Personal development in secondary education:
The Irish Transition Year

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Abstract: Secondary education in Ireland includes an optional Transition Year (TY) between the junior and senior examination cycles, when students are typically about 15 years old. Transition Year is an innovative programme, unique to Irish education, which is intended as a non-academic year devoted to personal and social development in the absence of examination pressure. Slightly more than half of the eligible student cohort take part in the programme, with the remainder skipping TY and progressing directly to senior education. Qualitative evidence suggests that TY is generally viewed as a positive experience for participating students. However, competing perspectives regard the programme as a luxury that is no longer worth sustaining. This article discusses the development of the programme and its relevance to the Irish education system, reviews previous and related research, and identifies future directions and areas where further attention is warranted.
Keywords: adolescent development; secondary education; nontraditional education; social development; work experience; Ireland; Transition Year.

El desarrollo personal durante la educación secundaria: el año de transición Irlandés
Resumen: La enseñanza secundaria en Irlanda incluye un año de transición opcional (TY) entre los ciclos básico y superior, cuando los estudiantes tienen comúnmente alrededor de 15 años de edad. El año de transición es un programa innovador, único en la educación irlandesa, que pretende ser un año no académico, dedicado al desarrollo personal y social sin la presión de exámenes. Un poco más

de la mitad de la cohorte de los estudiantes elegibles participaron en el programa, mientras que el resto omitió el año de transición (TY) y avanzó directamente a la educación superior. Los datos cualitativos sugieren que el año de transición (TY) es generalmente visto como una experiencia positiva para los alumnos participantes. Sin embargo, las perspectivas opuestas consideran el programa como un lujo que ya no vale la pena sostener. Este artículo discute el desarrollo del programa y su relevancia en el sistema educativo irlandés, revisa las investigaciones previas y afines, e identifica las futuras direcciones y áreas donde se justifica una mayor atención.
Palabras clave: desarrollo adolescente; educación secundaria; educación no tradicional; desarrollo social; experiencia laboral; Irlanda, año de transición (TY).

Desenvolvimento pessoal durante o ensino secundário: o ano de transição da Irlanda
Resumo: O ensino secundário na Irlanda inclui um ano de transição opcional (TY) entre os exames dos ciclos júnior e sénior (duas fases do ensino secundário na Irlanda) , quando os estudantes têm aproximadamente 15 anos de idade. O ano de transição é um modelo inovador, único na educação irlandesa, que pretende ser um ano letivo dedicado ao desenvolvimento pessoal e social, sem a pressão dos exames. Um pouco mais da metade do grupo de alunos elegíveis participou no programa, enquanto o resto não escolheu o ano de transição e foi diretamente para o ciclo seguinte do ensino secundário. Os dados qualitativos sugerem que o ano de transição (TY) é geralmente visto como uma experiência positiva para os alunos participantes. No entanto, as visões opostas ao programa veem-no como um luxo que não vale a pena apoiar. Este artigo discute o desenvolvimento do programa e sua relevância no sistema educativo irlandês, revê pesquisa anterior e análoga, e identifica direções futuras e áreas que requerem uma maior atenção.
Palavras-chave: desenvolvimento do adolescente, ensino secundário, educação não-tradicional, desenvolvimento social; experiência de trabalho; Irlanda, Ano de Transição (TY).

The Transition Year in Irish education

Secondary education in Ireland is divided into the three-year junior cycle (Grades 7–9), following which students complete a State examination known as the Junior Certificate, and the two-year senior cycle (Grades 11–12), which terminates with a second State examination called the Leaving Certificate. Between the two examination cycles students are offered the choice of enrolling in *Transition Year* (Grade 10) for one year, typically at age 15, before entering the senior cycle. The Transition Year programme (TY; more commonly known simply as Transition Year) is a non-academic "gap" year that is unique to the Irish secondary education system, and is aimed at promoting students' social and personal development. Alternatively, students may move directly from the three years of the lower examination cycle to the two years of the upper examination cycle without taking part in Transition Year. Figure 1 displays the pathways open to students.

Irish education is dominated by the Leaving Certificate examination. As well as acting as a certification of academic achievement in their chosen subjects, students' Leaving Certificate results are used for calculating admission requirements for post-secondary education (via a system in which grades are converted into "CAO points",[1] with a certain number of total points

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[1] "CAO" refers to the Central Applications Office, which is the body tasked with processing applications from students to Irish post-secondary institutes. Students' final grades in their chosen Leaving Certificate subjects are used to calculate their total number of CAO points, whereby higher grades equate to more CAO

required for entry to each course). Largely for this reason, the period during which students sit their examinations and the subsequent announcement of results are afforded substantial and sustained attention in the popular media (newspapers, television, radio) each year. The competition between students for preferred post-secondary courses is frequently emphasised in the media, with the Leaving Certificate often regarded in instrumental terms as a means to a further end—namely, progression to post-secondary education. The high stakes that are therefore attached to (relative) success or failure in the Leaving Certificate, as well as the heavy workload and perceived pressure from parents and teachers, contribute to the intense stress often reported by students sitting these exams (Smyth, Banks & Calvert, 2011). The relentless emphasis placed throughout secondary school on preparing for the terminal examinations is also regarded as having had the effect of "narrowing the range of learning experiences to which young people are exposed" at the expense of a potentially deeper understanding of subject areas (Smyth & McCoy, 2011, p. 7).
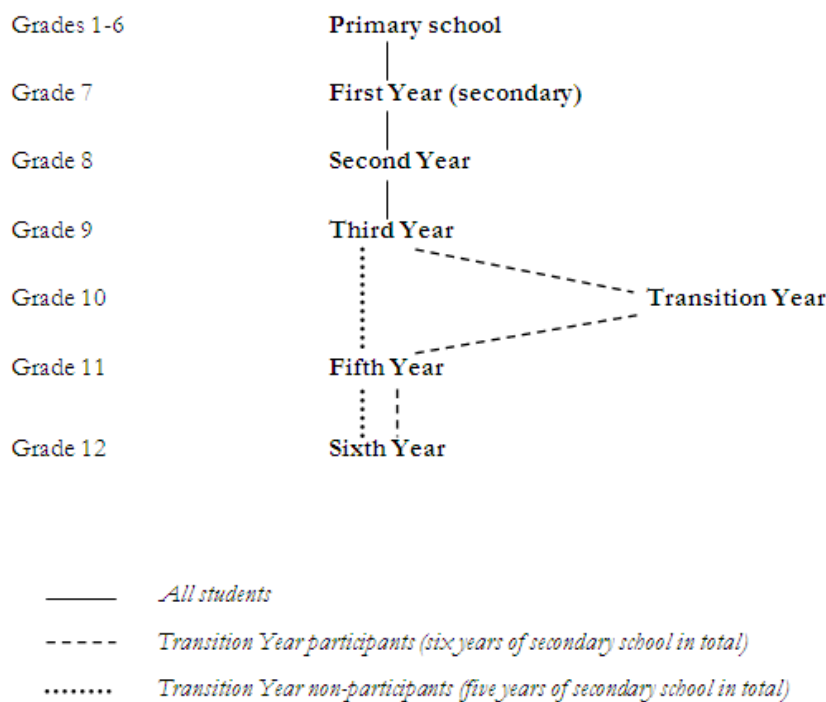
Grades 1-6	Primary school
Grade 7	First Year (secondary)
Grade 8	Second Year
Grade 9	Third Year
Grade 10	Transition Year
Grade 11	Fifth Year
Grade 12	Sixth Year

——— *All students*

- - - - - *Transition Year participants (six years of secondary school in total)*

········ *Transition Year non-participants (five years of secondary school in total)*

Figure 1. Pathways through Irish secondary education

In contrast, Transition Year is intended to be an opportunity for students to learn about the world outside academia—there are no conventional exams, so pressure to study is minimal. The Department of Education and Skill's guidelines for implementation of TY specifically include the condition that "Transition Year should offer pupils space to learn, mature and

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points (from 0 points for a failing grade to 100 points for a mark above 90%, with increments between these extremes), to a maximum of 600 points. Points requirements for admissions to post-secondary courses vary annually based on student demand, such that more points are generally required to be accepted onto courses to which more students apply (since students with more points are accepted first). For example, if all places on a certain course in a certain institute are filled and the lowest number of points gained by an accepted student is 320, another student who also applied with 300 points will have missed out on that course.

develop in the absence of examination pressure" in order to "prepare them for their role as autonomous, participative and responsible members of society" (Dept. of Education, 1993, pp. 1–2). Within these guidelines, schools are allowed considerable freedom to design their own Transition Year programme (ASTI, 1993; Humphreys, 1998) and, in practice, the structure and content of the year is often heavily dependent on individual teachers and leaders who drive the programme within their school (Jeffers, 2010). TY components can include such in-school modules as first aid, electronics, road safety, deportment and personal grooming, setting up business mini-companies, dance, foreign languages, and tasters for Leaving Certificate subjects or post-secondary courses (e.g., philosophy, media studies), as well as overnight or weekend trips, school exchanges, outside speakers brought in to address students, and a spell of unpaid work experience in a real workplace. The extra year is also seen as providing an opportunity, in the absence of high-stakes examinations, to explore familiar subjects in novel ways and to introduce students to new areas of study. See, for example, recent comments from the Minister for Education, Ruairí Quinn, relating to crossover between mathematics and consumer studies in Transition Year (*Irish Times*, 24 February 2012) and to the introduction of a TY module on Chinese language and culture (*Irish Times*, 4 May 2012).

Despite its standalone nature as a largely exam-free year between two high-stakes examination cycles, the Transition Year programme has historically been relatively under-researched and under-evaluated (ASTI, 1993; NCCA, 2002). However, progress has been made in documenting and examining Transition Year in recent years (Clerkin, 2012; Jeffers, 2007, 2010, 2011; Smyth, Byrne & Hannan, 2004). Although transition programmes and youth development programmes of various design are in operation in other jurisdictions, the Irish Transition Year is unusual in that a full school year is set aside for the programme as opposed to, for example, two classes a month (e.g., Pitre, 2011, in the United States) or delivery outside school (e.g., FYD, 2012, in New Zealand). In spite of this, and perhaps due to the scarcity of available empirical information, Transition Year has received little international attention. This article describes the existing literature on this innovative programme, and highlights areas requiring additional focused research.

Development of Transition Year

Transition Year is intended to act as a bridge from the junior cycle to the more self-directed learning that is expected of successful Leaving Certificate and post-secondary students.[2] The stimulation of the novel experiences on offer is explicitly aimed at expanding students' horizons, and in so doing promoting personal growth and maturity. It is worth considering the thinking of Richard Burke, the Minister for Education responsible for introducing Transition Year in 1974:

> Because of the growing pressures on students for high grades and competitive success, educational systems are becoming, increasingly, academic treadmills. Increasingly, too, because of these pressures the school is losing contact with life outside and the student has little or no opportunity "to stand and stare", to discover the kind of person he is, the kind of society he will be living in and, in

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[2] A new junior cycle assessment will replace the existing Junior Certificate, beginning in the 2014/15 school year. Further details are available from www.ncca.ie.

due course, contributing to, its shortcomings and its good points. The suggestion
was made that perhaps somewhere in the middle of the course we might stop the
treadmill and release the students from the educational pressures for one year so
that they could devote time to personal development and community service.
(Burke, 1974; cited in Jeffers, 2007, p. 1)

By "stopping the treadmill" in this manner, Burke saw the Transition Year as a way of
creating a more holistic schooling experience for Irish adolescents. Although this idea has
remained as a key concept underpinning the programme, tensions between the holistic spirit of
Transition Year and the looming pressures of the examination-driven Leaving Certificate has led
to some schools, with one eye on the Leaving Certificate, providing more traditional
(academically-oriented) programmes than others (Dept. of Education, 1996; Jeffers, 2007).

Transition Year—as a non-academic developmental year embedded in mainstream
secondary education—appears to have no direct equivalent in other national school systems (Le
Métais, 2003a; Smyth et al., 2004). The International Baccalaureate does accord importance to
education for global citizenship alongside its academic curriculum, but it is aimed primarily at
"gifted", "advanced", and highly-motivated students (cf. Foust, Hertberg-Davis & Callahan,
2009; Taylor & Porath, 2006) rather than the general school-going population, as is the case with
Transition Year. Some other national systems incorporate an orientation year during which
students choose an academic or vocational track for their future education (e.g., the French
seconde), but these lack the emphasis that the Transition Year guidelines place on providing
students with space to develop in the absence of examinations and a centrally-prescribed
curriculum. Therefore, the provision of a full year of mainstream schooling dedicated largely to
fostering students' personal development is, to my knowledge, a uniquely Irish experiment. The
unusual nature of the Transition Year is illustrated by the ambiguity over its classification in the
International Standard Classification of Education hierarchy, with TY variously falling into the
2A or 3C categories (Smyth, 2008).

Current debate over the value of the Transition Year programme is rooted in tensions
between two competing perspectives. On one hand is a point of view that prioritises students'
personal development and well-being in education (e.g., O'Brien, 2008) alongside more traditional
academic development, and may thus be termed a "holistic" perspective. On the other hand is a
more "instrumentalist" view inspired by human capital theory (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008) that
regards education primarily as an investment in future economic returns.

A former government minister provides an example of the latter viewpoint in a recent
opinion piece (*Irish Times*, 14 February 2012) in which the abolition of Transition Year is advocated,
as a cost-saving measure, as one of a number of suggestions that he believes should be made to the
education system in order to "integrate the needs of the economy into Irish education". Other
recent commentaries (e.g., *Irish Times*, 20 December 2011; *Irish Times*, 19 March 2012) have described
the programme as "pointless" because of a perceived lack of practical work skills arising from
participation, and as a luxury that can no longer be justified during a time of economic difficulty.
This instrumentalist perspective regards the qualification function of education—i.e., providing
students with the knowledge or skills to "do something" in particular—and the attainment of high
grades in examinations as paramount (Biesta, 2009; Mansell, 2010), and to some extent reflects the
"traditional divide between rational and emotional aspects of life" (O'Brien, 2008, p. 179) in
Western education.

The contrasting holistic perspective represents the view that education is more than
preparation for the workforce. In addition to matters of qualification, this view gives considerable

regard to the subjectification function of education (Biesta, 2009)—that is, the development of the individual (e.g., by fostering autonomy among students). With particular regard to Irish education policy, it is exemplified by two documents. The first, a Government White Paper on education (Dept. of Education, 1995), describes Transition Year as educating students for "the demands and pleasures of life, work, sport and leisure" (p. 53). The inclusion of "life", sport and leisure as relevant topics for consideration alongside work are noteworthy here. So, too, is the recognition that a formal education might be expected to prepare students for the pleasures of life after school, as well as the challenges. This holistic view is made explicit elsewhere in the document: "the fundamental aim of education [is] to serve individual, social and economic well-being and to enhance quality of life" (p. 7). Preparing students for future economic productivity is seen here as one (important) aim of education, but not an over-riding one. More recently, a paper published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2011) considers calls from business leaders, in light of the global and Irish economic downturns, for a greater focus in school on preparing students for the workforce. The NCCA responds to these demands in emphatic fashion: "innovation is not just about the economy and schools are not only to serve the economy but to enable children become the people they have the potential to be" (p. 3). Coming from the organisation with responsibility for advising the Minister on issues of curriculum and assessment, this statement suggests a reluctance at the highest levels to re-frame education solely as training for the workplace.

Transition Year was initially introduced as a pilot scheme in three schools in September 1974, with 16 schools participating by the 1977/78 academic year. Teething problems at this stage centered around uncertainty over how best to balance the vocational, social, and academic aspects of the curriculum, and over the appropriate level of emphasis to place on core examination subjects (English, Irish, and mathematics) throughout the Transition Year (Egan & O'Reilly, 1979). These criticisms were tempered with early recognition of the benefits of the pilot programme, with teachers and students alike perceiving improved student-teacher relations, positive attitudes towards school, broader conceptions of the world outside school, better knowledge of future career possibilities, and increased self-awareness and social confidence among participating students.

Although vocationally-oriented alternatives to the established Leaving Certificate examination are available (such as the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied), Irish secondary education as experienced by the majority of students is generally more oriented towards academic learning—with an eye on further education, for example, rather than the practical applications of schoolwork to a working environment (McCoy & Smyth, 2005; Tovey & Share, 2003). This means that, for many students, there is little formal interaction between their school life and the working world. It is therefore noteworthy that the Department of Education's guidelines for implementing Transition Year stress that TY should include an active orientation towards the world of work (Dept. of Education, 1993, 1996). The work experience component has indeed become a central feature of the programme. This usually involves students taking at least one short unpaid placement in a real working environment (with two different workplace settings over the course of the school year being a common arrangement), performing tasks as directed under the supervision of their employer.

Early programme developers took the view that a practical taste of working life such as this was necessary to allow students to contextualise and put into practice what they were learning in class (Harris, 1982). Wyn (2009) comments that "students preparing for life and work could do no better than to have the opportunity of working, within the structure of school, as a precursor to other world-based structures, such as they will later experience" (p. 52). Putting this into practice, the work experience component of Transition Year is intended to provide students with an understanding of the world of work, opportunities to take on responsibility, experience of working

with adults, generalisable and self-management skills (e.g., time management), and social skills and awareness (ASTI, 1993, 1994; Dept. of Education, 1993). Kellaghan and Lewis (1991) note that the opportunity to be treated as a responsible adult is valued by students, with the social interactions of the workplace often regarded as more important than learning any particular job-specific skills. Students are encouraged to explore and test their assumptions about the job market as they gain a taste of the day-to-day tasks of a particular occupation, and for many students it is their first taste of the workplace. Nonetheless, traditional gender- and social class-based expectations are evident in the variety of workplaces chosen by students (Jeffers, 2012) with, for example, boys being more inclined to seek experience in the automotive industry and girls more likely to work in hair and beauty.

The insights thus gained from work experience can lead a student to realise that a seemingly attractive job may not match their expectations, or that they are interested in working in an area they had not previously considered (McCoy, Smyth, Darmody & Dunne, 2006). As well as clarifying thoughts on (or eliminating) potential future careers, the experience is reported to have a positive effect on students' attitudes to work and school, and to help students achieve a more informed subject choice for the Leaving Certificate and for post-secondary education (Harris, 1982; Smyth et al., 2004, 2011; Watts, Jamieson & Miller, 1989). These benefits appear to be more pronounced in schools where TY is offered on an optional basis; more students in schools where Transition Year is compulsory express negative views of the programme (Smyth & Calvert, 2011).

In terms of availability, the Transition Year programme is not currently offered to all eligible students—a significant minority of schools do not offer the programme despite a large growth in provision since the mid-1990s. The latest figures show that it is offered in more than 80% of Ireland's secondary schools, with 574 schools enrolling TY students in 2010/11 (Clerkin, 2012). Some variation in provision by school type (voluntary secondary, community/comprehensive, or vocational[3]), schools' disadvantaged status, geographic location, and school size is evident, with smaller schools and those with more socioeconomically disadvantaged student intakes being less likely to offer the extra year (Clerkin, 2012; Jeffers, 2002). At the student level, more than 30 000 students enrolled in TY in 2010/11, making up about 55% of the cohort who completed the Junior Certificate the previous year—that is, more than half of the students who were eligible to take part (Clerkin, 2012). In approximately one-quarter of the schools that do offer a Transition Year, participation in the programme is compulsory. In the remainder, students are given the option of participating in TY or of moving directly to Fifth Year (Smyth et al., 2004).

Previous research

As noted above, the Transition Year programme was the subject of relatively little focused research for a long time after its inception in the 1970s (NCCA, 2002). In the last decade, however, two major sources of information on the programme have been made available. The first report draws on a postal survey of school principals and detailed case studies of twelve schools to describe the provision and content of the programme and the views of

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[3] *Voluntary secondary* schools are privately owned, often by religious organisations. More than half of Ireland's post-primary schools fall into this category. *Community* and *comprehensive* schools are owned by the State. *Vocational* schools are owned by local authorities and were initially established with an orientation towards technical education, although a wide range of academic and practical subjects are now offered. The same curriculum and same examinations are followed in each school type. For more information, see Coolahan (2003) or www.citizensinformation.ie/types_of_post_primary_school.html.

stakeholders (Smyth et al., 2004). It also provides quantitative information on some of the characteristics of the students who take part in the programme, such as gender, socioeconomic background, and academic performance. It should be noted that the latter data are drawn from an earlier (1994) student database, and therefore describe the characteristics of students from around the time that the Transition Year programme underwent a rapid expansion between the 1993/94 and 1994/95 school years (see Clerkin, 2012, for further detail on the growth of the programme at this time).

The second major source of information comes from the work of Jeffers (2007, 2010, 2011), who reports observations from six case study schools with "distinctive good practice in their TY programmes" (2007, p. 31). The findings—of students', teachers', and parents' attitudes to the programme and schools' organisation and implementation of the programme—are based on detailed interviews with school principals and Transition Year co-ordinators, focus groups with students and parents, and questionnaire data returned from more than 100 teachers across the six selected schools.

Although the works of Smyth et al. and Jeffers represent the most wide-ranging accounts of Transition Year to date, information on specific aspects of the programme can be drawn from other sources. These include a comparison of the academic performance of those students who do and do not take part in Transition Year (Millar & Kelly, 1999)—based on a longitudinal comparison of all students who took the Junior Certificate in 1994 and subsequently sat the Leaving Certificate in 1996, in the case of TY non-participants, or 1997, for TY participants— and an account of changes in the provision of Transition Year by schools and student uptake of the programme over the last 20 years (Clerkin, 2012).

The existing literature suggests that students who choose to partake in the extra year are, on average, younger than those who do not, have higher educational aspirations, and tend to come from more socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds (Smyth et al., 2004). Post-Transition Year, Millar and Kelly's (1999; Smyth et al., 2004) longitudinal study of Junior and Leaving Certificate performance found that participation in the programme was associated with superior Leaving Certificate performance, and noted that participation was particularly associated with a relatively better performance among students in schools with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. With more CAO points, on average, students who take Transition Year tend to have an advantage over their peers in applying to high-demand options at post-secondary level. However, Millar and Kelly (1999) lacked the data to identify specific reasons for the identified achievement gap. A notable limitation of the study was the absence of more detailed information on the students involved (for example, student-level indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage), which would allow for a more nuanced interpretation of the association between examination performance and Transition Year participation.

Among the reasons often cited for this Leaving Certificate advantage is TY participants' greater maturity, with school staff and students interviewed by Smyth et al. (2004) and surveyed by Jeffers (2007) suggesting that students had gained noticeably from the extra year. (Previous research has sometimes tended to refer to "maturity", following interviews with stakeholders, with limited reference to specific facets of that maturity.) However, the role that this personal development may play in subsequent Leaving Certificate achievement remains unclear (Jeffers, 2010; Millar & Kelly, 1999). The part-time work experience that forms a key component of the year may be important to perceptions of maturity by helping students to acquire an understanding of the world of work and to learn work- and occupation-related skills with relevance beyond school. For example, Kellaghan and Lewis (1991) point to the development of interpersonal skills, including self-confidence and an improved ability to relate to teachers and

other adults, as a result of work experience such as that undertaken by students as part of their TY. This dynamic, once established, carries through to classes in the two years of the Leaving Certificate proper, with teachers reporting generally better relationships with former Transition Year participants than with those students who came to senior classes directly from the junior cycle (Jeffers, 2007; Transition Year Curriculum Support Service, 2000).

It has been recognised that the year between the two examination cycles provides a unique opportunity for students to develop more personal and co-operative relationships with teachers and peers (Jeffers, 2007). In turn, supportive peer and student-teacher relationships in school can help to facilitate student engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004), more positive peer experiences (Dworkin, Larson & Hansen, 2003), school-related and social self-efficacy (Jerusalem & Hessling, 2009), an adaptive transition from school to work (Phillips, Blustein, Jobin-Davis & Finkelberg White, 2002), and predict positive changes in psychological well-being, as measured by increased self-esteem and decreased depressive symptoms (Reddy, Rhodes & Mulhall, 2003). Generally speaking, practices that promote the development of supportive, mutually respectful teacher-student relationships appear to make a substantive contribution to students' well-being (O'Brien, 2008).

The relatively stress-free nature of the Transition Year programme, with its focus on innovative teaching methods and on project and group work (Hayes & Childs, 2012; Smyth & Calvert, 2011), stands in contrast to the structured classroom experience of other grades in which project work and student-oriented teaching feature only rarely (Gilleece, Shiel, Perkins & Proctor, 2009). Viewed in conjunction with the recent findings of the International Civic and Citizenship Study that Irish students in lower secondary education report poorer student-teacher relations and less involvement in making decisions about their school and classroom when compared with the international averages for 38 participating countries (Cosgrove, Gilleece & Shiel, 2011), the tendency for Transition Year students to report experiencing greater involvement and more positive interactions with their teachers is welcome.

A common concern expressed by Junior Certificate students, and their parents, is the fear that they might fall out of the habit of studying if they opt to take part in TY and would consequently have catching up to do in preparation for the Leaving Certificate (Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004). Wroe, writing in the *Teacher's Handbook* of the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI, 1994), counters these fears by pointing out that the ethos of TY is based around students learning to learn for themselves, such that participating students should emerge from their completed Transition Year "more confident and better able to cope with the demands of the Leaving Certificate programme" (p. 18). Jeffers (2004) makes the same point, highlighting confidence, improved study skills, and an increased capacity for self-directed learning as expected outcomes of Transition Year participation. The possession of competent study skills such as those expected of TY students—e.g., time management, use of appropriate information resources, and productive communication with teachers—has been shown to predict academic performance and retention rates among first-year college students (Robbins et al., 2004). Le Métais (2003b; see also OECD, 2005) also identifies these metacognitive, interpersonal, and problem-solving competencies as being key skills for entry to adult and working life. On the other hand, the lack of appropriate organisational and time management skills can be major source of assessment-related anxiety and stress for students (Putwain, 2008, in a UK context).

The similarities between Transition Year, as a break from academic pressure halfway through secondary education, and more traditional gap years (following the completion of secondary education) are worth considering in this regard. As an integrated component of formal mainstream secondary education, TY may not, strictly speaking, qualify as a gap year.

However, the similarities in students' motivation for taking the year, the range of experiences on offer, and the expected outcomes of participation suggest that some comparisons may usefully be made. A gap year is defined as a period of time taken out of education or work where "the key criteria is the 'time out' from the formal aspect of a longer term career trajectory" (Jones, 2004, p. 22). Jones' review of the literature highlights the desire to take a break from education/work, to gain a broader perspective on life, and to gain personal life skills as being among the most common motivating factors prompting young people to seek gap years. These ambitions resonate with the rationale for the Transition Year programme—the major difference being that TY aims to provide students with an opportunity to address such concerns before, rather than after, leaving the secondary education system.

Reflecting some parents' concerns that Transition Year participation might result in their child losing the habit of studying, Jones (2004) notes similar warnings with regard to gap years between secondary school and post-secondary education among career advice publications. Martin (2010) directly addresses this point, finding that taking a gap year before entering university is associated with greater adaptive study behaviour (planning, task management, and persistence) amongst undergraduates. Martin suggests that taking the gap year may enable students to address deficits in these areas, yielding a more adaptive profile of academic motivation and behaviours in university. This is consistent with student self-reports and teacher views suggesting that TY participants are generally better-prepared, after their "year out", for the rigours of the two-year Leaving Certificate cycle (Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004). It may be that participation in Transition Year provides an opportunity to learn self-management skills that can get overlooked during the two years leading up to the Leaving Certificate, when passing the examinations is the overwhelming focus for most students.

Evaluating the Transition Year programme

A lack of suitable measurements of social and emotional outcomes has been identified as a key weakness in previous evaluations of the Transition Year programme (Smyth et al., 2004). The majority of previous research on the psychosocial outcomes associated with participation has been qualitative in nature, with quantitative data on student outcomes largely limited to academic performance. This body of evidence has provided valuable insights and consistently suggests that the programme is regarded positively by the majority of the students, parents, and teachers who are involved, but provides an incomplete picture.

Parallels in this regard can be drawn with the increasing emphasis on providing emotional and social support to adolescents that has led, in recent decades, to the growth of programmes in the United States designed to facilitate positive youth development (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak & Hawkins, 2004; Damon, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005). Several complementary definitions have been provided, with youth development programmes described as those seeking "to build [adolescents'] abilities and competencies…by increasing participants' exposure to supportive and empowering environments where activities create multiple opportunities for a range of skill-building and horizon-expanding experiences" (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a), or those aiming to promote positive attributes such as self-efficacy, self-determination, bonding, resilience, and social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural competencies, recognise participants' positive behaviour, and/or provide opportunities for prosocial involvement (Catalano et al., 2004). Durlak et al. (2007) state simply that positive youth development "seeks to promote the variety of developmental competencies that young people need to become productive, contributing members of society".

A common defining feature of these programmes is their focus on actively developing positive attributes, rather than on seeking reductions in negative outcomes (e.g., depression, substance abuse, behavioural problems). A further feature is that they are often aimed at the general youth population, as opposed to a subgroup identified as experiencing particular difficulties.

The Transition Year programme is similarly focused on promoting positive competencies among young people, with a view to preparing them for life and for active participation in society (and, indeed, the pilot phase was categorised as a personal development programme in a contemporary review of Irish curricular developments (Crooks & McKernan, 1984)). The value of offering the programme to all students and of devoting a full school year to this personal development—an unusual approach—is supported to some extent by the observation of Smyth et al. (2011) that "many students attributed the greatest change in their personal development [during their time in school] to their time in Transition Year" (p. 182). More detailed data on this front, however, are hard to come by.

Of particular relevance in this regard is the extent to which the detailed measurement of appropriate participant outcomes is emphasised as being necessary for the evaluation and understanding of youth development (Catalano et al., 2004; Durlak et al., 2007; Kurtines et al., 2008; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003b). Moore, Lippman, and Brown (2004) also underline the need to include positive indicators of development when evaluating participant outcomes, rather than merely looking for the absence of negative indicators. Examples of positive indicators of development include life satisfaction (Hawkins, Letcher, Sanson, Smart & Toumbourou, 2009; Park, 2004), psychosocial competencies (Hawkins et al., 2009), and self-efficacy beliefs (Qiao & McNaught, 2007; Vecchio, Gerbino, Pastorelli, Del Bove & Caprara, 2007). These recommendations further highlight the lack of an equivalent detailed assessment of the personal and social outcomes associated with Transition Year participation.

Looking ahead

The future development of the Transition Year programme will be determined by the manner in which a number of challenges are resolved. At the school level, Jeffers (2011) points to the tensions faced by the schools choosing to offer Transition Year, which is observed to be "in continual danger of being colonised by [the] values and practices" associated with the examination-driven Leaving Certificate and the pressure on students to obtain high CAO points. The association between TY participation and Leaving Certificate achievement has proven to be a double-edged sword in this respect, with schools often using such findings as a selling point to reluctant parents whose children are considering taking part in the programme (Jeffers, 2011).

Although questions of academic performance are, on a formal level (Dept. of Education, 1993), somewhat tangential to the main rationale for the programme—that is, supporting students' personal development—it is clear that research findings of superior Leaving Certificate performance among participants do go some way to allaying concerns that participation in the year out from examination-based education might have a negative impact on students' achievement. However, this awareness can contribute to a rather conservative approach to designing the content of the programme, with the distinction between the Transition Year and the two years of the Leaving Certificate proper becoming somewhat blurred in some schools (Jeffers, 2010). This pragmatic approach by school staff can be seen as reflecting the systemic dominance of the instrumentalist pressures associated with high-stakes testing in Ireland—although it is recognised that such pressure on educators is not unique to the Irish context (see, for example, Amrein-Beardsley, Berliner and Rideau (2010) for further discussion of such pressures). The conservative approach to Transition

Year reported in such cases serves to underline the veracity of Madaus' (1988) principles regarding the consequences of measurement-driven instruction in high-stakes testing environments, the last of which seems most appropriate here: "when test results are the sole or even partial arbiter of future educational or life choices, society tends to treat test results as the major goal of schooling rather than as a useful but fallible indicator of achievement" (p. 43).

More broadly, the continued provision of Transition Year in schools is threatened by the ongoing economic difficulties in Ireland, with the costs of providing the extra year a potential target for tightening school and Government budgets (*Irish Independent*, 26 September 2011; *Irish Times*, 19 March 2012). School principals already report that financial concerns are leading to changes in provision of the programme, including reductions in the breadth of modules offered, increased class sizes, reductions in the number of students allowed to take part, and even dropping the extra year entirely (ASTI, 2012). Public and political debate on the value of continuing to invest in the programme is fuelled to some degree by the perceived difficulty of quantifying psychosocial outcomes such as those targeted by the programme in comparison with academic and economic outcomes, with a relative dearth of psychosocial indicators evident in previous research. Informed debate on ways in which the implementation and content of the programme could be improved— and just as importantly, recognition of ways in which the programme fulfils its goals—is dependent on the availability of appropriate information.

Zimmer-Gembeck and Mortimer's (2006) review of adolescent work and vocational development lays out a key question for policy-makers worldwide: how can adolescents begin to be incorporated into the adult world without distracting them from school and personal development? As the Transition Year programme is intended to fulfil this specific purpose, research focused directly on the personal and social outcomes associated with participation in Transition Year, and with particular practices within the programme in different schools, may provide some answers to this question. The information arising would be directly relevant to informing future education policy in Ireland. It would also provide a marker for programme developers abroad as to the efficacy of the Transition Year model of supporting psychosocial development in adolescence in secondary schools, which is unique to the Irish context. A longitudinal study aimed at assessing some of these outcomes, managed by the Educational Research Centre, is currently in progress. In addition to providing a source of information on students' psychosocial development, the findings of this research may be useful in exploring in greater detail the association between academic performance in the Leaving Certificate examination and Transition Year participation, thereby addressing some of the instrumentalism-derived questions about the programme.

Another area for future research to examine more closely is the role of the work experience placements that represent a key part of the programme. These placements are widely regarded as being a positive experience for students, but the location of these placements, the manner in which they are secured, and the extent to which students are involved in meaningful work while on placement varies widely between schools, and between students within schools (Jeffers, 2012). The interaction between school staff, students and employers throughout this process merits further attention, as does the role of social capital (e.g., parents' personal and business networks) in securing placements.

Issues of social capital, in particular, may lead to certain experiences and working environments being made more accessible to students from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds than to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, which could be of some concern given the observed tendency for students taking Transition Year to come from more advantaged backgrounds in the first place. Together with the relatively lower rates of provision and uptake of the programme seen among socioeconomically disadvantaged student populations (Clerkin, 2012),

and more general variations between schools in terms of programme organisation and content (Jeffers, 2010), it is worth considering whether the social, personal and academic benefits that are often reported to be associated with participation are currently being made equally available— whether in terms of programme provision, organisation, or perception as an attractive and viable option—to all eligible students.

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