Programme Evaluation
Transition Year
REPORT

Ursuline Secondary School
Thurles, County Tipperary
Roll Number: 65470F

Date of inspection: 21 October 2010
EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in Ursuline Secondary School, Thurles, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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 programme co-ordinator and the assistant co-ordinator following the evaluation.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

Ursuline Secondary School offers a very high quality TY programme to its students. The programme, which is optional, has a very high profile in the school and is well supported by school management. The programme was introduced in the school in 1986 and therefore has a long and sustained presence on the school curriculum. The TY programme in the school is characterised by very good programme planning, co-ordination, reflection and review, within the ethos and vision shared by members of the school community. The programme has a visibility throughout the school. During the evaluation the students had a central involvement in the annual school musical and were visible on the school corridors engaging in mini-company enterprises.

Two teachers oversee the running of the programme and they are supported by the principal and deputy principal. One teacher acts as the TY co-ordinator while another acts as the assistant co-ordinator. Both roles are linked to the duties of posts of responsibility. There is no provision for a TY office within current room resources. There are two TY class groups in the current year that are based in adjacent classrooms. Both groups are mixed-ability in nature and the location of the classrooms, their decoration with students’ project work and the presence of a TY notice-board, all assist in providing a visibility for the programme within the school.

Procedures for the organisation, implementation and publication of the programme are appropriate, effective and well managed. The delivery of the programme involves up to twenty-six teachers. While this is a large group, there is a tangible sense of common purpose, unity and loyalty to the programme and of its contribution to the social and educational development of the students. While the team is largely stable and many of the teachers have extensive experience in the programme, it is clear that new teachers are facilitated to join and others to leave the team, as appropriate.

1.2 Resources

The TY timetable is well organised and the various aspects of the programme are appropriately weighted. It is very good practice that the team reflects upon, and adjusts, the timetable and aspects of the programme, as necessary. This flexibility in management, organisation and co-
ordination ensures that the programme does not become static and responds to students’ needs and changes in the school and community.

Staff is assigned appropriately to the programme and subjects, and activities are largely organised on a full-year basis rather than within a modular structure. The integration of information and communication technology (ICT) is evident across the students’ experience of the programme. ICT is timetabled for all TY students and their achievements are accredited through the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) programme. ICT is also significantly visible in the students’ project work and portfolios, and is integrated into teaching and learning in lessons.

Teachers are facilitated to engage in appropriate professional learning opportunities that support their work in TY. Significantly, there is also much support provided within the team on a collaborative basis. Teachers share their skills in particular areas to support their colleagues resulting in very positive outcomes for the students. It is clear that professional learning and the sharing of skills and good practice characterise this very effective teaching team.

1.3 Student selection and support

As the programme has significant visibility in the school it experiences a strong demand for places from students. Student interest, active participation in school and classroom activities, and good behaviour, are signalled to students throughout their junior cycle as the qualities required for entry to the programme. It is significant and very positive that academic achievement is not signalled as a prerequisite for entry. Students with additional educational needs can, and do, access the programme. Information for both students and their parents is provided in the context of the range of senior cycle options on offer in the school. Parents are provided with comprehensive information on all the options available and appropriate guidance is provided for students to make informed choices of both subjects and programmes, as they transfer to senior cycle. Students opting for TY are asked to pay a set amount of money to cover the cost of specific aspects of the programme. This cost is deemed necessary by school management and its use, and the activities it covers, are clear to students and parents.

Students must apply in writing for access to the programme. In this application, they are requested to state their reasons for applying and to outline what they want to achieve during the programme, and what they will contribute to it. It is clear that the selection procedure is fair and well organised. The entry criteria that are signalled to prospective students throughout junior cycle are also appropriate and are set within the traditions, culture and ethos of the school. However, to bring greater clarity and formality to this process, it is recommended that entry criteria be documented and circulated to all students and parents in advance of the process. This would ensure that all students are fully aware of the entry criteria and that the process is fully open and transparent.

1.4 Home-school links

Good quality communication between school and home is a characteristic of the programme. These communication processes reflect normal whole-school procedures and are comprehensive and effective. Communication begins through the pre-information, application and selection processes and continues throughout the year, particularly in relation to the organisation of specific activities. Parents are included and engaged in the students’ work as a result of these communication processes that culminate with a celebration evening for students and parents towards the end of the programme.
2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The quality of the programme provided to students is reflected in the very good programme planning process. A comprehensive TY plan is in place, as are individual subject plans that have been prepared by subject departments and teachers. These fully reflect TY guidelines and methodologies. The structure of the programme and the key elements of its organisation have been established for many years. The planning process has altered and improved the programme over time. This process of change and improvement has arisen from reflection and review based on students’ needs, available opportunities in the community, and resources in the school.

The recent outcomes of programme review have included increased class contact with the TY class groups for the co-ordinators, changes in the range of community and out-of-school activities, and the inclusion of annual cross-curricular themes within subjects. In the current year, the theme of Africa is used across a range of subjects. Other changes include attention to the timing of programme activities and the resulting workload on students in submitting projects at different times during the year. To prevent the repetition of pressure points in the programme calendar, when a large number of projects were required, good planning has now placed these submission dates at particular times throughout the year. These developments are clear evidence that the planning process is active in developing and improving the programme to the benefit of the students.

Evaluation of the programme, while effective, has been largely informal. This process has operated through discussion and commentary from parents, teachers and students. Parents are asked to comment on their hopes and expectations for their daughters at the parents’ meeting at the beginning of the programme. To build on the culture of planning, review and reflection that already informs the programme, it is recommended that the co-ordinators develop a more formal programme-evaluation process to include students, teachers and parents. The use of questionnaires, comment sheets or focus-group interviews could be considered. This would allow the team to build on the very good work already in place and to further develop the programme on the basis of consultation with students and their parents.

2.2 Coordination

TY is co-ordinated by a very effective and cohesive team that is fully committed to the programme in the school. The co-ordinators work very well together and engender a great loyalty among the teachers and the students. The co-ordinators lead programme planning, the student-selection process, work experience, assessment and accreditation, and they implement changes in the programme, as appropriate. The co-ordinators also teach some aspects of the programme, while one also acts as year head for the group within the school’s pastoral-care structure. Both play key roles in the high-profile activities that involve the TY students, including the direction of the TY drama and the organisation of the community-care programme. They work hard to achieve the very good quality outcomes for students that are in evidence.

Formal meetings are timetabled during the year, however much of the co-ordination work is completed through informal contacts with students and staff. The co-ordinators are involved with all aspects of the programme and yet empower other teachers to fully develop their interests and skills within TY. Their leadership of the programme is characterised by enthusiasm, good communication and attention to detail. These approaches contribute significantly to the quality of the programme and to the very positive experiences of the students.
2.2 Curriculum

The TY curriculum is interesting and varied, and arises from very good quality planning, provision and coordination. The curriculum complies with TY guidelines and is delivered appropriately based on the needs and interests of the students. A core curriculum of Irish, English, Mathematics, a modern language, Religious Education and Physical Education is offered to students. A second layer in the curriculum involves subject sampling of History, Geography, a combination of Physics, Chemistry and Biology, Music, Art and Home Economics. Students also engage in specific modules in Business Studies, through mini-company activities, ICT, the Young Social Innovators (YSI) project and community-care activities. Students also engage in a wider range of experiences available at particular times during the school year. These have a strong connection with the local community and include engagement in Positive Aging Week, Log on and Learn and research on local sporting heroes. The students commented very positively on the range and level of challenge of the activities on offer, and on the high expectations of their teachers for positive engagement and participation.

Work experience and community care engage students outside of the school setting during the programme. Work experience operates in two sessions; one week in November and a two-week session in March. Community care activities are appropriately organised and timetabled on a twice-weekly basis. Students rotate between activities in the community hospital, the local day-care centre, meals-on-wheels and a number of playschools. A range of other activities is also timetabled for all students for one afternoon per week. These include yoga, swimming, aerobics and horse-riding. These engagements were observed to be very valuable and worthwhile experiences for students and a significant aspect of the diverse programme on offer.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

The lessons observed were very well planned and prepared, and were clearly in line with TY guidelines on teaching methodologies, planning and assessment strategies. Planning for these lessons reflected the overall TY plan for the subject concerned. The level of planning and preparation in evidence was successful in engaging students in a teaching and learning experience that was significantly different to that of either junior cycle or senior cycle in that subject.

Teachers had planned to integrate poetry and drama in a freeze-frame exercise in English, to use a visual presentation of a stage musical as a stimulus in French, to engage in mask-making following the African theme in Art, and in a combination of practical tasks and ICT in Mathematics. It was also clear that the teachers’ detailed planning had resulted in both class groups working on very interesting and worthwhile enterprise projects set within the overall framework of the business studies subjects.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The quality of learning and teaching observed in lessons was very good in all cases. It was clear that learning was central to lessons. The learning intention was outlined, and the students were engaged by the methods used by the teachers to achieve this learning. Lessons were characterised by clear routines, good order, skilled teaching and engaging tasks. The students were very responsive and participated actively in the planned learning activities. Teacher inputs were minimised by the active student-centered classroom activities. It was also clear, in the lessons
observed, that it was normal and routine practice for students to participate in individual and group tasks, and to work collaboratively on projects. This allowed the teachers to facilitate and guide, rather than direct, the learning as it emerged. This is very good practice.

Examples of this very good practice included the integration of challenging individual and group tasks involving geometry in Mathematics. The learning intention was clear and a video clip, combined with animation, assisted in the illustration of the mathematical concept. The classroom for English was transformed into a drama space as students responded to a poem through mime, action and vocal response. Individual and group responses were found to be deep and insightful due to the very effective methodology used. While viewing the concluding scenes of a musical version of *Romeo and Juliet* in French, students responded and reflected on the action and the performance using a task sheet in the target language. Art students were active and engaged in making African tribal masks in a visually stimulating and well-organised art room.

In all these lessons students were challenged by the methodologies as they worked in a calm and stimulating learning environment. Relationships and rapport, between the students themselves, and with their teachers, were courteous, warm and mutually respectful. Students were confident and assertive as they responded to the challenges of the well-planned learning activities.

### 3.3 Assessment

Assessment in individual lessons was central to the methodologies and developed from the intended learning outcomes. Students’ learning emerged through questioning in the classroom, through the completion of tasks and from oral reports in group work. It was clear from students’ notebooks that the tasks and projects set in lessons resulted in significant challenge and work for the students.

Formal assessment of students is well organised and reflects normal practice. The assessment focus is on students’ project and task reports and on reflections based on community-care and work-experience involvements. Students submit a portfolio of their involvements and achievements for assessment in the final weeks of the programme. An overall achievement grade is awarded to students, based on this portfolio, and on the reports from their teachers. These reports are primarily concerned with students’ engagement, participation and commitment to the various aspects of the programme. Certificates are presented at an awards evening that also celebrates the involvement and achievement of all participants.

### 4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A very high quality TY programme is offered to students.
- The very good planning process results in very good outcomes for students.
- A very effective and cohesive team coordinates the programme and leads a committed group of teachers in delivering it.
- The TY curriculum is interesting, varied and challenging for students.
- The quality of learning and teaching observed in lessons was very good.
- Relationships and rapport between the students themselves, and with their teachers, were courteous, warm and mutually respectful.
As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendations are made:

- Entry criteria for the programme should be documented and circulated to all students and parents to ensure that the selection process is fully open and transparent.
- The TY co-ordinators should develop a more formal process for evaluating the programme, one that includes students, teachers and parents.