

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta
Department of Education and Science
Programme Evaluation
REPORT**

**Ashbourne Community School
Ashbourne, Co. Meath
Roll Number: 91495T**

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Evaluation of Transition Year

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Evaluation of Transition Year

The Transition Year (TY) programme is a one year programme for students who have completed the Junior Certificate. The TY provides a bridge to enable them to make the transition from the more dependant type of learning associated with the Junior Certificate to the more independent learning environment of the senior cycle. The programme promotes the personal, social, vocational and educational development of students and prepares them for their role as autonomous, participative and responsible members of society. Transition Year fosters academic achievement as students prepare for a Leaving Certificate programme, further study and adult and working life. It encourages the development of a wide range of transferable critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

Introduction

This report has been written following an evaluation of the TY in Ashbourne Community School. It presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for the further development of the programme in the school. During the evaluation, the inspectors held meetings with the school principal, a core group of teachers and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspectors liaised extensively with the programme coordinator and visited classrooms to observe teaching and learning. The inspectors provided oral feedback to teachers on lessons observed. The inspectors also examined students' work and reviewed relevant documentation pertaining to the programme, as well as teachers' written preparation. The outcomes of the evaluation were discussed with the school principal, the deputy principal, the programme coordinator and members of the core team at the end of the evaluation period.

Ashbourne Community School is the only post-primary school in Ashbourne serving the town and its hinterland. The school was opened in 1994 and is currently operating at full capacity with an enrolment of 948 students. It is felt, however, that with the establishment of new schools in its current catchment area the pressures for student places in the school will be alleviated. The school curriculum comprises a wide range of programmes and subjects, including the TY. The TY was introduced into the curriculum of the school in 1996 and currently there are three class groups comprising eighty students following the programme. Since its introduction the programme has benefited from the knowledge and skills of a number of different coordinators.

1 Quality of Programme Organisation

1.1 Whole-school support

A whole-school approach to the TY, one involving management, teachers, students, parents and the local community, was evident during the course of the evaluation. The school's senior management team has an excellent knowledge of the programme. The school principal in particular is very supportive of the programme. The principal once acted as TY coordinator in the school and, through this association, she is highly appreciative of the benefits that students can accrue from engaging with the programme.

The attitude of staff to the TY appeared very positive and supportive. The morale of the current and previous TY coordinators, and the thirty-seven strong TY teaching team, was seen to be high. There is also a good level of awareness of the programme among the non-TY teaching staff. This is facilitated through the reporting of TY issues at general staff meetings, through the weekly staff information bulletin, through the use of the dedicated TY notice boards in the staffroom and school corridor and through the use of the staffroom whiteboard which is used for displaying day-to-day announcements.

TY teachers have attended a range of non-TY specific courses over the years (for example, European Computer Driving License (ECDL), Civic-Link and Robocup training). It was clear that this had contributed to the introduction of a number of innovative and vibrant modules and calendar events into the programme. Apart from a very small number of teachers attending National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) organised training sessions relating to the writing of Transition Units, there has been limited engagement to date by staff with dedicated TY professional development. In light of this it is recommended that an audit of continuing professional development needs be conducted with respect to the TY and that an appropriate professional development action plan be developed. The TY coordinator and members of the TY core team should be prioritised for engaging with such professional development. Further, a formal induction programme should be conducted annually for those teachers new to the TY.

1.2 Resources

It was reported by management that the TY is a resource intensive programme. In a bid by the school to make the programme as self-financing as possible the TY student capitation grant is supplemented annually by a voluntary student contribution. The school operates a dedicated TY budget with the principal and TY coordinator discussing budgetary matters and agreeing spending annually. This budget funds activities such as outdoor excursions, materials for project work and visiting speakers. Budgeting arrangements are flexible enough to provide funding for materials and activities on a needs basis. This arrangement seemed to serve staff well as it was reported that all reasonable requests were usually met.

All teaching staff members are provided with the opportunity to teach on the TY. However, it is generally a teacher's interest in, and their commitment to, the aims of the programme that characterise those who are chosen to teach on the programme. Other considerations taken into account in forming the TY teaching team include the particular skills of the teaching body, subject options and timetabling issues. The school is particularly commended for its ability to tap into the non-subject expertise of its staff when developing its annual TY programme. This has assisted in the development of a programme that provides students with ample opportunities to reach their full potential and enhance their self-esteem.

The general resources of the school are readily made available to the TY with some (for example, the school's digital and video cameras) being stored centrally by the TY coordinator. A wide range of dedicated TY teaching materials is used across the TY also and while these are generally stored by individual teachers there is a culture of sharing such resources as necessary. An inventory of all resources available to the TY in the school, dedicated or otherwise, should be compiled and circulated to teachers at regular intervals so as to create a greater awareness among staff of the resources available to them.

1.3 Student selection

The TY is an optional programme in the school's senior cycle. The programme is provided in this way by design because, as reported by management, it allows those students who have an affinity for the programme to pursue it while simultaneously allowing those students who might not be suited to the programme to pursue other senior cycle progression routes. The school makes every effort to accommodate students' senior cycle preferences and in this context the number of TY places made available to students annually is flexible. The programme has a healthy uptake with approximately 50% of the school's junior cycle cohort progressing to the TY annually.

An annual senior cycle information evening is organised for parents of prospective senior cycle students. This event provides its audience with accurate and up-to-date information regarding the TY.

It was reported that one of the main aims of this evening, from the TY perspective, was to convey to parents and students that the TY was not a “doss year”. This event, together with the opportunities that students are presented with by the school to discuss programme choices with their teachers and guidance counsellor, enables both parents and students to make informed decisions regarding senior cycle options. Students who wish to do the TY must complete a skilfully designed TY application form which encourages students to reflect on the efforts that they will put into their TY, and on what they hope to gain from the programme.

1.4 Home, school and community links

There are regular and effective lines of communication in place between the school and the parents of TY students. Communications generally fall into one of two categories; firstly formal communications which take place through the medium of assessment reports, letters and phone calls home as well as parent-teacher meetings, and secondly informal communications which are facilitated through the circulation of the school newsletter and parents’ attendance at TY events and activities such as the ‘Battle of the Bands’ night and TY fashion shows. Parents are invited and encouraged to participate in programme events and this is commendable. Further, the school operates an open-door policy which facilitates any parent who wishes to discuss matters relating to his or her child’s education.

One of the principal benefits of the TY for the school has been that it acts as an effective public relations mechanism and in so doing has facilitated the establishment and development of extensive links with the community. Students’ participation in work experience and community and voluntary work, the organisation of excursions and site visits, as well as the success of the school to date in securing the services of a wide range of guest speakers, have all contributed to the existence of strong links between the school’s TY and the local community. To create a greater awareness of speaker availability it is recommended that a formal list of guest speakers be compiled. This list should be updated and circulated among staff regularly.

1.5 Supports for students

The school provides an effective induction programme for TY students. Part of this programme emphasises the development of students’ social and interpersonal skills and generally takes place off-site. From discussions with students it was clear that they enjoyed and benefited from the induction programme, particularly in terms of developing even stronger bonds with their peers. While Guidance is not provided as a discrete subject on the TY curriculum, it was reported that the students’ preparation for work experience encourages career development. A wide range of modules is provided on the TY which contribute to the development of students’ personal, civic and social skills. These include the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Life Skills programmes, as well as the Mental Health Matters and Self-Expression modules. This is commendable. It was clear from discussion with students also that the school’s pastoral care system acts as a significant support for them.

TY students with special educational needs are provided with supports where necessary. This can include the provision of a special needs assistant (SNA) and team teaching, as well as the implementation of differentiated teaching methods in lessons. There is appropriate liaison with the school’s special educational needs team where relevant. At the beginning of the year all teachers receive the appropriate information regarding students’ special educational needs. This is good practice. The four students currently in TY who have English as an additional language were supported appropriately in those lessons observed.

2 Quality of Programme Planning and Coordination

2.1 Coordination

The school has a tradition of reviewing and rotating the duties attached to posts of responsibility at regular intervals. This is considered good practice. The current TY coordinator was new in the position at the time of the evaluation. While the TY coordinator had a good knowledge of the programme, it was expected that the level of knowledge and expertise would increase as more experience in the role was accumulated. Previous TY coordinators act as a significant support to the current coordinator.

The coordinator’s duties were made available in written form. The duties attached to the post were wide-ranging and would regularly call upon the coordinator to exercise a range of skills including leadership, administrative, interpersonal and communication skills. The position of coordinator is attached to a post of responsibility at assistant principal level which incurs a weekly four-hour time allocation for TY coordination purposes. This is an appropriate time allocation. A good level of resources is made available to support the role of coordinator including a dedicated office with phone and computer facilities. The office, however, is quite small and can generate storage related problems, particularly in terms of TY resources and students’ work. The coordinator also has access to the school’s administrative support as necessary.

The school has an ad hoc TY core team in place. For the purpose of the evaluation the core team interviewed included the school's deputy principal, the current and immediate past TY coordinator's and the school's work experience coordinator. While it was clear that this team had not operated as a cohesive unit to date, it was evident that they communicated regularly as individual members of staff regarding TY issues. It is recommended that a TY core team be established formally in the school. While its membership could include those teachers interviewed during the course of the evaluation, consideration should also be given to involving TY class tutors.

The TY coordinator is effective at keeping the whole school community briefed on the activities of the TY programme. The level of record-keeping associated with the programme is of a high standard in the school with the coordinator taking responsibility for most of the records. The coordinator has timetabled lesson contact with some TY students, while the weekly TY student assembly time provides opportunity for liaison with the entire TY student cohort. This is good practice as it enables the coordinator to remain familiar with student issues and allows for the development of a quality rapport with students.

2.2 Planning

TY schemes of work, some printed and some hand written, for most of the subjects and modules on the curriculum were made available for inspection. A common format, similar to that outlined in the brochure *Writing the Transition Year Programme*, was used to present the individual schemes. While making use of this brochure is considered good practice it was clear from reading the schemes that some would benefit from a review. Only basic information, for example, was supplied in relation to certain key areas in the schemes (for example, the sections on resources and links with other subjects) and in many instances it was clear also that there was confusion between the sections on assessment (student) and evaluation (programme). It is recommended, therefore, that TY schemes of work should be reviewed where appropriate. As well as referring again to the brochure *Writing the Transition Year Programme* for advice, the expertise already available in the school in terms of writing NCCA Transition Units should be called upon.

It is further recommended that the review of the TY schemes of work should take place in the context of the development of a TY written programme. This programme should include other information on the TY apart from subject schemes. The brochure *Writing the Transition Year Programme* should be consulted in the context of this work. The TY written programme, once developed, should be approved by the school's board of management and circulated widely in the school and beyond, as appropriate.

The TY core team, once established formally in the school, should meet regularly (at least once per term). Appropriate records should be kept of these meetings and they should be circulated to school management accordingly.

There are many subjects offered within the TY programme that provide meaningful cross-curricular opportunities and it was clear from visits to some classrooms that teachers have exploited these opportunities. It is recommended that this cross-curricular dimension of the TY be replicated across more subject areas. Consideration could be given to choosing a social theme (such as school life, pop culture or use of energy) that could provide a focus for study during the TY. Another example of this approach could be the basing of the TY programme around a country whose language students study. Teachers of different subjects could collaborate in the development of a very stimulating learning experience for students.

2.3 Curriculum

The TY curriculum in Ashbourne Community School offers students a diverse range of subjects. The four layers normally present in a TY programme – core, choice and modular components and calendar features – were all present in the school's programme. It was clear that when devising the curriculum the school gave careful consideration to the interests, needs and abilities of students, as well as feedback from parents. It was clear also that the school makes a distinction between the TY programme and the corresponding Leaving Certificate syllabuses. The current TY curriculum is effective at putting students in a more informed position with regard to choosing subjects for their Leaving Certificate.

All students study Irish, English, Mathematics, SPHE, PE and Life Skills as core subjects. The modular components of the curriculum are particularly original and refreshing in nature and challenge many areas of students' development. Many of them are included as a result of management's success at tapping into the non-subject expertise of staff. The more innovative modules included on the programme are Drama and Theatre Studies, Natural Disasters, Film Studies, Driving Skills and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (or TEFL). As part of the Department's Modern Languages in Post-primary Schools Initiative a module in Japanese is included in the TY and this recently resulted in the introduction of the subject into the school's Leaving Certificate curriculum. Broadening

the provision for languages to include lesser taught languages is good practice. There is opportunity for inclusion of a module on Study Skills in the TY curriculum. This would assist further in ensuring that those TY students who progress to the Leaving Certificate programme are well disposed to study. Work experience forms part of the TY curriculum. There are two work experience placements annually, each of two weeks' duration. Students are given responsibility to find their own work placements but it was clear during the course of the evaluation that this was proving to be difficult for many students. Further, the current arrangement whereby students' preparation for work experience takes place as part of the Life Skills module is, in many respects, ineffective. It is recommended that the work experience element of the TY be reviewed. Consideration should be given to reducing the duration of the work experience element, for example to two weeks' duration. Greater attention should be placed on assisting students in planning for their work experience. Students, for example, need to be supported more effectively in the task of sourcing placements so as they can be assured of securing appropriate and beneficial work placements. A greater focus should also be placed on the debriefing process once students return to school following work experience; a more comprehensive evaluation of students' experiences should be considered. The school's work experience coordinator could play a key role in any revised work experience procedures.

TY students are afforded many opportunities to develop their information and communications technology (ICT) skills. This is achieved through a combination of providing students with dedicated ICT lessons (in which they study the European Computer Driving License programme) and integrating ICT into the TY teaching and learning experience. Efforts should be made to replicate across other subject areas the good practices evident in some subjects with regard to the integration of ICT in classroom practices.

3 Quality of Learning and Teaching

3.1 Planning and preparation for teaching

Long term planning was in place for most of the subjects and modules on the TY curriculum. This comprised mainly of the TY schemes of work. Reference was made in section 2.2 earlier to the fact that many of these would benefit from updating and review. In the context of such reviews emphasis should also be placed on identifying the relationship between the subject matter to be covered in lessons and the timeframe in which it is to be covered. This would assist teachers in determining how much subject matter could be realistically covered in lessons, particularly in the context of the TY modules, as well as assisting in planning for the pacing of work in lessons. Schemes should be developed for those subjects/modules where they are currently absent.

Short term planning and preparation for teaching was particularly effective in the context of those lessons observed. The majority of lessons observed were well prepared in advance. It was clear in these lessons, for example, that classroom activities were well planned. Further, there was a particular emphasis on the preparation of dedicated TY teaching and learning materials for use in most lessons, such as student handouts and worksheets. ICT was effectively used in some subject areas to prepare and source such materials. This is commendable practice.

3.2 Teaching and learning

All teaching in the TY is mixed ability in nature and lessons in a wide range of subjects, to include core, choice and modular subjects, were observed during the evaluation. These included some single and double lessons. Practically all of these lessons were well structured and there was obvious continuity with material learned in previous lessons. This approach helped to consolidate students' learning. The content of all lessons observed, and the pace of most, was appropriate to the ability levels of students.

A striking feature of those lessons visited was the variety of teaching and learning methods that were employed across the classrooms. Those observed included situations in which students worked in groups, pairs and individually. Other teaching approaches observed included discovery, self-directed and activity based learning techniques, as well as project work, research and demonstration. It was reported by numerous subject teachers that visiting speakers, seminars, field trips and study visits were also used regularly to assist student learning. From observations and discussions with students during lessons it was clear that they enjoyed this mix of learning situations and that the programme was encouraging them to take personal responsibility for their own learning. Students cited the teaching methods used in TY, and the different ways in which they were able to learn, as being distinguishing factors from their junior cycle experience.

The different teaching methods used by teachers facilitated a high level of student participation in the majority of lessons visited. The innovative use of ICT in lessons, as well as discussion and question and answer sessions, were particularly good at encouraging students to engage with the subject matter being taught. Questions varied in their demands and students were always given adequate time to reflect before answering questions. Students were also effectively affirmed for correct answers

given and were provided with adequate time to ask questions themselves. In the majority of cases teachers referred to students by their first names. This gave them a sense of belonging and security within the workshops.

Effective learning was taking place in the majority of observed lessons. This was evidenced by the high level of engagement on the part of students with lesson material, the quality of discussion that took place in lessons, the students' work and their ability to complete a new task or recall earlier work, the positive attitude of students to their work and the relaxed and interactive but purposeful learning environments. There was good teacher movement around the classrooms during lessons with students discretely receiving individual tuition where applicable. Personalised intervention was always pitched at a level appropriate to the attainment and ability levels of students.

Each classroom observed was a positive environment for learning in which there was good classroom management. It was clear that the TY was providing opportunities for a quality rapport to develop between teachers and their students, and between students themselves. Teachers displayed high expectations of their students and the students reciprocated this by the obvious work ethic they displayed and by their excellent behavior.

3.3 Assessment

A range of assessment modes is used in the TY to assess students' competence and progress. Details of assessment techniques employed are included in the TY schemes of work and include both summative (such as written assignments and end of term/module tests) and formative assessment techniques (such as observation, questioning in lessons and project work). It would be appropriate, however, for a greater level of detail to be included in the student assessment sections of many of the schemes of work. If a project, for example, is to be worth 40% of the overall grade awarded in a particular subject or module it would be appropriate to include a marking scheme for such a project. This kind of information should be shared with the students.

TY students maintain a portfolio box. This contains examples of their best TY work. These boxes are used as a means of encouraging students to engage in self-assessment; they are always asked to reflect on their work and choose carefully those items that eventually make it into these boxes. This is commendable practice and it is suggested that other ways be explored of engaging students in self-assessment practices as part of the student assessment procedures employed in the TY. The portfolio boxes are stored in the TY coordinator's office and are monitored regularly.

Teachers monitor and record students' attendance, their participation and effort in lessons and their attitude to work. It is suggested that students' performance in these areas be reflected in the report that is sent to the homes of TY students each January. Consideration could also be given to moving towards a bi-annual report home. A parent-teacher meeting is held annually for TY students and students are invited to attend this meeting if they wish. This presents another opportunity for students to personally reflect on their TY performance and should be capitalised upon by the school.

The school has produced a dedicated TY student journal. This is a comprehensive compendium of supports for the TY student. The 'highlight of the day' and 'self-assessment' sections in the journal are particularly good at encouraging students to adopt a reflective approach to their work. It was observed that this journal is also used effectively as a means of communication with students' parents. From reviewing a sample of journals, and from observations during lessons, it was clear that students are frequently allocated homework.

A TY awards night is held annually. A steering committee that includes a number of students plans this event and chooses which TY modules and activities that are represented on the night. TY parents are invited to attend, as are parents of third year students and local employers. This event acts as a good public relations event for the TY, and the school. Students are awarded with their TY certificates on the night and these are graded as a pass, merit, and distinction or excellent. Certificates in a range of other areas, such as ECDL, Gaisce and Car Safety, are also awarded. This is considered good practice.

4 Programme Evaluation and Outcomes

4.1 Programme evaluation and review

The programme is evaluated in its entirety annually. This evaluation involves the whole school community including management personnel, teachers, parents and students. Most of the individual subjects and modules are evaluated annually also by relevant staff members. The school makes use of a range of events to undertake TY evaluative activities including subject department meetings, the school's annual evaluation day, the annual TY graduation night and interviews with TY students that are held throughout the course of the school year. There was ample evidence to suggest that programme evaluations result in changes being made to the programme. It is recommended that the good practices that exist with regard to the annual evaluation of individual TY subjects and modules be replicated across the entire TY curriculum.

The school is conscious of ways in which the implementation of its TY could be made more effective. These include improving the interdisciplinary dimension of the TY and undertaking more formal evaluations of individual TY subjects and modules, and maintaining records of such reviews. This is evidence that the school is continually seeking out ways of improving its programme provision. The school should maintain formal records of the progression paths of TY students annually.

4.2 Attainment of programme objectives

The TY programme in Ashbourne Community School proactively upholds the national mission of the TY as laid down in the document *Transition Year Programmes: Guidelines for Schools* (Department of Education and Science: 1995) It also goes a long way to fulfilling the national aims of the programme particularly in terms of its promotion of general, technical and academic skills, as well as its emphasis on personal development including social awareness and increased social competence. The current programme, however, falls short of providing students with adequate interdisciplinary learning opportunities, but this is a shortfall that the school is acutely aware of and is endeavoring to address. There is also need for a greater emphasis to be given to the work experience element of the TY so as to ensure that the programme provides students with quality experiences of working life.

The TY in Ashbourne Community School has many benefits, but five in particular stand out. Firstly, the programme is successful at placing students in a more informed position with regard to choosing their Leaving Certificate subjects. Secondly, the programme fosters teamwork among teachers. Thirdly, the programme encourages teachers to reflect more regularly on their teaching, particularly in terms of the teaching strategies that they employ in their classrooms. It was also evident from discussions with staff and students and from lesson observations that the programme has contributed to improved teacher-student relationships. Finally, the TY has fostered greater links between the school and its community and acts as an effective public relations mechanism for the school. TY students were at all times courteous and polite throughout the evaluation. It was clear from the interview held with students that they were enjoying their TY; they approached the interview with a sense of maturity, and they displayed a genuine pride in their programme, in their work and in their school. Students also had a clear set of personal goals for their future.

5 Summary of Strengths and Recommendations for Further Development

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A whole-school approach to the TY is present in Ashbourne Community School, one that involves management, teachers, students, parents and the local community.
- The programme is well coordinated in the school and the TY teachers work well together as a team. The previous TY coordinators in the school act as a significant support to the current newly-appointed TY coordinator.
- The TY curriculum offers students a diverse range of subjects. In particular, the diverse nature of the modular subjects provided is testament to the school's success at tapping into the non-subject expertise of its staff.
- The school is careful to distinguish between the TY programme and the corresponding Leaving Certificate syllabuses.
- A striking feature of the lessons visited was the variety in the teaching and learning methods employed. This is a hallmark of a dynamic TY programme.
- Students are continually assessed in their TY, and the programme is widely certified. The dedicated TY student journal is an excellent support for the TY student.
- The TY programme in its entirety is subject to regular and effective evaluation and review.

As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendations are made:

- An audit of continuing professional development needs should be conducted with respect to the TY and an appropriate professional development action plan should be developed. The TY coordinator and members of the TY core team should be prioritised for engaging with such professional development.
- A formal TY core team should be established. The school's TY and work experience coordinators should be permanent members of this team. An immediate past TY coordinator and the school's team of TY class tutors should also be included in its membership each year.
- A TY written programme, in line with the guidelines provided in the document *Writing the Transition Year Programme*, should be developed. This should encompass an updating of the TY schemes of work for the different subjects/modules that make up the programme.
- The work experience element of the TY should be reviewed. Consideration should be given to reducing the duration of the work experience element of the programme. Greater attention needs to be placed on assisting students in planning for their work experience. A greater focus should also be placed on the debriefing process once students return to school

following work experience. The school's work experience coordinator could play a key role in such revised work experience procedures.

- The cross-curricular dimension of the TY should be strengthened.