An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Transition Year
REPORT

St Joseph’s Secondary School
Tulla, County Clare
Roll Number: 62020F

Date of inspection: 8 November 2010
EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in St Joseph’s Secondary 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 inspector 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 inspector liaised extensively with the programme co-ordinator 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, the deputy principal and the programme co-ordinator at the end of the evaluation. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

St Joseph’s is a co-educational secondary school serving a wide rural catchment area in Tulla, Co Clare. The TY programme is optional and is currently provided to one class group of twenty-four students.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

St Joseph’s Secondary School provides a very good quality TY programme to its students. The programme is well supported by school management and is valued within the school community. Twenty-four students have opted for the programme in the current year. It has been the position of school management that forty-eight applications from students would be required to create two class groups. Given that two-class groups would offer significant opportunities for the development the programme in the school, consideration should be given to reviewing this rigid applications target. This suggestion is made with due cognisance to possible limitations in relation to available teaching resources and resultant timetabling issues in fifth year.

The TY programme has significant visibility in the school. The mixed-ability class group is engaged in a range of rewarding activities outside of their classroom work and, in particular, has responsibility for the posting of notices and photographs on a digital-display screen in a central area in the school. Students with additional educational needs are appropriately supported and included in the programme.

An effective and cohesive teaching team delivers the planned programme and a TY co-ordinator has responsibility for its organisation. The co-ordinator and the teaching team have a commitment and a sustained loyalty to the programme and their work is well supported by school management.

1.2 Resources

The resources available, whether human, physical or financial, are used appropriately to support and develop the programme. A TY base classroom is not available as teachers have their own individual base rooms. Students move to these rooms for their various subjects and activities. A
TY office is available however, and this, combined with display of activities on the digital display screen, provides a focus for the students engaged in the programme activities.

Parents make a financial contribution to the costs of the programme. Due to the rural location of the school, significant transport costs are incurred in accessing activities or events. The co-ordinator and the school principal reflect upon these financial costs and the experiential and educational benefits of these activities. Regular changes have been made to the programme in the light of competing demands on resources. Detailed accounts of the use of the financial resources are kept. The concern for value for money in the planning and organisation of the programme is very good practice.

Information and communication technology (ICT) is significantly integrated into the programme. ICT applications are included in all TY subject plans. There was also clear evidence, in the lessons observed, that ICT had been significantly integrated into teaching and learning. Classrooms have been equipped with digital-data projectors and either a desktop or laptop computer was used in all lessons to illustrate and develop the topics for study. Students also engage in formal ICT applications and skills training in timetabled lessons. During the evaluation period the students were working on the on-line theory examination required for a driving licence application. The integration of ICT had a significant impact on the students’ experience and engagement with programme activities.

1.3 Student selection and support

The procedures and process for application and access to the programme are well organised and appropriate. Students and their parents are provided with comprehensive information on the programme and students are required to make a written application. These students are then interviewed. The criteria for entry are included in the TY plan and refer to: the student’s level of engagement and participation in school activities, including their behaviour; the quality of their application and interview; and their age. It is very positive that academic performance is not a criterion for entry and students with additional educational needs can access the programme. To build on this good practice, it is recommended that these entry criteria be circulated to all students and their parents from the beginning of junior cycle to bring further transparency to the entry process.

Students are supported throughout this process by the work of the guidance counsellor and the TY co-ordinator. The co-ordinator also acts as year head for the students in the programme and attends the weekly pastoral-care meetings with other year heads. It is good practice that the students in TY are clearly linked with whole-school student-support processes.

1.4 Home-school links

The level of communication between school and home is appropriate and well managed within the programme. The structure of the curriculum and the programme of events are signalled to parents well in advance and there is regular communication by means of the students’ journal and by letter. The co-ordinator is available to meet parents by appointment and more formally at the introductory information meeting, at the parent-teacher meeting for TY, and at the awards and celebration event on the end of the programme. Each year, parents and students are involved in a formal evaluation of their experiences of the programme. Their responses are used to review aspects of the programme and have resulted in change and improvement.
2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The quality of programme planning for TY is very good. An overall plan for the programme is in place and individual subject planning reflects this plan. A unifying theme is chosen each year and elements of this theme inform each of the subject plans. The international year of youth, dialogue and mutual understanding is the theme for the current year. There is an appropriate balance between topics that are included on Leaving Certificate syllabuses and new materials and methodologies that are appropriate to TY.

The planning process for TY is characterised by regular reflection and review of individual aspects of the programme. This process is both formal and informal, and is led by the TY co-ordinator. A number of significant changes have resulted from this process, including the introduction of Spanish as modern language, changes to work experience, and changes in the nature of social and community activities. A number of teachers, who are new to the school, have also joined the TY team in the current year. The very good quality informal collaboration and communication has ensured that these teachers’ planning and practice is fully in line with the TY programme guidelines.

2.2 Co-ordination

The programme is co-ordinated to a very high standard and with great commitment to the quality of the students’ experience. The role of TY co-ordinator is part of a special-duties teacher post of responsibility. The co-ordination is characterised by situational awareness, reflection, hard work and good leadership. The co-ordinator, as a teacher of a core subject, has regular class contact with the TY group. The co-ordinator also has responsibility, as the year head, for student support. These combined roles represent a significant workload but have resulted in constant and regular communication with students, teachers and parents relating to programme issues.

The work-experience aspect of TY is organised as part of the duties of the post of co-ordinator of programmes. The development of a core team of teachers that could share other aspects of the organisation of the programme should be considered to ensure the sustainability of the quality of the current programme. This would be particularly important in the event of the programme expanding to two class groups in the future.

2.3 Curriculum

The curriculum for the programme is well balanced and includes a range of interesting and challenging experiences for the students. The students study a core curriculum of English, Irish Mathematics, Religious Education and Guidance. A second layer in the curriculum includes a range of subjects that students take for the full year. The experience of these subjects significantly enhances students’ learning but also provides an important subject-sampling experience in advance of the subject-choice process for fifth year. A third layer in the curriculum includes a range of other experiences including timetabled physical activities, music and dance, Gaisce - the President’s Award, Young Social Innovators (YSI) and the County Enterprise awards. Of particular note, is the students’ engagement with Living Scenes, a programme funded by the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG). This involves students engaging with elderly people from the locality in a range of collaborative activities aimed at skills development and mutual understanding.
The current TY curriculum does not contain provision for Physical Education (PE) or History. It does however provide for two periods of Guidance. Given this, a revision of the curriculum should take place. Within this revision it is recommended that the timetabled physical activities should be restructured as PE module. A reduction in the provision for Guidance, from two periods per week to one period, should be considered. This could create some timetable flexibility for the creation of a combined Geography and History unit within the programme. A more fundamental structural revision could consider a change to modularised timetabling. This would provide for a wide range of curricular experiences within shorter units and could create further flexibility for change. These suggestions are made with due cognisance of the limitations of available resources.

Students also have two sessions of work experience in the year which are appropriately planned and structured. Based on feedback from students and parents, work experience has been extended to three weeks in the school year. This consists of one session of one week in term one and another of two weeks in term two. Given the requirement to also complete work experience as part of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), school management, the TY co-ordinator, the guidance counsellor and the co-ordinator of programmes should revisit this decision with a view to assessing the outcomes of these TY work experience sessions for students.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Planning and preparation for lessons was of a very high quality and fully reflected the standard of programme planning in evidence. In all lessons, it was clear that the topics for study reflected the individual subject plan and were clearly in line with TY methodologies and guidelines. The learning intention was clear in all cases and the methodologies selected engaged the students actively in their own learning. Teachers had planned their lessons to include student-centered activities and both group and individual tasks. ICT was integrated into all of the lessons observed. Planning for the inclusion of students with additional educational needs was also in evidence in lessons, particularly in relation to the planning of pair and group tasks. Teachers paid particular attention to the composition of these groups to ensure the inclusion of all students in the planned activity. This is very good practice.

3.2 Learning and teaching

A range of lessons was observed during the evaluation and the students’ experience in all of these lessons was engaging, participative and very positive. These lessons were stimulating for the students but had a significant focus on learning. Lessons were appropriately paced and direct teacher inputs were minimised as student-focused activities were to the fore.

In a business lesson, students worked on a case study of a new Irish company as a focus for developing their own enterprise ideas for entry in the County Enterprise Awards competition. A lesson in home management had students deciphering the ingredient labels on household food products. This topical and important activity clearly linked food science and health issues. In Science, students engaged in a very interesting and challenging lesson on genetics while English students critically examined the treatment of issues of prejudice and racism in three films dealing with these themes. A mathematics lesson involved students working in groups as they applied their knowledge of statistics to market research on the range of prices for consumer goods. Students were learning Spanish ab initio through giving oral responses in the target language and through responding to questions from their teacher arising from a language-learning educational
film. In Art, the students were enthusiastically engaged in a co-operative learning project as groups of students produced different sections of a painting. In all of these lessons, the learning intention was outlined, the appropriateness of the topics to TY was clear and the students were challenged in their learning.

In all lessons, the students were busy yet the classroom atmosphere was calm and purposeful. The tasks and challenges that were set fully engaged the students who were clearly enjoying their classroom experience. The rapport between students and their teachers was very positive and mutually respectful. Students were both courteous and assertive in their interactions with their teachers in very participative and engaging learning environments.

3.3 Assessment

Very good quality assessment strategies were evident in all lessons. Teachers reviewed previous learning and advanced the planned learning through discussion, targeted questions and a review of students’ projects and homework tasks. Students were busy with assigned tasks and it was evident from their notebooks that project work and tasks arising from classroom activities were ongoing. It was also evident however, that the extent of this work was not recorded in the student’s individual journal. Teachers should therefore emphasise to their students the importance of recording all homework tasks in the school journal.

Programme-level assessment procedures are also appropriate. These procedures include written and oral assessments in class, assessment of work experience through a reflective diary, and through the presentation of projects. These processes could be further enhanced by the use of portfolio assessment. Students could select items or artefacts that represent their best work in the programme and then write a reflection on their learning based on these selected items. This would direct students towards self-assessment and reflection, and would enhance the formative and summative assessment processes already in place.

At the end of the programme students are assessed based on the work that they have submitted and on class-based written assessments. Certification at three levels is provided based on the assessment criteria. These include grades received for assignments, effort, level of participation and cooperation, and general behaviour. These assessment procedures are in line with normal practice. Certificates of distinction, merit or pass are presented at a celebration event that includes a display of the students’ work and achievements in the programme.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The programme receives significant support from school management.
- Very good quality co-ordination and organisation is in evidence.
- Programme planning for TY is very good.
- The curriculum includes a range of interesting and challenging experiences for students.
- An effective and cohesive teaching team delivers the programme.
- The quality of learning and teaching is very good.
- ICT is significantly integrated into lessons.
- Very good quality assessment strategies are in place.
As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendations are made:

- A curriculum revision for TY is recommended with a focus on the inclusion of PE and some other subject areas.
- The inclusion of portfolio assessment should be considered and the recording of homework by students should be emphasised in all lessons.
- Entry criteria for TY should be circulated to all students and their parents from the beginning of junior cycle.

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

Section 1.1 “It has been the position of school management that forty-eight applications from students would be required to create two class groups …………target.”
The Board welcomes the TY Evaluation Report and in response to 1.1, it looks forward to having a new school building with sufficient accommodation for 2 TY classes along with the attendant staffing levels necessary.
The Recommendations made in the report will be positively explored and implemented where possible.