

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Programme Evaluation Transition Year
REPORT**

**St Mary's Secondary School Convent of Mercy
Mallow, Co Cork
Roll Number: 62350D**

Date of inspection: 30 September 2009



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in St Mary'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 and 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. The outcomes of the evaluation were discussed with the school principal and the programme co-ordinator at the end of the evaluation period.

St Mary's Secondary School provides a broad range of educational opportunities to 600 girls in the town of Mallow in Co. Cork. The school provides the Junior Certificate programme to all students. At senior cycle, students are offered the TY programme, the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Most students opt for the TY programme and then progress to complete the established Leaving Certificate. A significant number also take the LCVP, while a small group opts to take the LCA programme. The TY programme has a long tradition in the school and has been offered as part of senior cycle for the past eighteen years.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole-school support

St Mary's offers an excellent TY programme. The programme is well integrated into the school and attracts a significant uptake from students following completion of junior cycle. The majority of students transferring to senior cycle take the TY programme. Activities associated with the programme have a high profile in the school and have a visible presence in the photographic record displayed in the corridors and in the school's newsletter to parents. There is a palpable expectation and enthusiasm among the junior classes for the experience of the TY programme. There is equally a sense of the positive impact of TY from senior cycle students who have completed the programme and are now preparing for their Leaving Certificate examinations.

The main elements of the programme are now well established. The high-profile aspects, including the school musical and the range of subject-based and community-based initiatives, are well supported at whole-school level. The co-ordinating team is also well established and has worked with the programme for a significant period. The management and day-to-day running of the programme is delegated by senior management to this team. This is very good practice.

1.2 Resources

The programme is well resourced in the school. Staff is appropriately assigned to the programme and the large teaching team willingly engages with the teaching, learning and assessment methodologies that are central to the TY philosophy. A team of up to fifteen teachers is assigned to each of the three TY class groups. The timetable is well structured and balanced between the personal and social development, vocational and academic aspects of the programme. This is good practice.

Information and communication technology (ICT) is appropriately integrated into the programme. Students are offered the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) programme as an option. This course is certified through online assessment. Those not pursuing the ECDL are offered an Information Technology course designed by the school. Consideration should be given to basing the structure of this course on a review of the ICT skills levels of the students on an annual basis. The school has generated a position of ICT technician from its own resources and this enhances the integration of ICT into teaching and learning.

Continuing professional development (CPD) for TY is also supported by school management but, to date, this has been availed of mainly by the co-ordinator and core-team members. While the outcomes of CPD are disseminated appropriately among members of the teaching team, consideration should be given to widening access to CPD for other members of the team. This would build capacity and new skills and also help to ensure the continued success and long-term co-ordination and development of the programme into the future.

1.3. Student selection and support

The majority of students completing junior cycle opt to take TY, which is a positive endorsement of the programme. Students are facilitated to enter the programme following consultation among the teachers of third-year students and an interview with a selected number of students. In September, three class groups are created and students complete a residential programme in an outdoor-education centre as an induction activity for TY. This process had just been completed at the time of the evaluation and its success in creating a TY group identity and in energizing the students was very clear.

A small group of students do not take the TY programme and progress directly into the established Leaving Certificate programme, while another small group of students enter the LCA programme directly from third year. Guidance is provided to students as they make their choice of programme in advance of completing third year. School management and the co-ordination team should focus particularly on ensuring that the small group of students moving directly into LCA have considered fully the value and benefits of the TY programme before making their decision to bypass TY. These students, some of whom have additional educational needs, could, in conjunction with their parents, be encouraged to defer their decision to enter LCA until they have completed the TY programme.

1.4. Home-school links

Communication and other linkages between home and school are very well developed and are effective. It is clear that students are fully aware of the programme both from the profile that past TY programmes have had in the school and from the well-organised communication process between school and home. This process begins with the subject-choice and programme-choice process in third year. Parents attend a meeting that outlines the choices and opportunities available within the programme. The students themselves, their homework journal, school reports and the school's newsletter are the main conduits of communication between school and home.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

2.1. Planning

Planning for the programme is of a very high quality. A very well-developed TY plan is in place and, most significantly, it clearly informs and reflects practice within the programme. The plan is the outcome of many years of experience, experimentation and collaborative work by the co-ordination team and the teachers, to the benefit of the students in the programme. Detailed individual plans for each subject area are also in place and these equally inform classroom practice. The teachers involved in the planning process for TY are to be commended for the quality of the plans in place.

The programme is also subject to an annual review in the school and teachers are afforded the opportunity to join or leave the TY team. The voice of students is used in this review process through the use of evaluation sheets on completion of the programme. This is highly commended. To build on this very good practice, parents should also be invited to participate in this formal review process as was the case in the past.

2.2 Co-ordination

The co-ordination of the programme is excellent. Successful co-ordination of TY has ensured the provision of a diverse and challenging programme where expectations of student achievement are high and care and support for students is a priority. A co-ordinator and an assistant co-ordinator lead the programme team. While a large group of teachers deliver the programme, an identifiable core team exists. This team has a designated weekly meeting that facilitates discussion, decision making and planning. Professional relationships and collaborative practices underpin the work of the team. A TY office has been provided and a notice board has been created to display photographs and other materials, particularly documenting the social aspects of the programme.

2.3 Curriculum

The curriculum on offer is of very good quality and contains an appropriate balance between educational, vocational and social elements. The curriculum and the ongoing process of review illustrate a clear vision to provide a high-quality educational experience and to develop the knowledge, skills and competencies that facilitate the holistic development of the students.

Students are offered a range of core subjects including Irish, English, Mathematics, Physical Education, History and Geography. Language learning is provided through a choice of either French or German and a rotating module across the full year of Italian, Japanese and sign language. Another rotating module of Biology, Chemistry and Physics is also provided. This programme allows students to build on their learning in these subjects at junior cycle and to inform their subject choices for Leaving Certificate. All class groups engage with these subjects in a mixed-ability setting, except for Mathematics and Gaelic where the classes are banded.

The TY programme also offers a range of complementary activities combined into two modules. In one module, students can choose a full-year programme in Art, Home Economics, the Young Social Innovators project or mini-company activities. A further module for the full year offers ECDL, driver education or agriculture and food. Students also have timetabled provision for Guidance, work experience and communications, and personal development. Cross-curricular links are centred on the two sessions of work experience and on the school musical project that strives to include all TY students.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

The TY lessons observed were very well planned and prepared. These lessons clearly reflected the teaching programme as set out in the overall TY plan. The lessons had planned learning outcomes but were also open and relaxed to allow the students to express themselves and react to the stimulus materials provided. All lessons were planned to allow for an excellent balance between teacher inputs and student responses. In all cases the planned lessons facilitated very good quality interaction and engagement between students and the topic for study.

A variety of approaches to learning was observed. In the lessons observed in Art, Home Economics, Religious Education and Physical Education the level of preparation ensured that the students were actively engaged by the planned activities. Impressive use of ICT was observed in the study of modern Art. Carefully planned Geography and English lessons engaged students very effectively with textual and visual materials. Preparation for a drama module was also very impressive in that it combined all of the students within a team-teaching context. In all of the lessons observed, the preparation by teachers was informed by the subject plan and was reflected in the overall TY plan. This level of planning and preparation is highly commended.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The quality of learning and teaching observed in the programme was very good. This quality arose from the careful and effective planning by the teachers and from the methodologies employed during the lessons. Students were engaged actively in all cases by questioning, personal and group responses to stimulus materials, and by tasks. In all cases, the pace of lessons was appropriate and students were fully included throughout.

Lessons displayed a range of effective methodologies including timed circuit training in PE, practical pizza baking in Home Economics and sketching of abstract reflections in Art. In all cases, the students were given responsibility for their own aspect of the task but were carefully monitored and prompted by the teacher as appropriate. Inputs from teachers in terms of instructions, recapitulation and debriefing were well balanced and allowed students in these practical lessons to complete their activities and tasks in a timely and safe manner. In English, the students were stimulated by texts and by work completed by students from the previous year in an impressive print-rich environment. This prepared the current group of students to engage with a wide range of genres as a means of scaffolding their own learning. Particularly impressive was the engagement with genre-transfer activities using poetry and modern song. Geography students were challenged by maps of the local area in a study of changing land-use as an element of preparation for a local field-study. In Religious Education the students were drawn to reflection through meditation, which created a clear focus for engagement with a suitable text. The students responded very positively to the meditation activity in the calm environment of the school's oratory. The triple drama lesson combined mime, dance, singing and movement in a performance space. Both the methodologies used and the enthusiasm of the teaching team were very impressive.

All lessons observed were challenging, engaging and enjoyable. The classroom atmosphere was extremely constructive and energetic, and the rapport between teachers and students was

collaborative and very positive. It was clear that high-quality learning was taking place within the lessons observed.

3.3 Assessment

Careful attention to assessment processes also account for the success of the programme in the school. Assessment is central to the programme throughout the year. This is primarily focused on students' individual reactions and reflections on their experience of elements of the programme. This is structured from the outset by the students' engagement in reflective practice through the production of a portfolio of learning. This is complemented by a written journal which students are required to update regularly. A work-experience diary traces students' learning through preparation for work, communication and work placements. This engagement with individual reflection is very good practice and is both encouraged and commended.

Other assessment methods include the completion of projects, exhibitions of work, and written assignments. In some subject areas, class tests are used as appropriate. In a number of modules, the completion of tasks or challenges includes an assessment process. These include the ECDL, driver education and Gaisce – the President's Award. It is clear, from engagement with current and past students of the programme in the school, that individual work is challenging, time-consuming and valuable.

As the programme nears completion in May each year, students are interviewed, based on their engagement with the programme as represented by the artefacts and reflections accumulated in their portfolio and journal. Students' achievements in the programme are certified by the school and celebrated at an awards night that includes parents, staff and guests. The quality of assessment, individual reflection on learning and the celebration of achievement in the TY programme are highly commended.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation.

- The school offers an excellent TY programme.
- The programme is well resourced.
- Planning is of a very high quality.
- The co-ordination of the programme is excellent.
- The curriculum on offer is of very good quality.
- TY lessons were very well planned and prepared.
- Teaching and learning observed in the programme was very good.
- Assessment, reflection and the celebration of achievement are of very high quality.

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

- The quality of the TY programme in the school is of such a high standard that, apart from some suggestions made in the body of the report, no further recommendations are made.

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