An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Transition Year
REPORT

Sacred Heart Secondary School
Drogheda, County Louth
Roll Number: 63860I

Date of inspection: 8 March 2011
EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in Sacred Heart Secondary School, Drogheda. 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 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, the programme coordinator and members of the teaching team following the evaluation. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

Sacred Heart Secondary School has a current enrolment of 562 girls and introduced TY in 1995. TY is optional, with almost a quarter of third year students applying to participate in the programme; forming one TY class group at present. The TY mission statement supports the personal, social, educational, and vocational development of the students and the TY programme delivered in the school is well designed to achieve this objective.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

There is a whole-school approach to the planning, development and promotion of TY within the school and this is strongly supported by senior management. The principal supports the TY programme through providing time at staff meetings for TY to be discussed and providing time for TY teachers and the TY core group to meet. The principal attends TY meetings and is familiar with all aspects of the operation of the programme in the school. In addition, the principal maintains close links with the parents of TY students.

The whole-school community is kept informed of the programme in a variety of ways. The TY notice board is used as a valuable means of disseminating information and students’ projects and art works are displayed throughout the school. TY events and activities are highlighted in articles published in the local newspaper and on the school’s website. Very good affirmation and celebration of students’ participation and achievement in TY is provided by an awards night ceremony where certificates are formally presented.

1.2 Resources

Senior management deploys teachers effectively across the TY programme. Teacher preference, experience and expertise are taken into account in this regard. The position of TY coordinator is rotated periodically and previous coordinators continue to have involvement with the programme through teaching TY classes. This has proven to be a good way of keeping expertise and interest in TY within the teaching team. Where necessary, the school engages personnel from outside the school to deliver modules. This enables the school to add variety to the programme offered to students and is good practice.
Teachers have good access to continuing professional development (CPD) and training. Teachers new to the programme have availed of courses organised by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS). This has been of particular benefit to the work of the TY coordinator. Participation in information and communications technology (ICT) training and in CPD on the ‘Young Social Innovators’ social awareness programme has enhanced the delivery of TY modules.

The TY programme is very well resourced. A wide range of concrete materials is used in TY lessons; these include art materials, photography equipment, and fabric and sewing equipment for quilt making. There is very good access to ICT for use in TY. This includes the availability of ceiling-mounted data projectors and computers with audio facility in all classrooms. The computer room and the computers in the school library are used for some TY lessons. In addition some lessons take place in the ‘media room’ which contains a class set of laptop computers. Broadband internet access is available throughout the school. Very good use of this equipment was observed during the evaluation and it is particularly good that the students themselves are provided with much opportunity to engage with technology in the classroom.

On enrolment to TY parents are required to pay a contribution to cover expenses for almost all activities including transport, courses, field trips, and for any additional materials required during the year. Some optional activities such as ‘the US exchange’ are offered to students and incur additional expense for parents. The amount of this additional funding is kept as low as possible and parents are provided with advance planning time. This has contributed to the high levels of student participation in optional activities.

1.3 Student selection and support

The school’s admissions policy clearly outlines the optional nature and the selection criteria for TY. This good practice ensures that parents understand the position regarding TY before applying for a place for their daughter in the school. At present there is one TY class group comprising 23 students; this represents almost a quarter of third years. School management actively encourages applications for the TY programme and is working on increasing the number of TY class groups.

In keeping with best practice Guidance is provided to students for one timetabled lesson per week. In addition to preparation for work experience, the plan for Guidance includes career investigations, aptitude tests, and interest tests. It was evident in the evaluation, particularly through discussions with students, that this has been very valuable in assisting them in making subject choices for senior cycle and in encouraging them to identify career goals and to develop a focus for future study or work.

The TY class is a mixed-ability group and various very good differentiation strategies are used to cater for all of the ability levels present. Teachers work to students’ strengths and ensure that needs are met; through individual attention for anyone experiencing difficulty and through the provision of additional work for the better able student. There is an emphasis on choosing methodologies that naturally differentiate learning by allowing students to work at their own pace, for example, group work and project work. Needs that cannot be met by the subject teacher using these strategies are addressed, on an individual basis, in consultation with the learning support coordinator. The level of support provided for students is very good.

Prospective TY students are involved at the planning stages of TY at the end of third year. This involves students providing information so that courses can be designed to match their personal interests. This year saw the introduction of photography as a direct result of this process, for
instance. Student induction, at the beginning of TY, involves a bonding event that takes place outside the school. This is to establish a sense of class identity and to help students to form good relationships with each other.

The students’ attendance rate is very high and is maintained throughout the academic year. This is evidence of the students’ level of satisfaction with the programme. The TY programme complies with circular letter M10/95 in relation to the integrity of the school year with students attending for the full duration of the academic year.

The student voice is an important aspect of the TY programme at Sacred Heart Secondary School. In order to ensure that TY student contribution is valued, TY is represented on the students’ council, TY students are consulted about the design of elements of the programme and as part of the reviews conducted throughout TY on numerous aspects of the programme. This very good practice contributes to the development of TY students as responsible individuals.

1.4 Home-school links

An information night is held for the parents of all third year students outlining the programme and subject options available to students for senior cycle. The benefits of TY are explained to all parents at this meeting. Parents make a significant contribution to the school through participating in preparations for ‘the US exchange’, where students of Sacred Heart Secondary School visit an American high school and their American counterparts visit Drogheda. This involves hosting events for the visitors, for example. The parents of all TY students become involved in these activities including those students who do not make the trip to the United States. Parents are invited to the TY awards ceremony and graduation events. Overall, there is very strong parental support for the programme within the school.

Parents are kept informed of TY events and activities through the school newsletter and website. The school is currently introducing a system of reports for TY students. This is a good development as it will provide a formal means for parents to receive feedback on their daughters’ performance. The format of the report template used for other year groups had been adapted for TY which supports the unique nature of TY. The parents’ night is used as an opportunity for an exchange of feedback, between parents and teachers, on the quality of the TY programme and on the level of student achievement throughout the year. This format is well suited to the small number of students currently enrolled in TY. However, should the number of TY groups increase, as is planned; it is recommended that a parent-teacher meeting be introduced for TY and it is suggested that the students may be present at this meeting. In addition, student self-assessment could be supported by students carrying out a self-assessment for all subject areas in advance of this meeting.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The school has a very good level of TY planning in place. The four-member core team comprises the principal, the deputy principal, the TY coordinator, who is also class tutor to the TY class group, and the guidance counsellor.

A very good TY plan has been developed. It contains all of the subject plans for TY and accurate descriptions of all courses delivered by outside personnel. The plans for all subjects are set out in
terms of student learning outcomes with an emphasis on the use of alternative course material, methodologies and modes of assessment. There is a strong cross-curricular component that has been developed through collaborative planning. This is very much in keeping with the Department guidelines on developing the TY programme. The plan contains all of the relevant policy documents with the exception of a formal work experience policy. It is therefore recommended that the school set about developing a work experience policy based on the current practice and procedures.

Students reported a very high level of satisfaction with the school’s TY programme during the evaluation. They were particularly appreciative of the variety of experience in TY. They included the alternative methodologies used in teaching and learning, the modules delivered by outside providers, and the opportunity to sample new subjects as examples of this variety. The students described themselves as developing confidence and responsibility as individuals as a result of their TY experience. They were very positive about the role Guidance had played in assisting them in developing a strong sense of focus and they believed that this would be beneficial to them in preparing for the Leaving Certificate and beyond. Furthermore, the very good relationships within the TY group and between students and their teachers that had developed over the year were seen as a most valuable aspect of participation in the TY programme.

2.2 Coordination

The TY coordinator holds a post of responsibility at special duties teacher (SDT) level and coordinates the work of TY in a very effective and efficient manner. The duties allocated to this post are clearly defined and have been agreed with school management. It is very good that the TY coordinator has regular class contact with the TY group through acting as class tutor and teaching Science to the group. The duties of the coordinator include planning, coordinating and reviewing the TY programme and work experience. The coordinator’s commitment to and enthusiasm for the programme and the excellent relationship that has been developed between the coordinator and TY students contributes significantly to the success of the programme in the school.

2.3 Curriculum

The school’s TY curriculum offers students a variety of subjects, modules and activities and is in line with Department guidelines. The design of the curriculum takes into account student needs, interests and aptitudes and students are consulted in this regard. Students receive certification in word processing and PowerPoint through ‘Microsoft Office Specialist’ on completion of their ICT module.

Core subjects, providing continuity between the junior and senior cycles, are offered. It is very good that non-syllabus material is taught using alternative methodologies in all cases. There is a clear emphasis on using TY as an opportunity to encourage students to engage with the core subjects on an enjoyable level. In the case of some optional subjects, students can sample subjects that they did not study in the junior cycle; this helps students to make good subject-choice decisions for the Leaving Certificate. The modules offered in TY include public speaking, sign language, make-up application, legal studies, aromatherapy and first aid. These are included on the TY timetable each week, an arrangement that ensures that class time in other subjects is preserved.

TY students engage in a wide variety of activities outside the classroom. These include TY students organising sporting competitions for the whole school, participating in the Gaisce programme and organising fundraising events for charity. Through participation at all stages of the planning of these activities students have the opportunity to develop a wide range of skills such as
taking a variety of roles on committees. These activities are valuable in promoting student confidence and sense of responsibility.

There is good practice in relation to the arrangements and preparation for work experience. One of the aims of the TY programme in the school is to encourage students to become self-directed and confident and they are given responsibility for finding their own work placements under the direction of the TY coordinator. Assistance is provided, however, if a student has difficulty in finding a placement. There are two blocks of work experience, each of one week’s duration, the first in November and the second in February. As part of the TY guidance provision students complete career investigations and prepare a curriculum vitae; this is valuable in assisting students in their choice of employment. An evaluation form is sent to employers and the TY coordinator visits each student in the work place. This is very good practice. Students expressed satisfaction with their work experience during the evaluation.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

There is good practice in relation to subject planning for TY. A subject plan was available for each subject taught in TY and is contained within the main programme planning folder. It was evident from the review of these plans that considerable effort has been invested in developing student interest in each of the curricular areas. The French and Spanish plans, for example, include ‘Salsa Dancing’ and the study of topics relevant to teenagers’ lives. Everyday mathematics is a strong feature of the mathematics plan.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Five lessons covering Business Studies, Mathematics, European Studies, Physical Education (PE) and ICT were observed and in all cases the quality of teaching and learning was very good. A wide range of methodologies was used including, investigation, pair work, group work, active learning and student presentation of project work. Teacher explanations and instructions were clear and lessons progressed at a lively pace and included a good variety of activities. ICT played a valuable role in all lessons with the exception of PE where it was not required. In some cases ICT formed an integral part of the learning activities enhancing teacher exposition. In other cases students themselves used ICT either in the computer room or in the media room where each student had the use of a laptop computer. Teachers’ enthusiasm for their subjects and commitment to ensuring high quality learning experiences for their students contributed significantly to the success of the lessons observed in the evaluation.

It was evident that very good learning was taking place in each of the classrooms visited. The learning objectives were clearly outlined at the start of lessons and their achievement checked at the end which is good practice. Students engaged and participated fully in the planned activities and made valuable contributions to group and class discussions. There was very good student involvement with asking and answering questions. In all cases students demonstrated that solid learning had taken place and that they had achieved good understanding of the topics covered.

The standard of student behaviour throughout the evaluation was very good. Teachers were encouraging and supportive and regularly affirmed student effort. Students demonstrated a high level of respect for each other’s work, opinions and contributions. The work of each lesson progressed within a spirit of team work. It was clear that the relationship between teachers and
students is very good. Overall, students were enjoying their learning experience and the school’s TY programme.

3.3 Assessment

There is very good practice in relation to assessment. Through engaging in project work students are encouraged to take responsibility for time management by being expected to meet deadlines, to develop their presentation skills, and to learn how to work as part of a team. Teachers monitor student progress on an ongoing basis through observation and questioning in class. Student self-assessment plays a strong role in the assessment procedures; where they set goals for themselves at the start of the year and measure their progress against these goals. Students are required to maintain a portfolio of the work carried out in TY and this is evaluated at the end of the year. There is an appropriately strong emphasis on encouraging students to enjoy learning for learning’s sake in TY.

Students are awarded a pass, merit or distinction for their contribution and achievements in TY. The teaching team meets near the end of the year to agree each student’s award. A parents’ night is held where students are presented with their awards and their achievement is celebrated. This is a valuable way to recognise student contribution to the success of TY.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

• There is a whole-school approach to the planning, development and promotion of TY within the school and this is strongly supported by senior management.
• TY is very well resourced and senior management deploys teachers effectively across the programme.
• TY benefits from the involvement of parents in many ways and there is very strong parental support for the programme within the school.
• The student voice is an important aspect of the TY programme at Sacred Heart Secondary School. Students reported a very high level of satisfaction with the school’s TY programme during the evaluation.
• The school has a very good level of TY planning in place and the programme is coordinated in a very effective and efficient manner.
• The school’s TY curriculum offers students a variety of subjects, modules and activities and is in line with Department guidelines.
• There is good practice in relation to the arrangements and preparation for work experience and this is enhanced by the involvement of Guidance.
• In all lessons the quality of teaching and learning was very good and students were clearly enjoying their experience of learning in each subject area observed.
• There is very good practice in relation to assessment with students strongly encouraged to take responsibility through engaging in self-assessment.
As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendations are made:

- Should the number of TY groups increase, as is planned; it is recommended that a parent-teacher meeting be introduced for TY and it is suggested that the students may be present at this meeting.
- The school should set about developing a work experience policy based on the current practice and procedures.

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