

# Adapting Transition Year in Response to the Covid-19 Crisis

A recent survey gathered data on Transition Year from coordinators, principals, and deputy principals in thirteen schools in Ireland. The findings provide a useful insight into how Covid-19 has affected the TY programme and underscore how much schools value TY's contribution to students' development. The survey also identifies some concerns and challenges.

## Introduction

Not so long ago, an identified challenge facing the Transition Year (TY) was 'to keep refreshing it, to avoid it becoming stale, predictable and boring' (Jeffers, 2018, p. 219). The Covid-19 pandemic has ensured that TY in the current school year is anything but predictable.

During the second and third weeks of November 2020, data from thirteen schools in Ireland were gathered about TY through the eyes of coordinators and some principals and deputy principals. As with any complex picture, various shades, light and dark, emerged.

## School context

Rather than see TY as an isolated bubble, most informants immediately wanted to explain the context of schools in the pandemic. One deputy principal said:

*It's a hard year. So much school life has been disrupted: schools reconfigured; teenagers wearing masks all day; being confined to pods and zones. Then, so many of the exciting, high-visibility features of Transition Year – the musical, the overnight outdoor pursuits bonding trip, work experience, community service and so on – have been cancelled or postponed. It's anything but normal.*

At the same time, many informants noted how pleased students were to return to school. The evidence suggests that many young people found the school closures from March onwards quite difficult (Mohan et al., 2020; Bray et al., 2020). 'The students liked being back in school, in particular connecting with their fellow students and teachers as well as having a regular shape and routine to their day' reflected a widespread view across the thirteen schools.

However, many pointed out that schools are not the same places they were up to March. The restrictions and fear of another closure have



**Gerry Jeffers**  
Education  
Department,  
Maynooth  
University

changed the atmosphere. Some reported positive and negative sides to this. ‘There is less laughter,’ commented one principal sadly. ‘Students seem more subdued. Maybe we’re all a bit subdued,’ said a coordinator.

On the other hand, there are reports of young people being more appreciative of school, more respectful towards teachers and towards each other. As one coordinator put it: ‘They are learning responsibility and resilience in new ways.’ In many classrooms, students are reported as more compliant, more focused on their studies. Some observe that teachers are more cooperative with each other.

Some schools contacted had conducted formal surveys before the mid-term break, checking with students and parents how they perceived TY so far. One coordinator said: ‘I worried that back in January, in good faith, we had presented the idea of TY to parents and to students. I was very conscious we were not delivering what we had promised, so I wondered what they thought.’

“Some coordinators have been criticised, even verbally abused, by members of the public when they see relatively large groups of students out and about.

Survey responses, and anecdotal evidence from other schools, indicate disappointment tempered with realism and satisfaction. As another coordinator put it: ‘I think the students know we are doing our best and they appreciate that.’ Students interviewed for a radio item related to this research also captured the mixed feelings (RTÉ Radio 1, 2020).

### Creative responses

In many of the schools contacted, there is evidence of creative responses to the challenge of ensuring learning experiences that lead to meeting the goals of TY. This involves a lot of hard work. ‘You don’t just need to have a plan B,’ said one coordinator, ‘you need C, D, and E.’ Another spoke about having planned, back in June, a whole year of external trips, visiting speakers, and activity days. ‘Now I’ve got used to cancellations, re-bookings, thinking on my feet, listening around for fresh ideas and activities, especially as we moved through levels 2, 3, 4, and 5,’ she said.

Invention and adaptability manifest in many ways. Outdoor activities have been particularly popular. Individual and small-group activities that allow social distancing, whether on the school grounds or beyond in the countryside, forests, mountains, or by the seashore, continue the tradition of ‘learning beyond the classroom’ that has been such a distinct feature of TY since its inception. Further examples can be seen in activities such as local studies, gardening, photography, orienteering, community clean-ups, and other environmental pursuits.

Two slight downsides to moving outdoors are worth noting, beyond the obvious unpredictability of Irish weather. One is that some coordinators have been criticised, even verbally abused, by members of the public when they see relatively large groups of students out and about. Perhaps these critics have a narrow view of schooling as something to be confined within the walls of a school building. The phenomenon may also reflect a disturbing strand of the public discourse on the pandemic, which sees

schools primarily as childminding services that enable adults to keep the economy moving.

Secondly, there appear to be different interpretations of the various public health guidelines, including those relating to schools reopening (DES, 2020a). In some cases this has led to additional costs. For example, hiring a fifty-three-seater bus for a day trip from the west of Ireland to Dublin can cost up to €600. Reducing numbers to, say, twenty-six or seventeen can double or treble the cost.

### Continuity

Transition Year differs significantly from other school programmes in the level of autonomy each school has to shape its own curriculum (DE, 1993). Specific guidelines for the current school year suggest a four-layered structure of the programme (DES, 2020b). This builds on the concept of the 'TY Onion' developed by the TY Support Services in the later 1990s (TYCSS, 2000). The high-visibility layer of once-off calendar items has been hardest hit by Covid-19 restrictions, with work experience, community service placements, overnight trips to adventure centres, musicals and dramas, and specific workshops being postponed or cancelled.

However, the other three layers are all continuing: TY-specific activities such as modules on mini-company, Global Citizenship education, European Studies, First Aid, Media Studies, etc.; subject sampling for Leaving Certificate choices; and the inner core or continuity layer of subjects such as English, Physical Education, Relationships and Sexuality Education, Gaeilge, and Maths. Project work, oral presentations, and portfolio assessments also continue as before.

“There appear to be different interpretations of the various public health guidelines, including those relating to schools reopening.”

Visiting speakers still come to schools, sometimes via Zoom. Where possible, some students are getting or planning to get work experience placements, learning about Covid-19 protocols in the workplace. There are perceptible shifts in emphasis, now seeing TY less as a group experience and more of an individual one. Generally, there is a lot of positivity, optimism, and hope about what will be possible in December and after Christmas.

From the earliest research on TY (Egan & O'Reilly, 1979), challenges were evident in maintaining student interest in the continuity subjects. A number of coordinators in the current study referred specifically to teachers making exceptional efforts to engage students in new ways. 'It's as if they are aware that the students are losing out on so many features of TY, so they want to ensure their classrooms are stimulating and provide worthwhile experiences,' observed one. Another said, 'I can see that many teachers have upped their game this year.'

Some of this fresh thinking is in response to the sudden closure of schools on 12 March and the consequent incomplete experience of the Junior Cycle by current TY students. The section in the guidelines (DE, 1993) on Remediation and Compensatory Studies has taken on a new relevance.

Reimagining continuity subjects to align more with the overall goals of TY – increased maturity and autonomy, skills for life, social awareness, and so on – may even become an unexpected development arising from the crisis.

### Challenges

While most informants were surprisingly positive – ‘I think the students’ generosity of spirit and adaptability has been amazing,’ concluded one – some serious concerns were also voiced. Not all students have engaged well with TY. Schools in the DEIS programme were more likely to draw attention to this. Some lack of engagement is seen as a consequence of the extended closures. ‘I think that, for some youngsters, there was a lot of damage done between March and August when they were left to their own devices, often with no direction,’ noted one concerned principal. A coordinator remarked that a notable change this year has been the pastoral demands on his role, with increased referrals of students to the guidance counsellors in the school.

“ I think that, for some youngsters, there was a lot of damage done between March and August when they were left to their own devices, often with no direction.”

The general well-being of the school community is a persistent worry, especially if the crisis continues. One informant observed that Leaving Cert students are particularly anxious that schools remain open and that they can sit the 2021 Leaving Cert, adding, ‘Their concerns percolate downwards through the school.’ This may help with compliance on masks and social distancing but doesn’t necessarily support mental health.

The recent guidelines did emphasise the importance of focusing on well-being as well as health and safety issues (DES, 2020b). ‘We front-loaded well-being classes for the first three weeks in September, giving time to hearing the students’ concerns, and now we are reaping the benefits of that,’ reported a coordinator. Schools that offer a taste in TY of the relatively new Leaving Cert subject Politics and Society are finding those classes excellent spaces to use the pandemic as a lens for learning about how society functions.

The principals interviewed worry about the well-being of staff members, conscious of the strains arising from so much disruption and reimagining. They also fear future closures. When asked about supports, their most frequent positive response referred to a Facebook page for TY coordinators and teachers. Clearly there is a need for the formal support services to schools – Inspectorate, Professional Development Service for Teachers, National Behaviour Support Service, National Educational Psychological Service, etc. – to respond imaginatively to the changing landscape.

Overall, this limited survey confirms how much schools value the Transition Year programme and its goals for students’ holistic development, and how they are adapting the flexible guidelines to achieve these outcomes. It also identifies some urgent concerns.

*My thanks to the personnel in the thirteen schools who cooperated at short notice and while under considerable pressure.*

## REFERENCES

Bray, A., Ní Chorcóra, E., Maguire Donohue, J., Banks, J., and Devitt, A. (2020) Post-Primary Student Perspectives on Teaching and Learning During Covid-19 School Closures: Lessons learned from Irish students from schools in a Widening Participation Programme. Dublin: Trinity College Dublin. [www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/93107](http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/93107).

Department of Education (DE) (1993) Transition Year Programmes – Guidelines for Schools. Dublin: DE. [www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Transition-Year-/ty\\_transition\\_year\\_school\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Transition-Year-/ty_transition_year_school_guidelines.pdf).

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2020a) Reopening Our Schools: The Roadmap for the Full Return to School. DES. First published in July and subsequently updated. [www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/a128d-back-to-school/](http://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/a128d-back-to-school/).

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2020b) Returning to School Transition Year 2020/21. Dublin: DES.

Egan, O. and O'Reilly, J. (1979) 'The Transition Year Project', *Oideas*, 20, 49–59, Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

Jeffers, G. (2018) 'Transition Year: Past, Present, Future'. In: B. Mooney (ed.) *Ireland's Yearbook of Education 2018–2019*. Dublin: Education Matters.

Mohan, G., McCoy, S., Carroll, E., Mihut, G., Lyons, S., and Mac Domhnaill, C. (2020) Learning for All? Second-Level Education in Ireland during Covid-19. ESRI Survey and Statistical Report Series Number 92. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute. [www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/SUSTAT92\\_3.pdf](http://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/SUSTAT92_3.pdf).

RTÉ Radio 1 (2020) 'Covid 19: Transition Year Programme'. *Today with Claire Byrne*. 18 November. [www.rte.ie/radio/radioplayer/html5/#/radio1/21868467](http://www.rte.ie/radio/radioplayer/html5/#/radio1/21868467).

Transition Year Curriculum Support Service (TYCSS) (2000) Transition Year Survey on Co-Ordination, April 2000. Blackrock Education Centre: TYCSS.

\*\*\*

## NPCPP Leaving Certificate Helpline 2020



**Beatrice Dooley, Institute of Guidance Counsellors; Katherine Donnelly, Irish Independent; Norma Foley, Minister for Education & Skills; Mai Fanning, President, National Parents Council Post Primary, Reuban Murray, President, Irish Second Level Students Union.**

The NPCPP Leaving Certificate Helpline is a free phone service provided annually to Leaving Cert students and their parents and guardians at the time of issue of Leaving Cert results. The Helpline is staffed by members of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, who assist callers with up to date information on issues such as the grades appeals process, reviews and rechecks, CAO applications, non-CAO options and SUSI applications.

The Helpline is sponsored by the Department of Education, Independent Newspapers and Independent.ie, and is supported by SUSI and the GAA.