An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Transition Year
REPORT

Our Lady’s Secondary School
Castleblaney
Roll Number: 64770M

Date of inspection: 11 & 12 April 2011
EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year in Our Lady’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 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 the core team at the end of the evaluation period.

Our Lady’s Secondary School is a voluntary secondary school with an enrolment of 292 male and 339 female students. The school participates in the Department of Education and Skills’ School Support Programme under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan. The school offers the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme, a compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate (LC), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. Currently, there are five class groups involved on the TY programme, totalling 109 students.

The board of management 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.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

Senior management is very supportive of the TY in the school and has established a successful whole-school approach to the programme. The planning and organisation of TY and the involvement of the whole year group ensure that the programme has a very positive impact on the entire school community. The quality of communication with the school community is good. This supports the high profile of the programme in the school.

Senior management has appointed an enthusiastic and effective TY team to manage the programme. The team comprises a TY co-ordinator with a wealth of experience in the area, and four dedicated members of the teaching staff who act as TY class tutors. The team’s commitment to providing a positive experience of TY for the students in their care is acknowledged.

To enhance the programme, the school has enlisted the support and input of representatives from the school and the local community. The joint effort involves teachers, parents, a number of experts in various subject areas, local and national businesses, enterprises and agencies. The external links help to expand the provision offered to students and represents very good work.
Senior management encourages TY teachers to avail of in-service and professional development opportunities to support their work. The TY co-ordinator and a number of other teachers have been involved in a variety of relevant events.

1.2 Resources

As the numbers of students enrolled in the TY programme are high, the majority of teaching staff is involved. Teachers are enthusiastic and new modules and ideas for modules are regularly proposed to the TY coordinator. To enhance the provision of subjects and modules on offer to students, a small number of non-teaching staff with specialist expertise are invited to teach some modules.

In keeping with good practice, the school’s information and communication technology (ICT) facilities are used to organise and implement the TY programme. Students have good access to ICT to complete their course work. All classrooms have data projectors and every teacher has a laptop computer. The provision of lessons leading to the award of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) and the Log On, Learn programme give students good opportunities to experience ICT. In addition the production of the school magazine and the updating of the school’s website using ICT represents good planning and use of the school’s ICT resources.

The TY co-ordinator has the necessary administrative resources to support the functioning of the role. The TY co-ordinator’s office is some distance from the hub of school activities which is not ideal. In addition a small number of teachers do not have base classrooms. The logistical implications for the co-ordinator and teachers of TY can be significant. The school has acknowledged these issues and is seeking to improve accommodation as opportunities present and resources become available.

Students have access to all of the practical rooms required for the various subject areas. In some cases, the school has been able to provide new spaces and facilities to enable TY subjects and modules to take place. This is very supportive of the teachers and students involved in TY.

The school has developed a set of protocols for the financial management of the programme. Students experiencing financial difficulty are supported where necessary which is good practice.

1.3 Student selection and support

As the TY programme is mandatory there is no selection process. Good arrangements are in place to inform students and their parents about the nature of the TY programme and its intended educational benefits.

Students are assigned to groups by the co-ordinator in collaboration with year heads and management. These groups are different from those established in junior cycle to encourage the development of new friendships. An induction programme is provided for students to help them become established in their various groups. All of this is good practice.

Students with special education needs are placed in modules and class groups which support inclusion. Learning support is incorporated into the timetables of those students who require it. The special education needs department circulates relevant information to the subject teachers in TY to ensure that they have all the information required to provide effective lessons for students.
The level of contact between the TY co-ordinator, the TY class tutor and the class group is very good. A weekly timetabled Social Education lesson and a weekly timetabled short class tutor period facilitates the provision of support for TY students throughout the year.

In addition to the timetabled activities, the school provides a series of extra activities for which students must apply. However, a number of students each year do not apply for the additional courses and programmes provided. The school has addressed this by encouraging the students and enlisting the support of parents. Consideration should be given to providing an assertiveness course or self-development course specifically for these students early in the TY programme to enable them to take advantage of these options.

Guidance is implemented by the TY class tutors in collaboration with the Guidance Counsellor. The Guidance Counsellor provides direct support for students as they embark on their work experience. In light of the fact that the school plans to provide additional hours in the coming academic year for guidance and counselling, consideration could be given to providing space on the timetable for Guidance and Counselling for TY students throughout the whole programme.

1.4 Home-school links

Communication with parents of students on the TY programme is very good: it is of high quality, is timely and is considered.

Some parents are directly linked with the TY programme at the school. For example, parents in specific career areas give talks to the TY students, some parents facilitate modules at the school and others support the programme by facilitating contact with relevant agencies. This is good work.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

A very considerable level of forward planning, implementation and review takes place to ensure the delivery of an effective TY programme. The school makes very good efforts to plan for a programme that is balanced, flexible and realistic for students. In particular, the quality of administration is of a very high standard. The TY co-ordinator and the TY core team is commended for its work in this area.

Best practice suggests that including a subject sampling layer in TY offers students the best learning experience on which to base their subject choice decisions in the LC programme. In Our Lady’s Secondary School, the subject sampling layer is somewhat restricted. Students choose their optional subjects in third year before they embark on the TY programme. Good and timely arrangements are made to inform students and their parents about subject choice and there is flexibility if a student wishes to change subjects. However, lack of opportunity to sample a wider range of subjects before selecting subject options may impact negatively on final choice. It is understood that this decision was made in consultation with students, parents and teachers and was made for good reasons. However, this arrangement should be kept under constant review to ensure that the best possible opportunities are provided for each cohort of students.
A very well presented TY plan was made available during the evaluation. This document clearly outlines the programme, is updated regularly and is very useful for all members of staff involved with TY. Commendably, plans for all of the subjects and modules were provided. The quality of lesson planning is generally good. Some plans are more developed than others. Very good practice was observed where learning outcomes were used. To develop planning for lessons further, it is recommended that specific learning outcomes be used.

Commendably, lessons are underpinned by the principles of the TY programme. Senior management should monitor planning and implementation on an ongoing basis to ensure that all lessons continue to provide an appropriate focus on TY approaches to learning and teaching.

2.2 Coordination

The quality of programme coordination is very good. The duties assigned to the co-ordinator are extensive and are carried out very well. The work of the core team ensures that activities are well organised, and tasks and duties are delegated appropriately. Effective teamwork is a key factor in the provision of the TY programme in the school.

The TY coordinator meets with the principal on a weekly basis to facilitate the sharing of information. The core team meets formally once per term and informally on a regular basis throughout the year. This good practice facilitates planning and review.

A process of evaluation which involves students, teachers, parents and relevant outside agencies such as work experience employers, is in place. The core team reviews the programme annually in collaboration with senior management. In addition to this, the programme is also evaluated by the school’s Board of Studies which looks at the educational experiences of students. In this way, the whole-school community can contribute to the evaluation and planning of the TY programme in a meaningful way. It is noted that the school is currently focussing on the academic opportunities that the TY offers. For example, the school is looking at ways to incorporate literacy and numeracy into the TY lessons in innovative and interesting ways. It is also reviewing the provision of remediation in English. To further this good work, it is recommended that the process of evaluation should include focus groups of students. This would provide another channel for students to have their voices heard and would offer them good opportunities to comment openly on their learning experiences during the programme.

The quality of communication between the TY core team and the rest of the school community is good. Teaching staff on the TY attend a briefing meeting at the outset of each year. The TY co-ordinator makes regular presentations at staff meetings and all relevant information is posted to the teaching staff using the TY notice board and the school’s e-portal. Text messaging is also used when appropriate. New members of the TY teaching team are supported throughout the year by the co-ordinator.

The parents of TY students are kept well-informed using a variety of arrangements. Regular communication is maintained with parents by letter, text message and the school’s website. Parents are also kept up to date via a regular newsletter. Meetings for parents of students involved in specific events are also held when appropriate.

The co-ordinator makes contact with various agencies outside of the school to ensure that all opportunities available to students are pursued. This is very good work.
2.3 Curriculum

Notwithstanding the absence of a subject sampling layer, the programme is appropriately timetabled and a good balance is maintained between the different aspects of the programme. The programme offers students good opportunities to experience a range of subjects to build on their experience from junior cycle and to inform their experience of learning for LC. In addition, the TY timetable is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a very wide range of stimulating cultural, sporting, charitable and personal development learning events.

All TY students undertake a research project each year. This project lasts for two months and contributes ten percent towards students’ overall certification for TY. It is considered a very important part of the students’ work and is a rich learning opportunity. Students choose from four different topics and research their chosen theme using a variety of sources and methodologies. Guideline documents have been provided for students which is good practice. However, there is scope to develop differentiated learning outcomes for the project in order to better match the tasks involved with students’ ability.

The class groups for Irish, English and Mathematics are divided into higher and ordinary levels. Students are placed in mixed-ability settings for all other subject and module areas.

All teachers participate in evaluating the provision for TY in their subject or modules. Consideration should be given to gathering more qualitative data about subjects and modules from students, parents and teachers to gain a fuller picture of the learning experience for students.

It is very good to note that a number of TY activities create opportunities for students to make formal presentations to their peers and to students in other year groups. This provides very rich learning opportunities.

The arrangements for organising work experience are good. Work experience occurs in two discrete one-week blocks per year. The co-ordinator is committed to finding appropriate placements for students which will allow them the best learning experience possible. Students are also encouraged to find their own work placement in consultation with the co-ordinator. They are provided with the necessary supports to ensure that they benefit from the experience.

Work experience is integrated with curriculum. This provides opportunities to prepare students adequately for placements and to reflect on and discuss their learning with teachers and peers in lessons. All students write up a daily report during their placement. At the end of the placement, they fill out a work experience self-evaluation form. The completion of these documents is a good teaching and learning strategy. The documents are evaluated by the co-ordinator and contribute to students’ final grades.

The TY programme involves voluntary work in community care which is good practice. The activities include visiting senior citizens in the local home for the aged, fundraising for a wide number of national charities, involvement with the Tidy Towns and preparing primary school students for musical performances. All of this work is very supportive of two TY goals: developing social awareness and education for maturity.
3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Teachers put a lot of effort into preparing good stimulus material and resources for lessons. For example, in one lesson, a poster analysis worksheet combined a list of higher order and lower order questions which was very effective in the mixed-ability setting. The worksheet also supported literacy development.

In another lesson, a very good written plan was presented. This succinct document outlined the structure of the lesson and specified the learning outcomes, strategies and resources that were to be used to achieve them. It also suggested resources and strategies for future lessons. The quality of teaching and learning was optimal and provided a most positive and enjoyable learning experience for students in spite of the difficult topics being addressed. Senior management should explore ways of sharing this very good practice with all of the teaching staff on the TY programme.

The teachers spoken to during the evaluation described a culture in the school whereby interesting and motivational lessons for students are the norm. This is a very positive aspect of the implementation of the TY programme and evidence of this approach to planning was observed during the lessons visited.

The majority of classrooms observed during the evaluation were attractive and welcoming. Students’ work and relevant exemplars were on display. Some teachers invest significant effort in the development of good subject-specific learning environments for students. This reflects a high level of care and concern for students’ progression.

3.2 Learning and teaching

During the evaluation, nine lessons were observed. Generally, the quality of teaching and learning was good or very good. All teachers displayed awareness of the TY aims during lessons.

In the majority of the lessons observed, learning intentions were shared with students at the outset. Optimal practice was observed where the learning intention or outcome was shared with students. This provided the learning activities that followed with a very specific context, objective and value for students. It is recommended that this practice be extended to all lessons.

The structure of lessons in all cases was very good. Lessons began with roll call to settle students and were concluded effectively. In some cases, the checking of homework was appropriately integrated into lessons to use time effectively. In most lessons, a variety of methodologies was used to very good effect. These included discussion, brainstorming, note making, pair work and other types of group work. In the practical lessons, students were adept at retrieving and returning materials and equipment. In the main, students were comfortable and very familiar with the structure and routines of lessons which facilitated positive learning experiences. Teachers’ monitoring of these activities was appropriately non-intrusive and facilitated independent learning.

It is good to note that in the majority of cases, teacher input and students’ contributions were well balanced. This provided rich learning opportunities for students and was very appropriate to the TY programme. Teachers’ energy and enthusiasm for lessons was also a positive feature of the work observed at the school.
In all of the lessons visited, subject matter was carefully considered for its motivational and interest value. In an Irish lesson, students were asked to discuss their musical preferences using target vocabulary. By using the target language to discuss topics of contemporary interest, the subject has greater relevance for students. This good practice should be extended and used by all teachers where appropriate.

In the majority of cases, students’ behaviour was exemplary and the atmosphere in lessons was pleasant and conducive to work. Students involved in the Log On, Learn programme displayed patience, imagination and kindness in their encouragement of senior citizens.

Generally, the level of student engagement in the lessons observed was very high. Teachers are commended for providing a variety of approaches which take into account the learning styles and personalities of the students. During one of the lessons observed, students were asked to openly discuss a sensitive issue. They were very responsive and displayed a significant level of maturity and respect. A good learning environment was created. The management of the lesson is commended. This type of approach is supportive of students’ personal development.

Despite the efforts of teachers to provide stimulating subject matter for study, it appeared that a small number of students in various groups did not understand the relevance of lessons. In a few cases, students found it difficult to stay on task and were very easily distracted. It is suggested that a firm focus on learning outcomes, and very clear, immediate assessment of learning in each lesson would help these students maintain focus. Consideration could be given in some instances to the creation of learning targets which focus on the development of specific learning behaviours in lessons.

Good use was made of ICT in the majority of lessons, for example, to generate notes and handouts, to show screen shots and short films and to play music. In some cases, teachers prepared resource material using sources which engage students such as cartoons and audio visual clips. In summary, the use of ICT in lessons significantly enhanced the quality of the learning experience for students.

A variety of questioning techniques was used by teachers. Best practice was observed where a combination of lower-order and higher-order questions was asked of named students. This allows all students an opportunity to be challenged to their potential.

The organisation of students in mixed-ability groups is very good practice. In all of the lessons observed, there was a focus on differentiation. Some attempts were successful whilst others showed some scope for improvement. It is recommended that senior management provide professional development on differentiation for all teachers on the TY programme to support the good work being carried out. Consideration could also be given to providing information for teachers on assessment for learning practices.

3.3 Assessment

The assessment process in TY is generally a positive feature of the programme. Students’ copies were corrected and dated and in some cases, the good practice of making formative comments was used. This should be extended. Students record their activities and personal reflections each day. The assessment of project work and major endeavours is carried out and supervised by the programme coordinator. Students are assessed using a very specific rubric. The criteria are weighted to ensure that students are focussed on the important elements of the TY year. It is good to note that attendance, attitude, and willingness to ‘get involved’ are given significant prominence.
in the grading system. This directly supports the development of the individual student, regardless of ability, and is good practice. Students can achieve a distinction, merit and pass grade for their efforts. Students who have not achieved the requisite forty percent pass grade are provided with a certificate of participation.

Students sit formal in-house examinations at the end of the first and third term. The results of these examinations are communicated to parents through written school reports.

In addition to the school’s certificates, students are provided with a portfolio of certificates upon the achievement of certain criteria in different subject areas. The development of such a portfolio is very supportive of students’ confidence and encourages lifelong learning.

Student achievement in TY is celebrated at a formal ceremony each year. This ceremony further supports the unique nature of the programme at the school. The awards night is produced by TY students and is a showcase for the work carried out on the TY programme. All TY students are given the opportunity to participate. The awards night features presentations and performances by students as well as a guest speaker. This provides students, parents and teachers with an opportunity to celebrate the good work of the TY programme.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The TY programme is very well supported by school management and is a positive feature of the school’s provision.
- The TY programme is co-ordinated by an effective and enthusiastic co-ordinator and core team.
- Student support in TY is good and is enhanced by the provision of a social education lesson each week.
- The quality of programme co-ordination is very good.
- Planning for TY is appropriately student-centred and it is good to note that students’ interests are an important factor in the planning process.
- The curriculum in TY is broad and balanced and offers students the opportunity to engage in a very wide range of life-enhancing experiences.

As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendation is made:

- Senior management should provide professional development on differentiation for all teachers on the TY programme to support the mixed-ability setting of class groups.
Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

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

The Board of Management welcomes the Transition Year Programme Evaluation Report and is delighted that the dedication & hard work of Senior Management, the Programme Co-ordinator & the TY teachers is recognised & affirmed.

The Board welcomes that the commitment of the Board, Principal, Deputy Principal, Programme Co-ordinator & whole staff to providing a broad, balanced & fulfilling Transition Year to our students is clearly seen in this report.

Observations & recommendations contained in the report will be discussed and considered on a whole school level.

The Board commends the work of the Inspector who carried out the evaluation in a courteous & professional manner.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

Senior Management have initiated a programme of professional development on differentiation for all teachers.