY’s goals. The areas of Personal and Social Development, Civic, Social and Political Education, Health Education, Aesthetics Education and Preparation for Education and Working Life were all cited as examples of areas where particular calendar activities provided such

<sup>32</sup> For example, a class labelled ‘Irish’ and, say, studying the TG4 serial *Ros na Rún*, for example, could be said to touch on aspects of areas 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9 14, 18 and possibly others (depending on the teacher’s imagination and competence).

opportunities. As the same time, the absence of such areas from the timetable may be indicative of domestication by omission.

The analysis also fails to categorise activities such as Research in Ash School, Library in Beech School, Co-ordination in Maple School, Tutor Class in Oak, Learning Support in Sycamore School. Again, as already discussed in relation to timetabling, details such as the time allocated to a subject or module, can be important variables. Despite these reservations, the ‘areas of experience’ may be another effective lens for a school evaluation. The absence in some of these six schools of explicit programme features in the ‘Health Education’ category is conspicuous. The recent deliberations by the NCCA Senior Cycle course committee for SPHE (NCCA, 2006) not only maps out a possible future structure for this subject but also includes insightful perspectives regarding SPHE from senior cycle students themselves.

One could also point to categories – notably Civic, Social and Political Education, Personal and Social Development, Practical Studies – where some of these schools might re-examine their provision. Pointers towards greater CSPE provision at senior cycle can be found, for example, in two recent NCCA publications, on Social and Political Education (Tormey, 2006) and on Development Education (Honan, 2006).

At a wider level, the conservative thrust of school’s programmes – despite occasional deviations – point back to Gleeson’s (2004, p.104) questioning of the widespread acceptance of the rhetoric ‘that proclaims that the 1990s has been a decade of unprecedented change in Irish post-primary education’.

### **Programme planning to promote maturity.**

‘Education for maturity with the emphasis on personal development including social awareness and social competence’ is one of TY’s key aims. It is not surprising that 93 per cent of the teachers agree that TY advances maturity. There is also a broad consensus among the teachers surveyed that TY promotes more independent learning, orientates students well to adult and working life, builds young people’s confidence, thinking and problem-solving skills, increases social awareness and social competence and helps clarify career goals. The parents interviewed also concur that

TY had a powerful effect on developing the confidence and social competence of their sons and daughters in the schools studied.

Previous commentaries on TY, for example, Egan and O'Reilly (1979), Doyle (1990), DoE (1996), TYCSS (2000b), Smyth et al. (2004) all report that TY does seem to be effective in bringing about maturity. However, they also acknowledge the difficulties in the precise measuring of young people's personal and social development. In contrast, some of the academic benefits of TY have been carefully quantified, e.g. Millar and Kelly (1999) and Smyth et al (2004).

Furthermore, what, in particular, within a TY programme brings about this apparent leap in personal development? The evidence points to the importance of an overall experience that is well planned and well executed, involves practical opportunities for new learning experiences inside and outside the classroom, engages the hearts and minds of students and teachers and is characterised by mutual regard between teachers and students.

These six schools also succeeded in developing distinctive TY cultures that inspire confidence in a majority of students and parents. Many of the schools are conscious that such success has to be sustained, that each new cohort of students and parents has to be convinced of the programme's merits. The culture that develops around TY in a school both shapes and is shaped by the attitudes of various stakeholders to the programme.

Educationalists Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996, p.23) interpret culture to mean:

... the content of the shared sets of norms, values and beliefs of members of an organisation *and* the form of the patterns of relationships among these members.

Organisational theorist Schien (1992) adds that such beliefs, assumptions and relationships often operate unconsciously, in a 'taken for granted' fashion. As clearly evident from the student, teacher and parent data, relationship patterns in TY between students and teachers are more open, with students' voices heard more, with less focus on examination achievement, and a greater sense of working together, when compared to the JC experience. Critically important, it seems, is that *both* students and a

majority of teachers value this shift. The evidence also points to a successful TY being one that both students and teachers enjoy together. While this is especially evident in areas such as outdoor pursuits, drama and musical productions, mini-company and project work, it also seems to be critically important in more conventional classes. Students value classes that are interactive, focused and relevant. When students, parents and teachers see that the programme is actively contributing to students' maturity the TY culture is further enhanced.

TY culture can be seen as a distinct sub-culture within the culture of an individual school. A thriving TY culture will be characterised by the spirit and ethos referred to above. As seen in the teacher feedback, TY's capacity to infuse and energise the rest of the school can be powerful.

On the other hand, one can also imagine a TY culture that might be less positive, that might inhibit rather than advance maturity. If, in any school but particularly in a culture that puts a premium on high academic achievement, TY does not have focus and rigour, and is not intellectually demanding, it is likely to have difficulty commanding respect from students, teachers or parents. Furthermore, in such environments, the rationale for activities specifically aimed at social and personal development may require greater explanation to all parties. Casual approaches to programme structure or timetabling or co-ordination or assessment can readily attract the label 'doss-year'. Young people's experience in the more conventional classes – for example, in Maths and Irish, in French and History – can also be crucial in contributing to TY cultures, either positively or negatively.

### **Learning needs and experiences**

Central to official guidelines on TY – from the CEB (1986) and the DoE (1993c) – is the idea that students need to be exposed to a wide range of teaching/learning methodologies and situations. Teachers indicate very positive attitudes to this. Eighty-seven per cent of teachers in this study indicate that they agree with the statement *I like using active teaching and learning methodologies*. Students respond enthusiastically to such variety, when it is provided.

Students and teachers report greater variety of approaches in TY compared to JC and LC. Smyth et al (2004, p123) found that ‘most teachers report using a wider range of methods that they use in other senior cycle classes’ adding that ‘ a significant minority of teachers, especially in the more academic subjects continue to use a more ‘talk-and-chalk’ approach. This is no evidence from the six schools in this study to contradict what Smyth et al report. The student data also suggest that while some teachers respond imaginately to TY’s non-exam focus, others don’t. Furthermore, students not only speak positively about the novelty value of activities like work experience, community service, project work, group work, classroom discussion, role play, field trips, visiting speakers and so on, many contend, that they enjoy learning through such methods. As is evident in the teacher data, there is a complex spread of attitudes evident towards mixed-ability teaching. A TY mixed ability class appears likely to be more challenging if JC classes are arranged on a perceived ability basis. There is also some evidence that, even when convinced of the value of a more varied teaching repertoire, some teachers demonstrate an understandable reluctance to depart from well-established patterns and performances.

An important caveat is that the data derive, primarily, from reporting by students and teachers about perceptions of, and attitudes to, classroom practices and cultures rather than from direct observation. One of the great mysteries in any school concerns the dynamic developed between a teacher and a particular class. Classrooms are very particular spaces, not easily accessible to research, where communication is multi-layered and nuanced, where messages regarding encouragement and affirmation, motivation and challenge, co-operation and achievement are intertwined with knowledge exploration and transmission.

Given the various attitudes voiced by students and teachers, the need for more structured in-service teacher education regarding methodologies seems an urgent one. Not only did 76 per cent state that they would like ‘more in-service training’, a number wrote additional comments specifying that this should be in relation to teaching methodologies. The indications are that, across the subject range, teachers would welcome opportunities to hear the rationale for a greater variety of approaches to learning, to see examples in action (DVD technology might be a productive route for this) and to have opportunities to practise such approaches. Some agencies are



already engaged in providing for this need but, particularly in the light of recent NCCA proposals, creative responses from the DES, University Teacher Education Departments, the SLSS, the Teaching Council, subject associations and education centres will be an on-going requirement. Furthermore, teaching/learning methodologies are at the heart of teachers' professional work. Hence, sharing ideas, resources and observing each others' practice seems like a mutually advantageous form of professional development that can be implemented in practical ways by all teachers at individual school level.

As regards subjects, teacher education needs appear most urgent in that inner part of the TY 'onion', particularly in subjects such as Mathematics and Gaeilge. This is a formidable challenge. Firstly, teachers need to be convinced of the need to change to more varied methodologies. As Evans remarks:

People must be sufficiently dissatisfied with the present state of affairs and their role in maintaining it – or they have no reason to endure the losses and the challenges of change. (Evans, 1996, p.57)

Dewey's perspective on active participation is apposite. As he says:

Every individual becomes educated only when he has an opportunity to contribute something from his own experience, no matter how meagre and slender... and finally that enlightenment comes from the give and take, from the exchange of experience and ideas. (Dewey, 1916)

Furthermore, the work of Jung, Kolb's views on experiential learning, the notion of learning styles and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences can all contribute to grounding teachers' beliefs about the need for more varied teaching/learning strategies.

### **Learning beyond the classroom**

One of the clearest messages from this study is how successful TY is in highlighting the fact that learning is not confined within the four walls of the conventional classroom. Students and their parents consistently refer to work experience, outdoor pursuits and other trips, musicals and dramas as among the defining features of TY. These learning opportunities appear to succeed in capturing the attention and imagination of young people, of providing the kind of intense immersion in activity that has been described above as 'flow'. Students across the ability and motivational range

respond well to such opportunities, sometimes discovering previously unrecognised attributes, developing new interests, learning teamwork-related skills and enjoying the strengthening of group solidarity with fellow TY students and their teachers.

Additionally, students' comments, in particular about their work experience placements, may suggest that TY can have an important impact on the self-esteem of students, especially those whose classroom achievements may be modest; often they encounter a strong sense of achievement, success and affirmation from participating in these activities. For some, in the aftermath of their JC results, such positive experiences can be important counterbalances. In the context of 'lifelong learning', interventions that encourage learners to re-evaluate their views of themselves as learners can be especially valuable.

However, three linked concerns related to such activities refuse to go away. Firstly, there are questions of cost; the bills for a trip abroad, a few days and nights in an outdoor pursuit centre, field trips and other excursions can be substantial. Co-ordinators voice an anxiety that some people judge the effectiveness of TY in terms of the number and location of such trips and feel under pressure to compete with neighbouring schools. They point to the additional TY grant of €63.49 per student as having remained static since 1994.<sup>33</sup> This topic can raise temperatures concerning perceptions of inequalities between schools. For example, some members of the support service discovered, early on in their work with school staffs, that citing good practice from another school was likely to meet hostility if such good practice was from a school that charged fees. Whether rational or not, this was a common response. In this study, the restrictions on activities due to (lack of) finance was most obvious in the two schools designated 'disadvantaged'.

A further concern is an apparent dichotomy, evident from student and teacher discourse, that points to classroom learning and extra-classroom learning being seen as if they are parallel learning tracks. Students' observations tend to contrast some teachers' relaxed engagement outside the classroom with a more formal pedagogical style within. Students also suggest that, sometimes, connections between the activities

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<sup>33</sup> This point is developed further in the section headed 'Participation rates, disadvantage and resources'.

undertaken outside the classroom and what might be called ‘regular classes’ were not evident. A heightened awareness within schools of the complementary possibilities of activities outside and inside the classroom should lead to more integrated learning. Such integration does not seem to happen automatically and hence ‘coherence making’, as mentioned in relation to school leadership, is important. In terms of young people becoming ‘self-directed learners’ greater integration of learning experiences inside and outside classrooms may be critically important.

### **A change from exam-led learning**

A year where students would be freed from the pressures associated with formal examinations was a central feature of the original vision of TY. Not only do many students see the absence of exams as a defining feature of the programme, some talk about it as a ‘break’ even as a ‘recovery’ after the JC examination. Some LC students, however, perhaps manifesting some of the stress associated with the points system and the LC examination, often wonder out loud about TY’s relationship with the LC.

Among the students interviewed, the intrinsic value of learning was rarely acknowledged; most indicated a strongly utilitarian attitude to their schooling. Perceptions of success in schooling tend to be stated, almost exclusively, in terms of examination achievements. With achievement in formal examinations being such a dominant feature of the Irish school system, a particularly robust case needs to be put to all stakeholders for learning that is not exam-led. For example, co-ordinators indicated that, in varying degrees, students and their parents tend to have a more casual attitude to attendance in TY compared to any other year and cite the absence of formal exams as a major contributory factor.

One of the most widespread misunderstandings regarding TY is that being ‘learning-led’ rather than ‘exam-led’ means that assessment is jettisoned. The *Guidelines* could hardly be clearer:

Assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. It should be diagnostic, so as to provide accurate information with regard to pupil strengths and weaknesses, and formative, so as to facilitate improved pupil performance through effective programme planning and implementation. (DoE, 1993c, p.9)

In this study, teacher attitudes capture some of the dilemmas associated with moving away from exam-led learning. Three-quarters of the teachers surveyed welcome the opportunities in TY for varied forms of assessment but 60 per cent state that ‘devising and operating new forms of assessment is difficult’. Close examination of the six individual programmes suggests that while some innovations are being implemented, for example a type of portfolio assessment in Maple School and some joint student-teacher assessment in Ash School, TY is not particularly characterised by original or even, at times, appropriate modes of assessment. Indeed, the evidence suggests that schools find the cultural shift from terminal examinations to the assessment vision as set out in the *Guidelines* very challenging. The *Guidelines* emphasis on pupil profiling, log books, records of skills and competencies, and pupil participation in the assessment procedure, has not yet been translated into these schools’ TY programmes. Again, this issue is partly one of teacher education. Time is also a problem, though as Christmas and Summer examinations already command substantial time and energy within schools’ internal structures, not an insurmountable one; perhaps the challenge regarding assessment is more one of imagination and a willingness to experiment. A potentially productive avenue to assist schools in moving towards fresh thinking on assessment is offered by the growing literature and evidence concerning ‘assessment *for* learning’ (as distinct from ‘assessment *of* learning’). Work by the NCCA and the NUI Maynooth TL21 project (TL21, 2006) offer examples of how assessment for learning can operate in concrete, practical ways.

A number of principals, co-ordinators, teachers and students point to ‘homework’ as an ‘area of concern’. Frequent homework, usually for completion within a day or two, is a well-established practice in most schools from first year to third year and in and Sixth years. The evidence suggests that nightly homework is not a consistent feature of most subjects in TY. Where project work has been established,<sup>34</sup> it can be accompanied by a heavy workload for students, as, for example, parents in Oak School observed. However, teachers also remark, for example in Beech School, that students struggle to manage their time when given a project spread over a number of weeks; a tendency to procrastination can even lead to non-completion of projects. It also appears that, in some subject areas, the general under-development of assessment

has been accompanied by a significant reduction in the homework load for many TY students, especially when compared to adjacent Third year or Fifth year classes. In the context of some school cultures, students' and parents' attitudes to TY as 'a soft option' or even 'a doss year' may be related to perceptions about the volume of homework.

### **Relevance, imagination and challenge**

Checklists such as the 'areas of experience' mentioned above offer a particular perspective on curriculum construction and evaluation. It is also useful to pose questions here about learning itself. What, and how, should students learn during TY? Rogers, writing in the 1960s, suggested that 'the most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning, a continuing openness to experience and incorporation into one self of the process of change' (Rogers, 1969 p.163). Along a continuum of meaning, he divided learning into two general types. At one end of the scale he locates the learning of nonsense syllables such as baz, ent, nep, arl, lud and the like.<sup>35</sup> He remarks: 'Because there is no meaning involved, these syllables are not easy to learn and are likely to be forgotten quickly' (Rogers, 1969, p.3). He contended that much of the material presented to students in the classroom, has, for the student, the same perplexing meaningless quality as the list of nonsense syllables. In contrast, at the other end of the spectrum is 'significant, meaningful, experiential learning'. This, he maintains, has the following defining features: personal involvement; self-initiated; pervasive; is evaluated by the learner; its essence is meaning. Rogers believed that all teachers and educators prefer to facilitate this experiential and meaningful type of learning, rather than the nonsense syllable type. Despite this, he saw schools as locked into approaches to learning that make 'significant learning improbable if not impossible' (Rogers, 1969, p.5).

While the extremes of Rogers' spectrum are exaggerations, his model does resonate with how students contrast their JC experience with those in TY. TY can be seen as a conscious effort to move away from an emphasis on memorisation, rote learning and learning for extrinsic rewards. Work experience probably represents the most dramatic form of Rogers' 'significant learning' in TY. The evidence in the current study also suggests that some of the extra-classroom learning activities and

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<sup>35</sup> Rogers took these 'nonsense syllables' from a series of psychological tests popular at the time.

engagement with some of the ‘big’ projects are close to the ‘significant’ end of Rogers’ spectrum. While one challenge is to design TY programmes where such learning dominates, another may be to ensure that young people encounter such learning across the curriculum from 1<sup>st</sup> year through to LC level.

The need to provide young people with significant learning experiences is also a dominant theme in the work of Hargreaves et al. (1996, p.80). They identify three common problems in the construction of curricula for adolescents. They are:

- the problem of relevance
- the problem of imagination
- the problem of challenge.

Citing research from Canada and Australia that asserts that ‘it is curriculum that is responsible for much of what we call the dropout problem’, Hargreaves et al warn against curricula that are watered-down, fragmented, or do little to engage with students’ interests, enthusiasms, talents or future lives.

However, they continue, citing the work of Egan (1988) and Woods (1993), ‘relevance’ can sometimes degenerate into mediocre, descriptive studies of tedious topics on self, family and community. The contention is that *imagination* is one of the most neglected aspects of curriculum planning, that curriculum is too often presented as a fact, not as a problem, that young people are fascinated by imagination. In this view, storytelling ‘should be at the heart of teaching, not in terms of what the teacher actually says, but in terms of how the learning is structured.’ (Hargreaves et al, 1996 p.82)

Furthermore, for example in Martin (2006, p.73), the link between high but achievable expectations is one of the most consistently cited factors associated with positive student outcomes. *Challenge* within the learning experience needs to be real and significant and promote the kind of engagement that Csikzentmihalyi (1990) refers to as ‘flow’. ‘Flow’ is a state of concentration so focused that it amounts to absolute absorption in an activity and is the necessary ingredient for optimal experience and quality of life.

Indications from the six schools in this study are that aspects of TY that are perceived as relevant, imaginative and challenging in the students a positive attitude to the programme and, most importantly, to learning itself.

### **Student motivation**

As evident from the discussion above, TY puts the motivation question centre stage. Why should students select TY? Why, beyond compulsory age, should they go to school at all? For decades, partly because of Ireland's social and economic situation, extrinsic motivation – do well at school to get a good job, work hard to get high points to win a place on a particular course – has led to relatively high participation rates in schooling. The seismic shift forty years ago brought about by the introduction of universal secondary education continues to presents schools with the major challenge of responding to the needs of the full cohort. The evidence in this study is that students perceive much teaching in school to be exam driven. While the kind of extrinsic rewards mentioned above can be highly motivating for many, especially those who experience success, it does not work for everyone. For those who experience limited academic success, the continual use of exam success as the primary motivating tool can lower self-esteem, reduce motivation for learning, increase student indiscipline, and contribute to school drop-out. In a society that values 'lifelong learning' for all its citizens, having young learners leave school with the word 'learning' weighed down with negative connotations highlights a gap between the rhetoric and the reality.

TY shifts this ground. Because of the absence of public examinations, TY presents the real possibility of genuine success in learning for all. The challenge for schools is to devise programmes that offer breadth and variety, that engage and enthuse young minds and hearts and that are implemented through relationships that are mutually respectful and age appropriate.

### **Transition Year and the Leaving Certificate Programme**

There is a tension between TY and other programmes, notably the JC and the LC. An optimistic view of this relationship is that TY acts in a genuinely complementary way, enhancing the experience in other programmes and, overall, enriching the schooling process for students and teachers. A darker view is that not only does little change

through TY, but TY becomes colonised by the other programmes, if not in an official sense then in the minds of teachers and students

An uneasy relationship between TY and the LC dates right back to the early development of the programme. Egan and O'Reilly found a tension between 'linear subjects' (Maths, Science and Languages as academic subjects) and the more novel features of TY. They noted that 'linear subjects were deemed an irritation in many schools and received the minimum possible emphasis' (Egan and O'Reilly, 1979, p.55). They posed the question as to how much TY was 'a curriculum project' and how much 'an administrative arrangement where schools are given certain liberties for a year'.

Concern with TY's relationship with the LC is also evident in *Transition Year Option, Guidelines for Schools* (CEB, 1986). The curriculum is seen as having a number of components including 'academic, technical, aesthetic, additional studies, social and personal development and careers education'. There is recognition that students' needs will vary considerably from school to school. In a telling observation, it is suggested that students 'who intend to pursue LC1 and LC2 will probably need a higher proportion of academic studies'. Then, in what for some became a very distinctive feature of this document, the *Guidelines* state that 'between 30 per cent and 50 per cent of the time should comprise traditional and/or academic studies'. That said, and possibly both attempting to address some of the issues identified by Egan and O'Reilly while at the same time realising the possible implications of this emphasis, there follows an exhortation that 'academic and/or traditional school subjects should be seen to be clearly different to that of any other programme at Junior Cycle or Senior Cycle and be directly related to the overall aims of the programme'.

So, this tension and not a little ambiguity reflects some of the dilemma of wishing to appeal to a set of values – such as the centrality of personal and social development, intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning – and at the same time being pragmatic enough to put down some marker to prevent TY being totally colonised by the LC. It also indicates some of the consequences of conceptualising curriculum as a series of 'components'. In fairness, the thrust of the document is to emphasise what might be



called the ‘spirit of TY’. However, an observation from many of the 68 seconded teachers in 1994 reveals something about how guidelines are interpreted. At in-service cluster meetings and in-school sessions in preparation for the mainstreaming of TY, these teachers consistently reported that teachers who knew little else about TY were highly conscious that 30 per cent to 50 per cent of LC material ‘was allowed’.

Perhaps conscious of the difficulties associated with this quantification, the 1993 *Guidelines for Schools* dropped the categorisation of some subjects as ‘academic’ and did not offer any estimated percentages of how time might be spent. Also, possibly sensitive to criticism that TY might be seen as a watered-down curriculum or without rigour, the 1993 document seeks to reassure doubters by stating:

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. (DoE, 1993c, p.5)

However, ambiguity in the relationship between TY and LC is not totally absent from the 1993 document.

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 pupils’ personal and social awareness/development. When Leaving Certificate material is chosen for study it should be done 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. (DoE, 1993c p.5)

Phrases like ‘not absolutely excluding’, ‘augmenting the Leaving Certificate experience’, ‘original and stimulating’ and ‘significantly different’ are all open to a variety of interpretations. Such guidelines might be expected to lead to varied practices. In particular, many teachers of LC subjects would reject the implication that their teaching is neither ‘original’ nor ‘stimulating’. Furthermore, the point that ‘linear’ subjects such as Mathematics and Languages require continuity between JC and LC appears pedagogically sound and responsible.

As part of the research commissioned by the Points Commission set up in 1997 and which reported in 1999, the views of over 3,000 students were sought about the

system. Differing perceptions of the aims of TY and the LC emerged strongly from that study.

Many of the findings highlight the tensions and real clash of values between what Transition Year promotes and what the points system seems to value. For example, Transition Year promotes maturity, independent research and learning, exploration of ideas, initiative, teamwork, skills development, the ability to make judgements about their own work and the extension of the learning environment beyond the classroom. It is not always clear how the Leaving Certificate and the points system build on these educational experiences. The emphasis seems to be on individual competitiveness, knowledge retention and recall.  
(Humphreys and Jeffers, 1998, p.36)

Evidence in this current study suggests that such tensions continue. One of the principals recalled the consequences of an over-strict interpretation of the guidelines:

One mistake we made at the time was that we listened strictly to the Department's guidelines: no Leaving Certificate content; no Leaving Certificate tones about it, and therefore for a programme like Maths, they (the teachers) set about doing an alternative type of programme, which was a disaster for very bright ones. And in Maths and Irish and subjects like that, you have to have a continuity element in it... I make no apology that in our Transition Year there is honours Maths going on and there is a lot of oral French going on and oral German and in English there is acting out part of the play that they might be doing in Leaving Certificate.  
Principal, Ash School

At the same time, there is widespread evidence that Ash School has embraced the spirit of TY and implements it with imagination and flair.

A less integrated example was illustrated in a focus group of students in another school. When one of the students stated that the teachers 'don't take TY seriously', he was asked for evidence to support this assertion. The contention was that sometimes they 'didn't turn up for class', that in 'a lot of classes we don't have teachers and are just left there' and, when questioned further, supported this by asserting that one teacher suggested they go and play football instead of having the normal class, adding that the same teacher had spent lunchtime conducting an extra LC class.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> In fairness to all concerned, it needs to be pointed out that the interview took place in May, shortly before the LC written examinations and at a particularly busy time for schools. It is not clear how typical the example is, but it is indicative of what can happen if TY is seen as of less value than another programme.

A more stark contrast between differing attitudes to TY and to the LC can be found in some of the promotional literature produced by for-profit schools. For example, Ashfield College in Dublin, in a brochure<sup>37</sup> designed to attract students into Fifth year states:

There are many reasons why students decide to move to Ashfield College for 5<sup>th</sup> year. Most importantly you will find smaller class size. Many are anxious to avoid Transition Year altogether. Coming to Ashfield will ensure the momentum of studying is not broken.

The implication that TY breaks the momentum of learning is a serious one. Such examples serve to highlight strands of wider public attitudes to TY. Within schools where TY is a seriously contested issue, it is likely that its critics highly value the LC. Perhaps some tension is inevitable and the issue is one that has to be addressed primarily at individual school level, especially if backed up by Whole School Evaluation and other support from the Inspectorate. Rather than simply divide into simple ‘pro-TY’ or ‘anti-TY’ camps, collective exploration of the possibilities within the TY-LC relationship, fraught as it may be, is the most productive way forward.

The uneasy relationship also suggests that ‘ring-fencing’ TY as a stand-alone year within a three-year senior cycle is more likely to see TY’s values thrive; attempts to integrate TY with the LC would appear to run a high risk of TY values being diluted if not totally colonised. Developing the NCCA’s proposals will present particular challenges regarding the relationship of Transition Units to the LC programme.

While the main concern is with a possible ‘backwash’ effect of the LC on TY, the LC could be enriched by learning from the TY experience. For example, the popularity of work experience in TY, and also in LCA and LCVP, suggests that integrating work experience placements, including work shadowing, into Fifth and Sixth year programmes could extend the opportunities for career education as well as personal and social development. Similarly, the bonding and motivational effects of appropriate trips outside the classroom might be extended beyond TY. Project work, already a core feature of some LC subjects, might be developed to further opportunities for learning problem-solving and teamwork and counteracting some of the excesses of competitive individualism.

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<sup>37</sup> [www.ashfield-college.com](http://www.ashfield-college.com), accessed on 14 January 2007.

Finally, schools are sites of tension and contestation. For example, vibrant schools seek to harmonise the continuation of tradition and perceived future needs, attention to academic achievements and spiritual values, liberal learning and vocational aptitude, artistic capabilities and technical endeavours, personal accomplishments and social responsibilities (Coolahan, Editor, 1994, p.8). Furthermore, a school's view of itself may be at variance with other interest groups. Progress requires schools to continually reassert themselves, articulating their purposes in language and behaviour that is consistent and coherent. TY – in particular its relationship with the LC – offers a particular arena where this drama is played out.

### **Subject choice**

Students don't always find choosing optional subjects for the LC an easy process. There is some evidence that students can find TY a very valuable space to sample subjects before deciding to pursue them at LC. For example, a number of students indicated that their LC choices were different following TY than if they had made choices at the end of Third year. Principals and co-ordinators expressed the view that they believe sampling subjects in TY reduces the likelihood of students requesting to change option subjects in Fifth or Sixth years. This resonates with the finding that TY students tend to be 'more adventurous' in their subject choices (Miller and Kelly, 1999)

However, while subject sampling in TY can be very beneficial for those unsure about their LC choices, others can find it frustrating. A number of students indicated that, if they are very clear about their LC choices early in TY, it can be difficult to engage with modules that are presented as 'subject tasting' in areas that they have effectively rejected. While this may be an example of an LC perspective overshadowing TY learning, it can present real difficulties for teacher and students. There may be a need to re-configure such modules to include more emphasis on the intrinsic value of the learning, irrespective of whether one will continue with it to LC or not.

LC subject choice can also have important links with TY work experience. While learning about workplaces in general and developing some of the personal and social skills required for effective workplace performance may be seen as the main purposes

of placements, they are not the only benefits. Some students and parents report that placements can be very effective in assisting in career choices and in some cases in LC subject choices. Guidance counsellors can play an effective role in linking more closely the interaction between work experience placements, LC subject and career choices. Some of the wider issues concerning work experience, including its relationship with part-time work, is discussed by Smyth et al (2004, p.85 sqq.) and the evidence from the current study tends to support their finding that variation of practice occurs across schools.

### **Transition Year and the Leaving Certificate Applied.**

In addition to the mainstreaming of TY, the restructuring of the senior cycle in the mid 1990s involved the introduction of the LCA, a ring-fenced programme replacing and building on the Senior Certificate (SC) and the Vocational Preparation and Training Programme (VPTP). Evaluation of the programme (DES, 2000c) has indicated that the LCA ‘was meeting the needs of a particular student cohort whose needs were not being met heretofore,’ that it increased student retention and that it enhanced teachers’ skills through providing them with ‘an enriched range of methodologies’. Importantly, the evaluation noted that there was ‘scope for a more systematic and inclusive approach’ in keeping parents and the wider community informed about the LCA.

As with the established LC, there can be ambiguity in the relationship between TY and the LCA. Two of the schools in this study offer the LCA. Teachers who teach on the TY and LCA programmes tend to emphasise the similarities between the thrust of both programmes: learning methodologies, students’ enthusiasm for particular components, improved student–teacher relationships etc. When contrasting the two programmes, teachers are inclined to refer to assessment (more structured in LCA) and subject-specific in-service education (more available for LCA). In the schools in this study that do not offer the LCA, principals and co-ordinators indicated that, as they were not familiar with its practical operation, they did not feel they were in a position to comment.

Patterns of TY and LCA uptake can be intertwined. In both Beech School and Oak School, LCA is seen as an alternative track to the established LC with TY closely

associated with the LC track. In practice, most students who chose TY see themselves, by that decision, as opting for the LC, rather than the LCA. Frequently this leads to a situation where LC students stay in school for a six-year cycle, while their LCA counterparts complete their schooling in five years. The schools offer two, linked, explanations for the difference. Firstly, following the JC, students see two, rather than three, more years in school as attractive. Secondly, LCA learning includes many experiences similar to those encountered in TY so that the programme has, in effect, built in 'transition' elements. The majority view in the two schools was that TY for all, followed by students choosing either the established LC or LCA, would be resisted by LCA students and their parents. The two school principals believe that the introduction of LCA has increased the senior cycle completion rates in their schools.

The Principal of Maple School, a small VEC school, indicated that, in an ideal world, he would like to offer both TY and LCA but, because of its small student enrolment, the school had to choose one or the other; they chose TY. One can imagine that fear of fragmentation and over-stretching of limited resources is a major consideration in schools with enrolments of less than 300 students considering offering both TY and LCA. Indeed, many of the 200 or so schools that do not offer TY tend to be quite small and, frequently, do offer LCA. On the other hand, the non-availability of LCA in larger schools is a conspicuous feature of provision throughout the country (Jeffers, 2002).

### **Student–teacher relationships**

Informants from all six schools highlight improved relationships between students and teachers during TY. The data strongly support the findings of Smyth et al (2004, p.163) that 'overall, students felt that teachers were more relaxed and friendly in TY than in previous years'. The evidence also confirms their observation that this was 'with *some* teachers'; improved student–teacher relationships in TY are neither automatic nor universal.

Young people's enthusiasm for more adult relationships with teachers is a consistent feature of the data. Teachers and students working together both inside and outside the classroom, especially on trips away from the school, appear effective in fashioning better rapport. The absence of examination pressure on teachers is seen by many as

enabling more democratic classrooms where students express opinions and feel listened to. In each school, TY students voiced sentiments similar to the following:

You can work with teachers and you can work with groups. In third year you'd just sit down in the class and take notes. You're handed out leaflets and you just do what you're told to do. But in fourth year you get to say what you want to and you get to work with the teachers. You don't just have to listen to the teachers. You get to express your opinions to the teachers and they, like, they listen to you and you don't have to go by what they are saying.

Mike, Fourth year, Maple School

While such comments prompt questions outside the realm of this study regarding student–teacher relationships in schools generally, the evidence points towards a particular issue that can emerge in some Fifth year classes. In schools where TY is optional, a typical Fifth year class will consist of a mixture of students who have completed TY and students who have just finished the JC. If the TY students have a well-developed relationship with a particular teacher, this may present challenges for all concerned, including the teacher. Awareness of such difficulties will go some way towards resolving them. An induction programme at the outset of Fifth year, emphasising expectations, common goals and group support may also be worth implementing in some schools.

Improved relationships not only enhance the in-school learning experience. In some cases they realise aspects of what the NCCA has proposed for 2010 as ‘a different school culture’, (NCCA, 2003b, p.4). Moreover, a qualitative shift in relationships can also be both cause and effect in relation to young people’s maturity. In the two schools designated ‘disadvantaged’, for example, teachers sometime play a crucial role in assisting students’ subject and career choices. Across all schools, and strongly within both parents groups, there was an appreciation that learning to relate with adults in less childish ways is a major task of growing up. The fundamental adolescent task of developing a personal identity on the road to adulthood is linked closely to relating to people in new ways. The kind of opportunities TY presents for teachers and students to listen to each other, to trust and respect each other, to negotiate and to co-operate can be especially rich in promoting maturity.

Furthermore, TY appears to facilitate more mature relationships among students themselves. Girls, in particular, spoke about the ‘bonding’ that can occur during TY, especially in trips and high intensity projects. Re-arranged class groups can enable some to make new friends, though, when TY is optional, the fear of losing friends can be a factor in students deciding not to follow TY. The student evidence serves to underline how strongly many young people see school primarily as an arena of social interaction with their peers. For some, particularly those unexcited by academic pursuits, classes and other adult-related activities can be seen as interrupting such social intercourse.

Thus, in effecting shifts in student–teacher relationships, particularly with more participative classrooms, in student–student relationships, in student-parent relationships, and in how students relate to the wider society, TY is centrally engaged in citizenship development, promoting an appropriate maturity that begins to engage others in more adult ways.

### **Optional or compulsory**

Should TY be compulsory or optional? This question can divide students, parents, teachers and policy makers quite sharply. In this study, one of the schools, Ash School, is unequivocal in making TY compulsory while another, Beech School, effectively makes it compulsory for those following the track towards the established LC (as distinct from the LCA). In the other four schools, Chestnut, Maple, Oak, and Sycamore the programme can be described as ‘optional’. Diametrically opposing views on the issue can be found among teachers in all six schools. In the schools where it is optional, student discourse on this topic suggests that decisions are often relatively uninformed, based on flimsy evidence and quite random.

As Smyth et al (2004, p. 24) observe, ‘... the distinction between compulsory and optional is not as clear-cut as it might at first appear.’ Those who favour a compulsory TY tend to emphasise the importance of the TY experience for all. They raise a concern that, if optional, those who could benefit might opt not to do it. Some also link this to a perception regarding selectivity:

...it was evident from the case-study schools that certain groups of students, particularly those with behaviour problems, with less attachment



to school life and those who may be at risk of dropping out, may be discouraged from participation in the programme. (Smyth et al, p.52)

Many students, teachers and parents express the view that young people who do not wish to follow a TY programme should not be compelled to do so, that a class with too many ‘conscripts’ will be very difficult to motivate and manage. TY students themselves often voice strong opinions about classmates whom they perceive as not taking the programme seriously.

There are also students, parents and teachers who voice a concern that TY might somehow ‘interrupt’ the studies of young people who are especially studious and motivated, particularly towards academic pursuits.

The compulsory/optional debate needs to be located in the context of a school’s admissions policy and practice back at first year. If the majority of students in a year group are highly motivated, a compulsory TY should be relatively easy to sustain; a school with an open intake policy, with sizeable numbers of reluctant learners, may find it almost impossible to maintain a TY for everyone. Schools operate in very different contexts and so generalisations on this topic appear unwise.

As has been seen in this study, the two schools designated ‘disadvantaged’ have built support systems to assist and encourage Third years in their choices. As well as interviewing students, parents are sometimes interviewed. A thorough process of providing students and their parents with relevant information consumes time and other resources; in Beech School and in Oak School such investments are regarded as worthwhile. Data from all the schools where TY is optional point to the value of schools actively counteracting the folklore that can surround TY. From students’ and their parents’ initial contact with the school, the leadership and teachers need to be explicit and consistent in communicating the purposes and benefits of TY. Statements like ‘we leave it to the students themselves to make up their own minds’ can appear to be coded and to favour uptake from students from families with greater insights into TY’s benefits.

When TY is optional there can be consequences for students and teachers in Fifth year and Sixth year classes. There is evidence that sometimes when students come from a Third year class directly into Fifth year, their relationship with teachers is weaker than that between teachers and those who completed TY. This can contribute to a variety of tensions regarding motivation, engagement and teamwork. Some students in Oak School, for example, pointed out that, following TY, they approached Fifth year with focused goals and were ready for serious work. They expressed frustration at being in the same class as students fresh from the Junior Cert. who see Fifth year ‘as their lull year’. For teachers, issues of mixed-ability and mixed motivation can be even more pronounced following an optional TY.

### **TY’s relationship with the rest of the schooling experience**

While TY is often described as a ‘stand-alone’ year, it can never be isolated from what proceeds it or what follows. The wider national, local and school contexts in which TY operates have a significant effect on attitudes to the programme. While one of the most ambitious aspirations in the *Guidelines*, is:

The aims and philosophy of Transition Year should permeate the entire school. (DoE, 1993c, p.4)

the evidence suggests that the JC and LC, with their focus on examination achievement, also constrain the development of TY.

One of the most positive perspectives to emerge from the teacher data was the almost universal belief, even among those with serious reservations about TY, that it brings a fresh energy to school life, opens the school towards the world beyond its gates and enables more mature student–teacher relationships. There is also some evidence that TY engages teachers in ways that promote their own professional development, confidence and competences.

However, there is also evidence that TY is sometimes conceptualised as a kind of separate educational experience, parallel to and disconnected from the established realities of the JC and LC programmes. This view would manifest itself most clearly in a school that consciously chose not to offer TY at all; in effect, seeing the three-year JC followed immediately by the two-year LC as sufficient secondary schooling.

Similarly, when schools offer TY as optional, the decision effectively puts some young people on a five-year cycle while others benefit from a six-year one. This optional nature of the programme is one of the most contentious features of TY. Educators can make impassioned cases on both sides of the issue. For example, both Principal and Co-ordinator in Ash School believe strongly in TY as an integral part of a six-year developmental programme. Others, equally committed and concerned about young people's welfare, contend that unless students – and their parents – make conscious choices to 'opt-in', they are not likely to derive much benefit from the year, and can even damage the experience for other students. There is clearly merit on both sides of a complex debate.

Of particular concern is the widespread perception that young people with lower rather than higher achievements in the JC, from families with limited experience of formal schooling, and who articulate more modest career and educational ambitions, are least likely to choose TY. The evidence here, particularly from students and parents, prompts the questions about how 'real' these choices are.

As has been seen, the decision to do TY or not is often based on limited information, perceptions and 'myths from the schoolyard' and are strongly influenced by peers' decisions. The challenges that the two schools in this study designated 'disadvantaged' face to maintain their TY programmes draw attention to varying levels of student interest and motivation but also highlight the importance of school leadership and what might be described as giving 'active invitations' – as opposed to passive ones – to students to take up TY. In both Beech School and Oak School there is evidence of the value of structured interviews and teacher encouragement as being supportive of students who might otherwise not give TY much consideration. Notwithstanding this, as the parents in Oak School articulated so clearly, the fear that some students might embark on a TY and then drop out of school altogether is strong and the dominant attitude is that the certification offered by an LC is more desirable than any alternative.

School policies regarding selection for LCA and the JCSP can also have implications for who follows TY, particularly when TY is closely aligned with the established LC or the LCVP and LCA seen as an alternative track.

Four other concerns touching on TY and the rest of the school are worth noting. Firstly, if many students continually contrast their perceptions of learning in TY as active and engaging, while regarding Junior Cycle as non-engaging, even boring, this may signal some serious system failures within the first three years of schooling.

Secondly, if, during TY, students and teachers establish greater rapport with their teachers, this has implications for student–teacher relationships throughout the rest of senior cycle. The student data and some of the responses from teachers point to a preference for a senior cycle that would include many of the features as set out by the NCCA in its vision ‘towards a different school culture at senior cycle’ (NCCA, 2003b, p.4). Students clearly welcome opportunities to participate in decisions about their own schooling, to engage in learning beyond the classroom, to receive support in making informed decisions about their lives. In enabling students to become more mature, TY, in effect, creates in students expectations of a more adult engagement in their final years of schooling. There are implications in this for diverse features of school life including school rules and responsibilities, student councils, parent–teacher meetings and, most centrally, relationships within classrooms.

The third concern arises from TY being seen as the year *par excellence* when students have opportunities for trips outside the classroom. If schools, as it were, pack all the apparently ‘exciting’ learning experiences into one year, the other five years can look even more barren and sterile. Enough is known about adolescent development to indicate that schools need to aspire to the relationships of learning that characterise the best TY experiences from First year through to Sixth year. In other words, musicals, dramas, outdoor pursuits, mini-companies, work experience placements, community service, field trips etc. and, most of all, active, participative classrooms should not be restricted to Fourth year; they need to ‘permeate the whole school’.

Fourthly, by the very fact of being seen as different from the other five years, TY is engaged in either challenging or reinforcing a school’s hidden curriculum (Lynch, 1989). More participative classrooms certainly imply a questioning of the values of passivity, compliance, docility and conformity. Improved student–teacher relations

suggest a recognition of a need to move from traditional, unequal power relations. The ways in which schools domesticate TY appear to have elements that both challenge and reinforce hidden curricula. As will be seen later, patterns of participation in TY, especially regarding social class and gender, raise disturbing questions of the hidden curriculum.

### **Teacher development**

In the mid-1990s, not long after the restructuring of the senior cycle, Callan observed that:

... there is a tendency for individual teachers to excuse their non-involvement in new programmes on the basis of the absence of adequate supports whether in the form of money or proper school management.  
(Callan, 1997, p 27)

The six school principals were keenly aware of difficulties associated with teacher deployment on the TY programme. They mention particular dilemmas. Should any teacher have the right to refuse to teach a particular school programme? On the other hand, if a teacher is clearly out of sympathy with the basic values and thrust of the TY project, is it fair to students – or indeed the teacher in question – to timetable him or her for a TY class? What would happen if a majority of teachers lacked sympathy for TY?

Concern within the DES on this issue was evident at the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science meeting in March 2004. Assistant Chief Inspector Doreen McMorris identified as one of the most significant challenges facing the TY project as

... the need to attract and retain teachers with high levels of motivation and energy to plan and implement the programme and who also have the appropriate competencies and skills. (Joint Oireachtas Committee, 2004)

Contributors to that wide-ranging discussion, including Marie Hoctor TD, tended to recognise the challenge associated with teaching TY classes. However, a key point to emerge was that planning and teaching TY can be very developmental for teachers.

Burke (2001) states that, when he initially imagined TY, teacher development was a key outcome. As he put it:

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. (Burke, 2001)

Sixty-nine per cent of teachers surveyed for this study agreed with the statement *Teaching TY has helped my development as a teacher*. Superficially this may appear encouraging, but what about the other 31 per cent? Fourteen per cent actually disagreed and 17 per cent offered no opinion. A significant minority of teachers asserting that they do not see TY helping their development must ring alarm bells. Teacher development is essential to wider school development and the overall health of the school system. The alternatives to teacher development serve to underscore its seriousness: teacher under-development, disengagement, disaffection. The implications for student learning are far-reaching. As Barth has noted:

Probably nothing in a school has more impact on students in terms of skills development, self-confidence or classroom behaviour, than the personal and professional growth of their teachers. (Barth, 1990, p.49)

Understanding how TY can contribute to teachers' development is a matter of interest to teachers, school leaders and policy-makers. Like students, teachers also have different learning styles and are at different stages of development.<sup>38</sup> They also operate in a professional ethos that Lortie (1975, p.212) has described as 'conservative, individualistic, and focused on the present'.

Lieberman and Miller (1999) present a model of three distinct arenas of teacher development that, if supported, might offer particular assistance to those who do not believe that teaching TY currently helps their development as teachers. Firstly, teachers develop as individuals who read, reflect on classroom experience etc. Secondly, they develop in association with peers by attending courses, in-service workshops, seminars, being members of subject associations. Thirdly, they develop in association with their colleagues in the school where they teach. While teachers need

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<sup>38</sup> Accounts of stages in the professional development of teachers are set out extensively by Huberman in *The Work of Teachers* (1993) and more recently by Day et al in *Teachers Matter* (2007).

to be active in all three arenas, one perspective is that the 'in-school' dimension of professional development needs particular encouragement, particularly given the Irish school tradition of teacher independence and isolation.<sup>39</sup> This emphasis on in-school professional development is based on the strong belief articulated by many teachers that they learn best about teaching from other teachers. It is also posited on the practical reality that regular workplace contact between colleagues is what sustains cultures and ethos and so is a critical context in which to support change. As Fullan asserts:

Professional development is not about workshops and courses; rather it is at heart about the development of habits of learning that are far more likely to be powerful if they present themselves day after day.  
(Fullan 2001 p. 253)

This resonates with a central feature of the perspective from Miller and Lieberman:

Learning for teachers involves more than listening to ideas about school, it involves learning in school by trying out new ideas with peers and students as a regular part of the school day. (Lieberman and Miller p.69)

Teacher development that is centred on the workplace reality is also more likely to acknowledge the emotional dimensions of the profession and not merely enhance technical skills.

### **Participation rates, disadvantage and resources**

Patterns of school and student participation in TY have attracted some analysis and comment (e.g TYCSS, 1999b; Miller and Kelly, 1999; Jeffers, 2002; Smyth et al, 2004; Hanafin 2005). Among the identified trends are higher levels of uptake among girls, among schools that charge fees, and in schools in the east of the country, with corresponding lower levels of participation among boys, particularly those from family backgrounds with low levels of formal schooling, and in small and rural VEC schools. It is worth pointing out that such trends are not uniform or universal and, as with so many features of TY, school-specific contexts vary greatly. That said, the equity issue is a key one. As Smyth et al remark:

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<sup>39</sup> While not concerned specifically with TY, one example of a school implementing a collaborative, in-school approach to professional development can be found in *Talking about teaching in non-crisis situations: learning from a teacher support project* in Jeffers, G. (2006a) *Irish Educational Studies*, Vol 25, No 2, June 2006.

In terms of equity, it is important that all students should be allowed to access the programme where they so choose... The challenge in policy terms is to widen the appeal of the programme to a broader set of schools. (Smyth et al. 2004, p.220)

The school experiences recounted in this study, particularly from Beech School, Maple School and Oak School, provide some pointers as to how TY can be sustained in challenging situations.

As already discussed, the evidence suggests that strong beliefs in the values of TY, and creativity regarding the curriculum, are crucial within individual schools. Challenging the hidden curriculum that makes certain presumptions about 'who TY is for' may also be important. There are indicators to the importance of finance as a resource. As has been shown, students greatly value opportunities for learning beyond the classroom. But the costs of even modest trips by class groups to locations such as museums, art galleries, outdoor pursuit centres, third-level institutions, community service facilities, county council meetings or Leinster House quickly mount up. Those working in schools designated 'disadvantaged' identify a number of unfavourable comparisons with more privileged schools. As regards work experience placements and visiting speakers, they are conscious of not having a large, willing past-pupil network. In talking about what has become known as parental 'voluntary contributions' as well as, in some (non-fee paying) schools, specific charges for TY they tend to emphasise a desire not to have students or their families deterred from the programme by the cost. At the same time they are not suggesting that all trips, especially those to more exotic locations, should be funded by the taxpayer.

At the time of the mainstreaming of TY in 1994, a major attraction was the provision by the DoE of an additional grant of IR£50 per student. This applied to all students following TY programmes in non-fee-paying schools. In its presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science, the Department highlighted this additional funding as one of the significant features of the mainstreaming process. Perhaps surprisingly, given inflation and the years of the Celtic Tiger economy, this £50 has not been increased and remains at €63.49 per student. Those in schools designated 'disadvantaged' wonder whether other schools have responded to this by simply asking more direct payments from students and their parents. In this study,



personnel in all six schools expressed concern at the increased costs of supporting particular activities, for example those involving the hiring of buses etc. and a resistance to increasing the charges on families. Some also expressed unease at the practice of offering some activities as optional because of the costs. They make the point that while that is regarded as 'normal', if the activity is a trip to a ski resort or a Premiership football match in the UK, it is more problematic when the trip is to an outdoor pursuit centre or a cross-border one; not only do some students miss valuable learning opportunities, but unfortunate distinctions are highlighted within the TY group, based on the willingness or otherwise to pay.

This is a complex topic involving issues well beyond the scope of this study, including state policies regarding educational disadvantage, charging of fees (directly and indirectly), school transport, out-of-school youth services, and schemes operated by other Departments, for example Justice, Equality and Law Reform and Social and Family Affairs. Nonetheless it appears an urgent issue, not least because of the perceived benefits of a well-structured TY programme to young people regarded as 'disadvantaged'.

From the outset, the statistical data point to greater participation of girls than boys in TY. Whether this reflects a lack of enthusiasm among boys in general or among all-boys schools is unclear. With four of the six schools in this study being co-educational, co-ordinators in three of the schools not only suggested that they would like to see more boys take part in TY, they also indicated that girls seem to engage more enthusiastically with many TY activities.

### **Real change?**

While this study has discovered some evidence of the energy and spirit associated with TY having a positive effect on the rest of the school, there is considerable evidence of other values restricting and inhibiting the realisation of TY. This prompts at least two further questions. Firstly, how much is TY to be seen as an innovation grafted on to existing practices, softening the edges of what is sometimes perceived as a harsh and demanding system? Or is TY a change that involves a radical, systemic shift that challenges the very way schools are conceptualised and organised and demands that basic assumptions, goals, structures, role, norms and relationships be

questioned? From a teaching point of view, is it an invitation to do things slightly differently or to alter fundamental beliefs and practices about teaching and learning?

Evans observation regarding innovation in schools is a sober reminder:

One of the central lessons we think we have learned from previous rounds of innovation is that they failed because they didn't get at fundamental, underlying, systemic features of school life; they didn't change the behaviours, norms and beliefs of practitioners. (Evans, 1996, p.5)

This question of how much 'real' change TY brings about in schools directs our attention to Fullan's contention that 'deep change' takes place at the level of materials, of practice and of practitioners' beliefs and values (Fullan, 1991, p.32).

This study suggests limited evidence of some change at all three levels and indicates how slow and difficult it can be to bring about such change, as noted by Gleeson (2004) and Callan (2006).

The second question, and linked crucially to the above and perhaps to the difficulty of effecting real change, is: how should the relationship between TY and the LC be viewed?

### **Inter-connectedness**

In seeking to isolate distinct features or components of TY, one might miss the inter-relatedness of multiple factors. Essentially the TY experience is a process; individual components and distinctive features interact strongly with each other. The evidence from these six schools suggest that, in each case, a complex interaction of factors, stretching from well before the JC to the conclusion of TY, contributes to students and teachers experiencing TY as meaningful and beneficial.

For example, students highly value learning beyond the classroom. However, within the array of experiences it is clear that the varied nature of these experiences (such as a work experience placement, a half-day's hike in the mountains, a visit to an art gallery), the preparedness of students for the activities, how well resourced they are, teachers' levels of engagement and the quality of the de-briefing or follow-up afterwards, all contribute to the quality of the learning.

Similarly, the evidence points to learning-beyond-the-classroom activities as providing an important platform for improving teacher-student relationships. Building on this within classrooms, a combination of improved relationships, the lack of exam pressure, and the flexibility of the programme can further enhance student-teacher relationships. Trust and confidence in each other can increase. Students report that this is much more likely to occur when their voices are listened to respectfully. More participative, democratic classrooms in turn appear to be important confidence building arenas for students. Students tend to emphasise the importance of this classroom dynamic more than the subjects or modules in the programme. Thus, for example, in advancing TY's key aim of promoting students' personal and social development, whether a school timetables specific 'Personal and Social Development' classes or not, may be less important than the kind of activities and relationships of learning that take place within TY classrooms.

Continuing with the theme of inter-connectedness of components, it appears that when student-teacher relationships are broadly positive, as they were the six schools in this study, students' motivation for learning is also enhanced. This increased motivation can lead to improved academic performance which eventually translates into higher point scores in the LC.<sup>40</sup> Analyses that separate or even juxtapose academic development and personal and social development risk not seeing their inter-connectedness. TY's focus is on holistic development.

Critically underpinning all these interactions are the attitudes of the teachers to the TY programme. Fundamental beliefs are important. Imagination is needed to plan a TY programme. Planning is more likely to be fruitful when teachers work collegially. Collegiality is more likely to happen when structured time is made available to facilitate it. While leadership from the principal and co-ordinator is important, so is the involvement, commitment and sense of 'ownership' among the whole school community. Courage among teachers to experiment, to take risks, to go beyond the confines of conventional textbooks, to listen respectfully to student voices, to evaluate with a view to dropping what is not working, are also among the factors that contribute to a successful TY.

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<sup>40</sup> The complexity and inter-relatedness of TY related factors impacting on academic performance in the LC is acknowledged in Millar and Kelly (1999) and Smyth et al (2004, p.211)

In addition, as a process there is some evidence that the TY experience can go through various stages between September and June. Seeing the year in developmental terms requires a perspective that goes beyond planning a timetable that will operate week-in, week-out from September to June. For example, when the division of the year into three distinct parts seems to support greater timetabling diversity than usually operates for JC or LC classes.

TY timetables need to be complemented by calendars. For example, extra-classroom learning, especially work experience, community service placements and a variety of 'trips' need to be planned into a TY calendar. Similarly, when classroom visitors, induction events, student presentations and exhibitions, assessment events and end-of-year arrangements are explicitly and carefully planned into the school calendar, the TY programme is enhanced and everyone is clearer about the its aims and structure.

Ultimately, then, this analysis of attitudes to TY points to the need for schools to attend to both macro and micro dimensions if this innovative programme is to be successfully implemented and sustained. A broad vision of how TY might enrich the schooling experience of adolescents needs to be complemented by creative attention to detail. Well co-ordinated teaching teams, capable of establishing rapport with young people inside and outside classrooms, need to be supported in devising and implementing programmes that are relevant, imaginative and engaging, that are evaluated regularly by all stakeholders and that are continually adapted to meet changing challenges and opportunities.

### **Future developments**

Mixed attitudes to TY characterise the six school communities. The term *domestication* has been used in an attempt to capture the embracing of some features of TY and the resistance to others. Teachers' views suggest widespread enthusiasm, for example, for students' personal and social development, enhanced maturity, greater student confidence and competence, contrasting with more diverse attitudes to assessment, evaluation, mixed-ability teaching, a more prescribed curriculum, the programme's status among teachers and the provision of resources.

As has been seen, each school domesticates TY in its own particular way. Such local adaptation, with flexibility in curriculum construction and respect for each school's individual identity, can be seen as one of TY's great strengths; it is also a weakness. All programmes depend, to some extent, on 'top-down' support – directives, guidelines, resources etc from the DES; their implementation requires 'bottom-up' engagement that is competent, imaginative and sustained. TY programmes in these schools have been sustained by the commitment of creative teachers, very hard-working co-ordinators and supportive school leadership. Their experiences offer pointers for other schools as they introduce, develop and sustain TY programmes.

For policy-makers, the attitudes to TY evident in this study may inform wider decisions. For example, the tense relationship between TY and LC suggests that TY's fragile character requires the 'protection' its current 'stand-alone' status provides. While some teachers welcome the great freedom TY offers to devise their own programmes, modules and subjects, others would prefer greater scaffolding and direction. Recent NCCA proposals, particularly the idea of 45 hour Transition Units, appear to offer an important structural development for TY.

Proposed templates will enable schools to consolidate components of TY already developed and, indeed, enhance their status. Cross-curricular modules developed in association with non-governmental agencies (NGOs) will be given added legitimacy. A national data-bank of TUs will be available centrally. However, particularly given the constraints on time for schools to engage in devising and developing their own TY programmes, one can imagine a swing towards schools adopting more 'ready-made' components. This may be no bad thing, especially if the TUs are of a high quality, but the challenge will be to ensure that school-based creativity in devising TY programmes is neither down-graded nor marginalised.

A further challenge deriving from a new focus on 'curriculum components' relates to the importance of the TY as a year-long experience. Senior cycle students, teachers, co-ordinators and principals in each school speak about TY having a particular rhythm across the school year, with highs and dips for both students and teachers. Co-ordinators point out that, for some students, the maturing process can be very slow, and TY's benefits are not always immediately appreciated; some students with indifferent

engagement in October may be much more focused and energised by March, not least due to the learning environments they experience in the intervening months. This resonates with the emphasis placed by all groups of informants on the centrality of relationships – student–teacher, student–student, school–home, and school–community – in bringing about new learning experiences and enhancing maturity. TY development is a process that takes place over months; isolated components alone are unlikely to deliver such development.

While TY within these six schools is seen by parents, students and teachers as enabling young people – across a wide spectrum of abilities and motivations – to experience success in learning, the uneven participation of schools means that such benefits are not universally available. Attitudes from Beech School and Oak School, both designated ‘disadvantaged’, and from Maple School, the one with the lowest enrolment, indicate practical ways in which such schools can engage productively with TY.

TY’s possibilities for two other distinct groups of young people also deserve attention, namely, those with special educational needs and those for whom English is not their first language. Given the increased participation of both groups in mainstream schooling, TY’s flexibility must be an asset in tailoring provision to meet their individual learning requirements. The challenge for policy-makers is how to support schools in realising this.

### **Schools in a fast-changing society**

Schools, with strong traditions reaching back through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, face particular challenges in the twenty-first. Recent social and economic transformations in Irish society accentuate such challenges. If schools are to re-invent themselves successfully, curriculum reform must be at the heart of that change. There is some evidence from this study that, not only can TY be an arena for innovation and experimentation, but that students, their parents and teachers welcome curricular space dedicated to exploring new avenues of learning. They also indicate ambiguity, perhaps fearing ‘throwing out the baby with the bathwater’.

Any school curriculum has to have one eye on the richness of a cultural heritage that values the passing on of particular values, stories and insights while at the same time,

to remain relevant, must imagine the future so that learning is directed towards practical engagement with that, as yet unknown, future. The danger is that schools and their personnel become so caught up with the demanding tasks associated with operating a modern school, the *status quo* prevails. New initiatives, however worthy or radical, all face the prospect of being ‘domesticated’, of having, as it were, their teeth extracted, of being defined, shaped and restricted according to existing practices. One is not painting on a fresh canvas but rather attempting to add another layer to the existing, strongly defined, reality.

Hence an individual school’s engagement with TY has to be located in the wider, historical context. TY represents particular views about the learning needs of mid-adolescents and schools as organisations. TY challenges dominant models of current practices in schools, particularly exam-led motivation, passive forms of learning, what a recent report refers to as the persistence of ‘more than a few features’ of ‘hierarchical control, unimaginative teaching and conformist learning’ in second-level schools (Hogan *et al*, 2005).

Schools aspire to very ambitious goals. For example, some of the schools in this study, and many others, include in their mission statements phrases such as ‘... assist all students realise their full potential...’ When juxtaposed with data like that from the OECD (2003, Table 5.4) that indicate more than half the 15-year-olds are ‘bored’ with schooling (a figure higher than many other countries), one gets a sense of the size and shape of the challenges.

The times we live in are characterised by massive challenges, for example from globalisation, from successful wealth generation, from interculturalism, from the pace of life, from responsibilities for inequalities, for the environment, for living in harmony with each other. In a fast-changing society, schools live in danger of becoming fossilised in their practices, their processes and in their thinking. TY represents an invitation for teachers and students to be particularly creative. TY carries strong connotations of optimism, of possibilities. Schools, especially the leadership within schools, can do much to nurture such creativity. It also appears that they can stifle it. A programme dedicated to changing traditional emphases within school may be a singularly appropriate one for the times in which we live.

**Ready, Fire, Aim!**

Perhaps one of the long-term legacies of the mainstreaming of TY is that it has generated, and sustains, discussion among students, parents, teachers, school leaders, policy makers and the wider society as to the purposes of schooling.

TY challenges a narrow instrumentalist view that sees schools only in credentialist terms. It asserts clearly that schools are not solely there to serve an economy. TY presents an alternative perspective, a holistic view of human development where intellectual growth is never isolated from personal and social development. It particularly asserts that at the critical stage of mid-adolescence, social and personal development is an urgent educational imperative.

The schools in this study demonstrate that, when faced with a challenge as radical as TY, they tend to adopt some features and reject others, adapting the guidelines to suit their own wider agendas, domesticating the programme. Notwithstanding this, substantial evidence also points to how these six schools have greatly enriched their students' education through TY.

By nature complex and, at times, contradictory, schools are continually challenged to be responsive to the needs of their current students, striving to maintain their balance while buffeted by the high winds of competing priorities. TY provides a particular stage where various actors engage with such tensions. The story of three decades of TY development is rich and varied, with twists and dips as well as significant achievements. Each school has its own story to tell and the coming years should see important developments in these stories. NCCA proposals relating to senior cycle represent an attempt to fine-tune current provision. Transition Units (TUs) offer exciting possibilities but need to build on what has been learned, sometimes painfully, since 1974.

Though over 500 schools now offer TY, it remains a contested feature of our schooling system. Its case needs to be constructively and continually made. Approximately 200 schools do not offer TY. Some of these offered TY at some stage during the past decade and dropped it. Many schools not offering TY are small, with enrolments of less than 300 students. A disproportionate number have been



designated ‘disadvantaged’. In the foreword to the DEIS report (DES, 2005), Minister Hanafin acknowledged that:

‘... we know that too many of our people do not reach their full potential in our education system and, as a result, cannot benefit from full participation in our society and economy’ (DES, 2005, p.3).

It seems that a fundamental principle of the provision of universal secondary education to all young people should be the availability of TY learning opportunities in all schools. The experiences of the schools in this study give some indication of what is possible and how such possibilities might be realised.

## CHAPTER 9

### Recommendations

#### All Stakeholders

1. A reading of the full report should confirm the view that attitudes to Transition Year, including perceptions of its meaning and purpose – whether by students, parents, teachers or as found in official policy – are characterised by some ambiguity. The heart of the struggle to convince some stakeholders of the value of Transition Year centres on fundamental questions about the purposes of schooling for mid-adolescents. In particular, TY highlights a tension between perceptions of learning to pass examinations and learning for personal and social development. Thus, school communities – as well as the wider society – could benefit greatly by engaging in more open discussion and clarification of the responsibility of schools to provide a holistic education for the full range of young people and to promote school cultures that sustain such education.

#### Inclusion

2. In order to achieve greater inclusion and equity, schools that currently do not offer TY as an option need to be encouraged and supported to do so. These supports should include financial assistance and programmes of professional development for teachers.

#### Optional - compulsory

3. It should be compulsory for all schools to offer TY, though not necessarily compulsory for all students to follow the programme.

#### Financial Support

4. Consideration should be given to restructuring the student grant (increased to €100 per student in September 2007.) to assist smaller schools, in particular, in offering TY. One possibility would be that all schools receive a minimum TY grant of €2,000, irrespective of the number of students in TY, and then €100

for each student in excess of 20. Additional, once-off, financial resources to assist schools in planning to introduce TY – for team meetings, staff development, visiting other schools, developing the curriculum - would also be helpful.

### **Professional development and networking**

5. The history of TY's development (Chapter 1) suggests that the third attempt (in 1994) to mainstream the programme was successful partly because the strategy included financial incentives and partly because school involvement in 'locally and regionally based programmes of staff development/in-service education' was a condition of participation (DoE, 1993c, p.13). The evidence from the six schools in this study (Chapter 6) indicates the value of enabling schools to tell their own TY stories. Local and regional networks to facilitate the exchange of experiences between schools – including between principals, between co-ordinators and between teachers of specific modules and subjects - need greater support, especially where there is perceived competition between neighbouring schools. Education Centres and Curriculum Development Centres can play key roles in this. DVD technology also offers opportunities for schools to demonstrate TY classes in action.

### **Active methodologies**

6. Based on data from teachers (see for example p.119, p 294), support for teachers to develop greater use of active learning methodologies in linear or continuity subjects (subjects like English, Irish Mathematics, etc. that students must take in both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes) should be prioritised.

### **Schools**

7. To avoid fragmentation of TY programmes and promote greater coherence, the evidence suggests that four activities, in particular, are likely to contribute to coherence rather than fragmentation in TY programmes. They are planning and writing the programme; communicating with parents, the role of the co-

ordinator and the quality of in-school leadership. (see pps.259, 261, 273 sqq, 280, 297).

### **Teaching teams**

8. Teaching teams within schools need to spend time together to devise and revise engaging and stimulating TY programmes. Frameworks to support such activities include the 1993 Department of Education publication *Transition Year Programme: Guidelines for Schools* and the resources available through the TY Support Service at [www.ty@slss.ie](http://www.ty@slss.ie).

### **Cost burden**

9. While opportunities for ‘learning beyond the classroom’ can contribute significantly to the TY experience, schools need to be attentive to the cost burden on some families associated with particular activities and should seek to maximise the many educational opportunities that are available at relatively low cost.

### **Policy-makers and schools**

10. The danger of TY being colonised by the established Leaving Certificate is ever present (see p.265, p.302, p.305). Transition Units and other aspects of senior cycle schooling should be developed in ways that ensure that such colonisation does not occur. Maintaining TY’s ‘stand-alone’ status as a year-long process is one way of ensuring this. Furthermore, policy-makers and schools should seek ways of spreading the practices and benefits of TY learning experiences to enrich the other five years of secondary schooling. (see p.312 sqq)

### **TY and LCA**

11. Pathways need to be developed to facilitate students who, during the course of TY, decide that Leaving Certificate Applied is a more appropriate follow-up course than the established Leaving Certificate. Recognition of TY modules for LCA accreditation purposes could contribute to this.

## **Parents**

12. Given parents' enthusiasm for a greater understanding of the values, possibilities and challenges associated with TY (see Chapter 5), schools need to be proactive in engaging parents of all students in discussions about TY. Such discussions need to extend well beyond a once-off meeting during Third Year. At national level, there should be greater involvement of the National Parents Council – post-primary in promoting TY.

## **Assessment**

13. Although the liberating effect on students and teachers of moving from an 'exam-led' focus to a 'learning-led' one is a distinct feature of TY, schools can enhance structure, coherence, motivation and credibility by applying innovative forms of assessment – particularly those that actively engage students in the process.

## **Agency co-operation**

14. At national level, responsibility for promoting and developing TY needs to be more coherent and less fragmented (see, for example, Chapter 1). This requires greater leadership and co-operation between agencies such as the Department of Education and Science, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Second-Level Support Service and the School Development Planning Initiative

## **Initial Teacher Education**

15. Preparation for teaching Transition Year needs to be coherently integrated into programmes of initial teacher education so that student teachers appreciate its history, development and rationale, can devise programmes that are relevant, imaginative and challenging, and employ appropriate methodologies and assessment processes. Teaching Council support for teaching TY, including recognition of specific competencies, would enhance its status and advance its development.

## **Inspectorate**

16. Given the layered complexity of TY programmes as indicated in this report, inspection of TY programmes should go beyond looking at individual components of the TY programme as seen, for example, in some recent Whole School Evaluation Reports. The DES Inspectorate needs to give careful attention to how the overall programme fits into the context of each school including who follows the programme and who doesn't, its breadth and balance, how the school has domesticated it, its relationship with other senior cycle programmes, teachers' professional development and the application of assessment processes.

## **Further study**

17. TY practice could benefit by further research into

- Views and experiences of schools that do not currently offer TY;
- Timetabling in TY, including block structures, modules, teaching teams and variations on the traditional 40 minute class period.
- How TY relates to other second-level programmes: the Junior Certificate, the established Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.

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## Appendix 1

### *Case Record material*

#### *Additional illustrative comments from students*

##### **TY as ‘recovery’**

.....after such a hard year, it'll be nice to get the break.

Maria, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, Ash School

It's, like, a break after 3<sup>rd</sup> year..... It's fun. It's not as boring as the rest of the years.

Orlagh, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Sycamore School

You do projects and then every Wednesday you go out and do charity work and I think that would make you more aware of what's happening outside.

Lorraine, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, Oak School

... it's mainly about your experiences and not having to worry... before you couldn't do these things because you had exams and you had to be studying, so there's a lot of free time to do things you haven't done before.

Mike, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Maple School

Basically it is a bit of fun but you still get a bit of work done.

Niall, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Beech School

##### **TY as ‘different’**

I think it's good; it is another year to give you time to prepare for Leaving Cert.

Martin, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, Maple School

It's a year in-between. It's different from all the other years. It's a year you do different subjects you have not done before and, you get to know the teachers better, and the teachers respect you a bit better. There is an awful lot of projects, and study.

Eamonn, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, Sycamore School

A few of my friends are after doing it already and one person will say that it's good and another person will say it's just stupid... I was told if you do TY it's very hard to get back into studying in 5<sup>th</sup> year. I would have no interest in doing TY because it's just an extra year in school.

Teresa, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, Oak School.

But I suppose that sometimes waste can be good, so you can actually have a break, so you can relax.

Frank, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Sycamore School

I only ever heard one person say that TY was a lot of hard work, a lot of project work, more than they expected.

Eoghan, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, Chestnut School

In 3<sup>rd</sup> year it's all academic learning, studying books, writing things down and doing homework, whereas in 4<sup>th</sup> year it's a bit different.

Mary, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Oak School

They were always rushing last year to try get things done and get things over with before a certain date, to try and move on to the next thing. They were trying to cover everything for the Junior Cert.

Grace, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Sycamore School

I think you would have easier learning (in TY) than you would have 5<sup>th</sup> year because as soon as you go into 5<sup>th</sup> year you have hard learning and hard studying for your Leaving Cert.

Finn, 3<sup>rd</sup> year, Chestnut School.

It's a year out from academic work and constant studying and it's good, like, from when you're finished with Junior Cert and being in third year, you get to do things that you never do usually like and you get your two weeks work experience which matures you before you can go into fifth or sixth year.-

Barbara, 5<sup>th</sup> Year Ash School

### Choosing to do TY or not

A few of my friends are after doing it already and one person will say that it's good and another person will say it's just stupid... I was told if you do TY it's very hard to get back into studying in 5<sup>th</sup> year. I would have no interest in doing TY because it's just an extra year in school.

Teresa, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, Oak School.

My sister did TY and when her friends that didn't do TY had finished their Leaving Cert. she was saying 'I wish I didn't do TY, I would be finished now too'. She was kind of regretting it.

Breda, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, Sycamore School

Some people come into first year with their minds made up about TY. Some people change their mind when they hear, when they see how other people have got on.

Eamonn, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, Chestnut School

But I suppose that sometimes waste can be good, so you can actually have a break, so you can relax.

Frank, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Sycamore School

My Mam didn't know whether I should or not but my brothers was totally against it. My brother is 24 now and he had friends that did drop out when they did it... and he did not want that to happen to me and so he was totally against it and we used to actually argue over it. and then the same with C? and my Mam used to have to come in and the teachers said it would be a good idea. Mr. C (the TY co-ordinator) and my head teacher... thought it would really benefit me ... so then my brother said it's up to yourself.

Margaret, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Oak School

I really was hoping and praying they would change the rules in school and let us go straight to 5<sup>th</sup> year.....I just thought the sooner I get out of school the better.

Niall, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Beech School

I was always going to do 4<sup>th</sup> year. I never thought about skipping, I don't know why. It's just me, and my age as well.

Odhran, 5<sup>th</sup> Year, Chestnut School

When I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> year, my uncle George, he did it. He did 4<sup>th</sup> year and he said it was great. Straight away I knew I was definitely going to do 4<sup>th</sup> year. I didn't now what whether I was going to go to college or what I was going to study or anything but I just thought, like, .. it gives you more time as Tamara says to grow.

Tony, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Beech School

## **Maturity and development**

To develop more, to develop my skills, to deal with more subjects and to deal with different kind of subjects and to find out my career after leaving school.

Tara, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Sycamore School

You get a chance to calm down for the year and you get to think about your career, more than having to do subjects all the time.

Leslie, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Sycamore School

I benefitted in a lot of ways. Before TY I would have always hated getting up and speaking. At the start of the year we all did, you know, we all got up in front of the class and did debating. I definitely benefited from that. I became more confident. Then RTE came and I was interviewed....It was about bullying, well anti-bullying . I would have died if I had had to do it before but I just did it, it was grand like. I got it over and done with and as well, like, the concert; we have a school concert every year with about 600 people and I was always terrified. I used to get up but I was terrified and then this year I had more time, you know, to practice and all and I did so much, like I was up there eight times and I was just so happy to be able to get up there and do that.

Tara, 4<sup>th</sup> Year Maple School

There are a lot of people in TY that I would never talk to before and you get to know them better and you talk to different people.

Grace, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Sycamore School

I was the quiet one in 3<sup>rd</sup> year. I wouldn't open my mouth to anyone. I would sit there. If anyone said anything to me, I would just sit there. I wouldn't say a word. But it's unbelievable how much you mature and

realise things about yourself. I was in the minicompany... you have to get involved in things, so you had to make a stand for yourself. I completely changed myself by graduation night....You have to realise that you can't let people walk all over you, you just can't.

Orna, 5<sup>th</sup> Year, Oak School

I think I was kind of shy beforehand. I have opened up a little bit more with person to person stuff.

Dermot, 6<sup>th</sup> Year, Maple School

It is very good. You learn a lot in it. You do a lot of different things that you don't usually do in 3<sup>rd</sup> year or in Junior Cert, or in another academic year. You do computers, with keyboarding, and you do first aid school and you go swimming, and you go on a trip.

Noelene, 5<sup>th</sup> Year, Sycamore School

You need that space to think ..... I know some people now in 6<sup>th</sup> yr and they just don't have a clue what they want to do. I know if I didn't do TY and then I went into 5<sup>th</sup> year I would have been swamped with stuff and not had time to think.

Alex, 6<sup>th</sup> Year, Maple School

## Highlights

You have so many activities to get involved in, outside school and within school that different people just really enjoy different things.

Sandra, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Ash School

We went to the Gaeltacht in October for a weekend and there were two houses and we were split up and the first night we had a barbecue and the second night we went to a Ceilí and it was brilliant.

Iris, 4<sup>th</sup> Year Oak School

...it's mainly about new experiences and not having to worry. Before, you couldn't do these things because you had exams and you had to be studying, so there's a lot of free time to do things you haven't done before.

Mike, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Maple School

Me and a friend of mine set up a business and got on pretty well.

Leo, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Chestnut School

## Different classrooms

In Junior Cert classes, (teachers) say just work, work, work, and in 4<sup>th</sup> year it's more fun. They enjoy it themselves. They are nicer to talk to. They get on with everyone.....In 3<sup>rd</sup> year it's 'do your homework, do your study, if you don't do it, you are going to fail your Junior cert', penalty sheets. And in TY it's up to yourself. Whatever you put in, you



are going to get out.... It's up to yourself if you are going to put in the work..... if you are not, you are not. If you put in the work, you'll feel good about and you will see the outcome of what you are after doing.

Margaret, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Oak School

They are not as strict. You get on an awful lot better with the teachers and you have a laugh with them as well. They do teach you, but because you are a bit more mature they treat us as older ..... I think that is better for us as well. ....In 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> year they are, like, leading the class, they are telling you what to do. You have to do this or that. But in 4<sup>th</sup> year they let you make your decisions if you want to do this or that. They give you more choices and treat you with more respect because you are older and you understand what you want to do in class.

Tony, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Beech School

You have a better relationship with the teachers ... I mean you feel you can ask them, you know, the way you sit in a class... you can ask them questions.

Tara, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Maple School

### **Improved relationships**

(In TY) Their attitudes towards you changed..... And you feel it straight off. .... They were no longer just teaching. They were more friendly. ...They tried to get to know us better. We get that even now in 6<sup>th</sup> year. 6<sup>th</sup> year is a totally different, we're treated totally different to anyone who is in 3<sup>rd</sup> year.

Iseult, 6<sup>th</sup> Year, Ash School

(In Junior Cycle) you would be totally intimidated by the teachers; not that they were bad or anything, but you just take whatever the teachers say -they must be right.....then (in TY) we went away with them on weekends and they are easier to talk to. In 3<sup>rd</sup> year you are afraid of them. You are intimidated by them. You wouldn't even argue or contradict them or disagree with something they said in the classroom, whereas now, if the teacher said something you don't agree with, then you are going to argue back.

Darina, 6<sup>th</sup> Year, Oak School

You really see it in 4<sup>th</sup> year. They start seeing us as people with maturity. In 3<sup>rd</sup> year you're still kinda, you know, kicking up and making a fuss and making problems for yourself .. and the classes are getting into trouble a lot. ..In 4<sup>th</sup> year you start to mature and the teachers don't have to correct you as much. You're not getting as many discipline slips, There's less discipline as they get to know you.... I think they feel they don't have to be as strict with you because maybe they feel they don't have to get courses done. In 4<sup>th</sup> year there's no pressure to finish a course.

Brigid, 6<sup>th</sup> Year, Ash School

When you are in a classroom up to 3<sup>rd</sup> year, you sit back and you listen to teachers. You take notes, you do your work but in TY I think they listen to you as well. So there's more interaction in the class. You can speak up and that gives you confidence too, so you don't mind speaking in front of your class.

Noelle, 6<sup>th</sup> Year, Oak School

You have a better relationship with the teachers as well. mean you feel you can ask them, you know the way you sit in a class..., well know you can ask them anything.

Tara, 4<sup>th</sup> year, Maple School

From 1<sup>st</sup> year to 3<sup>rd</sup> we are with certain people. In 4<sup>th</sup> year there are all different classes because four different classes are split into LCA and TY. Now there are two classes (of TY) and you are going to mix with totally different people, so you get to know more people and make more friends.

Tony, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Beech School

There is a lot less pressure (in TY). You don't have to worry about exams. The homework isn't as much as what you get in Leaving Cert. There are more things to look forward to like going on trips and you get on better with your class as well.

Eric, 5<sup>th</sup> Year, Beech School

### **Teaching and Learning**

*Extract from focus group discussion with TY students in Maple School*

**Interviewer:** What about the actual classroom teaching? Is that different?

**Manus:** Completely, yeah.

**Brian:** It's interactive.

**Manus:** Yeah, it is.

**Interviewer:** What do you mean by 'interactive'? I thought that's what happened in computer games!

(Laughter)

**Brian:** They ask you questions. You can tell them what you think.

**Tara:** It's more like teamwork rather than on your own.

**Manus:** You can work with teachers and you can work with groups. In third year you'd just sit down in the class and take notes. You're handed out leaflets and you just do what you're told to do. But in fourth year you get to say what you want to and you get to work with the teachers. You don't just have to listen to the teachers. You get to express your opinions to the teachers and they, like, they listen to you. You don't have to go by what they are saying.

### **Individual and co-operative learning**

*Extract from focus group discussion with TY students in Maple School*

**Brian:** When you are working in groups, you know, someone always just sits back and let's others do the work.

**Tara:** Yeah, that's important.

**Brona:** It does cause arguments within the group because there are always certain people doing the work and others sitting back.

**Manus:** Teachers always see the final product and think it's great so they...

**Brona:** They think it's everyone.

**Manus:** Everyone gets credit for it, but there always is someone who hasn't done anything.

**Interviewer:** But isn't that one of the lessons about teamwork that you're actually learning?

**Lee:** Well, yeah, like, there is always someone in the group to tell you what to do..

**Manus:** And there's always somebody to make jokes..

.....

**Tara:** I liked the way we were working in groups. I've learned that I like doing team work

### **Practical project work**

I like doing projects and stuff, it's easier than learning maths formulas and doing maths exams, and people saying you'll need this in your Leaving Cert, and you're in big trouble if you don't do well..... I wish they had found some different way to do Maths.

Una, 5<sup>th</sup> Year, Ash School

Myself and two friends did the Futuristic Fashion Show. That was the highlight. We got into the finals and that was a great experience.

Lisa, 5<sup>th</sup> Year, Ash School

In TY it's much more hands on, more practical work and you are given a lot more responsibility.....like, you learn how to do continental cooking. Usually in Home Economics you do a lot of theory and some cooking but we learned about the traditional dishes of the country and we actually made them. That was good. And everyone got to taste them as well.

Barbara, 6<sup>th</sup> Year, Oak School

*Extract from focus group discussion with TY students in Maple School*

**Brian:** I don't like the project work because you always leave it to the last minute.

**Interviewer:** ...isn't that a good lesson you've learned, useful when you do project work in the future?

**Brian:** Well, I've learned that I'm not going to do any of, what do you call them, Home Economics stuff.

**Interviewer:** I see.

**Brian:** Yeah, I could do the LCVP but because I know you have to put forward a portfolio, I'm not. I'm not going to do Construction or Home Economics or Art, well, any project work.

### **Sampling subjects and modules in TY**

Because I love the seashore and I loved all the experiments we did in TY I picked Biology.

Noelle, 6<sup>th</sup> Year, Oak School

Business and Accounting, I didn't know which one of them I wanted, and TY helped me to pick Accountancy. It helped me to pick physics as well ..... our teacher for Junior Cert Science specialised in Biology.....and in TY we did more Physics and I liked Physics and took it on then.

Peter, 5<sup>th</sup> Year, Sycamore School

I wanted to do Chemistry, History and Accounting and when I went into TY I got to do all the subjects and I just found out that I wasn't very strong in any of them. And Business - I never thought I would like it - but it was completely different to Business Studies that I studied up to 3<sup>rd</sup> year so I decided to do that. Then I never thought I was good at Physics but when I went into TY I found out that I was very good at that so I decided to do that. And then, because of all the practical work and extra work you do, I liked Music as well so I did Music.

Barbara, 6<sup>th</sup> Year, Oak School

I got involved in Media and things in school that I didn't realise before I had such an interest in.....I got really involved in the Justice group and I did media through that. I kept it up last year... We ran the radio and did the magazines and all that. There were a lot of the extra curricular activities that I could get involved in.

Doreen, 6<sup>th</sup> Year, Ash School

### **Life in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year after TY**

(in TY) They (teachers) are trying to get you ready for 5<sup>th</sup> year and all that as well. They do the 5<sup>th</sup> course like some of the English course, maybe, some Irish.

Thomas, 4<sup>th</sup> Year,, Sycamore School

(In 5<sup>th</sup> year) TYs stick together and you get some people who came straight from 3<sup>rd</sup> year saying 'Oh, you get to do everything and the teachers always ask you to do this and that.' .....and even I noticed, we are organising our debs at the moment, and to start with we had a big vote we had to vote on and everyone was like 'oh the TYs you are all organising it'...They still see us as the girls who did TY, the real 6<sup>th</sup> years, who stayed here for six years whereas they stayed for five.

Kelly, 6<sup>th</sup> Year, Oak School

In TY you realise that, if I want this, I will have to work for it. Because you went on work experience, you do projects on careers in career investigation you realise what you have to do, so you have to put the work in. Then when we got into 5<sup>th</sup> year, you are going to work. You are going to get your goals. But they ( who have come from 3<sup>rd</sup> year to 5<sup>th</sup> year without doing TY) don't know what they want yet, so this is a lull year for ... I think they are not going to realise it until late next year and try and cram everything in then.

Maire, 5<sup>th</sup> Year, Oak School

I liked going into fifth year, after fourth year... A lot of the time in fourth year you didn't feel like there was much of a purpose in anything you were doing, even though you were broadening your education is a different subject, and doing all extra things. You don't feel like you're working for your Leaving Cert so ..... you couldn't be bothered as much. Which is nice. Then, when you come into fifth year, I think, you're kinda like, oh I have to get this book done for my Leaving Cert, to get where I want to go and stuff.

Diane, 5<sup>th</sup> year, Ash School

### **Advice**

Don't go in with an attitude of it being a waste of time. Just do what you have to do to have fun, the year has been fun. There also has been a lot of work that you have to do, but you get a lot back out.

Leo, TY student, Chestnut School

If they are academic and they enjoy school, and they are good at school, do TY. But if you hate school and you are not good at it, don't.

Shane, 6<sup>th</sup> Year student, Chestnut School.

In my TY you had to be motivated, because otherwise nothing will happen.

Shane, 6<sup>th</sup> Year student, Chestnut School.

## Appendix 2

### Interview schedules

#### *1, Principals*

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the research. I appreciate it very much. As you know, the research is for the Department of Education and Science. I am looking at peoples' attitudes to aspects of schooling, particularly the Transition Year. The plan is to get the views of principals, teachers, students and parents in a small selection of schools.

Obviously the experiences, ideas and opinions of principals is central to the study. I'm interested in all viewpoints, whether positive or negative. In anything I write afterwards the name of the school or of actual people will not be used.

To allow me to listen carefully and at the same time to record your views, I would like to use a tape recorder for the interview. Please free to turn off the tape recorder at any time during the interview. I would like you to do this especially if you feel uncomfortable about what you have said or are about to say. You can turn it off like this (DEMONSTRATE). Is that OK with you?

*Acknowledge assent.*

Have you any questions?

### Questions

How did the school get involved in TY in the first place?

How has it evolved within the school?

(compulsory-optional)

What are the main strengths of the programme?

What have been the main difficulties?

How would you describe the attitudes of the students to TY?

How would you characterise the attitudes of the teachers?

What would you see as the dominant attitudes of parents?

What impact has TY had on the school?

## *2, TY co-ordinators*

My name is Gerry Jeffers. I work in the Education Department of the University at NUI Maynooth. This school has agreed to co-operate with me on some research I am doing. The research is for the Department of Education and Science. I am looking at peoples' attitudes to aspects of schooling, particularly the Transition Year.

I wish to hear about your experiences, your ideas and your opinions. I'm interested in all viewpoints, whether positive or negative. In anything I write afterwards the real names of schools will not be used. Similarly, if I quote you, I won't use your actual name.

To allow me to listen carefully and at the same time to record your views, I would like to use a tape recorder for the interview. In case you are worried, the principal will not hear what you say on the tape. As you have agreed to take part, then you are free to turn off the tape recorder at any time during the interview. I would like you to do this especially if you feel uncomfortable about what you have said or are about to say. You can turn it off like this (DEMONSTRATE). Is that OK with you?

Acknowledge assent.

Have you any questions?

How did the school get involved in TY in the first place?

How has it evolved within the school?

(compulsory-optional)

What are the main strengths of the programme?

What have been the main difficulties?

How would you describe the attitudes of the students to TY?

How would you characterise the attitudes of the teachers?

What would you see as the dominant attitudes of parents?

What impact has TY had on the school?

## *3, students*

My name is Gerry Jeffers. I work in the Education Department of the University at NUI Maynooth. This school is co-operating with me on some research I am doing.

The research is for the Department of Education and Science. I am looking at peoples' attitudes to aspects of schooling, particularly the Transition Year.

I wish to hear about your experiences, your ideas and your opinions. I'm interested in all viewpoints, whether positive or negative. In anything I write afterwards the real names of schools will not be used. Similarly, if I quote one of you, I will deliberately give you a different name so that it will be hard for anyone to recognise the actual person who is being quoted.

To allow me to listen carefully and at the same time to record your views, I would like to use a tape recorder for the interview. In case you are worried, no teachers will hear what you say on the tape. As you have agreed to take part, then you are free to turn off the tape recorder at any time during the interview. I would like you to do this especially if you feel uncomfortable about what you have said or are about to say. You can turn it off like this (DEMONSTRATE). Is that OK with you?

*Acknowledge assent.*

Have you any questions?

### **Questions with 3rd years**

If you met someone who knew nothing about TY how would you describe it to them?

What do you think might influence a 3rd year student to follow a TY?

What are the attractions, as you see them, of Transition Year?

What are the drawbacks?

How would you describe your parents' attitudes to TY?

How do you think the teachers view the programme?

How is the learning different from what you experienced in 3rd year?

### **Questions with TY students**

If you met someone who knew nothing about TY how would you describe it to them?

Why did you decide to opt for TY?

What have been the highlights of the TY programme?

Have there been disappointments?

How would you describe your parents' attitudes to TY?

How do you think the teachers view the programme?

How is the learning different from what you experienced in 3rd year?

### **Questions with 5th years**

If you met someone who knew nothing about TY how would you describe it to them?



Why did you decide to opt for TY?  
What were the highlights of the Ty programme?  
Were there disappointments?  
How would you describe your parents' attitudes to TY?  
How do you think the teachers view the programme?  
How was the learning different from what you experienced in 3rd year?  
How was the move to 5th year? (LC programme)

#### **Questions with 6th years**

If you met someone who knew nothing about TY how would you describe it to them?  
Why did you decide to opt for TY?  
What were the highlights of the TY programme?  
What were the disappointments?  
How would you describe your parents' attitudes to TY?  
How do you think the teachers view the programme?  
How was the learning different from what you experienced in 3rd year?  
How was the move to the LC?

#### *4, Parents*

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the research. I appreciate it very much. As you know, the research is for the Department of Education and Science. I am looking at peoples' attitudes to aspects of schooling, particularly the Transition Year. The plan is to get the views of principals, teachers, students and parents in a small selection of schools.

Obviously the experiences, ideas and opinions of parents are vital to the study. I'm interested in all viewpoints, whether positive or negative. In anything I write afterwards the name of the school or of actual people will not be used. Indeed, to protect you, I will give each of you a different name in any report I write.

To allow me to listen carefully and at the same time to record your views, I would like to use a tape recorder for the interview. Please free to turn off the tape recorder at any time during the interview. I would like you to do this especially if you feel uncomfortable about what you have said or are about to say. You can turn it off like this (DEMONSTRATE). Is that OK with you?

*Acknowledge assent.*

Have you any questions?

### **Questions for Focus Group with Parents**

What do you think of the Transition Year?

Why might a parent be keen for his/her son/daughter to do Transition Year?

What reservations might a parent have?

How does a parent get information about the TY programme?

What do you hear about the Transition Year programme from your own children?

What do you hear about the Transition Year programme in this school?

What do you hear about the Transition Year programme, nationally?

Do you notice maturity, skills, orientation to adult and working life in your children develop during or after Transition Year?

Have you any other comments about Transition Year?

## Appendix 3

**National University of Ireland, Maynooth**  
MAYNOOTH, CO. KILDARE, IRELAND



**NUI MAYNOOTH**  
Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

Department of EDUCATION  
Head: John Coolahan

October 2003

Dear Teacher,

As you may know, the Principal in the school where you work has agreed that the school takes part in a research project related to the Transition Year Programme. The work, commissioned by the Department of Education and Science, involves seeking the viewpoints of a variety of stakeholders.

The attached questionnaire has been designed to elicit views from teachers. I would be most grateful if you would volunteer to complete it.

Obviously, when I am at the writing-up stage no school will be mentioned by name. Furthermore, you can rest assured that any responses and comments which you make will remain anonymous.

The questionnaire runs to nine pages and should take about 15 or 20 minutes to complete. Your responses will be a combination of ticking boxes, ranking by 1,2 and 3 and some open-ended answers. Additional comments about the Transition Year programme in your school are most welcome.

Many thanks for your co-operation which is much appreciated.

Yours sincerely

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*Gerry Jeffers*

Lecturer

Tel 01-7086087

Fax 7084610 E-mail

gerard.jeffers@may.ie

## Teacher Questionnaire – Transition Year Programme (TYP)

1. What **subjects** do you teach?

a) in Transition Year \_\_\_\_\_

b) in other programmes (Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, LCVP, LCA,)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. How many **years** have you been teaching? *(please tick one box)*

A) *less than 5 years*  B) *6-10 years*

D) *11-20 years*  E) *More than 20 years*

3. What is your **Employment status**? *(please tick one box)*

A) Permanent wholetime  B) Permanent job-sharing

C) Temporary wholetime  D) Eligible part-time

E) Part-time

4. What is your **Post of Responsibility**? *(please tick one box)*

A) Principal or Deputy Principal  B) Assistant Principal

C) Special Duties Post holder  D) No post

5. Please name any **extra curricular activities** within the school for which you have responsibility?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. Which **gender** are you? *(Please tick one box)*      Male       Female

\_\_\_\_\_

7. **Today's date** \_\_\_\_\_

8. Below are some statements about the aims of a TY programme. How do you see each one in terms of the school where you work? *(Please tick one box in each case)*  
 You may add a comment if you wish.

<b>OVERALL GOALS</b>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
TY gives students a broad educational experience					
Students develop well in the absence of examination pressure					
TY advances students' maturity					
Students are better equipped for a Leaving Certificate programme after a TY					
TY orientates students well to adult and working life					
Students become more independent learners through TY					

Comments

9. How do you see the specific TY programme that has been devised in this school?  
*(Please tick one box in each case)* You may add a comment if you wish.

<b>THE PROGRAMME</b>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
Our programme is well-thought out					
Our programme is well-tailored to our students' needs					
Our programme has breadth and balance					
Our programme presents students and teachers with good opportunities for learning beyond the classroom					
Our programme provides students with intellectual challenge					
The assessment techniques used in TY are appropriate					
Our approach to evaluation is progressive					

Comments

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10. What, in your opinion, are the main strengths of this school's TY programme?

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11. Here are some statements about Transition Year and students. Again your perspective in relation to your own school is sought. *(Please tick one box in each case)*. You may add a comment if you wish.

<b>STUDENTS</b>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
Students become more confident					
Students' thinking and problem-solving skills are enhanced through TY					
Students develop technical skills					
Students develop academic skills					
Students show little interest in TY					
Students who follow a TY programme achieve higher results in the Leaving Certificate than those who don't					
Students become more socially aware					
The TY programme has a low status among students					
Students become more socially competent					
Students become more motivated and self-directed as learners					
TY assists students clarify career goals					

*Comments*

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12. In your opinion, what, if any, are the benefits to students from Transition Year?

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13. In your opinion, what, if any, difficulties or negative features for students result from Transition Year?

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14. Below are some statements about teachers in relation to the TYP. What is your attitude to these statements as they apply to your own school situation? (*Please tick one box in each case*). You may add a comment if you wish.

<b>TEACHERS -General</b>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
Teaching TY promotes the professional development of teachers					
Teachers find mixed-ability classes difficult					
Teachers respond well to the freedom and flexibility to design relevant programmes					
Teachers develop skills in TY which enhance their teaching in other years					
Teachers would prefer a prescribed syllabus for their subjects					
The programme has a low status among teachers					
Teachers would prefer a 3 year Leaving Cert. programme					
Teachers find that there is a lack of resources for TY					
Devising and operating new forms of assessment is difficult					
TY promotes teamwork among teachers					

*Comments:*

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15. Here are further statements in relation to teaching TYP. What are your views as they apply to yourself? *(Please tick one box in each case)*. You may add a comment if you wish.

<b>TEACHERS -Personal</b>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
I like teaching Transition Year classes					
I would prefer a prescribed syllabus for my subject					
I like teaching mixed-ability classes					
I like the freedom and flexibility which TY offers					
I welcome the varied forms of assessment in TY					
I like using active teaching and learning methodologies					
I would prefer a 3 year Leaving Certificate programme					
Teaching TY has helped my development as a teacher					
I would like more time for planning TY classes with colleagues					
I would like more in-service training for TY					

**Comments:**

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16. How do you see the organisation of the programme within your school? *(Please tick one box in each case)*. You may add a comment if you wish.

<b>ORGANISATION</b>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
Our TY programme is well co-ordinated					
Parents of 3 <sup>rd</sup> year students are well informed about TY					
Our written TY programme is very good					
Parents are kept well informed about activities and events during TY					
Class sizes are too big					

**Comments:**

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17. What THREE factors within the school contribute most, in your opinion, to the success of the TY programme? *(Please rank by Number : 1 for most important, 2 for second most important , 3 for third most important)*

IN-SCHOOL FACTORS 1	POSITION BY RANK
Support from the Board of Management	
The TY programme that we as a school community designed	
The leadership given by the school principal	
The work done by the Transition Year co-ordinator	
The imagination, creativity and expertise of the teaching staff	
The regular review and evaluation of the TY programme	
The work done by the core-team	
The students' interest in and commitment to the TY programme	
Support from parents for our TY programme	
The additional finance that is available for the TY programme	
That it is compulsory/optional <i>(delete as appropriate)</i>	
The commitment of the teaching staff to the TY programme	
The co-operation and teamwork between teachers	
Other (name)	

*Comments:*

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18. What THREE factors, in your opinion, militate most against the success of the TY programme? (Please rank by Number : 1 for most important, 2 for second most important , 3 for third most important)

IN-SCHOOL FACTORS 2	POSITION BY RANK
A shortage of finance	
Students' lack of interest in and commitment to the TY programme	
Teachers' lack of commitment to the TY programme	
The TY programme that we as a school community designed	
That it is compulsory	
Lack of teacher expertise in active teaching and learning methodologies	
Parents' lack of commitment to the TY programme	
The absence of regular review and evaluation of the TY programme	
Lack of sufficient time for teachers to work together in planning the TY programme	
Lack of teacher expertise in active teaching and learning methodologies	
Limited in-service training	
Other (describe)	

Comments:

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18. What external factors, if any, impact either positively or negatively on the Transition Year programme in your school?

<i>Positively</i>	<i>Negatively</i>

20. Below are some issues associated with Transition Year. You may wish to write a brief comment about some of them.

Optional v compulsory: .....

Selection of students: .....

Work experience: .....

Part-time jobs: .....

Active teaching and learning methodologies: .....

Homework: .....

Assessment: .....

Cross-curricular work: .....

‘It’s a doss year’ .....

Programme planning: .....

Attendance: .....

Co-ordination: .....

Attitudes of parents: .....

Remediation: .....

Evaluation: .....

Resources:.....

Support: .....

TY and the Leaving Certificate: .....

Teacher-student relationships:.....

21(a). What impact, in your opinion, has the TY programme had on the life of the school?

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21(b). While TY differs from school to school, there are certain common features about the programme nationally. Your views are now sought about the national picture. (Please tick one box in each case). You may add a comment if you wish.

<b>NATIONAL PICTURE</b>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No opinion
The TYP is a very appropriate programme for 15-16 year olds					
Transition Year is now firmly embedded in the Irish education system					
Transition Year is well supported by the Department of Education and Science					
Transition Year is well regarded within the education system					

Comments

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Have you any other comments about the TY programme?

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You may wish to continue overleaf

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Please return to the Transition Year Co-ordinator in your school  
or post directly to *Gerry Jeffers, Education Department, National University of  
Ireland, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.*

Thank you for your co-operation.