



What do we know about Transition Year? Looking to the future



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This summary gives a brief overview of what is known from previous research on Transition Year (TY), which draws strongly on the views of students and teachers. It includes the most commonly-reported benefits and problems that are associated with TY, as well as several important issues about which we still have relatively limited information.

The summary ends with some suggestions for aspects of TY provision that are worth reflecting on at a time when the Irish senior cycle, including TY, is under review. The senior cycle consultation provides an opportunity to critically examine and reappraise our assumptions about TY and the various ways in which it has been implemented in different schools and different contexts. In doing so, we can consider areas where students' educational experience could be enhanced in a future senior cycle, and identify existing practices or ideas that should be maintained for future cohorts.



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Key points about Transition Year

1. Most students who do TY report enjoying the year and describe it as a beneficial experience. This is supported by many teachers and parents. (See “Benefits”, below.)
2. A substantial minority of students – perhaps one-quarter – report disappointing or underwhelming TY experiences. (See “Problems”, below.)
3. School-level provision of TY has increased consistently over time, from 60% of schools in 1994/95 to 89% in 2014/15.
4. Student-level uptake of TY (where available) has also increased consistently, from 31% of the eligible cohort in 1994/95 to 65% in 2014/15. Since 2008/09, a majority of students have taken part in TY each year.
5. In general, students report more negative views of TY when participation is compulsory rather than optional.
6. In 2013, South Korea introduced a programme that is partially modelled on Transition Year to Korean middle schools, aimed at 13-year-old students. Korean educators, policy-makers, and researchers are drawing on Ireland’s experience with TY to inform the ongoing development of this initiative. Transition programmes at the beginning of senior cycle are also receiving renewed interest in Finland and England.



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Benefits

Among the reported benefits of TY participation are:

- making new friends and mixing with other groups;
- forming better relationships with teachers;
- having a break from high-stakes examination stress before entering senior cycle;
- more varied teaching and assessment methods, such as portfolios and project work;
- going on trips in Ireland or abroad;
- getting to sample a range of subjects;
- doing work experience and having opportunities to engage in the ‘adult world’;
- thinking about and learning about possible future careers or areas of study;
- making stronger subject choices for senior cycle (after subject sampling and insights achieved from work experience);
- taking part in musicals, mini-companies, and other medium- or long-term projects;
- developing self-regulatory and organisational skills (e.g., time management);
- feeling more mature and independent;
- finding new interests and developing new skills (personal, social, practical, and artistic);
- developing stronger social skills and confidence.

These outcomes are reported by a majority of students (and supported by teachers and parents) each year – sometimes accompanied by strong endorsements of “life-changing experiences”!

Problems

Students report negative views of TY when it is experienced as a 'doss year'.

- This tends to be the case when students feel that they have little to do in their TY classes, that their teachers don't take TY seriously (e.g., "our teachers are out talking in the corridor during class"), or that their TY classes are too similar in format or content to more conventional classes at more junior or senior grade levels.
- In such cases, students become bored or disengaged.
- This can be contrasted with the idea of TY as 'a break' between junior and senior cycle, which many students do appreciate. In these cases, students report active engagement in challenging, relevant activities and novel experiences both in and out of the classroom.

Concerns over losing study skills over the course of the year, and the substantial additional expense associated with TY, are also common.

- These reservations can contribute to Third Year students who are interested in some of the other experiences of TY deciding not to enrol in the first place...
- ... or to TY students experiencing regret at the perceived loss of academic momentum in cases where they also feel that they gained relatively little from the extra year. (However, there is little evidence that Fifth Year or Sixth Year students who took part in TY experience any subsequent disadvantage.)

Recent figures indicate that TY is not available at all to students in about one-in-ten schools around Ireland (11% of schools in 2014/15).

- This tends to be more common in small schools, schools with more socioeconomically-disadvantaged student intakes, and ETB schools.
- The decision not to offer TY can be related to lack of student interest in TY within the school, resourcing constraints, or small cohort sizes.
- Although a lack of widespread student interest can contribute to a school's decision not to offer TY, this also means that any students within the school who might have an interest in (aspects of) the extra year are not able to access it.



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Unknowns

There is reliable evidence that students who do TY achieve a substantially higher performance in the Leaving Certificate than their peers who skip TY (even after their prior Junior Certificate performance and other background factors are taken into account). However, the reasons for this difference remain unclear. Possible contributors include:

- self-regulatory or organisational skills learned by TY participants;
- motivational differences related to students' attitudes, aspirations, or vocational intentions (for example, if exposure to a variety of subjects, work environments, and other experiences helps students to acquire more focused goals for the senior cycle or post-school life);
- differences in cognitive, behavioural, or emotional engagement at school (for example, students who perceive stronger relationships with teachers are more likely to ask for help, which could support subject content knowledge and broader learning strategies);
- students making better subject choices, informed by TY sampling and work experience placements;
- the differing demographic and educational profiles of students who tend to take part in TY and those who do not;
- or other factors.

Although students, parents, and teachers have consistently reported strong socioemotional development arising from TY participation in qualitative terms (e.g., in interviews or written comments) over several decades, there has been very little research to date on the extent of quantitative (measured) differences between TY participants and non-participants.

- A recent ERC survey found substantial socioemotional differences between TY participants and non-participants at the end of Third Year (i.e., before TY), but fewer observable quantitative differences in patterns of development over time related to TY as students progressed through the year.
- There is much scope for further research in this area. Such work could also inform future examination of differences in students' academic (Leaving Certificate) achievement.



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Although good case studies of the implementation of TY in varying school contexts are available, there is very little system-wide information on structural or organisational differences in the TY programmes offered by different schools.

- For example, the most recent reliable estimate of the proportion of schools where TY is compulsory (about one-quarter) is based on data gathered by the ESRI in 2001 – almost two decades ago.

Issues for reflection

There is evidence that, even where TY is offered by a school, it may not in practice be fully accessible to all students who are interested in (some or all of) the year.

- All else being equal: older students, students from other-language backgrounds, students whose parents report lower educational attainment, students who already know what type of job they want in future, students who do not aspire to a third-level degree, students who report more autonomous motivation in junior cycle, and students who are less engaged by their schoolwork up to junior cycle are less likely to choose to enrol in TY. In addition, students who are seen as being at greater risk of early school leaving, or as being more disruptive, are sometimes discouraged from taking part in TY by their teachers.
- Some students who choose not to take part in TY might nonetheless be interested in particular aspects of the year, or in taking part if TY was run differently in their school.
 - For example, an ERC survey found that, among Third Year students who subsequently skipped TY, about half reported thinking that the TY programme in their school was a good one (even though they chose not to take part in the end) and about one-quarter held the view that TY was not a good experience in general, but about one-quarter thought that TY could be good for students in other schools, but not the TY programme in their own school.
- *Do these students miss out on what could otherwise be a positive experience?*

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- *How common is it for students to move from one school to another to take part in TY?*
 - Is this a possibility that should be encouraged if TY is not available locally?
 - What if this would entail travel over long distances or boarding away from home?
- *Are there possibilities for greater inter-school collaboration with a view to offering students a broader range of options?*
 - For example, could a student participate in a taster subject or other module that is offered by another school (but not their own), either off-site or online?
- *Are there other ways to make TY more broadly accessible?*
 - Could it be made a more appealing option?
 - Or is it sufficiently accessible already?

One way in which some schools deal with this issue is by making TY compulsory for all students.

- However, student reports of TY are generally more negative in schools where participation is compulsory. It should be recognised that students can have valid reasons for wanting to skip the year – for example, if they already know what they wish to do after school and do not want to ‘waste’ an additional year that does not lead to a formal qualification, or if they are unwilling to take on the associated additional expense, which can be substantial. Forcing disengaged or unenthusiastic students into the year could also negatively affect other students’ (and teachers’) engagement in and experience of TY.
- *For these reasons, compulsory provision is a decision that should be considered carefully.* Where it is seen as the best option (e.g., in small schools), school leaders and teachers should be cognisant of the need to afford students (including – or, perhaps, especially – reluctant participants) a certain level of autonomy and input into decision-making to foster engagement in the year’s activities.



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With a review of senior cycle education currently underway in Ireland, and in light of the recent introduction of a similar programme with some structural differences (e.g., lasting one semester rather than one year, and aimed primarily at 13- or 14-year-olds rather than 15-year-old students) in South Korea, some broader questions arise:

- *Is TY's positioning – as a 'gap year' following the completion of lower secondary education, when most students are about 15 years old – still optimal?*
 - Could it be made available to younger or older students? Should it be?
 - Would younger students be sufficiently mature to achieve insights from participation in adult workplaces?
 - Would older students have already committed to their educational or vocational pathways (thereby reducing the potential benefits of a 'year out' in school)?
 - Would students at other grade levels benefit from greater exposure to the community-focused or creative aspects of TY participation?
 - Is the introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme, which means that children are now starting primary school at an older age than would often previously have been the case, likely to have a knock-on effect on TY participation in the coming years? That is, if more students have reached or are approaching 16 in Third Year, will they want to spend an extra year in school?
- *Is the distinct character of TY as a standalone (or 'ring-fenced') year important?*
 - If it were split up into a series of modules spread over two or three years, would it lose something? Would students lose the chance to take advantage of a defined break following the end of junior cycle? However, at the same time...
 - ... with the implementation of the revised junior cycle, including short courses and more collaborative learning, would students still feel the need for a break? Students have often highlighted project work and collaborative approaches as being among the key features of TY, in contrast to their prior experience of school – this contrast may become less clear over the coming years. Could TY

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lose some of its appeal (having previously being seen as a clear change from more 'traditional' classes preparing for Junior Cert. and Leaving Cert. exams)? If so, does the role of TY need to be re-imagined?

- Is one full year necessary to achieve a positive TY experience? It may be that a full year outside normal school structures would be too long for younger students at the beginning of their secondary schooling. However, perhaps mid-adolescents (on the cusp of adulthood) are better-equipped to make use of an extended period of freedom from high-stakes academic pressures and can engage more fully in the social, community, developmental, vocational, and artistic activities of TY?
- *Would there be value in considering a stronger emphasis on 'core' examination-focused learning in TY, in response to student (and parental) concerns over study habits or loss of learning?*
 - But then, what about the other activities of TY which contribute to other important aspects of personal and social development?
 - Is sufficient attention already devoted to examination preparation and 'academic' learning at other grade levels?
 - Should more attention be given to vocational and professional learning in TY, or at other grade levels? Many students report that their work placements are a valuable experience. Could students' vocational learning be enhanced further? For example, students are likely to find it easier to gain access to some work placements than others (e.g., through family or other connections, or previous social or extracurricular links) – how are inequalities in exposure or access to placements and vocational opportunities best addressed?



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Further information and resources

- Reviews of the research literature on TY (Clerkin, 2012: <https://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/1061/1022>) and discussion of psychological theories of adolescent development relating to TY (Clerkin, 2018a: <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3112> and Clerkin, 2018b: <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3113>) are freely available to download.
- A detailed analysis of year-on-year growth in the provision and uptake of TY from 1992-2011, with differences by school type and socioeconomic composition, is available from Irish Educational Studies (Clerkin, 2013: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2013.770663>) or by contacting the author.
- Transition Year in Action (Gerry Jeffers; published by Liffey Press in 2015) presents a variety of hands-on ideas and examples of good practice on the organisation and content of TY from schools around the country.
- Learning through work experience (Gerry Jeffers; published by the Educational Company of Ireland in 2014) offers a structured template for teachers and students to use in preparing for, recording, and reflecting on work experience placements.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (templates for short courses): www.ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/programmes-and-key-skills/transition-year.
- Professional Development Service for Teachers: www.pdst.ie/TY.
- Educational Research Centre: www.erc.ie/TY.