An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation, Transition Year
REPORT

St Joseph’s College, Borrisoleigh
County Tipperary

Roll Number: 65241N

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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 St Joseph’s College. 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 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 and the programme co-ordinator at the end of the evaluation period.

This privately owned co-educational school was founded by Pádraig O’Shea in 1978. This followed the closure of the Convent of Mercy Secondary School in the village of Borrisoleigh, Co Tipperary. St Joseph’s was initially opened as a school for girls only but has included boys in its enrolment since 1981. Mr. O’Shea is the owner and manager of the school. A new school principal was appointed in 2009. 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.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

School management at St Joseph’s College introduced the TY programme in 2009 following the recommendation of a whole-school evaluation report published in 2008. The school had made a number of attempts to introduce the programme in previous years and these efforts bore fruit in 2009 when a cohort of students became the first TY group in the school. The programme is optional and two mixed-ability class groups were formed from the students who applied in 2009. The TY programme on offer is significantly strong and the work of the school principal and the programme co-ordinator is acknowledged in establishing the programme on such firm foundations.

The programme is very well supported by school management and the appointment of the deputy principal as the co-ordinator for the first year was significant in that it has assisted in establishing the status of the programme in the school. Much preparatory work and research was undertaken by the co-ordinator to assist in planning, organising and delivering the programme. This included contacts with other schools in the region, and advice and school visits from the Transition Year Support Service (TYST). This detailed preparatory work has ensured the provision of a very good quality programme in its initial year in the school. The work has been complemented by support from school management, the co-ordinator of programmes and the staff as a whole. These collaborations provide a good foundation for the future development of the programme.

Good communication between the school principal and the co-ordinator has characterised the development of the programme. The level of communication at whole-school level is also mirrored in the provision of advance information on the programme to parents and students, and in the regular communication between school and home.
The programme is delivered by a very large team of teachers. In this, the initial year of the programme, teachers were allocated to subject areas and to class groups with very limited prior notice. As the timetable for the programme is developed in future years, teachers assigned to teach TY subjects should be notified well in advance to allow time to prepare and plan for the delivery of individual subjects, in line with TY methodologies and guidelines. Where resources allow, teachers who may wish to volunteer to engage in an aspect of the TY programme, should be facilitated and encouraged. Similarly, in the context of timetabling, the creation of a core team of teachers for the programme would be very helpful in further establishing the quality of the programme. This core team could act as a review and development group to assist in the future coordination of the programme. From a whole-school support perspective, advance notice of inclusion on the overall TY teaching team and the creation of a smaller core team, will assist in creating a sustainable programme into the future.

1.2 Resources

The programme is appropriately timetabled and a good balance is maintained between the different aspects of the programme. The programme offers students an opportunity to sample a range of subjects to build on their experience from junior cycle and to inform their subject choices for Leaving Certificate.

A four-week period is allocated to work experience within the programme. This is divided into two fortnightly blocks, completed in term one and term two of the school year. While it was evident from discussions with students, and from the records and folders examined, that purposeful work-experience placements are availed of by the students, the amount of time spent on this activity is too great. One session of two weeks, or two placements of one week each, would limit the disruption to the planned programme of teaching for all subjects and would avoid undue overlap with the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) that is offered to students on transfer to fifth year. LCVP also has a work experience requirement. It is therefore recommended that work experience be limited to a two-week period in the school year for TY students.

As a core teaching team develops, the skills and strategies relating to TY should be shared as part of the school’s continuing professional development (CPD) programme. This CPD programme could be developed from within the school through the sharing of experiences and the outcomes of the school’s own evaluation of the programme over time. External supports, particularly the resources, publications and website of the TYST, could also be utilised.

The use and application of information and communication technology (ICT) is well integrated into the programme. Students have two timetabled ICT classes that are used to develop skills and to work on projects and individual tasks. In a range of subjects observed during the evaluation, it was clear that ICT applications were well integrated into the programme both in terms of teaching and assessment. This was particularly evident in Design and Communication Graphics (DCG), in Home Economics (HE) and in French. Further integration of ICT is encouraged and consideration should be given to offering some form of certification to students in the area of ICT skills and applications. The European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), or a similar programme, is worthy of consideration.

The school’s practical rooms are also used to deliver aspects of the TY programme. The provision of DCG, HE, Construction Studies (CS), Technology, Art and a science module provide a range of opportunities for students to experience these subjects, develop their skills, and challenge any gender stereotyping that may exist in subject choice for Leaving Certificate. Of particular concern
however, is the condition of one practical room used to teach CS, Technology and Materials Technology Wood (MTW). This room has been created through the conversion of three classrooms into a practical room to teach CS at senior cycle and MTW at junior cycle. Health and safety concerns relating to this room, observed during the evaluation, were brought to the attention of the teacher and the school principal. Some of these concerns were due to the limited space available and the organisation of the room. The positioning of work benches and the resultant lack of space available for students to use tools safely and to work on their projects were significant concerns. Of concern also, was the obvious difficulty for the teacher in moving between benches to observe and instruct students. Other specific safety concerns included: the general tidiness and order of the room; the absence of safety sign boards and the lack of safety markings on the floor. The level of dust in evidence in the room was also of concern. The secure storage of students’ examination projects in advance of their Leaving and Junior certificate examinations was a further issue of concern. TY students, in the lesson observed, could have had access to these projects due to the very poor design and layout of the room.

School management should carry out an immediate safety audit of this, and other practical rooms, and issues identified should be addressed as a matter of urgency. In this regard, detailed reference should be made to the Review of Occupational Health and Safety in the Technologies in Post-primary Schools, a document produced jointly by the Department of Education and Skills and the State Claims Agency. Appropriate secure storage for examination materials should also be provided by school management. It is essential and therefore strongly recommended, that the health and safety concerns observed in this room be addressed in the interests of the safety of students and teachers.

1.3 Student selection and support

It is clear that very good systems are in place for the selection of students and for their support as they experience the programme. Documentation provided to the evaluation team illustrated the level of detailed preparation for the development of the programme in this area. An enrolment policy for TY has been put in place as has a student-enrolment interview schedule.

In addition to the school’s pastoral-care system, the TY co-ordinator provides significant care and support for the students as they experience the programme. While much of this support is provided informally, the timetabling of a general studies class for each class group provides a forum to discuss issues arising and reactions of students to the programme. This lesson, taken by the co-ordinator, is used as a tutorial period and was observed to be effective in providing a voice for the students in the programme.

Teachers of subjects in the programme are aware of TY guidelines and methodologies and are enthusiastic in their planning and delivery of the programme. Students are supported in subjects through appropriate planning and the provision of a challenging programme. It was also clear from observations and interactions that students were busy and engaged in purposeful TY activities. Equally, they were impressive in their ability to discuss and reflect upon their experience of the programme.

1.4 Home-school links

Communication and contacts between school and home are well organised and are of good quality in this the first year of the programme. These processes ensure that all concerned are fully aware
of, and value, the depth and quality of the programme. A range of letters and the students’ journal illustrate this good practice. The schools’ website has also been utilised in presenting information to parents and in recording events and achievements of students as the programme progresses. A planned end-of-year celebration and awards ceremony will further enhance home-school links. It is also planned to provide a questionnaire for parents to evaluate the programme as the year ends. The provision of a parents’ questionnaire, in combination with a similar questionnaire for students, represents very good practice and should contribute to the development of the programme into the future. These questionnaires had been drafted at the time of the evaluation.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The quality of the TY, in its initial year, reflects very good programme planning. A TY plan is in place and this reflects the guidelines for TY programme planning and relevant Department circular letters. Planning for the assessment of students’ work features strongly in the plan as do subject plans, enrolment procedures and details of the evaluation of the programme. Preparation, reflection and evaluation are key strengths of the programme-planning process. The outcomes of the students’, parents’ and teachers’ evaluations should assist in this process. It is essential that the outcomes of these questionnaires are used to inform future developments in the TY programme.

Individual subject plans have also been developed by the teaching team in line with the TY subject-planning template. It is commendable that this level of planning has been achieved in such a short period. It is clear that subject plans, as evidenced in the TY plan and in the lessons observed, illustrate an appropriate balance between syllabus topics from both Junior and Leaving Certificate and new, interesting and innovative topics selected by the teachers. As the co-ordinator and the team reflect on year one of the TY programme, they should seek to build on this initial progress in planning. This can be achieved by keeping the planning focus on students’ learning. The team should specifically identify intended learning outcomes for students within the overall programme to develop the aims of TY as outlined in school’s planning documents. These intended learning outcomes should then act as a framework within which subject-specific learning outcomes could be devised. The further development of the TY planning process, that has already been well established, will ensure that learning and teaching is the key focus of programme planning.

2.2 Co-ordination

Very good quality co-ordination has characterised the programme in its first year. While the appointment of the deputy principal as co-ordinator was an initial and interim strategy, it has been very effective in establishing the programme. This co-ordination has been characterised by clarity of vision, reflection and careful preparation. Key building blocks have been put in place including a planning process, contacts with community and outside agencies, communication and evaluation procedures. The interest and enthusiasm of students for the programme has also been achieved.

As it is planned to appoint a new co-ordinator for year two of the programme, it is of particular importance that the momentum created in TY should be maintained. The continued support of the principal and school management for the programme is essential. The perception of the TY programme, by the students and their parents, as a valuable educational and developmental experience, will be essential for its survival and growth. To this end, it is recommended that the
new co-ordinator should be supported and mentored by the deputy principal, in the short term, if such an arrangement could be agreed. This initiative, combined with the development of a core team and a continued focus on planning to positively impact on the students’ learning experience in the classroom, should ensure the sustained growth of the programme.

2.3 Curriculum

The TY curriculum offered to students is comprehensive in both breadth and depth. There is an appropriate balance between the academic, vocational and personal-development aspects of the curriculum. This balance allows the programme to link effectively with the junior certificate and leaving certificate programmes on offer in the school and also provides a wide and interesting range of complementary activities and experiences.

Students are offered English, Gaeilge, Mathematics and French as core aspects of the curriculum with an allocation of three class periods per week in each subject for the full year of the programme. Students take these subjects as a combined class group. Students also study a comprehensive range of other subjects including Science, Art, Music, Accounting, Economics and HE. Two mixed-ability class groups are created for these subjects, many of which have a practical element. Other curricular areas include a three-period block for a mini-company project, a similar allocation for social and community activities and two single periods for computer studies. This represents a broad curriculum for the TY programme and provides students with an appropriate balance between subject sampling and exposure to new areas of study and experience.

A range of complementary and co-curricular activities also contributes to a well-balanced programme. Social and community activities, sports, health and well-being and the mini-company project form a significant portion of the programme. Activities arising from these areas include a student-mentoring programme, a mental-health module, a road-safety and driving programme, Gaisce, the President’s Award, and a food-safety programme. The range of activities organised is extensive and of very good quality. Vocational and educational guidance is also provided to students in two timetabled guidance classes.

A significant number of lessons on the timetable for all year groups are of thirty minutes duration thus limiting what can be achieved in single periods in some subject areas in the TY programme. A modular approach to the timetabling of some subject areas could create significantly more class periods albeit for a limited period. This could facilitate project work or specific aspects of the programme that would benefit from a larger time allocation over a shorter period. Such an approach could be considered in future planning of the timetable and the programme by the school principal and the programme co-ordinator in consultation with the teachers of the TY programme.

The opportunity to sample a range of subjects is a significant strength of the TY programme in St Joseph’s College. On completion of the programme however, students face a restrictive and limiting subject-choice process as they advance towards Leaving Certificate. Students are required to select subjects from pre-set option blocks of subjects. It was clear from discussions with students during the evaluation that, while they welcomed and enjoyed the experience of a range of subjects in TY, they knew that they could not continue with some of these subjects to Leaving Certificate due to the limitations of the subject-option blocks. The school principal and school management should use the outcomes of a survey of the initial choices of students to construct the subject-option blocks that would therefore vary from year to year. This would allow the students’ experience in TY to have a further meaningful impact on their subject choice for Leaving
Certificate. A subject-choice process arising from an annual survey of students’ preferences, conditional on available teaching resources, is very good practice.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Planning and preparation for lessons was very good. The content of the lessons observed reflected the individual subject plans and the wider TY plan. The lessons observed demonstrated a significant level of individual planning and preparation. Practical lessons observed in HE, DCG, CS had students actively engaged in a range of activities both as individuals and in groups. In other lessons, including French, European Studies, Mathematics, Guidance and Religion, it was clear that the teachers’ planning and preparation had resulted in a range of good quality learning activities. While the potential for cross-curricular links, particularly between the planned work in both European Studies and French, should be explored in subject planning, the impact of teachers’ individual planning ensured that students were engaged actively in learning. Students’ folders and copybooks also illustrated the range and quality of the work that had been planned and completed by students.

To build on the good quality planning in the initial year of the programme, teachers are encouraged to focus on developing specific intended learning outcomes for students as part of their individual subject planning. These intended learning outcomes should also be used to inform assessment in the individual subject. The learning intention and intended learning outcomes should be clear to all students in lessons in any subject in the programme.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The quality of teaching and learning was good in the TY lessons observed during the evaluation. Interaction with both class groups in a range of classroom settings showed high levels of engagement and participation by students in the planned learning activities. Teacher presentation, brainstorming, questioning, visual stimulus materials and ICT generated projects were used, across the range of lessons, to engage the students in learning. The topics for study were presented to students using methods appropriate to the mixed-ability structure of the lessons and to the TY guidelines. Lessons were dominated by student-centred approaches with very limited direct teaching. The presentation of a learning intention and a review of learning outcomes could, however, have enhanced the quality of some lessons.

Students in both European Studies and French were engaged in oral and visual presentations of projects on different European countries and on the regions of France. Opportunities to collaborate and therefore enhance students’ understanding of the concept of culture, region and national territory should be explored. More extensive use of the target language in French lessons is recommended. Project and practical work were also central to the HE lessons observed. One group of students prepared and cooked a range of dishes while the other completed an on-line assessment as part of the Safe-Food Programme. Mathematics students were engaged by an interesting lesson about permutations relating the dealing of playing cards. A theoretical concept was brought to life by a practical application that the students both enjoyed and understood. Students in DCG worked individually on Solid Works, a computer-assisted design application. The students had produced an impressive portfolio of design tasks as an outcome of their engagement with the subject. CS
students were completing their work on a bodhrán in collaboration with the TY music programme. The guidance lesson observed had students presenting to their classmates on their work experience. The skills gained from the actual experience were linked to vocational guidance in the area of career investigation. The range of activities and teaching methodologies observed offered rich learning experiences to the students.

The classroom atmosphere in lessons was very positive and the management of students in all lessons was purposeful, courteous and mutually respectful. A very good rapport between students and their teachers was in evidence in engaging and participative settings for learning.

3.3 Assessment

Good quality assessment practices were in evidence in the lessons observed. There was evidence of continuous, written and oral assessments in these lessons. The planned assessment of students’ work within the overall programme includes a combination of summative, formative and portfolio assessment. Students present their work for assessment in the form of projects and portfolios. Examinations of a selection of these folders, during the evaluation, showed clearly that significant tasks, with an appropriate level of challenge for the students, are assigned and there is much attention to detail in their presentation by students. These assessment methods are appropriate to the topics for study and to the subject plans. Assessment of these portfolios forms part of the overall assessment of learning in the programme.

Students sit short formal written tests at Christmas and at the end of the summer term. Self-assessment by students is also planned. The student portfolio and a work-experience report are presented for assessment in May and are combined with an individual interview. The outcomes of these assessments inform a final grade of distinction, merit, pass or certificate of participation. These are presented at an awards and celebration evening. While these assessment modes and procedures represent good practice, it is of importance, as the programme develops, that an appropriate balance be kept between the various assessment modes that are used and that formal examinations be kept to a minimum. Such issues can be included in the overall evaluation of the programme by the co-ordinator and school principal.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The TY programme is well organised, planned, and delivered to the benefit of the students.
- The programme is very well supported by the school principal and school management.
- Co-ordination of the programme is of very good quality.
- Preparation, reflection and evaluation are key strengths of the programme-planning process.
- The TY curriculum is comprehensive in both breadth and depth.
- The quality of teaching and learning was good in the lessons observed.
- Assessment modes and procedures used represent good practice.

As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendations are made:
• It is strongly recommended that the health and safety concerns observed in one practical room, used to teach CS, Technology and MTW, be addressed in the interests of the safety of students and teachers.
• Work experience should be limited to a two-week period in the school year for TY students.
• Intended learning outcomes for students should be identified within the overall programme and these should be used as a framework within which subject-specific learning outcomes could be devised.
• The school principal and school management should consider using the initial choices of students to construct the subject-option blocks in fifth year and thereby allow the students’ experience in TY to have a further meaningful impact on their subject choice for Leaving Certificate.

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