An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Transition Year Programme Evaluation
REPORT

Jesus and Mary College,
Goatstown Road, Dublin 14

Roll Number: 60891E

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EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in Jesus and Mary College, Goatstown, Dublin, which was conducted as part of a whole school evaluation. It presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for the further development of the programme in the school. During the evaluation, the inspector held meetings with the school principal and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised with the programme coordinator and visited classrooms to observe teaching and learning. The inspector provided oral feedback to teachers on lessons observed. The inspector 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 at the end of the evaluation period.

Jesus and Mary College introduced TY to its programme provision in 1994. Participation in TY is currently optional with two class groups following the programme. The school intends to introduce a six-year cycle for all students. From 2011, participation in the TY programme will become compulsory for all. This is clearly outlined in the school’s admissions policy. The TY vision statement of enabling students to reach their full potential both academically and socially and of fostering the spiritual and aesthetic dimension of life is lived out through many aspects of the comprehensive TY programme offered to students.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

Senior management fosters a whole-school approach to TY and plays an active part in the planning, development, and promotion of TY in the school. The principal has a good knowledge of the implementation of the programme and issues surrounding the programme and displays effective leadership in this regard, as evidenced in the course of the evaluation. For example, there is a structured induction process for teachers new to the programme. There is a whole-school approach to publicising and implementing the programme in accordance with Transition Year Programmes, Guidelines for Schools. Information regarding the TY programme is disseminated to staff involved in teaching the programme in many ways and staff are consulted widely on many relevant issues. An example of this is the recent introduction of portfolio assessment and ongoing school evaluation of the programme. Minutes of meetings provide evidence of the extent of whole-staff consultation regarding TY. To strengthen this process, it is recommended that TY be regularly part of the agenda of staff meetings, when the co-ordinator can address the whole staff on issues relating to TY. In this way, staff can contribute to the effective and ongoing planning and review of the programme. Information is disseminated to students and staff through the special TY notice boards. TY events, activities, and student successes are also highlighted in articles published in the school newsletter.

Student achievement in TY is affirmed and celebrated by the school community at a graduation ceremony in May. This important event includes a formal presentation of TY certificates. The school, in consultation with TY subject teachers, presents an academic excellence award to one student from each class group and an overall student of the year award. School achievement certificates are graded in such a way that highly achieving students graduate with distinction.
1.2 Resources

Staff is appropriately deployed to teach the TY programme. Teachers’ skills are well utilised in designing and implementing the programme. The vast majority of teachers on the staff are involved in the delivery of TY. The various elements of the programme are in the main appropriately timetabled. However, time allocation to some subjects is in need of attention and the blocking of some subjects in the same time period may need reallocation in future years. Teachers are encouraged and facilitated to engage in appropriate continuing professional development (CPD). The current co-ordinator has participated in the TY induction course for new coordinators, and in relevant in-service on portfolio assessment, the benefit of which was clearly in evidence during the evaluation. Teachers of TY have participated in in-service programmes which have enhanced the delivery of TY modules, including the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL).

TY classrooms and subject specialist rooms are in the main commendably utilised for the delivery of the programme. In some cases, the classroom environment could have been further enhanced with relevant posters, charts and students’ project work. Information and communication technology (ICT) was used effectively in both organising and implementing the programme. A comprehensive list of TY resources should be made available on the school’s intranet, when this becomes available. This would also help to promote cross-curricular approaches to TY programme implementation.

On enrolment to the programme, parents agree to the payment of a contribution to cover expenses for most activities. It is commendable that this contribution has been reduced in the current year. Students may avail of the opportunity to take part in the annual school tour, which would incur an additional contribution.

1.3 Student selection and support

Students are well supported in making an informed choice regarding participation in TY. Third-year parents are invited to a TY programme information evening. In the current year, the vast majority of third-year students have opted for TY. All applicants to the TY programme are accepted, and such is the interest in TY that the school has decided that TY will become a compulsory part of the school’s curriculum from 2011, as mentioned earlier in this report. In this context, the school should ensure that the TY programme is designed to meet the needs of the full student cohort.

Guidance provision in TY is very well documented in the TY plan and in the school’s guidance plan. Students are very well prepared for the work experience in many ways including: curriculum vitae preparation; interview skills; clear goal setting; and through differential aptitude testing (DATs). This also helps direct students to appropriate subjects for Leaving Certificate. This level of preparation is highly commended.

Students with additional needs are well supported and resource hours are well utilised. The learning support department plays an important role in monitoring and liaising with TY teachers, the TY co-ordinator and senior management.

At the outset of the academic year, students are guided through the timetable for the year ahead and are informed of rules and expectations pertaining to the TY programme in the school. The weekly timetabled lesson period assigned to the co-ordinator for pastoral care facilitates enhanced
support to students throughout the year. To augment the TY induction process, it is suggested that students be taken on an induction trip in September.

1.4 Home-school links

Contact with parents is on-going throughout the year. Communication with parents is conducted in many ways: information letters regarding programme events, the school newsletter, the information evening regarding subject choice for Leaving Certificate and through the TY parent-teacher meeting. It is suggested that students also be invited to attend this meeting. Parents are invited to school events, including the TY graduation ceremony and the annual variety show. A questionnaire is sent to parents inviting feedback and evaluative comment on TY. This is very good practice, as concerns of parents can be accommodated in the future planning process for TY.

There is ongoing communication between home and school through the student journal and it was evident in the course of the evaluation that these journals were well utilised. Parents receive meaningful feedback on student progress by means of school reports sent home following examinations at Christmas and summer. Documentation reviewed in the course of the evaluation, including the TY plan and the TY brochure for parents, indicates the school’s strong academic focus in the TY programme offered. While academic subjects and student academic achievement are important, it should not form the focus for a TY programme, which aims to foster personal development, social awareness, self-directed learning and education through experience of adult and working life. Therefore, it is recommended that the overall aims of TY be more fully communicated to parents, and that attention be drawn to the most recent research from the ESRI regarding TY and its immense benefit to students in schools that have designed innovative, well-balanced programmes in line with the overall aims of the programme, as stated in Department guidelines.

2 Quality of programme planning and coordination

2.1 Planning

An appropriate, current written plan is in place for the TY programme. It is broadly in line with Department guidelines and outlines the many aspects of programme provision. The plan provides the rationale for TY, states the school’s main aims for TY and provides the organisational details of the programme. Class timetables, a comprehensive calendar of events and details of teachers and students involved with the programme are included. The TY subject plans are in the main well designed and developed in line with Department guidelines on writing the TY programme. Some subject plans are in need of further development, especially in the area of how the subject or module is evaluated. In an effort to strengthen the overall structure and content of TY, it is recommended that consideration be given to introducing a small number of transition units into the programme. Samples of these units, together with templates and teacher’s handbook can be downloaded from the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), www.ncca.ie. It is praiseworthy that the plan also outlines the school’s evaluation and comprehensive assessment procedures.

It is very good that there are ongoing meetings between senior management and the TY co-ordinator and minutes viewed in the course of the evaluation provided evidence of the ongoing commitment of all involved to the successful planning and implementation of the programme. The TY plan outlines the TY team as consisting of the principal, the TY co-ordinator and the guidance counsellor. It is recommended that this model be developed into an advisory core-team, with its main remit to advise the co-ordinator in the ongoing planning and evaluation of TY. This is
particularly important in light of the school’s responsibility to design a TY programme to suit all students in coming years.

The TY programme is collaboratively evaluated and programme evaluation and review have had a positive effect on the delivery and implementation of the TY programme in the school. For example, Spanish was dropped from the programme for the current year following review, as it was not deemed to be meeting students’ needs. Student and parent responses in the TY questionnaires administered annually provide evidence of a very high level of satisfaction with TY and students confirmed their high level of satisfaction in the course of the evaluation.

2.2 Co-ordination

TY co-ordination duties include the day-to-day organisation of the programme, liaison with outside agencies, with parents, with staff and with senior management and organising and implementing student portfolio assessment. These duties are carried out very effectively as evidenced in the course of the evaluation. In addition, the TY coordinator also undertakes TY year head duties. In this capacity, the co-ordinator looks after student discipline and pastoral issues and it is very good that the co-ordinator has regular class contact with all TY students. Communication with parents, senior management, teaching staff, students and the whole-school community is very effective.

2.3 Curriculum

The TY curriculum in the school endeavours to introduce students to a wide range of experiences beyond the scope of the standard curriculum, while enabling students to build on their academic achievements and to prepare for senior cycle and for their future role in society. The curriculum offers a variety of subjects, modules and activities and is broad and balanced in line with Department guidelines. The core subjects of Mathematics, English, Irish and French offer continuity from junior cycle and many optional Leaving Certificate subjects are sampled. Students are streamed for core subjects, based on performance in the Junior Certificate. It is recommended that a more flexible approach to the teaching and division of class groups for core subjects be adopted in TY. In particular, it is recommended that the content of the TY Mathematics course be re-evaluated to ensure that there is a suitable balance between core academic material and innovative TY material.

Important ICT skills are taught and consolidated through student participation in the ECDL course. To broaden the innovative experience, additional subjects are introduced including legal studies, social education, driver education, public speaking, mini-company and money management. Some subjects are organised on a modular basis. The school should endeavour to introduce further modules into TY to further support its vibrant and evolving programme. It is very praiseworthy that the TY module of activities and leisure skills is timetabled for both class groups for one afternoon per week. The way these activities are timetabled helps to ensure continuity with the other subjects and modules on the TY curriculum. Students continue with their studies in their chosen subjects and receive an introduction to all curricular subjects. Diversity within the TY curriculum is supported by student participation in many activities, training courses and events including the first aid course, Gaisce, self-defence, BT Young Scientist Competition, driving instruction, sailing, equestrian sports, law day and mini-company market day.

Active learning and group and team work have been successfully integrated into many key aspects of the programme. Student participation in the annual variety show is very high. Networking with other schools is a praiseworthy activity in any TY programme as is the sharing of resources,
teacher expertise and student talent. Therefore, further opportunities to forge such links should be pursued. Students learn important research skills through science project work and participation in the Young Social Innovators project strengthens the social awareness aspect of TY provision in the school. It is suggested that this element of TY provision be enhanced by facilitating students to carry out further work in the community. For example, students could partake in a community care programme in lieu of one week’s work experience. In this way, students can be further supported with opportunities to learn to be responsible and participative citizens and actively participate in their local community.

Activities outside the classroom are encouraged and supported by the school and these activities are a vital element of the TY programme. Confidence building is promoted through these activities. Work experience provides a vocational element to the programme and tasks undertaken in an adult working environment play an important part in the development of students’ experiential learning. Students are very well prepared for work experience with support from the guidance department, the TY coordinator and school management. One class period each week is dedicated to the preparation and support for work experience. Work experience is organised for a two-week block in November and an additional one-week block in May, with students encouraged to pursue different work placements. An evaluation form is sent to employers and feedback has been very positive. It is also very positive that students evaluate their own work experience and are encouraged to discuss their work experiences in class.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

A current TY plan was available for all subjects evaluated in the course of the evaluation. The quality of these plans was good. The taught programme reflects the school’s plan for the programme and, in the main, is in keeping with the stated objectives. Handouts, materials and practical and ICT equipment were ready in advance of lessons and the good level of advance planning for the majority of lessons led to effective student learning and contributed to very successful learning outcomes. The varied methodologies observed in lessons worked very well as a result of well-thought-out strategies and high morale among teachers.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The aims and objectives of many lessons were outlined to students at the outset. Lessons were in the main well structured and the pace of lessons was suited to students’ abilities and to the various tasks undertaken by students. Relationships and rapport in the classroom were very good and student learning, interest and motivation were enhanced as a result. Students in the main enjoyed the learning experiences. Classroom management was effective in the vast majority of lessons; however, for group work to be effective, the groups should be restricted to a small size so that all students are actively engaged in the task in hand. In addition, the physical environment for group work should be such that groups can work in discrete units. To this end, teachers should sometimes consider moving to a larger, more spacious environment for certain activities. Teacher inputs were generally short, clear and concise and teachers in the main demonstrated an awareness of TY aims while delivering classroom lessons. Teachers had high expectations of students and students responded positively to these expectations. Many activities were designed to boost students’ confidence and to develop students’ communications skills. This is very praiseworthy. Evidence encountered during classroom visits confirms that these strategies were very successful. Many students presented material to their peers with great confidence and enthusiasm in the course of the evaluation.
A variety of resources and assessment materials were effectively used to support teaching and student learning. There was seamless integration of a wide variety of activities, interactions and teaching methodologies. The board was used effectively to highlight key ideas and as an aid to group assignments. ICT was used effectively in some lessons, suitable websites were analysed to support learning, and well-designed presentations aided the teaching of new material. The inclusion of the ECDL in the programme demonstrates the school’s commitment to students becoming highly literate in this very important aspect of education. However, it is recommended that ICT be used more widely as an aid to student learning and that it forms an integral part of planning for lessons. To this end, some teachers may wish to avail of opportunities to update their ICT skills. This matter could be addressed by the sharing of in-house expertise. Worksheets and other teaching aids were used to reinforce learning and to engage students as active learners. During many lessons and activities, appropriate links were established with students’ everyday experiences.

Students were sufficiently challenged by the teaching and learning activities. The quality of students’ understanding was reflected in their ability to ask and answer questions. Evidence was provided in the course of the evaluation to indicate that students’ understanding of material was of a high quality. Students were frequently addressed by name and questions posed were designed to elicit specific responses but emphasis was also placed on higher-order questions, which encouraged students to hypothesise and to explain their reasoning.

The development of research skills through project work was the focus of some lessons evaluated. Students showed an ability to summarise, to present their findings confidently and to communicate collaboratively in the completion of their assigned task. Some issues led to lively debate between groups of students. Students were challenged to justify their stance on particular issues and demonstrated an excellent ability to do so. The skills developed are in line with TY aims. Students’ confidence was developed and reinforced in line with TY guidelines.

Differentiated teaching practices were in evidence in many lessons with individual and group help and support provided as needed. In some lessons, it is recommended that teachers circulate more widely while pre-prepared material is presented to students. In this way, all students can be accommodated to keep up with the content and pace of the lesson.

Teachers were knowledgeable, enthusiastic and innovative. Concepts were explained with clarity and students demonstrated positive attitudes to learning. A very good investigative approach to learning and active learning was promoted. A cross-curricular approach to learning was presented in some lessons in line with TY guidelines.

### 3.3 Assessment

Portfolio assessment has been introduced to the TY programme and now plays a major part in the strengthening and diversification of the assessment process. A reflection sheet is completed by each student for each piece of work. Students present for interview having chosen six of their best samples of work from six different subject areas. In addition, marks are allocated for attendance, behaviour and participation in the TY programme. This is very good practice.

A range of methods is regularly used to assess students’ competence and progress. TY students sit examinations at Christmas and at summer and reports are sent to parents following these examinations. There is ongoing assessment through class work and project work. Employers assess students’ work experience. There is systematic recording of students’ attendance and
progress and high-quality records are maintained. This is very good practice. There is good emphasis on homework in the TY programme with homework being assigned during many lessons evaluated. Students receive annotated feedback and affirmative comments on their work in some subjects and this is very good practice as it supports formative assessment.

5 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A whole-school approach to TY is fostered by senior management, the TY co-ordinator and the teaching staff. The whole school community is kept fully informed regarding TY and its implementation.
- The school has an appropriate current TY plan in place.
- TY co-ordination duties are carried out very effectively.
- The TY curriculum is broad and balanced in line with Department guidelines.
- Students are well prepared for work experience with support from the the school guidance service, the TY co-ordinator and senior management.
- Relationships and rapport in the classroom were very good.
- Concepts were explained with clarity and students demonstrated positive attitudes to learning.
- A very good investigative approach to learning and active learning was promoted.
- Students’ confidence and communications skills were developed and reinforced in line with TY guidelines.
- Student achievement in TY is affirmed and celebrated by the school community.
- Portfolio assessment has been introduced to the TY programme and now plays a major part in the strengthening and diversification of the assessment process.

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

- It is recommended that the overall aims of TY be more fully communicated to parents, and that attention be drawn to the most recent research from the ESRI regarding TY and its immense benefit to students in schools.
- It is recommended that a more flexible approach to the teaching and division of class groups for core subjects be adopted in TY. In particular, it is recommended that the content of the TY Mathematics course be re-evaluated to ensure that there is a suitable balance between core academic material and innovative TY material.
- TY provision should be enhanced by facilitating students to carry out further work in the community.
- TY issues should regularly form part of the agenda of staff meetings, when the co-ordinator can address the whole staff on issues relating to TY. An advisory core-team should be formed, with its main remit to advise the co-ordinator in the ongoing planning and evaluation of TY.
- Time allocation to some subjects is in need of attention and the blocking of some subjects in the same time period may need readjustment in future years.
- ICT should be further integrated into TY students’ learning experiences.
- Consideration should be given to introducing a small number of transition units into the TY programme.

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