The Transition Year Experience:
Student perceptions and school variation

Aidan Clerkin

Educational Research Centre
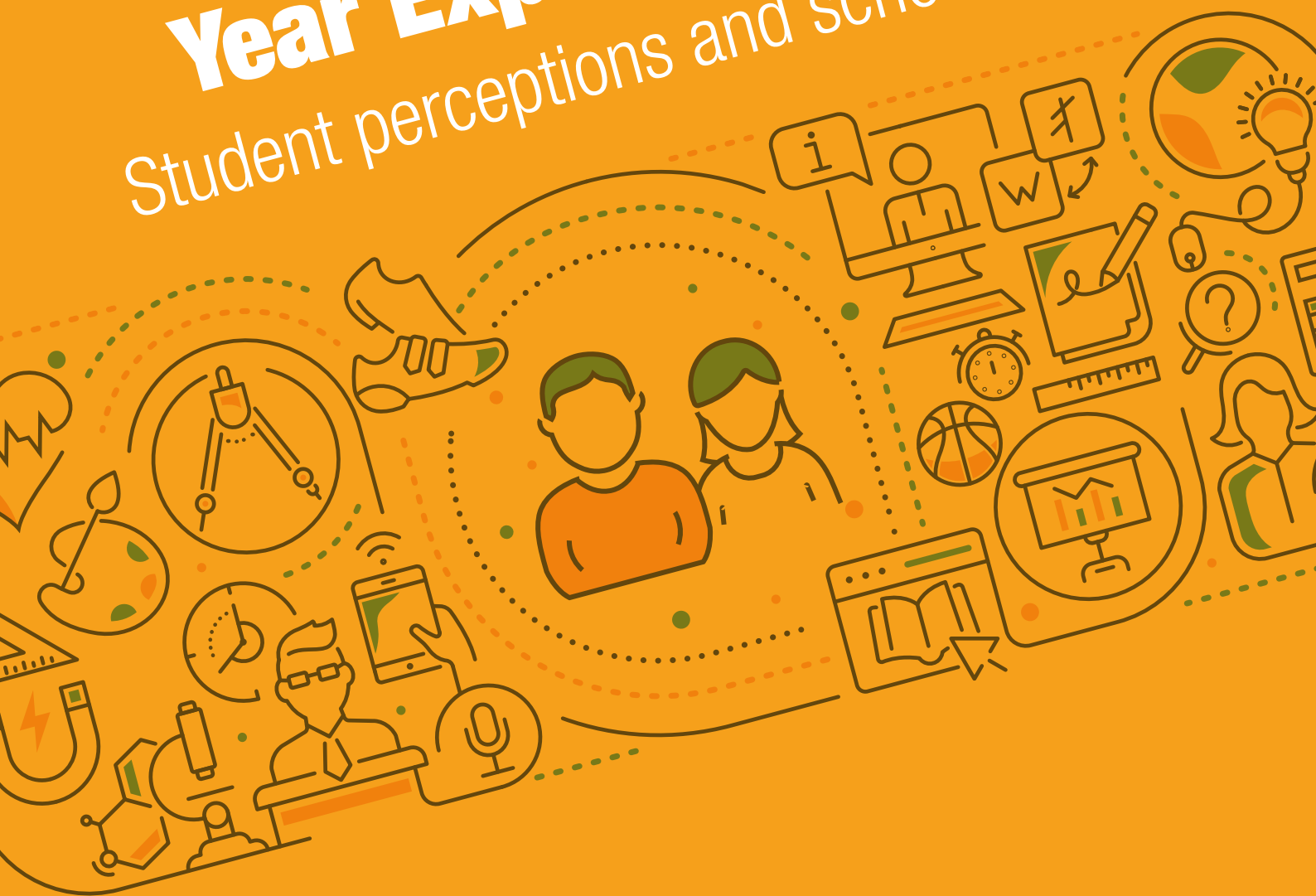2019

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Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

This report presents findings from a three-year, three-wave longitudinal study of students' experiences and perceptions of Transition Year (TY) and associated socioemotional outcomes. Some aspects of the study have been reported elsewhere (Clerkin, 2016, 2018a, 2018c, 2019). The current report focuses especially on the student voice: what students know and think about TY while in Third Year, such as the parts of TY that would attract them and those that would deter; what they report from their experience as participants during TY; and how they view TY in retrospect from a more senior vantage point in Fifth Year and Sixth Year. A wide range of viewpoints is represented, including students who opted to take part in TY, students who took part in a compulsory TY, and students who chose to skip the programme entirely. The nature and extent of variation in students' TY experience between schools is also considered.

Methodology

5472 students from Third Year, Transition Year, Fifth Year and Sixth Year participated across three survey waves from 2011 to 2013. In each wave, the survey was administered near the end of the academic year. Participating students were enrolled in one of 20 post-primary schools that had been sampled randomly so as to provide a nationally-representative sample of students. Students who were in Third Year and Transition Year at Wave 1 were invited to take part again in Wave 2 (while in TY or Fifth Year) and Wave 3 (while in Fifth or Sixth Year).

Two main types of data are presented in this report. First, quantitative indicators of students' view of TY are presented based on data gathered from all participants. These include, for example: Third Year students' views on whether they would expect TY to be a good experience in general, in schools *other than* their own school, or not at all; TY students' views on whether TY had turned out to be as they had expected, and on whether or not they would recommend it to younger students; and Fifth and Sixth Year students' views on the extent to which TY had played a positive or negative role in their choice of Leaving Cert. subjects, their study habits, their plans for the future, self-management skills, and so on.

Second, more detailed qualitative accounts of students' views were provided by participants in the form of self-generated written responses to a series of questions (i.e., students could write as much or as little as they chose, on whatever aspect of the topic they wanted to focus on). The vast majority of participants provided at least some written responses. Because of the large number of participants in the study, the written views of a subsample of 997 participants were transcribed and analysed in detail (details on the selection of the subsample are given in Chapter 2).

The recurring themes and major points emerging from these self-generated responses are presented in detail, alongside the quantitative indicators, through Chapters 3 to 5.

Main findings

Some of the main findings are briefly summarised below. A more complete discussion of these points is provided in Chapter 6. Recommendations for teachers and for policy-makers and educational agencies based on these findings, together with some suggested topics in this area that

merit further research attention, are also given in Chapter 6. The findings in this report should be considered alongside those in Clerkin (2019), noted briefly in Chapter 6, which presents longitudinal measurements of several aspects of students' socioemotional development over the three years of this study.

Third Year students' expectations for TY

The responses of students who had taken part in TY suggest that their experience of TY did not always match their expectations. Almost two-fifths of TY participants said that the year was not what they had expected, and one-quarter said that their school had not given them enough information about TY while they were in Third Year. Students who felt that TY did not turn out to be what they had expected reported more negative views of the programme, and were less likely to recommend participation to younger students.

It is inevitable (in this, as in any other scenario) that individuals' expectations will sometimes run ahead of what is feasible in reality. However, substantial variation between schools can be seen in the extent to which students reported insufficient information. This suggests that school-level practices have a role to play, both in curating Third Year students' expectations (giving an accurate picture of TY) and in the delivery of the programme for TY students.

TY as a 'doss year' or a 'break'

Many Third Year students looked forward to taking part in TY, explicitly regarding it as a break following the stresses of the junior cycle (and before the stresses of Fifth and Sixth Year). The opportunity to explore new activities, career paths, and areas of learning in the low-stakes environment of TY was also widely valued. These views resonate with Minister Richard Burke's original vision that students would be provided time to focus on discovering themselves and their interests through engaged participation in TY, facilitated by pausing the 'treadmill' of preparation for academic exams for a period. For many students this is viewed, both prospectively and retrospectively, as a valuable and worthwhile endeavour.

This view of TY stands in contrast to that reported by a non-negligible minority of students (in this study, but also in previous research) for whom TY is seen as a 'doss year'. This tends to be the case when students think that their TY lacks direction or that they are wasting their time – for example, if students feel that the school has not provided activities that were promised, or if they feel that their teachers do not take TY seriously and that they therefore end up spending lengthy periods doing nothing of interest in class. This may lead to disengagement and lowered motivation for active participation in the developmental experiences that are intended to be part of TY, both among the most disaffected students and among their teachers and classmates.

Educational disadvantage

Third Year students attending DEIS schools were less likely to regard the TY in their school as a good experience, compared to their peers in non-DEIS schools. They were more likely to view TY as being a good experience in other schools, and much more likely to view TY negatively in general. However, the students who took part in TY in DEIS schools reported broadly similar views of their actual experiences within the programme as students in non-DEIS schools.

Students' self-generated written opinions pointed to several reasons why a Third Year student might be reticent about participation in TY, even if they held some interest in the year – most notably, concerns over losing study habits or over wasting an extra year, negative feedback from older students, and the expense of participation. These reservations occurred to some degree in all schools and must be taken seriously. However, it was also clear that the phenomenon of TY being viewed as an interesting prospect to which students would give consideration but ultimately decide not to participate in tended to occur more regularly in schools serving more socioeconomically-disadvantaged students. This suggests that, if additional educational and financial support was available, more students who are interested in TY would find themselves in a position to take part, giving them access to the same opportunities for personal, social, and vocational development as many of their peers.

Compulsory vs optional provision

Most students reported positive experiences of TY. However, students in schools where participation was compulsory (rather than a choice) were more likely to say that they were unhappy with their TY experience, that they hadn't enjoyed it, that it wasn't useful, that it wasn't what they expected, that they weren't given enough information about TY, and that they felt (relatively, compared to students in optional TY programmes) less well prepared for the Leaving Certificate. They were also more likely than their peers who had opted into the programme to say that they would recommend against TY participation to younger (Third Year) students.

In some schools, it may not be feasible (for example, given constraints on resources, staffing, or student cohort size) to provide a TY programme unless all students take part. In other schools, the decision to provide TY on a compulsory basis may be policy-driven (e.g., by the belief that all students should benefit equally from exposure to the experiences of the year). The data arising from this study suggest that the choice to mandate participation in TY should be considered carefully. Where it is taken, school staff should be mindful of the need to ensure active engagement by (in some cases, unenthusiastic) students in the programme in order to minimise the risk of negative experiences and (perceptions of) wasted time.

TY as a positive experience for young people

The most consistent feature emerging from students' responses to this survey is that TY was reported to be a positive experience for the vast majority of students. For example, four out of five TY students said that they were satisfied or happy with the year, and a similar proportion would recommend TY to Third Year students. Three-quarters of TY students found it to be enjoyable, with only 10% reporting negative views. Three-quarters of students said that their school gave them enough information about TY before beginning the year.

Almost half of all TY students said that they felt better-prepared for the Leaving Certificate than they would have without TY (an additional one-third reported that TY did their Leaving Certificate preparation no harm). Fifth and Sixth Year students noted that new friendships were made during TY; increased confidence following TY; better subject choices for the Leaving Certificate; new skills learned; greater knowledge about their vocational aspirations; improved organisational, collaborative, and self-management skills; and the benefit of seeing more links between their schoolwork and its applications in the real world.

These quantitative indicators give some sense of students' thoughts about the programme.

However, the detail underpinning these views is best appreciated through the additional comments provided by students across all grade levels, which included Third Year students who were very much looking forward to taking part in TY, current TY students who didn't want the year to end, and Fifth Year students who looked back and described TY as the best year of their lives. For some students, TY was regarded as a turning point that may turn out to have changed their lives. Such feelings were not shared by all students, but it is certainly the case that many participants volunteered highly positive comments about their time in TY and that it was regarded, in general, as a valuable experience for most participants.

Chapter 1:
Introduction

This report presents the views of post-primary students towards Transition Year (TY) and, for those who took part, their reported experiences during and after TY. The data presented here were gathered as part of a three-year, three-wave longitudinal study of socioemotional development in relation to participation in TY. Almost 5500 individual students took part in at least one wave of the study at four grade levels spanning the end of junior cycle (Third Year) through to the end of senior cycle (Sixth Year). Their responses provide a comprehensive view of some aspects of the TY experience and the extent of variation in those responses across varying school contexts.

1.1   Background

A number of studies have investigated students' perceptions of TY over the years, beginning with Egan and O'Reilly's (1979) evaluation in the early stages of the programme (a survey of the 19 schools then offering TY, four years after its initial introduction). Following the mainstreaming of TY in 1994, Smyth, Byrne, and Hannan (2004) and Jeffers (2007) have provided detailed pictures of the TY programme implemented in (respectively) 12 and six case study schools. Both studies report the findings of in-depth focus groups with students, as well as interviews with school staff and (by Jeffers) students' parents. More recently, the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (2014) conducted a survey of TY and Fifth Year students at four regional focus groups and through an online survey.

Several themes have consistently been identified across these studies. Many students – a majority – report that TY was a generally positive experience for them. Participation in TY is often credited with an increased perception of maturity and confidence, improved social and interpersonal skills, a clearer sense of vocational purpose moving towards the end of secondary education (and beyond), and the development of new friendships with peers and stronger relationships with teachers. Against these reported positives, a substantial minority of students report more negative views of TY, describing it as being a waste of time or as a boring year, and also noting the substantial additional financial cost that can accompany participation. Many of the students who report negative views describe a feeling that they have lost motivation, or forgotten the habit of studying, as they approach Fifth Year and the subsequent terminal examinations. However, Smyth (2016) has noted that the ESRI's Post-Primary Longitudinal Study found no evidence that the transition from junior cycle to senior cycle was more difficult for students who had passed through TY en route. (These students did report some difficulties in adjustment, but to a similar degree as their peers who had moved to senior cycle directly.)

In the words of Richard Burke (the Minister for Education at the time of TY's introduction to post-primary education), TY is intended to be a low-stakes environment in which students are permitted, or even encouraged, to "stand and stare" (Burke, 1974) and to mature, focusing on personal development in the absence of examination pressure. As part of this role, TY students are provided with accelerated opportunities to interact with the adult world and to take on more adult responsibilities, while remaining within the context of school and adult supervision. The 'transition' evoked by the name of the programme is therefore best considered as a process of gradual growth and deliberate expansion of horizons, rather than a clear point of transition from something to

something else. This developmental growth, aiming for eventual full participation in adult society, can be viewed as part of

> *… a never-completed maturing. It is not a plateau of age but the asymptote of life's developmental curve. The individual can become more and more of an adult, but there is no guarantee that ageing automatically brings with it maturity as understood normatively.*
>
> (Archard, 1993, p. 36, on 'adulthood')

However, the need for students to actively engage with the novelties of TY in order to unlock its potential has been highlighted by teachers and students alike:

> *It's not fair, they don't put in anything and then they say this is boring… they don't get stuck in. It's going to be boring if you are going to be just sitting there every day.*
>
> (TY student speaking about her classmates, quoted in Jeffers, 2007, p. 50)

> *They miss the point that what they bring to the course is 'themselves'. The course allows failure but the pupils react to 'failure' rather than learn from it.*
>
> (Teacher quoted in Jeffers, 2007, p. 99)

Remarks such as these underscore the fact that students construct their own TY experience to a large degree. This observation encompasses both the nature, and the extent, of their participation in various personal, social, intellectual, creative, and vocational activities during the year. Such freedom is afforded to a greater extent during TY than has tended to be the case at other grade levels, where daily activities and pathways through the academic year have generally been more tightly demarcated. However, the heretofore clear distinction between students' reported experiences and teaching approaches during lower secondary education and during TY may become blurred over the coming years as recent reforms to the junior cycle are implemented (DES, 2015).

1.2   The role of Transition Year in Irish education

A simplified[1] depiction of movement through the education system by two groups of students – those who take part in TY between the junior cycle and senior cycle, and those who do not – is presented in Figure 1.1.

Along the right-hand side, some of the factors at each stage that are associated with TY participation are highlighted. For example, following completion of the common junior cycle (including the Junior Certificate School Programme, where applicable), student characteristics may influence the choice to take part in TY or to skip TY (see Clerkin, 2018c; Smyth et al., 2004) as denoted by

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1   'Simplified' because it does not refer to, for example, early school leaving, where students may leave at any point along the depicted sequence.

the inward-facing arrow. Students' characteristics, and their personal experience of school to that point, may also interact with the specific characteristics of their school's TY programme (such as the timing of Leaving Certificate subject choice decisions, the availability of particular activities, peer feedback from older cohorts within the school, and relationships with teaching staff) as influences on their choice to participate. In some schools, this interaction is likely also shaped by school policy and staff, in the sense that some students may be encouraged 'into' or 'away from' the programme (Jeffers, 2015; Smyth et al., 2004). Such factors are represented by the inward-facing arrow leading from the characteristics of the school to students' participation in TY. These dynamic processes should, ideally, result in all students achieving an optimal 'fit' within the school environment during the next stage of their education, taking account of their current educational and developmental capacities and needs (see Clerkin, 2018a; Eccles et al., 1993).

During TY, the novel experiences that students are exposed to throughout the 'gap year' (Clerkin, 2018a) are often reported to be related to subsequent personal development. Positive personal, social, and educational outcomes are also clearly stated as the intended goals of the programme from a policy perspective (Department of Education, 1993). In practice, any given student's experience is dependent on a range of factors, including the local characteristics of their school's TY programme, the activities and classes experienced within school during the extra year, the increased opportunities for out-of-school experiences facilitated by the absence of high-stakes examinations, and so on. Insofar as these factors may play a role in the outcomes associated with TY participation, they are represented here by outward-facing arrows going 'back' towards the student.

Figure 1.1: The role of Transition Year in Irish education

Shared educational experiences to end of Junior Cycle

Transition Year
- Student characteristics
- Characteristics of school's TY programme
- Formal experiences during TY
- Informal opportunities for learning and personal development
- Time to 'stand and stare' (break from exam-related pressure)

Senior Cycle
- Leaving Certificate (Established / Vocational / Applied)

Post-school
- Post-secondary education
- Employment and career development
- Personal goals and relationship
- Civic awareness and participation

Beyond TY, both participants and non-participants progress along similar pathways through the senior cycle which terminates, for most students, in one of the Leaving Certificate qualifications (LCE, LCVP, or LCA). TY participants tend to perform more strongly than non-participants in the

Leaving Certificate, although the role of TY participation in these results is unclear (Millar & Kelly, 1999; Smyth et al., 2004).

Finally, following second-level education, all of these young adults integrate with and participate ever more closely in 'adult' and civic society, with further education, employment and career progression, personal goals and achievements, social and collegial relationships, and other aspects of participation in society coming to the fore. There has been very little research on the longer-term impact of participation in TY as participants move beyond school into adult life, and these issues do not typically feature in discussions around TY. Nonetheless, the stated aims of the programme suggest that long-term or distal outcomes of this nature were regarded as relevant by the programme developers (Department of Education, 1993). With that in mind, the enduring legacy of Transition Year participation is represented as the final stage in this framework.

This framework depicts an overarching view of TY's place in the current education system and on several issues worthy of consideration in a comprehensive perspective of the programme. The current study focuses particularly on the period of time from Third Year to Sixth Year, encompassing TY participation where applicable. Mapped onto the framework above, it follows the movement of students from the first stage (shared experiences to the end of the junior cycle) to the third stage (senior cycle). For some participants, this movement includes the second stage (TY) while, for others, it does not. Longer-term outcomes, such as those depicted in the fourth stage of the framework, were not considered here.

Previous research has demonstrated differences in the availability or provision of the TY programme across schools, and also in the characteristics of students who choose to participate in TY compared to their peers who opt not to take part in the extra year. Smaller schools and schools with more socioeconomically-disadvantaged student intakes are less likely to run a TY programme (Clerkin, 2013; Jeffers, 2002), often for reasons related to resourcing constraints or lack of sufficient student interest to justify organising the programme. Where TY is available, the students who choose to take part tend, on average, to come from more socioeconomically-advantaged backgrounds and to report higher educational aspirations and higher prior educational achievement (Clerkin, 2018c; Millar & Kelly, 1999; Smyth et al., 2004). Using data gathered as part of the longitudinal study discussed in this report, Third Year students who subsequently participated in TY were also found to report stronger cognitive engagement in learning than their non-participating peers, lower autonomous motivation for schoolwork, and a greater degree of uncertainty about their educational and vocational futures (Clerkin, 2018c).

Taking a long view, it can be seen that both the availability of TY in schools around the country and student uptake of the programme have increased consistently and substantially since the programme was 'mainstreamed' in the early 1990s (Clerkin, 2013, 2018a). TY is now offered in about nine-in-ten Irish post-primary schools, and taken by about two-thirds of the eligible student cohort (Clerkin, 2018a). These increases point to potentially-significant changes to the TY landscape since the publication of the detailed studies undertaken by Smyth et al. (2004) and Jeffers (2007).

1.3   The current report

This report presents some findings from a longitudinal mixed-methods study of TY outcomes that was organised and implemented by the Educational Research Centre (ERC) in Dublin. The purpose of the ERC's TY study was to extend the existing knowledge base on students' experience of TY and the associated outcomes by taking a long-term and longitudinal view of students' development and attitudes over the course of several years. A primary goal was to gather, for the first time, quantitative

data on students' attitudes and psychosocial development and to examine the relationships between these measured outcomes and TY participation. An additional goal was to seek a more holistic view of students' TY experience by offering open-ended questions and asking participants to identify the key features – positive or negative – that they wanted to focus attention on. Smyth's (2016, p. 18) observation that "mixed methods longitudinal studies are rare, even in education" speaks both to the difficulties associated with implementing a study of this nature, and to the potential insights that can be gleaned from the rich dataset arising from its completion.

Some initial findings arising from analysis of the quantitative data on students' development are reported in Clerkin (2018c) and Clerkin (2019). In contrast, the current report focuses more closely on students' subjective perceptions of their Transition Year experience. Their self-generated comments provide a context in which to interpret the broader developmental outcomes often attributed to TY by clarifying their day-to-day thoughts and the type of activities experienced during TY. (That is, these reports allow the quantitative measurements of psychosocial development to be compared to students' own qualitative perceptions of change, and other outcomes of participation.) The self-generated comments are further complemented by students' contemporaneous quantitative ratings of selected aspects of the TY programme within their school. Differences in the TY experience between each of the participating schools are a particular point of interest here, as is the extent to which students report feeling that they get the Transition Year experience that they expected. With this in mind, specific aspects of the programme that are frequently criticised or endorsed are noted throughout.

From here, the report is organised into five further chapters. Chapter Two describes the study design and the methods used to conduct the analyses reported here. The next three chapters deal with students' views before, during, and after TY, respectively. In each case, quantitative cross-sectional comparisons of perceptions of the TY experience are first presented, providing the wider context in which to interpret students' specific comments on the programme. Thematic analyses of the more detailed self-generated comments are then reported. Selected student quotes are used for illustrative purposes, and recurring themes are highlighted. Finally, Chapter Six integrates the key findings, drawing a broad picture of students' perceptions of TY, and offers some suggestions for educational policy, practice, and research.

Chapter 2:
Study design and implementation

The data presented in this report are part of a larger longitudinal study. This chapter describes, first, the sampling and administrative procedures of the survey as a whole and, second, the subset of data that provide the basis for the qualitative findings presented here.

2.1   The longitudinal Transition Year survey

In 2010, the Educational Research Centre initiated a study designed to assess aspects of the social and personal development that is intended as one of the primary goals of Transition Year (and reported as being among the primary outcomes). To this end, a three-wave longitudinal survey was set up with data collected from 2011 to 2013. The survey included quantitative measures for selected psychosocial constructs that have been associated with participation in TY[2] as well as quantitative and qualitative data on students' subjective perceptions of the quality of the TY programme in their school and their experience of it. Additional information on students' home background, educational aspirations, homework and study habits, and senior cycle subject choices were also included.

2.1.1   Choosing a longitudinal design

Longitudinal research provides many advantages over cross-sectional studies and even multi-wave studies that are not truly longitudinal (for example, because different participants or different measures are used in each iteration). However, the longitudinal design is also accompanied by a range of additional difficulties and complications. Among the major difficulties are the extended timeframe necessary for multiple waves of data collection compared to simpler 'one-shot' cross-sectional studies, uncertainty as to whether the area of interest at the beginning of the research will still be relevant by the end of the study, and the need to secure the time, resources, and stakeholder interest required to maintain the study over several years (White & Arzi, 2005). Technical complications pertaining to the maintenance of accurate records, ensuring comparable measures in each wave, the management and linking of databases, and potential biases introduced by participant dropout over time (attrition), are also serious issues to consider and prepare for (Ludlow, Pedulla, Reagan, Enterline, Cannady & Chappe, 2011; Warner-Smith, Loxton & Brown, 2007).

On the other hand, if these issues are resolved to a satisfactory degree the resulting data can provide valuable information on the extent and nature of change over time, the examination of temporal influences (with X preceding Y), and a deeper understanding of human development (Collins, 2006). From this perspective, longitudinal research can be considered "the study of *what happens* rather than *what is*" (Roe, 2008, p. 41). Studies examining 'what happens' are relatively rare in the educational and psychological literature, and have thus been the focus of repeated calls for greater investment in the collection of longitudinal data (e.g., Roe, 2008; White & Arzi, 2005).

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2   For example, self-reliance, social self-efficacy, and the quality of students' relationships with their teachers. The initial analysis of these measures is reported in Clerkin (2019).

Building on the conceptual framework presented in Chapter One (see Figure 1.1), Figure 2.1 shows the target year groups for the current study at each of the three waves of data collection used for this research, along with the movement of particular groups of students across grade levels between waves. In each participating school, all students within these year groups were invited to take part in the study.

Figure 2.1: Movement of participating students from Wave 1 to Wave 3
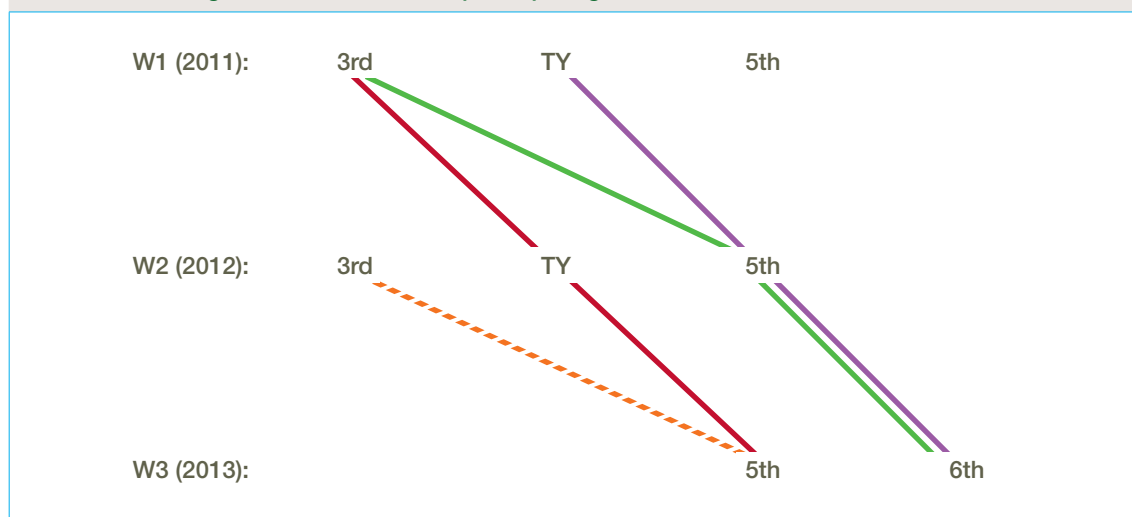
As shown by the solid lines, students in Third Year in 2011 were included as intended participants in 2012 (whether they progressed to TY or directly to Fifth Year) and again in 2013 (in Fifth Year or in Sixth Year). Students who were in TY in 2011 (Wave 1) may also have participated in subsequent waves alongside their new classmates (the 2011 Third Year students who chose to skip TY). The broken line from Third Year in Wave 2 indicates that only some of those students were eligible to participate in Wave 3; that is, those who moved directly to Fifth Year were included in Wave 3, but their former classmates who were in TY in 2013 were not.

2.1.2 Sampling

Thirty schools were invited to take part in the survey. These schools were sampled randomly from a list of all schools in Ireland that had students enrolled in TY (553 schools at the time of sampling, with 178 schools having no TY students). In order to achieve a representative sample of students, the 553 eligible schools were sorted by four implicit stratification variables: SSP/DEIS status (signifying the concentration of socioeconomically-disadvantaged students enrolled in each school), school type (secondary, vocational, community/comprehensive), school gender intake (boys, girls, mixed), and enrolment size. Schools were sampled with a probability proportional to size, such that schools with larger student enrolments were more likely to be sampled.

Although thirty schools initially agreed to participate in the study, five of the selected schools withdrew just before the first wave of data collection, citing time pressures on staff. These withdrawals occurred too late to contact and recruit replacement schools. Thus, twenty-five schools were sent survey materials (information sheets, consent forms, and student questionnaires) in March 2011. Of these twenty-five schools that agreed to participate and were sent survey materials, five did not return the completed questionnaires, despite repeated contact following the scheduled administration of the questionnaire. Their students were therefore excluded from the final achieved sample of twenty schools.

Therefore, although the initial sample of schools was drawn from a sampling frame that was designed to produce a representative depiction of the environments in which students experience Transition Year, the non-participation of ten selected schools introduced a potential source of bias into the achieved sample. To examine this possibility, the characteristics of the national population of eligible schools (those providing TY), the drawn sample (thirty schools) and the final achieved sample (twenty schools) were compared (Table 2.1).

It can be seen that the relative proportions of the stratification characteristics (e.g., DEIS status, school type, school gender) were generally maintained in the achieved sample when compared to the original sampling frame. One point to note is that large schools (>800 students) are more prevalent in the drawn (27%) and achieved samples (30%) compared to the underlying population (10%) because of the sampling technique, which gave larger schools a higher probability of being sampled. This was achieved at the expense of schools with intermediate enrolment sizes (84% of the population and 65% of the achieved sample), while the achieved sample of very small schools (<200 students; 5%) is in line with population estimates (6%). Otherwise, the proportions of schools in each category in the final study sample are close to those of the underlying population of schools providing TY.

			Gender			Type				Enrolment	
		DEIS	Mixed	Boys	Girls	Sec.	Voc.	Comm./Comp.	Irish-medium	<200	>800
Population (N = 553)	N	110	326	93	134	342	133	78	48	34	44
	%	20	59	17	24	62	24	14	9	6	10
Drawn sample (N = 30)	N	4	16	6	8	19	6	5	3	1	8
	%	13	53	20	27	63	20	17	10	3	27
Achieved sample (N = 20)	N	4	11	5	4	13	5	2	2	1	6
	%	20	55	25	20	65	25	10	10	5	30

Table 2.1: Characteristics of the eligible population, drawn sample, and final achieved sample of schools

This suggests little evidence of bias arising from school non-participation at this point. However, it is possible that the non-participating schools differed from participating schools on other, unrecorded, characteristics. Therefore, the characteristics of the achieved student sample were investigated, with reference to the overall student population, in order to determine the representativeness of the participating students.

Table 2.2 compares the achieved sample of all students who took part in Wave 1 of the TY survey with the population from which they were drawn (i.e., all Third Year, Transition Year, and Fifth Year students attending any school with TY students). Male students were seen to be slightly over-represented in the achieved sample (53% of survey participants compared to 49% of students nationally). Participating students were also slightly more likely to attend a secondary school and slightly less likely to attend a community/comprehensive school. However, in both cases the differences were small. Broadly speaking, in terms of the characteristics of the schools they attend, the study participants appear to reflect the population from which they were drawn quite closely.

Table 2.2: Student- and school-level characteristics for student population in schools where TY was available and for participants in Wave 1

| | | Student | School | | | | | |
		Male	Sec.	Voc.	Comm./ Comp.	DEIS	Irish-medium	Compulsory TY*
Population (N = 104807)	N	51010	69700	17848	17259	12924	6594	–
	%	49	67	17	16	12	6	–
Study participants (N = 4039)	N	2148	2868	651	520	570	323	1412
	%	53	71	16	13	14	8	35

*Population-level data on compulsory/optional Transition Year programmes are not available.

Just over one-third of participating students (35%) attended a school where the TY programme was compulsory.[3] Nationally-comparable data are not available because this information is not collected by the Department of Education and Skills or other agencies (e.g., the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)).

2.1.3 Survey administration

Wave 1 of the survey took place in March and April 2011. The target grade levels in Wave 1 were Third Year, Transition Year, and Fifth Year students. All students at these grade levels in the 20 participating schools were eligible to take part. Wave 2 took place one year later, in March 2012. The primary goal was to follow up with the students who had participated in the first wave, especially those who had been in Third Year in Wave 1, whether or not they had subsequently taken part in TY. Accordingly, the target grades were Transition Year and Fifth Year. The final round of data collection, Wave 3, occurred in March and April 2013. Again, the same cohort of students were asked to participate, this time while in Fifth Year and Sixth Year.

On each occasion, a questionnaire was administered to students by their regular teachers in class, which was expected to take no more than one class period for students to complete. Teachers were asked to distribute a questionnaire, an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, and a consent form to each student in the target grades. Parental consent forms were also prepared and offered to schools if they wished to use them. Although the reading level of the questionnaires was designed to be accessible to most students, teachers were advised that they were free to give any clarifications required in the event that a question was not understood by the student.

Following completion of the survey, as a gesture of appreciation and in order to provide some direct feedback to the participating schools, all school coordinators were sent a short report for their school. This feedback summarised and described their students' (averaged and anonymised) views of the Transition Year experience in their school, with comparison to the average for all 20 schools that took part in the study.

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3   The compulsory or optional nature of the TY programme in schools taking part in this survey was ascertained through examination of schools' websites and communication with school staff.

2.1.4 Participation rates

Response rates for all three waves, and overall, are presented below (Table 2.3). Teachers in the participating schools were not asked to provide attendance records for their classes on the day that the questionnaires were administered, so it is not known how many students were absent or out of class when questionnaires were administered. As a consequence, it is not possible to ascertain accurately how many students could have taken part on a given day (i.e., who chose to participate or not participate). However, using school enrolment data provided by the Department of Education and Skills for each school for each of the three years in question, it is possible to compare the achieved student sample (the number of returned questionnaires) with the total overall enrolment at each grade level (the highest possible number of potential respondents).

It is important to note that, if all enrolled students had been present when questionnaires were administered, the participation rates shown below would correspond exactly with the actual participation rate. However, it can be safely assumed that not all enrolled students were present during administration. For example, among a comparable cohort, 12.5% of the 15-year-old students selected to participate in PISA 2012 were recorded as being absent on the day of testing (Perkins, Shiel, Merriman, Cosgrove & Moran, 2013). Students may also have been present in school but out of class while the survey administration was ongoing due to extra-curricular, personal, or other school-related activities. The percentages presented below can therefore be regarded as conservative – they almost certainly underestimate the true response rate.

Nonetheless, within these conservative parameters, the calculated participation rates were high (Table 2.3). Assuming no absenteeism, 77% of all enrolled students returned questionnaires at Wave 1, 74% at Wave 2, and 69% of all enrolled students at Wave 3. (If a realistic absenteeism rate of 12.5% as per Perkins et al. (2013) is assumed to apply on the day of administration, the achieved response rates are estimated at approximately 88% (Wave 1), 85% (Wave 2) and 78% (Wave 3) of students in attendance on the day.)

These participation rates are favourable compared with those achieved with similar cohorts of second-level students in other Irish studies. For example, student participation rates ranging from 45% (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012) to 69% (Freeney & O'Connell, 2012) to 84% (Perkins et al., 2013) have been reported in recent large-scale surveys. Considered as a whole, the high participation rates in each wave – together with the representative nature of the sample – suggest that the information acquired over the course of the study can be expected to offer a good reflection of the national student body.

Table 2.3: Participation rates for Waves 1-3 as a percentage of total student enrolment *(and assuming 12.5% absenteeism)*

	Wave 1 (2011)			Wave 2 (2012)			Wave 3 (2013)			Total number of participants at each grade level
	Total enrolment	Q'aires returned	%	Total enrolment	Q'aires returned	%	Total enrolment	Q'aires returned	%	
Third Year	1969	1563	79							1563
TY	1448	1131	78	1578	1166	74				2297
Fifth Year	1844	1345	73	1820	1364	75	1909	1301	68	4010
Sixth Year							1718	1188	69	1188
OVERALL	5261	4039	77	3398	2530	74	3627	2489	69	9058
(assuming 12.5% absenteeism)	*(4603)*		*(88)*	*(2973)*		*(85)*	*(3174)*		*(78)*	

Enrolment figures come from Department of Education and Skills records for participating schools in the relevant years.

2.1.5   Matching longitudinal records

As the longitudinal element is one of the key features of this study, the capacity to match students' responses across waves was essential. Rather than assigning an ID number to students in the first instance (on the dual grounds that very few students would remember their designated number between waves, and that schools would not consistently be able to match an individual student to an anonymised ID number in subsequent waves), this was achieved by means of a self-generated identification code (SGIC). The SGIC structure followed a consistent pattern, which was described on the front cover of the questionnaire booklets for participants to follow. Students were asked to fill in their complete date of birth (day, month, and year), the number of older brothers that they have (a self-generated numeric response), the first letter of their first name (e.g., A for Anne), and their gender (M for male, or F for female).

SGICs of this nature were first suggested in a medical context as a means of identifying patient records over time and across different hospitals (Hogben, Johnstone & Cross, 1948), and were later developed for use in surveys of adolescent alcohol and drug usage in the 1970s by Carifio and Biron (1982). They have previously been used successfully in longitudinal research involving adolescents and young people, particularly when anonymity for participants is a concern or when sensitive issues (e.g., sexual practices or drug use) are involved (e.g., Dilorio, Soet, Van Marter, Woodring & Dudley, 2000; Faden et al., 2004; Grube, Morgan & Kearney, 1989). The promise of anonymity conferred by using SGICs, rather than names or other obvious personal identifiers, also helps to ensure that the resulting data is of high quality and is less susceptible to under- or over-reporting of socially-desirable responses (Durant, Carey & Schroder, 2002). The use of SGICs thus solves one of the major problems of research involving adolescents or topics of a sensitive nature by providing reassurances as to the genuine anonymity of participants' responses.

The various components of the SGIC were chosen for three reasons. First, they are variables that, with the exception of gender, tend to exhibit high variance between respondents, which reduces the chances of finding duplicate IDs (see McGloin, Holcomb & Main, 1996). Second, they are highly stable – that is, they should remain the same from year to year (although it is recognised that participants do not always complete even highly stable details in a consistent manner; Schnell, Bachteler & Reiher, 2010). Third, the inclusion of date of birth and gender in the ID provides useful demographic information while reducing the response load on participants by removing two questions from the main questionnaire.

When combined with a two-digit ID number assigned to each school for this study and the particular grade level of the student – both of which are common to sets of participating students, and so were filled in by the researcher upon receipt of the completed booklets – the full ID code takes the format '4132901950AF'. In this fictional example, we see that the student attends School 41 (41), is a Third Year student (3), was born on January 29th, 1995 (290195), has no older brothers (0), has a first name beginning with the letter 'A' (A), and is female (F). The ID code thus generated is reliable (with all details remaining stable from year to year, except for the grade level which is added and monitored as an extra check by the researcher), easy to manage (students don't need to remember anything; they simply fill in their own details as instructed on the cover page), and close to unique (as the chances of two students generating the same combination of details are very low). In the first wave of this study, 99.3% of students produced SGICs that were, in fact, unique. (For the 0.7% of students whose SGIC did match another student's, this was partly because of incomplete data.)

Figure 2.2 shows the final participation status of students classified according to their participation in one, two, or all three waves of the survey. As shown, a comparatively large number of students

(1996 students) are categorised as taking part only once, in Wave 1; this is largely attributable to the participation of Fifth Year students in 2011 who were not invited to participate while in Sixth Year in 2012. Aside from this group, the largest group of students were the 1153 who participated and could be matched in all three waves of the study (in the central intersection). Smaller numbers of students, ranging from 372-574, took part in any two of the three waves, or only in Wave 2 or Wave 3.

In total, 5472 individual students returned questionnaires in at least one wave of the study, providing 9058 student-level records (each representing one participation per wave) across all three waves.

Figure 2.2: Extent of respondent overlap across waves (Ns participating in one or more waves)
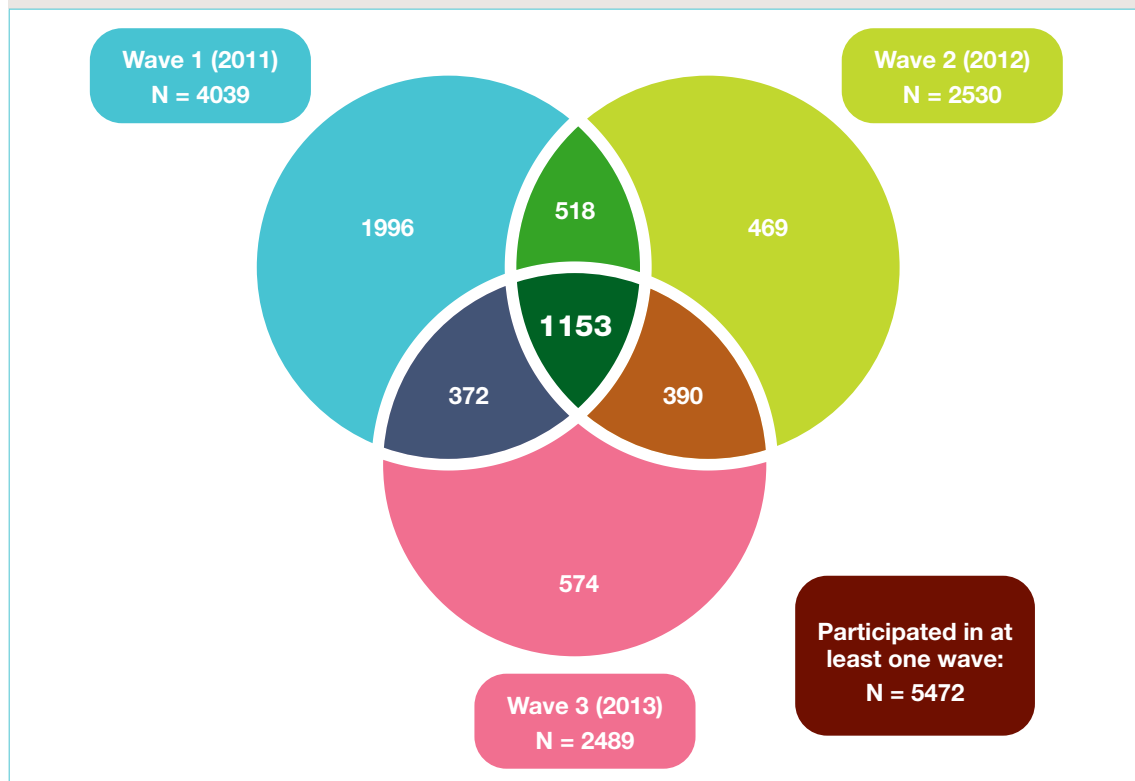
2.2   The current report: Variation in the Transition Year experience

This report focuses specifically on students' perceptions and experience of the TY programme. The participation of students at four different grade levels provided the opportunity to compare students' attitudes to Transition Year before they had the opportunity to participate in the programme (Third Year), during the programme (TY), and after having had the opportunity of participation (Fifth Year and Sixth Year). The following chapters are grouped by these three categories of the student experience. To facilitate a clear and informed reading of the remainder of this report, schools are identified below using anonymised identification codes and are referred to in text by these ID codes, where relevant. Summary school-level characteristics of factors that are known to be related to Transition Year provision and uptake are provided in Table 2.4. This allows students' reported attitudes and feedback on their TY experience to be interpreted in the appropriate school context.

School ID	Type	Gender	DEIS	Fee-paying	Compulsory TY
12	Comm./Comp.	Mixed	Non-DEIS	No	Optional
14	Secondary	Boys	Non-DEIS	No	Compulsory
15	Secondary	Boys	Non-DEIS	No	Compulsory
16	Secondary	Boys	Non-DEIS	No	Optional
18	Secondary	Boys	Non-DEIS	Fee-paying	Compulsory
20	Secondary	Girls	Non-DEIS	No	Compulsory
22	Secondary	Girls	Non-DEIS	No	Optional
25	Secondary	Girls	Non-DEIS	No	Compulsory
26	Secondary	Girls	Non-DEIS	No	Optional
27	Secondary	Mixed	Non-DEIS	Fee-paying	Compulsory
28	Secondary	Mixed	Non-DEIS	Fee-paying	Compulsory
30	Secondary	Mixed	Non-DEIS	No	Optional
31	Vocational	Mixed	Non-DEIS	No	Optional
32	Vocational	Mixed	Non-DEIS	No	Optional
33	Vocational	Mixed	Non-DEIS	No	Optional
35	Comm./Comp.	Mixed	DEIS	No	Optional
36	Secondary	Boys	DEIS	No	Optional
37	Vocational	Mixed	DEIS	No	Optional
38	Vocational	Mixed	DEIS	No	Optional
40	Secondary	Mixed	Non-DEIS	Fee-paying	Optional

Table 2.4: Summary characteristics of participating schools

The analyses presented here take advantage of this range of student experience by examining opinions of TY from two complementary points of view. The first approach explores the extent to which certain statements relating to TY were endorsed by participants on a Likert scale. The statements varied by year group and were written for this study to address some of the issues that are most commonly-reported as being relevant to students at the respective grades. This set of analyses draws on all available data, making use of student-level records from each of the three waves covering all four participating grade levels. As noted above, 9058 individual data points are available, representing 5472 individual students. These data are presented, for the respective year groups, at the beginning of Chapters Three, Four, and Five.

The second approach to ascertaining students' views reports the additional information provided by participating students when asked to articulate and expand on their opinions with open-ended written comments. These comments provide a more direct route to exploring students' attitudes. Participants were prompted to write about what they would like to see in a TY programme, the best and worst aspects of the year, what aspects of the programme they would have liked to experience if they did not take part, and so on. In each chapter, students' views are presented under headings that reflect each of the questions posed, and the key themes under each heading are highlighted.

A large majority of students took the opportunity to comment on some aspect of Transition Year: 1400 Third Year students (90%), 2081 TY students (91%), and 3978 students at Fifth and Sixth Year (77%). Because of the large numbers involved, it was not feasible to transcribe and code every

response; therefore, a purposive subsample of students was selected for this portion of the analysis. The purposive sampling of participants for qualitative analyses, as a subset of a larger sample drawn using probability sampling techniques for quantitative analyses, is an example of what Teddlie and Yu (2007) call *concurrent mixed methods sampling* (p. 92).

Several factors informed the composition of this subsample. Preliminary readings of the responses suggested that approximately 15-20 students per school would be sufficient to provide a representative flavour of the particular school experience, with a high degree of similarity apparent among many responses within any given school. Where schools had higher numbers of participating students, a subset of respondents was selected randomly for transcription, with a small number of supplementary transcriptions included if a key theme relating to the school was not represented at that point. In all cases, and particularly where more variation of attitudes within a school was evident, care was taken to ensure that each of the main points articulated by respondents was reflected in the transcribed comments. In addition, a number of schools were selected as being of particular interest at each grade level due to unusual or more extreme patterns of student responses to the Likert-type items addressing students' perceptions. These schools were treated as priorities in order to ensure that the breadth and extent of the unusual student attitudes within these schools was represented clearly.

In total, the open-ended responses of 303 Third Year students, 345 Transition Year students, and 349 Fifth Year students (in total, 997 respondents) were transcribed. All 20 participating schools are represented in these transcripts. All Third Year student responses came from Wave 1 and, generally, Transition Year student responses from Wave 2 and Fifth and Sixth Year student responses from Wave 3 were prioritised in order to most closely reflect the movement of the cohort.

A thematic content analysis was undertaken in order to identify recurring features in students' observations (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Darmody & Byrne, 2006; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis can be defined as "any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" leading to the identification of patterns or themes (Patton, 2002, p. 453). In this study, individual codes relating to specific aspects of students' experience were derived inductively – in a bottom-up manner – from the data. These codes were subsequently used to identify overarching or recurring themes, with the aim of reducing large amounts of information into fewer, more meaningful categories. This approach is known as conventional content analysis, contrasting with directed content analysis (which uses pre-determined codes) or summative content analysis (which focuses on counting and comparing the frequency of keywords) (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). By developing codes and identifying themes in students' constructed responses from the ground up, rather than imposing pre-defined categories based on analysis of the quantitative data, the qualitative data can be used effectively to explore nuances and subtleties that may be beyond the reach of the main quantitative outcome measures (Sandelowski, Voils & Knafl, 2009). All thematic coding was performed and managed using the NVivo 10 software package (QSR International, 2012).

The juxtaposition of quantitative indicators (such as the Likert ratings described in this report and aspects of socioemotional development described in Clerkin, 2018c and Clerkin, 2019) with students' qualitative views of the programme (this report) is an example of what Greene, Caracelli and Graham (1989) call the complementarity function of mixed-methods research. Complementarity describes research studies where "qualitative and quantitative methods are used to measure overlapping but also different facets of a phenomenon, yielding an enriched, elaborated understanding of that phenomenon" (Greene et al., 1989, p. 258). They note that "interpretability is best enhanced when the methods are implemented simultaneously and interactively within a single study" (pp. 266-267),

as is the case here, with responses to all measures provided contemporaneously by the same groups of students. Kelle (2006) and Symonds and Gorard (2010) make similar points by emphasising the potential for each approach to validate the other. For example, qualitative analysis can point to unmeasured variables that have been omitted from quantitative models. The use of both approaches can also mitigate the risk of making inappropriate over-generalisations through relying too heavily on only one perspective on the data.

Next, the main findings are presented in the following chapters, which are ordered chronologically (an organisational principle suggested by Sandelowski, 1998 and Wolcott, 1994). This means that students' views are presented so as to reflect their changing experience as they move through the school system. The next chapters focus, in turn, on the anticipated experience of Third Year students, followed by students experiencing Transition Year at the time of the survey and, finally, on the retrospective and distal experience of students in Fifth Year and Sixth Year.

Chapter 3:
'Before TY' – the views of Third Year students

At the time of the first wave of the survey (March/April 2011), some Third Year students already knew whether or not they would take part in Transition Year in the following school year. Other students had not yet decided or were waiting for the school to let them know. Regardless, all participants were asked briefly about their opinion of the TY programme in their school (Section 3.1) and were further prompted with open-ended questions regarding their views on the ideal components of a TY programme (Section 3.2), whether or not TY would be expected to be a good experience in general terms (Section 3.3), and their specific reasons for taking part, or not taking part, in TY the following year (Section 3.4).

3.1 Variation in beliefs about Transition Year

A large majority of Third Year students – more than four-fifths (82%) – reported that they expected that the TY programme in their own school would be a good experience (Figure 3.1). Another 10% of students believed that Transition Year could be a positive experience generally, but had doubts about the quality of the programme in their school. Only 8% of students reported a negative view of the programme as a whole. These perceptions, formed before and throughout Third Year, are strongly linked to subsequent participation in the programme (Clerkin, 2018c).

Although these figures present a generally positive picture of expectations for TY, significant variation between schools was evident. For example, School 31 had a particularly high percentage of students who believed TY to be a good experience in other schools but not their own (46%), almost matching the percentage who expected it to be good in their school (50%). Conversely, four schools (School 16, School 18, School 22 and School 37) had extremely high levels of student endorsement for their TY programme. Endorsement for their own school's programme in these schools ranged from 94% to 96%, with only 1-2% expecting TY to be better in other schools.

In four of the twenty schools (School 14, School 35, School 36 and School 38), a notable minority of Third Year students (between 19% and 28%) endorsed the view that TY was not a good experience in general. Three of these schools, containing the three highest proportions of students with this opinion (School 35, School 36 and School 38), receive extra supports under SSP/DEIS. By contrast, students from the fourth SSP/DEIS school in the study (School 37) reported overwhelmingly positive views, with 96% of students believing it to be a good experience.

The Transition Year experience: Student perceptions and school variation
Chapter 3: 'Before TY' – the views of Third Year students

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Figure 3.1: Variation in Third Year students' perceptions of TY, %, overall and by school (N = 1563)

School	Yes, it's good in my school	Maybe, in some schools but not mine	No, not a good experience
School 38	44	28	28
School 31	50	46	4
School 36	60	19	22
School 35	60	14	26
School 27	61	27	12
School 14	61	19	19
School 28	72	19	9
School 20	80	16	4
School 40	80	17	3
School 30	81	9	10
School 25	82	12	6
School 15	83	15	1
School 33	84	7	9
School 32	85	10	5
School 26	87	7	6
School 12	90	5	5
School 16	94	1	5
School 18	95	3	1
School 37	96	2	2
School 22	96	2	2
Overall	82	11	8

■ Yes, it's good in my school   ■ Maybe, in some schools but not mine   ■ No, not a good experience

Examining students' beliefs in terms of the characteristics of their schools shows that responses tended to be similar across the various categories (Table 3.1). Nonetheless, some patterns are suggested by the data. The clearest of these patterns is the tendency, just noted, for students in schools with higher concentrations of disadvantage to report more negative views of TY than their peers in non-DEIS schools. About four times as many students in DEIS schools said that TY was not a good experience in general (21% vs 5%), and they were also more likely to believe that TY might be a good experience in some circumstances, but not in their particular school (15% vs 10%).

Table 3.1: Third Year students' perceptions of the TY programme, %, by school characteristics

From what you've heard, do you think TY is a good experience?	Yes, it's good in my school	Maybe, in some schools but not mine	No, not a good experience
Compulsory TY	82.9	11.8	5.3
Optional TY	81.5	9.9	8.6
DEIS	64.7	14.7	20.6
Non-DEIS	84.9	9.8	5.4
Gender – mixed	76.7	13.3	10.0
Gender – boys	86.4	7.8	5.7
Gender – girls	87.8	7.6	4.6
Type – comm./comp.	74.6	9.6	15.7
Type – secondary	84.4	9.9	5.7
Type – vocational	77.8	13.2	9.0
Overall	81.9	10.5	7.6

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Chapter 3: 'Before TY' – the views of Third Year students

Students in mixed schools were somewhat less positive about TY than students in single-sex schools, while students attending voluntary secondary schools were slightly more likely than those in other school types to endorse positive views of the TY programme in their school. Third Year students' perceptions were similar whether TY was provided on a compulsory or optional basis in their school, although negative attitudes about TY in general were slightly more common in schools where TY was optional.

3.2 Ideally, what would you do in a Transition Year?

This section differs from the previous in that it moves away from purely quantitative indicators of the Transition Year experience. Instead, students' own self-generated comments on what they would like to see in an ideal Transition Year are examined. Recurring categories of suggested TY features were identified inductively from repeated readings of students' responses, without specifying a pre-determined structure in advance (Sandelowski et al., 2009).

Responses to the first question, asking for students' thoughts on the ideal TY experience, tended to fall into one or several of 10 main recurring themes:

i) Having a break, or a chance to relax, between the stresses of Third Year and beginning the senior examination cycle. This was put forward as a major part of the appeal of TY by a majority of students, and was more commonly cited by boys than by girls.

> *"I would like a year where there is no pressure or stress. A year to have a break, relax and have fun. I would like to get involved in activities which would benefit the local community"*
>
> (School 16, male)

ii) Using the year to help prepare for the LCE. In some cases, a direct route to the LCE was suggested by beginning study early as a means of spreading the load across three years. More commonly, students referred to the idea of having breathing space to consider their options in light of their JCE results and their experience with TY subjects and work experience, with the goal thereafter of settling on or amending LCE subject choices.

> *"Get more experience and familiarise myself with the Leaving Cert to get a better chance to pass it"*
>
> (School 36, male)

iii) The chance to learn a skill (common choices specifically mentioned included computer/ software coding, learning to drive a car, or first aid) or to take part in a particular TY activity or module (e.g., plays and musicals, debating, outdoor activities, mini-companies, or community and charity work) that the student had not had the chance to experience before and would not experience in other school years.

> *"Everything – take up lots of new sports/clubs, learn boxing/flute, learn to drive, take on 2 new subjects, run a marathon, go abroad, do work experience, do a Gaisce, etc.!"*
>
> (School 22, female)

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iv) Trips within Ireland (e.g., to outdoor centres or museums) and travel abroad (on student exchanges, with charities, or on school trips). Many specific suggestions were made but these tended to be clustered within schools, clearly implying regularly-organised destinations for successive cohorts of TY students within particular schools. The appeal of the trips included the intrinsic value of seeing a new place or taking part in a new activity, interacting with peers and teachers in a new setting, and simply for the chance to try something new outside the classroom and normal school timetable.

> *"I would like to get new experiences. Less schoolwork and more trips and learning about things outside of school"*
>
> (School 37, female)

v) Learning a language, either by improving skill in an existing language (e.g., French, Spanish, German) by means of an exchange or school trip abroad, or by trying a new language (e.g., Italian, Japanese). This overlaps with each of the previous three themes, but was common enough to merit its own category.

> *"Learn another language, e.g., Japanese, because it would come in useful when applying for a job"*
>
> (School 22, female)

vi) The chance to practise and devote more time to improving existing skills and extra-curricular activities. For many students, these were specific (named) individual and team sports, and musical instruments.

> *"Learn and improve on my skills such as piano and guitar. Play and improve on sports such as golf and football. Learn how to drive a car. Get better at French and Irish"*
>
> (School 12, female)

vii) Beyond those students who wanted to devote more time to an existing sporting activity, one of the more common ideas was that many students were looking forward to having more time for P.E. in school, wanted to try new physical or sporting activities (e.g., kickboxing, canoeing, horse-riding), or specifically mentioned wanting to get fitter or improve their general fitness without naming a sport. This ambition tended to be expressed more frequently by male students.

> *"More PE classes as this year, the school gave us no P.E."*
>
> (School 15, male)

viii) Making new friends and getting to know existing classmates better through different activities in school, extra-curricular activities, and trips outside school. This theme was more commonly expressed by female students than by males.

> *"Go on a good few day trips so I can get to know what my friends are like outside school"*
>
> (School 37, male)

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ix) Consciously taking the extra year to mature as a person. For some students this related to developing social skills and working as part of a team. For others, it was more about developing self-confidence (e.g., by taking part in a school musical or public debate). In other cases, students were interested in developing particular 'life skills' – for example, public speaking, sociocultural awareness, or decision-making – or in 'maturing' in a very general sense.

> *"I would like to prepare for leaving school because this is really important. I would like to find out what career I'll take and also gain skills that will help me for leaving school, eg. Public speaking, etc."*
>
> (School 33, male)

The final broad theme that recurred frequently related to the work experience component of the programme:

x) Work experience was commonly cited as something that students were looking forward to. This was often in quite general terms because, as many students were quick to point out, they did not know what to expect at all, and the main appeal was in seeing what a workplace would be like. There were some notable exceptions from students who had a specific work placement in mind that they wanted to experience because it was what they wanted to do, or something they were considering, after leaving school, and Transition Year presented an opportunity to see how they would get on in that environment. Other students struck a middle ground between these two extremes by intending to use the work experience placements to help give them an idea of what sort of choices they might want to make in future and to learn some work-related skills.

> *"I would like to go to the army barracks because going to the army is my dream job and I want to know what it's like before I go"*
>
> (School 37, male)

3.3   Do you think Transition Year is a good experience?

Responses to this question were notable for several repeating themes, including some that appeared more frequently in certain schools than others. The most prominent feature to come from the transcriptions, across all schools, was the importance of word-of-mouth in building perceptions of a school's Transition Year programme amongst the student body. The reports of older siblings and friends who had experienced the programme were central to fostering positive or negative impressions among Third Year students. By contrast, teachers' opinions on the programme were rarely mentioned, and only then if they conflicted with peer reports:

> *"Most boys in my school leave transition year saying that it was the best experience of their lives"*
>
> (School 16, male)

> *"It is well run in our school – everyone that does it recommends it. I think it's a year to find out a lot about yourself and become more mature"*
>
> (School 22, female)

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> *"All my friends are in Transition Year and they all say it's a waste of time but my teachers are saying it is a good year and are advising that we do it"*
>
> (School 36, male)

> *"All my friends say do it or you will regret it"*
>
> (School 37, female)

In cases where conflicting advice was being received from peers and teachers, students usually reported still being unsure whether or not they wanted to take part in TY even at the time of this survey, near the end of Third Year. A more detailed ambiguity regarding perceptions of TY was expressed by some students who recognised that there might be positive aspects to the year, but preferred to skip it nonetheless in favour of beginning the senior cycle directly:

> *"I think that it is a good experience as you mature and get many different qualifications [but] I do not want an unnecessary extra year in school"*
>
> (School 12, male)

These nuanced views appeared in a number of schools but were particularly apparent in three: School 33, School 35, and School 36. School 33 is a non-DEIS vocational school, while both School 35 and School 36 are categorised as having higher concentrations of disadvantage by receiving supports under the DEIS programme. For many students, this preference – moving directly to Fifth Year – was linked to concerns about losing their academic stride by losing the habit of disciplined study that had been developed during the year leading up to the Junior Certificate, with knock-on implications for performance in the Leaving Certificate examinations. Such concerns are well-documented (Smyth et al., 2004) and something that TY coordinators are generally aware of, but they appeared again amongst this cohort:

> *"Maybe it's an ok experience, but it is also a waste. It takes you out of the habit of learning/studying and when you come back into 5th year, you are disoriented"*
>
> (School 33, female)

> *"People say it's a doss and then in 4th and 5th year [5th and 6th year] they can't get back into studying again and end up doing not well in the Leaving Cert"*
>
> (School 35, male)

The Department of Education and Skills' guidelines are clear that TY is not intended to form part of a three-year examination cycle. However, "while not absolutely excluding Leaving Certificate material", it may be designed "with a view to augmenting the Leaving Certificate experience [and] laying a solid foundation for Leaving Certificate studies" (Department of Education, 1993, p. 2). The expectations of Third Year students suggested that some schools take advantage of this licence by attempting to strike a balance between integrating core Leaving Certificate material into the TY programme, thereby consolidating learning in a small number of key subjects, while simultaneously offering a more expansive range of optional subject tasters:

> *"From what I hear I think that TY is a good year to learn new skills and catch up on work in core subjects, and it's good to have a break after the Junior Cert"*
>
> (School 12, female)

> *"In TY in our school the students still learn the core subjects, but get to sample other subjects like music [as well]"*
>
> (School 12, female)

> *"Everybody that has done Transition Year in my school has said it's been good experience and it gives you a taste of all the Leaving Cert subjects"*
>
> (School 36, male)

The difficulties faced by teachers in adequately striking a balance in this regard, for their own students, was highlighted by the fact that a minority of students also made the opposite criticism – feeling that their Transition Year was overly-focused on academic learning and not sufficiently different from the rest of their everyday school experience. In such cases, where the balance of traditional schoolwork compared to out-of-school activities and non-traditional modules (e.g., first aid) was skewed, the purpose of TY was seen as being defeated:

> *"I've heard from other students that it's like doing 3rd or 5th year. Some schools don't do much activities and get a head start for the Leaving Cert. I understand why, but we should have more freedom and learning in a fun way about the world"*
>
> (School 31, female)

Beyond these purely academic concerns, another reason for the apparent contradiction expressed by some students – recognising the benefits of TY in terms of providing space to become more mature, gain confidence, and learn life skills, but nonetheless choosing not to take part in it – may be the 'density' of activities during the year. Students frequently chose to praise their school's TY programme with references to how busy the current Transition Year students were being kept, or, conversely, criticised their school's programme by pointing to a lack of activity:

> *"They take part in activities and never seem to be bored"*
>
> (School 12, female)

> *"It is well structured and it isn't a boring year, there are many trips and lots of things to do"*
>
> (School 18, male)

> *"Yes – it is well done and organised. Do good activities. Go to good careers forums. Have good language and sports events/courses. Good travelling options/opportunities. Take part in so much, a variety"*
>
> (School 22, female)

> *"In some schools but not in mine – it's very slack!"*
>
> (School 35, male)

> *"People in TY this year don't seem to be doing a lot and mostly seem to be just sitting about the school"*
>
> (School 35, female)

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This comparison – between being kept busy and taking part in a variety of activities, versus not doing many activities – was key to Third Year students' impressions of the TY experience. It featured, directly or indirectly, at the heart of any unfavourable comparisons that were drawn between the TY programme in the student's own school and what they had heard about from students in other schools. Criticism of this sort was particularly noticeable from students in School 15 (a boys secondary school with a compulsory TY) and School 31 (a mixed vocational school with an optional TY). A number of students in each reported the impression that their school's TY was disorganised or uninteresting, particularly when compared to what they had heard about the activities that Transition Year students took part in in other schools:

> *From talking to students currently in TY it is a great experience but not so much in my school. Apparently the activities are messy and unorganised as well as being infrequent"*
>
> (School 15, male)

> *"Because most schools go on trips and have a good time – in mine all you do is more work than [in] 3rd year"*
>
> (School 31, male)

> *"I get a lot of stories from my friends in other schools telling me they're going on long-distance trips and do a lot of fun activities. People in 4th year at the moment [in my school] have told me that you don't do much work and just sit there"*
>
> (School 31, male)

Overall, it is clear that feedback from older students and siblings was a key factor in Third Year students' decision-making process. Where students had a choice with regard to participation in TY, responses suggest that it was given a lot of thought as students weighed up the pros and cons of the extra year in school while trying to disentangle the potentially-conflicting advice they may have received from peers, parents, and teachers. A majority of students seemed to look forward to the possibilities and unusual nature of the year, but in some cases this was counteracted by seemingly low expectations where they feared that the programme, as implemented in their school, would not live up to its reputation. This ambiguity is explored further in the next section.

3.4 Why will you [not] take part in Transition Year next year?

Finally, Third Year students were asked to declare their intentions with regard to their potential participation in TY during the following school year, and also to describe whether they held a positive impression of TY (either in their own school or in more general terms). In total, just over three-quarters of the cohort (76%) said that they did intend to enter TY, compared to one-fifth (19%) saying that they would not and 4% who expressed no firm intention ("don't know") at that point, near the end of Third Year.

These expressed intentions were highly predictive of students' subsequent participation in TY, as observed in the second wave of the study (see Table 3.2 and Clerkin, 2018c). A small proportion of students (1%) who subsequently enrolled in TY had not intended to in March/April of Third Year and,

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conversely, some students (6%) who subsequently skipped TY had expressed an interest in taking part while in Third Year.

As shown in Figure 3.1 (above), the cohort as a whole reported favourable impressions of TY. However, the views of students who went on to take part in TY and those who did not diverged sharply. Most students who participated in TY in the following school year (91%) held positive views about the TY programme in their own school while still in Third Year. However, this was true for only half of students (51%) who chose not to take part in TY. By contrast, about one-quarter of non-participants (23%) expected TY to be a good experience in other schools but not in their own, while a slightly higher proportion (27%) did not regard TY as being a good experience for students at all.

Table 3.2: Attitudes of Third Year students towards Transition Year, by subsequent TY participation		TY participants (N = 1200)	Non-participants (N = 363)
Do you think you will take part in TY next year?	% - Yes	**96.7**	5.6
	% - No	1.2	**81.9**
	% - Don't know	2.1	**12.5**
From what you've heard, do you think TY is a good experience?	% - Yes, it's good in my school	**90.5**	50.6
	% - Maybe, in some schools but not mine	7.2	**22.5**
	% - No, not a good experience	2.3	**26.9**

Where statistically significant differences between groups (p < .05) exist, the higher value is marked in **bold.**

Students were also asked to explain *why* they planned to take part in TY or to skip it during the following year (as an open-ended written comment). At face value, this question may not seem relevant in schools where Transition Year participation is compulsory – nevertheless, it can provide insight into students' thoughts about the value of the mandatory programme. For example, a lot of students in School 18, in particular, answered the prompt by saying that they have to do TY in their school but that they *would* want to do it anyway. In other schools, the lack of an option means that students who felt strongly about continuing directly to the senior cycle may have had to seek an exemption or even move schools:

> *"In our school we are forced to do it but I agree it gives us more ideas about life after school"*
>
> (School 18, male)

> *"It is done [compulsory] in my school but my mam wants me to change school to skip it"*
>
> (School 20, female)

The main reasons why students knew that they wanted to experience Transition Year (a break from the high-pressure school environment, the chance to experience real workplaces, trips and travel, mental space and opportunities to mature and gain life skills, etc.) or knew that they wanted to skip it (not wanting to lose the habit of study, or not wanting to waste a year doing nothing or being bored) have been discussed in the previous two sections. Because of this, the focus here turns to the small proportion of students who expressed mixed views or were still undecided about Transition Year coming towards the end of Third Year.

Provision of a Transition Year programme (by schools) and uptake of the option (by students) are

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known to be lower in vocational schools than in other school types and in DEIS schools compared to non-DEIS schools (Clerkin, 2013). One reason for this is suggested by the finding that the most nuanced Third Year perceptions of TY here came from students attending a vocational school and from DEIS schools (for example, see the relative percentages of students selecting "Maybe, in some schools but not in mine" in Table 3.1). While many students tended to come out quite strongly in favour of the programme or were definitely not interested in taking part, students with more nuanced perceptions were more likely to recognise the potential value of participation in an abstract sense or for other students, but to feel that it was better not to take part themselves or to still be weighing up the pros and cons. A number of respondents – in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools – expressed views of this nature:

> "Most Junior Certs do it, do a lot of activities, work, charity, different activities…
> [but] I would not study and [would] lose concentration and I would waste the year"
>
> (School 22, female)

> "The school makes an effort to do many activities to make the year special [but I am] not particularly interested. Would like to move on to Leaving Cert instead"
>
> (School 33, female)

> "Past pupils said it was a good experience and so did teachers [but] I think personally it is a waste of a year and subject choice suited me this year and might not have next year"
>
> (School 35, male)

> "Yeah, it seems good enough in my school. Lots of activities. [But] I don't want to do an extra year – 5 [years] is enough"
>
> (School 35, female)

> "I want to do it and I don't want to do it both for different reasons"
>
> (School 36, male)

These students were clearly aware of the options and had put some thought into the best course of action for themselves. The decision to skip TY was often linked to their preference of staying in the habit of studying or to keeping the remaining time until they could complete the Leaving Certificate to a minimum. Given the higher rates of disengagement and early school leaving among students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds (Byrne & Smyth, 2010), the decision to skip TY could suggest a conscious determination on the part of these students to continue with mainstream education without disruption or distractions that might cause them to disengage from the regular school day. In essence, they may not have seen Transition Year as the most pragmatic or useful way to spend time when they could have been progressing towards terminal qualifications. (For more on this, see the theoretical discussion of gap years and stage-environment fit theory as they relate to TY in Clerkin, 2018a and Clerkin, 2018b.)

This perspective has been implicitly acknowledged by the school management in School 35, where the two senior cycle years (leading to examinations) appear to be known as Fourth Year and Fifth Year rather than Fifth Year and Sixth Year:

> "Waste of year – people get bored of going into school and doing nothing. [It's] difficult to get back into [the] flow of school work in 4th year [Fifth Year]"
>
> (School 35, male)

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This terminology was used by several students in School 35. It suggests a structure where First Year to Fifth Year (Sixth Year) is regarded as the norm, with Transition Year presented more clearly than in most schools as a discrete experience separated from the 'mainstream' grade levels. Furthering this impression, School 35 was the only school where the phrase 'gap year' was used by students – a small number of whom presented their decision not to do Transition Year explicitly as a trade-off against their preference for a gap year after leaving school:

> *"No – I want to take a gap year after my Leaving Cert instead"*
>
> (School 35, female)

> *"No – I feel that I'm at the right age now, and will be the right age when doing my LC. Also I feel that if I were to do TY I would probably not take a 'gap year' after the LC, as I am seriously considering it, for many reasons"*
>
> (School 35, male)

School 35 provides a good example of the wider phenomenon of Third Year students reporting mixed perceptions of the Transition Year programme in their school. While some students had very poor impressions of the activity levels of TY students in their school (see example quotes in Section 3.3), others had heard very favourable comments:

> *"Most people who come out of TY say 'it was the best year of my life, I want to do it again'"*
>
> (School 35, female)

> *"I have heard a majority of past TY students telling me to do it and that it's well worth and you get closer to much more people"*
>
> (School 35, male)

At first glance, these positive recommendations conflict strongly with the negative perceptions reported by other students. The fact that substantial proportions of the cohort reported both extremes – receiving exhortations to take part in TY and also to avoid it – serves to underline the difficulties for TY coordinators who are tasked with trying to design and run a programme that benefits all of their students in the most effective way. The uncertainty felt by Third Years at this juncture, when the main source of information is two completely contradictory sets of advice from older peers, was neatly expressed by one student:

> *"People seem to have a mixed impression of TY – people who do it say definitely do it and people who don't say definitely don't do it"*
>
> (School 35, male)

In such cases, the deciding factor may be one or both of the only two themes that featured strongly (across all schools) in responses to the question heading this section but not to the previous questions. Where all else is equal, the final decision may be swayed either (a) by students' desire to spend an extra year in school if they feel that they would be too young leaving school otherwise, or (b) by taking whichever option would keep them with the majority of their existing friends:

> *"I will take part because if I don't I will only just have turned 17 and that is quite young. And TY will give me an idea of what career I want"*
>
> (School 35, female)

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"Because I want to finish my Leaving Cert with my friends and go to college with them instead of staying an extra year in secondary school"

(School 35, male)

"Because it sounds fun and I would really like a break from my exams and because most of my friends are going into transition year"

(School 36, male)

Indirect peer influence of this nature featured as a factor for many students here. One implication for school staff is to be aware that, if certain students are identified as good candidates for TY and encouraged to take part while other students are advised to continue directly to senior cycle, knock-on effects throughout their friendship groups are likely. Beyond that, these factors (students' age and peer influence) are out of the hands of TY coordinators. However, they should be acknowledged and discussed in any communications or informational events that are intended to help students make a decision on whether or not Transition Year is right for them.
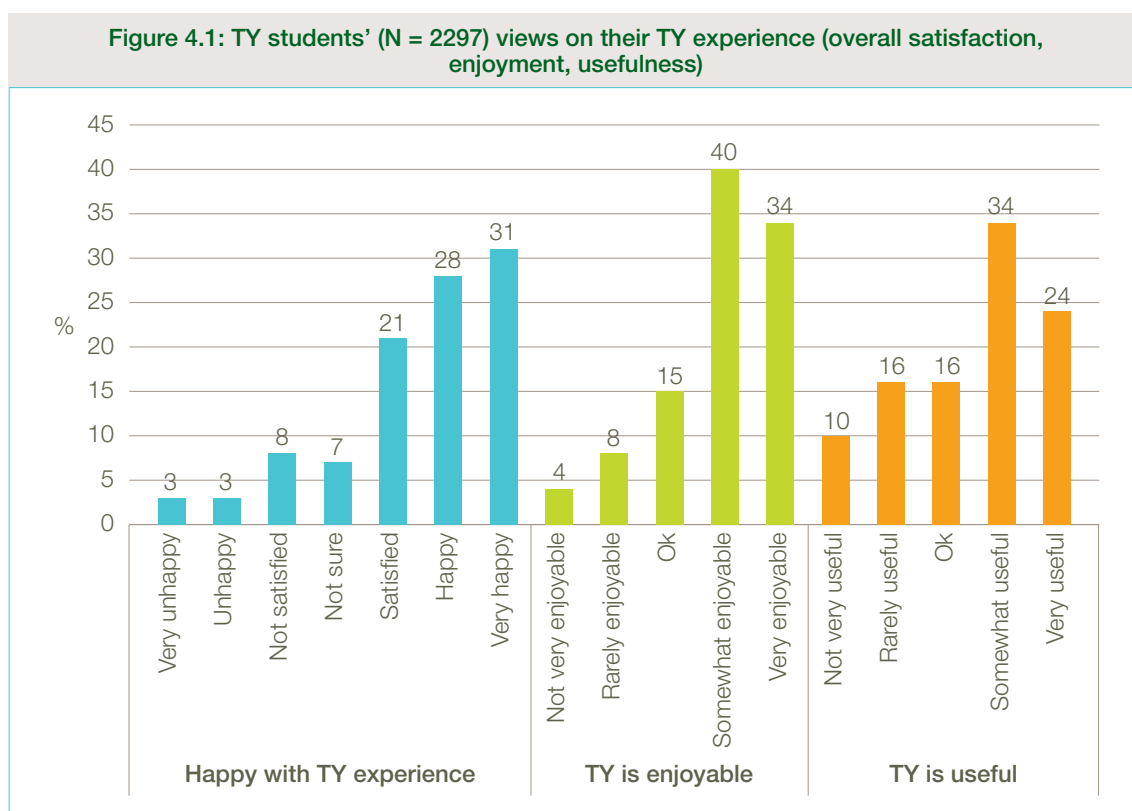
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'During TY' – the views of Transition Year students

As well as the Likert-style items reported in the first section of this chapter, TY students were asked three open-ended questions: one about their experience of the year, one about whether they would recommend the year to future cohorts of Third Year students, and one about what could have been done to improve their year. Taken together, the feedback and comments allow us to build up a picture of the TY experience nationally and within particular schools.

4.1   Variation in the Transition Year experience

Transition Year students were asked a broader range of questions than Third Year students based on their experiences up to the time of the survey, near the end of the school year. As shown (Figure 4.1), the general impression given is that the TY experience was a positive one for many, but not all, students. Four-fifths of TY students (79%) were at least *satisfied* with their experience, with nearly one-third of the total (31%) being *very happy* with the year. A minority of students (6%) were *unhappy* or *very unhappy*, and a further 8% were *not satisfied* with their time in TY.

Figure 4.1: TY students' (N = 2297) views on their TY experience (overall satisfaction, enjoyment, usefulness)

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Nearly three-quarters of students (74%) reported that their year had been an enjoyable one. On the other hand, respondents were somewhat less convinced about the utility of the year – a smaller majority (58%) considered it to have been a useful experience for them.[4] Conversely, about one-tenth of students (11%) did not enjoy the year or enjoyed it only rarely, and one-quarter (26%) did not consider their time in TY to have been useful or saw it as only rarely useful.

Additional analyses revealed that TY students who had said a year earlier, while in Third Year, that they expected the TY experience in their school to be a good one reported having a significantly more enjoyable, more useful, and more satisfactory TY than their peers whose prior expectation had been that TY could be good in some schools (but not their own) or that TY was not a good experience in general. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) showed significantly higher levels of enjoyment of TY ($F_{(2, 745)} = 29.25$, $p < .001$), usefulness of TY ($F_{(2, 745)} = 25.21$, $p < .001$), and happiness with the actual TY experience ($F_{(2, 743)} = 42.72$, $p < .001$) among students who had previously endorsed TY as likely to be a good experience in their school compared to students in either of the other two groups.

Two questions dealt with the issue of 'selling' TY to Third Year students (and their parents) and the information that is provided by schools in advance of participation. The first question asked, in a general sense, whether students' actual experience of TY matched what had been expected. Expectations could be taken to incorporate official information, such as brochures and talks provided by the school, as well as more informal impressions of the programme influenced by peers, parents, siblings, and school staff. More than one-third of all students (37%) said that Transition Year had not been as they expected (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: TY students' views of the information provided to them in Third Year about TY, and the likelihood that they would recommend TY to younger students

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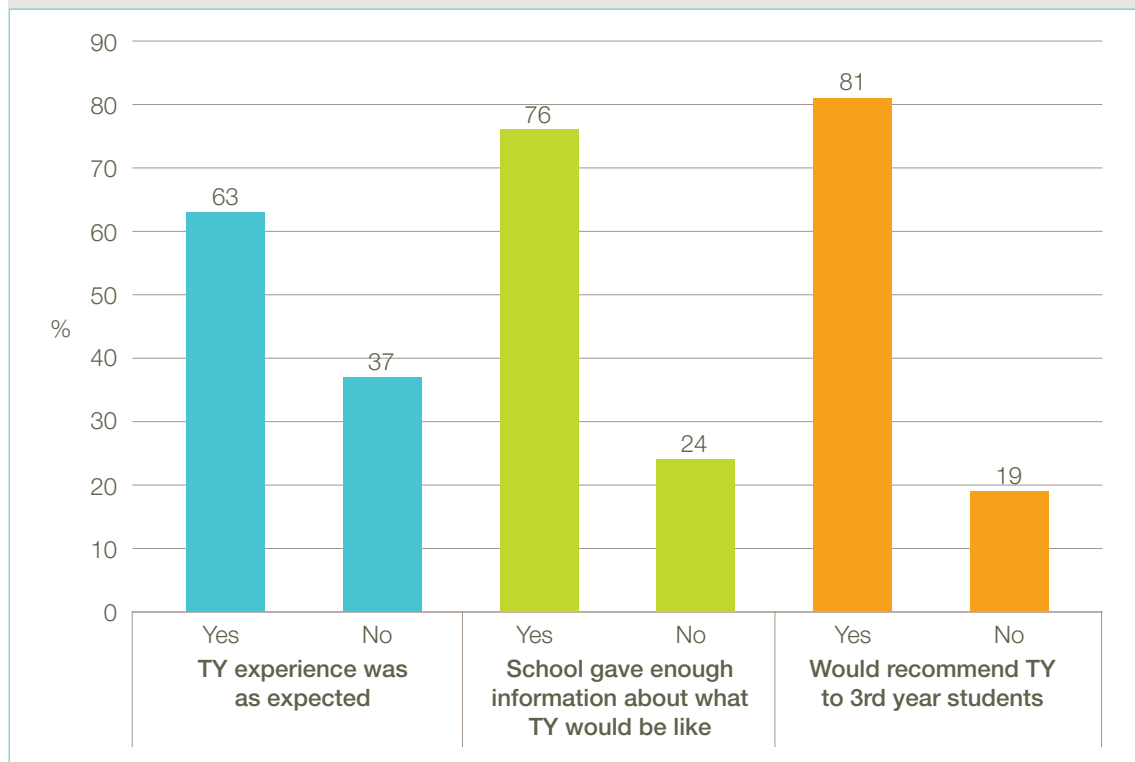
4 Judgements as to what qualifies as 'useful' were not defined in the question and so were left to students' own interpretation. The self-generated comments discussed in the following sections deal with this topic in more detail.

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In an extreme case, 92% of students in School 31 said that TY was not what they had envisaged (Table 4.1). The next-highest percentage in any individual school was lower, at 59%, but still represents more than half of the relevant cohort.

| Table 4.1: TY students' views on the information received prior to taking part, %, by school				
	Was TY as you expected?		Did your school provide enough information?	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
School 12	52.8	47.2	76.4	23.6
School 14	41.2	58.8	67.6	32.4
School 15	66.2	33.8	59.2	40.8
School 16	70.2	29.8	72.6	27.4
School 18	69.3	30.7	83.9	16.1
School 20	43.9	56.1	60.7	39.3
School 22	65.1	34.9	80.7	19.3
School 25	56.3	43.7	74.7	25.3
School 26	76.5	23.5	92.9	7.1
School 27	51.0	49.0	66.7	33.3
School 28	59.4	40.6	75.0	25.0
School 30	73.8	26.2	92.3	7.7
School 31	7.7	92.3	30.8	69.2
School 32	69.7	30.3	87.9	12.1
School 33	52.2	47.8	73.9	26.1
School 35	71.7	28.3	73.9	26.1
School 36	54.5	45.5	50.0	50.0
School 37	69.6	30.4	91.3	8.7
School 38*	-	-	-	-
School 40	76.8	23.2	84.1	15.9
Overall	**62.7**	**37.3**	**76.4**	**23.6**

*These items were administered in Wave 2 only and TY was provided in School 38 in Wave 1 only. Therefore, there are no responses from School 38 for this question.

The second question asked more directly whether the school had given students sufficient information about what their TY programme would actually be like. Overall, 76% of students agreed that they had received enough information (Figure 4.2). Again, substantial variation between schools was clear (Table 4.1). In individual schools, student satisfaction with the level of information provided before participating ranged from lows of 31% (School 31) and 50% (School 36) to highs of more than 91% (School 26, School 30, and School 37).

Almost half (43%) of the students who said that TY had *not* been what they expected felt that they had not received enough information from their school about what TY would entail before beginning the year (Figure 4.3).

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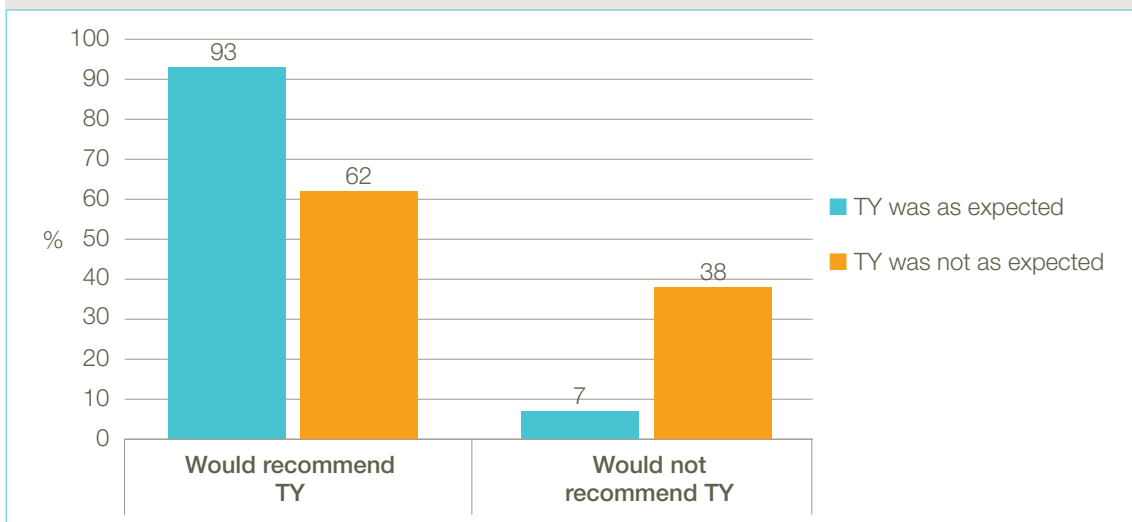
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Figure 4.3: TY students' views of the information provided to them in Third Year about TY, by whether their actual TY experience turned out to be what they had expected
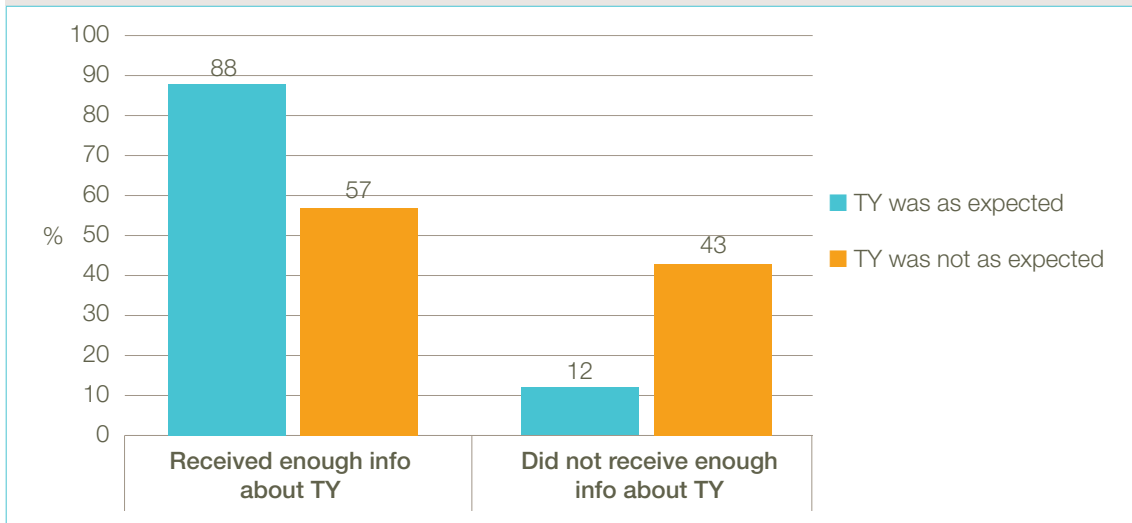
Four out of five TY students (81%) said that they would recommend TY to Third Year students in their school (Figure 4.2). As was the case for the Third Year views reported in Chapter Three (see Figure 3.1) – and, presumably, a contributing factor to those views – variation between schools was clear (Table 4.2). In some schools the recommendation was almost evenly-split: the percentage of participants who would recommend the programme to others in their school went as low as 53% in School 14, which has a compulsory TY, and 55% in School 31, which has an optional programme. On the other hand, five schools (School 22, School 26, School 30, School 32 and School 38) had very high levels of satisfaction, with more than 90% of students recommending participation.
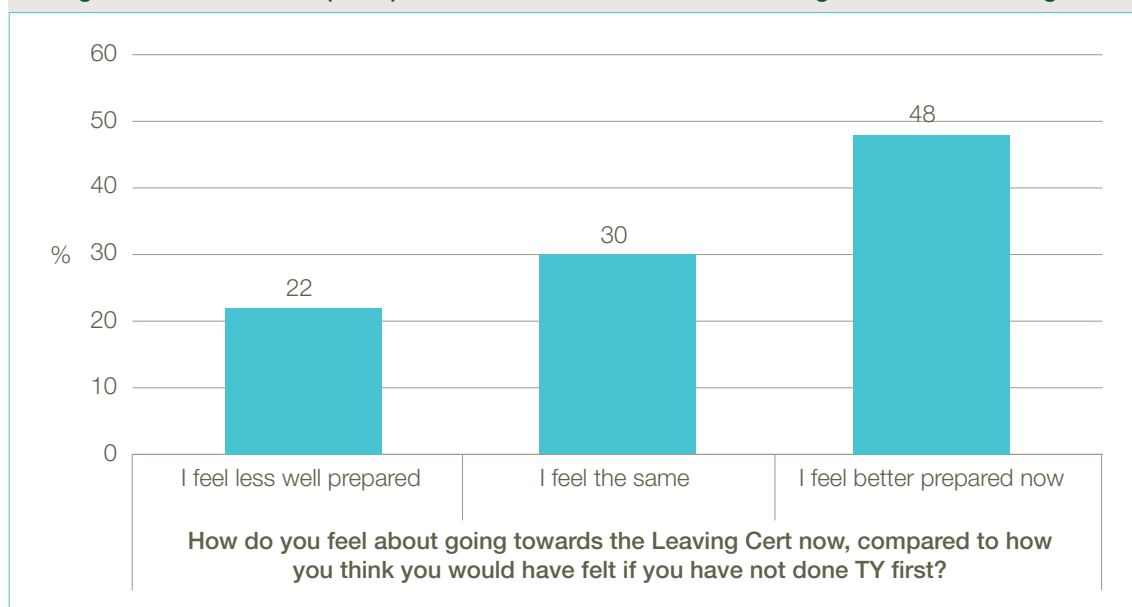
Almost all students (93%) whose TY experience had matched their expectations said that they would recommend TY to younger (Third Year) students. This was less common (62%) when students did not feel that TY had been what they expected (Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4: Variation in TY students' recommendation of TY to Third Year students, by whether their TY experience was what they had expected

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Finally, at the end of their Transition Year, students were asked whether they felt any more or less prepared to enter the senior examination cycle than they would have if they had not taken part in TY (Figure 4.5). Almost half of students (48%) reported feeling better-prepared for the Leaving Certificate, while about one-fifth (22%) felt less well prepared.

Figure 4.5: TY students' perceptions of their readiness for the Leaving Certificate following TY

How do you feel about going towards the Leaving Cert now, compared to how you think you would have felt if you have not done TY first?

Opinions varied widely between schools (Table 4.2). Depending on which group of students was asked, about 20%-73% of students per school reported feeling better-prepared for senior cycle, and 3%-44% reported feeling less well prepared. Interestingly, in only one school did a majority of students report feeling about the same towards senior cycle as they would have felt without TY (62%). This was in School 31, which was also an outlier in that only 8% of students had had the TY experience that they expected (see Table 4.1).

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	Would recommend TY?		Feel prepared for LCE?*		
	Yes	**No**	**Less well prepared**	**I feel the same**	**Better prepared**
School 12	82.6	17.4	32.6	22.5	44.9
School 14	52.8	47.2	32.4	47.1	20.6
School 15	77.4	22.6	44.3	35.7	20.0
School 16	88.7	11.3	14.3	32.1	53.6
School 18	83.3	16.7	24.4	31.4	44.2
School 20	75.7	24.3	31.6	33.3	35.1
School 22	91.3	8.7	15.7	21.7	62.7
School 25	73.8	26.2	28.7	41.4	29.9
School 26	92.4	7.6	17.6	17.6	64.7
School 27	77.3	22.7	14.9	31.9	53.2
School 28	69.9	30.1	31.2	34.4	34.4
School 30	90.0	10.0	3.2	42.9	54.0
School 31	54.8	45.2	15.4	61.5	23.1
School 32	93.1	6.9	6.1	21.2	72.7
School 33	80.7	19.3	23.2	18.8	58.0
School 35	78.8	21.2	15.6	26.7	57.8
School 36	61.5	38.5	31.8	18.2	50.0
School 37	81.0	19.0	26.1	34.8	39.1
School 38	92.9	7.1	-	-	-
School 40	81.7	18.3	13.4	24.4	62.2
Overall	**80.6**	**19.4**	**22.2**	**29.7**	**48.1**

Table 4.2: TY students' views towards TY and entering senior cycle, %, by school

*This item was administered in Wave 2 only and TY was provided in School 38 in Wave 1 only. Therefore, there are no responses from School 38 for this question.

Students' attitudes towards TY were interrelated. Students who felt better-prepared for their Leaving Certificate after TY tended to report greater enjoyment of the year (Pearson r = .41, p < .001), a stronger sense that TY had been useful (r = .49, p < .001), and a greater level of satisfaction with their TY experience (r = .41, p < .001). (These are generally described as 'moderate' positive correlations.)

In terms of school characteristics, students' responses were generally comparable across categories in most cases. For example, student feedback was very similar in DEIS and non-DEIS schools. However, important differences in students' impressions of TY were apparent between schools where TY was offered on an optional basis and schools where participation was compulsory (Table 4.3).

TY students who had been part of a compulsory Transition Year reported more negative views of the year than students in other schools who had opted into TY, consistently, for each of the questions asked. For example, only about half as many students in schools with compulsory TY were *very happy* with their experience of the programme (20% vs 38%), and twice as many reported feeling unsatisfied or unhappy (21% vs 9%). Similar patterns emerged when asked about their enjoyment of the year and how useful they found it to be. A higher proportion of students in compulsory TY programmes said that they would recommend against participation in TY to Third Year students (25% vs 16%). Finally, where TY was compulsory, more students reported feeling less well prepared to enter senior cycle (30% vs 18%) and fewer reported feeling better prepared (34% vs 56%), compared to their peers who were given the choice to participate.

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Table 4.3: Transition Year students' perceptions of TY, %, by compulsory vs optional TY programmes		Compulsory (%)	Optional (%)
Overall, were you happy with your TY experience?	Very unhappy	4.3	1.9
	Unhappy	4.7	1.6
	Not satisfied	12.3	5.6
	Not sure	8.8	5.5
	Satisfied	23.0	19.3
	Happy	26.8	28.4
	Very happy	20.0	37.8
TY is an enjoyable year	Not very enjoyable	6.3	1.9
	Rarely enjoyable	11.1	5.4
	Ok	19.0	11.5
	Somewhat enjoyable	41.9	39.4
	Very enjoyable	21.7	41.7
TY is a useful year (e.g., have you learned much?)	Not very useful	15.2	7.0
	Rarely useful	20.8	12.1
	Ok	17.1	15.0
	Somewhat useful	31.2	36.0
	Very useful	15.7	30.0
Would you recommend TY in your school to 3rd year students?	Yes	74.8	84.4
	No	25.2	15.6
Has your TY experience been what you expected?*	Yes	57.4	65.9
	No	42.6	34.1
Do you think your school gave you enough information about what TY would be like?*	Yes	70.6	79.8
	No	29.4	20.2
How do you feel about going towards the Leaving Cert next year, compared to how you think you would have felt if you have not done TY first?*	Less well prepared now	29.8	17.7
	I feel the same	36.1	25.9
	Better prepared now	34.1	56.4

*Item administered in Wave 2 only.

These differences are particularly striking given that Third Year students tended to report similar *expectations* of TY regardless of whether the programme was compulsory or optional in their school (see Table 3.1 for comparison).

4.2   Why did you [not] find TY enjoyable or useful?

Responses to this question can be separated into two opposing categories: a small set of recurring negative aspects of the year, and a broader range of comments about positive aspects. The most common criticism of TY was the feeling that the year had been a boring one or that classes had been aimless, with too much unstructured time. This was noted by at least one student in a number of schools, but was particularly common – and the single most frequent comment – in School 14, School 15, and School 31. A related complaint, most often articulated in School 31, was that too much time was being spent in class as opposed to getting out into the real world:

> *"Nothing to stimulate our minds and keep us interested"*
>
> (School 14, male)

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> *"I think that T.Y. is boring and that we don't go on enough trips or do enough enjoyable subjects"*
>
> (School 15, male)

> *"We are mostly in class and have not started on the 5th year course and it gets very boring. If we were able to do more practical work, I think it would be much better"*
>
> (School 31, female)

At the root of these complaints is the sense of being underwhelmed by a Transition Year lacking in direction. These students feel they do not have enough interesting work to do in school and are also constricted by a dearth of TY activities outside the school building, and so feel as though they are left to drift. The responses of Third Year students (Chapter Three) make it clear that new experiences are the lifeblood of the TY programme, with participants eager to get outside school for trips and activities and to learn new skills in class. These characteristics rank among the most fundamental attractions of the TY programme. Therefore, disappointment is inevitable if students form an expectation for certain activities or for some other special feature of TY – based on reports from older students or from the school's brochures and information nights – that does not correspond with their actual experience. In line with the comments above, students in School 15 and School 31 reported a particularly wide discrepancy between the expected TY experience and the actual TY experience (although the feeling was not unique to those schools):

> *"It was good, but there weren't as many activities as let on in 3rd year"*
>
> (School 15, male)

> *"Transition Year is glamorised in 3rd year, in actuality it can be quite boring"*
>
> (School 18, male)

> *"We were told it wouldn't be a doss year but that is EXACTLY what it was. I wish we had participated in more activities that I could have remembered in the future"*
>
> (School 31, male)

It is worth noting that this sense of disappointment was not restricted to students with particularly negative views of TY. It featured even among some students who reported more general feelings of positivity towards the TY experience but felt let down that it wasn't everything it could have been. In some cases, the problem does not seem to be with the TY experience in itself, but more with a lack of consistency or a loss of momentum throughout the year:

> *"I think it could be really good but it is let fall apart around half-way through the year and is a waste"*
>
> (School 18, male)

> *"Good experience but lazy/boring at times. No goals"*
>
> (School 30, male)

Finally, another variation on the theme of expectations not being met was articulated in School 16,

where several students noted their impression that their teachers were overly (or even unnecessarily) strict with TY classes. This contrasts with the more common perception that teachers can be more approachable during TY, and that students and teachers often develop better relationships in TY that continue through to the senior cycle. Undermining this perception may reduce the attraction of the programme, since a key selling point to Third Year students is that TY offers a different type of school experience and a more interactive way of working with teachers and peers. Contrast the views of students in School 16 on this point with those from students in other schools:

> *"TY is just like any other year with a couple of trips thrown in. Teachers are even more strict because they want to emphasise that it is not a free year, which takes the whole point out of Transition Year"*
>
> (School 16, male)

> *"Teachers seemed to be a lot stricter on minor things"*
>
> (School 16, male)

> *"It's a good experience and you get to go on trips and you're trusted more in the school"*
>
> (School 30, female)

> *"It helps to mature and the teachers treat you like an adult and they talk to you more"*
>
> (School 38, female)

Although these reports highlight certain problems with the implementation of the programme in some cases, the greater majority of students do seem to come out of TY with observations of a positive experience that is different from their everyday school life. This is reflected in the wide range of outcomes for which praise for the year was volunteered by participants in this study.

When asked why they enjoyed the year or found it to be useful to them, the most commonly-articulated reasons fell into six main categories: (a) that TY gave them breathing space and a chance to recover mentally following the Junior Certificate examinations; (b) that TY helped them to make decisions about their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate and/or their career after school; (c) that TY led to the acquisition of a range of new skills and a variety of novel experiences which broadened their view of the world; (d) that TY resulted in forming new friendships and strong bonds with peers; (e) that TY enabled them to mature, grow in confidence, become more independent, and so on; and, finally, (f) that TY gave them an opportunity and the means to learn about the real world, life as an adult, and the world of employment. Some examples, for illustrative purposes, include:

> a) *"It gives you the time needed to just relax and get yourself ready for a study-filled two years"*
>
> (School 15, male)

> b) *"I feel it is a good year because it matures you and lets you have a year to think about subjects for the LC and what you'd like to do after the LC"*
>
> (School 38, female)

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c) *"I am happy with my TY experience because we got the chance to participate in more practical work, for example, we set up a mini-company and that taught us skills that were very valuable such as good communication"*

(School 26, female)

d) *"It's helped me learn a lot about myself and the people in my year. I've also spoken to people I never would have talked to before"*

(School 26, female)

e) *"I am very happy with Transition Year. I feel that my social skills have definitely improved. I have gained new confidence in myself and feel capable of doing new things in Fifth Year"*

(School 22, female)

f) *"I feel as though I have matured and become more responsible and organised. I have seen more of the world"*

(School 18, male)

The correspondence between Third Year students' suggestions of what they would hope to experience in a Transition Year (Section 3.2) and these TY students' reports of the actual main outcomes is clear. Most of the key features that Third Year students hope to experience in TY are, indeed, part of the reality of their Transition Year. In one sense, this is not surprising, as the views of Third Year students are heavily influenced by the reports of older peers (current or former TY participants) who can tell them what to expect from the TY programme in their school. Assuming a certain level of year-to-year consistency in the content of the TY programme in any given school, under the same TY coordinator, such informed expectations stand a good chance of being realised. In another sense, the fact that a substantial minority of students are left disappointed by the content and atmosphere of TY in their school, as reported above, is a reminder that expectations are not always met. In this context, the successful delivery of a satisfactory programme to most students is noteworthy in itself. Where expectations are not met, it may be partially attributable to the make-up of the programme varying from year to year (for example, if an activity or trip provided for one cohort is not made available to the next) or to variation in interpersonal dynamics and attitudes across cohorts.

Taken as a whole, praise and positive judgements in students' feedback here tended to outweigh criticism in most schools. In some (including School 22, School 30, and School 38), the feedback was predominantly complimentary. TY students were almost universally positive in School 26 and School 35. In the latter schools, some particularly strong reactions were evident, with TY credited with improving attitudes to school and acting as a catalyst for personal development:

"Because the year has enabled me to expand my views and look at different perspectives in life. I have become more confident around others and feel I have 'evolved' as a person. I have allowed myself to make new friends that I will have forever. I heart TY"

(School 26, female)

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> *"I have met a lot of new friends. I'm more confident in my abilities to make decisions. I have a greater understanding of Leaving Cert subjects. I have grown more mature and confident. It is the best year ever!"*
>
> (School 26, female)

> *"Transition Year gave me the break from academia I needed to focus on personal and physical development. I am now a fit, happy person that has finally had the chance to step away from books and towards life-changing experiences. If I was in 5th year right now I would have no time for this development"*
>
> (School 26, female)

> *"I'm happy with my Transition Year experience because it gave me the chance to think about what I want to do in life and just to see how fun school can be and TY gave me a better view of how school can be for me"*
>
> (School 35, male)

The quotes that begin this section illustrate one version of TY – the version that is sometimes described as a 'doss year' or as a waste of time. These quotes, on the other hand, articulate a handful of examples that show the transformative power of the Transition Year programme when it is delivered and engaged with to its fullest potential. Providing the latter experience, rather than the former, to as many students as possible could be viewed as a core part of any strategy aimed at supporting wellbeing and ensuring the entry of healthy, well-rounded adults into Irish (and global) society.

4.3   Why would you [not] recommend TY to Third Year students?

As might be expected, TY students' reasoning for recommending for or against participation in TY closely matched the reasons why they had a positive or negative experience during the year. Each of the themes discussed in the previous section featured here. However, there were a number of additional points that students were also keen to make.

The most serious warning against Transition Year reported by TY students was the feeling that taking part can make it harder to do well in Fifth Year than would otherwise have been the case. As noted in Chapter Three, this was one of the main reservations that Third Year students held when considering their participation in TY.

The most direct reason for this concern was expressed by TY students who talked about forgetting things that they knew at the end of Third Year. In this interpretation, the year spent outside formal academic structures in TY could be considered analogous to the summer months between other school years, which are sometimes associated with a relative decline in achievement test scores on returning to school (termed *summer learning loss*). This may be a particular concern for students from more disadvantaged backgrounds and lower-achieving students, who are most at risk of summer learning loss in normal circumstances (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2007; Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay & Greathouse, 1996; Rambo-Hernandez & McCoach, 2015). More indirectly,

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some TY students also reported that the relative lack of schoolwork or high-stakes examinations can create a habit or attitude of 'doing nothing'. Students anticipate a certain level of culture shock on encountering the typical senior cycle workload which, if carried on a prolonged basis into Fifth Year and Sixth Year, could prove detrimental to subsequent learning:

> *"It's a bit of a waste and will make it harder to go into 5th year as it's easy to forget everything you learn in 3rd year"*
>
> (School 12, female)

> *"As a lot of the same it is boring and monotonous, there are no real exams and nothing to work towards. I myself feel at a loose end almost. Also, with the lack of homework and study, 5th year is sure to be difficult"*
>
> (School 22, female)

> *"Waste of a year. Will find it hard to start studying again"*
>
> (School 36, male)

Interestingly, a small number of students recommended that worried Third Years could turn this concern on its head by making the most of having an additional year in school in order to consolidate or continue with their studies. For example, the following students (in a disadvantaged boys school) suggested that they felt as though their time in TY was beneficial for their preparation for the senior cycle beyond simply informing their subject choices:

> *"Yes – if they are hard-working they would have the same idea as well, having an extra year to study"*
>
> (School 36, male)

> *"Because it gives you that year to mature and find out that the Leaving Cert is much harder than the Junior Cert. It gets you out of this 'it's only the Junior Cert' attitude so you don't go into Leaving Cert doing nothing"*
>
> (School 36, male)

It was not always clear whether such additional study was part of the school's official TY programme or simply a private determination by the student. However, it does point to the potential supporting function of TY with regard to traditional subjects, particularly for schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged students, should schools choose to emphasise this approach. At the same time, it remains the case that TY is not intended to be used as the beginning of a three-year examination cycle (Department of Education, 1993). Retaining a serious concentration on traditional examination subjects without merely repeating junior cycle material or getting a head start on Leaving Certificate material – while also maintaining the 'outside the mainstream' atmosphere and alternative teaching methods of the intended TY – requires substantial thought and creativity on the part of the teachers involved.

Beyond this main reservation (concern over losing academic momentum), most TY students were happy to recommend Transition Year to their younger peers (as shown in Figure 4.2) for the reasons described previously – greater maturity, a chance to think about subject choices and career options, new friendships, new experiences, and so on:

"Yes – because you will not get another chance to try out different things and discover who you are"

(School 18, male)

"I think Transition Year is a great opportunity to learn lots of new things. You take part in subjects and activities that you may have never tried before. It is very beneficial to students who lack in confidence or are unsure of career paths etc."

(School 35, female)

While many respondents accentuated either the positives of their experience (in recommending for) or the negatives (in recommending against), some students preferred to lay out the pros and cons of TY, as they saw it, before coming to a final judgement of the programme on balance. For example, some students admitted to not particularly enjoying the year but nonetheless, on reflection, finding it a worthwhile experience:

"Although I did not enjoy it that much, I have matured a lot as a person and without TY I would not have been ready for the pressure of the Leaving Cert"

(School 12, female)

The other recurring pattern of response to this question came from students who declined to give a definitive recommendation either way. Almost invariably, the reason given was that whether or not a student should take part in TY depends on the student themselves – what they would want from the year and how they would intend to behave. These responses could be considered a qualified recommendation of TY, as they tended to suggest that the programme would be beneficial if students were prepared to take full advantage of it. In some cases, this meant taking advantage of the various opportunities offered by the school; in others, this meant having the initiative to create one's own opportunities using the freedom and additional free time that come with participation:

"If you intend to get involved with what goes on, it is a great year, but only do it if you will involve yourself. You get out of it what you put into it"

(School 12, female)

"Only if they have the will power and initiative to do stuff without people having to tell them, otherwise they will be bored all the time!"

(School 15, male)

"If you really go for everything and get very involved it can be a worthwhile experience – there are lots of things that can be tried that you won't get the chance to do in more academic years"

(School 18, male)

The final question asked of TY students delves deeper into the reservations expressed above by asking directly what would have given them a better TY experience.

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4.4   What else would have been helpful for your TY?

One notable feature of the question heading this section is that it generated far fewer responses than the others. In fact, three-quarters of students left this question blank despite answering the first two questions (on what made their year enjoyable/not enjoyable and on why they would/would not recommend TY to Third Year students). This might suggest that students with frustrations felt that they had already expressed them in response to the previous questions and felt no need to reinforce those criticisms. It might also be indicative of the general satisfaction with TY that was expressed by the majority of students – given a prompt to articulate problems in a different way or to raise new issues that weren't covered by the previous questions, three out of four students declined to comment.

From the students who did provide ideas, two main issues emerged as popular suggestions for improving TY for future cohorts. The first is that, although some information may already be provided in advance, students often wanted more concrete details about what happens on a day-to-day basis in TY. This included clarifying more precisely what differences students should expect to see between the Third Year classrooms that they are used to and the TY classrooms that they will be forming – for example, in terms of the teaching methods, level of student autonomy, or subject matter. It also referred to the desire to know before entering (or choosing) TY the specific activities and trips that were likely to be available, as well as any major additional expenses:

> *"What class would be like and what we would spend our time doing outside class"*
>
> (School 12, female)

> *"We weren't told the exact subjects we could be doing until we started Transition Year"*
>
> (School 15, male)

> *"More in-depth explanation rather than just telling us we will be going on trips and work experience"*
>
> (School 16, male)

One obvious barrier to giving this level of detail is that it may not be possible for TY coordinators to confirm to Third Year students what activities outside the school will be available a year, or even several months, later. However, activities within the school are often maintained or adapted from year to year. Information nights, together with printed informational brochures about the programme, are valuable in beginning to paint a picture of the programme for parents and students. Descriptions of classroom activities and other specific information from current Transition Year students are likely to be of interest as part of this process, given that the views of older students play such an important role in Third Year students' decision-making (see Chapter Three):

> *"They had a T.Y. information night which really helped me and talking to other T.Y. students, they recommended it"*
>
> (School 12, male)

The second issue arising was that students wanted not just *more* information that filled in the details of what to expect from Transition Year, but also *better* information that could be relied upon

to represent the reality of the experience. This reflected the comments of a number of students who reported that the programme had been oversold to them – for example, that they were told they would be doing things that never actually happened, or that they felt led to expect that activities would be better than they were. This criticism centres on the accuracy of the information given to Third Year students:

> *"I think they made it sound better than it was"*
>
> (School 12, female)

> *"It would have been useful to know not everyone could participate in certain events because of the large number of people doing TY"*
>
> (School 22, female)

> *"They weren't right about the COST"*
>
> (School 26, female)

> *"They showed them going on loads of trips but never showed how boring it actually was"*
>
> (School 32, male)

Comments such as these appeared in several schools, and were particularly common in School 15. This corresponds to earlier feedback, reported above, about feelings of boredom in class and more general disappointment that the year hadn't lived up to its billing. In such instances the problem is not necessarily that students did not know what to expect from TY, but that the view they had at the beginning of the programme did not match their subsequent experience. This mismatch was one of the most common sources of frustration with the year.

Explicitly acknowledging the 'downtime' that can be a feature of TY classes – or, if possible, reducing the extent of such downtime – could go some way towards ameliorating such complaints. As well as ensuring that Third Years, used to a more strictly-structured timetable, are made to recognise in advance that TY students sometimes report feeling at a loose end, this could be framed as a (supervised) challenge to students: *the school will prepare a TY programme for you, but if you feel that you do not have enough to do, take it as an opportunity to seize the initiative.*

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The final group of students asked for their views were Fifth Year and Sixth Year students, who can look back on Transition Year at one year's or two years' remove, having fully re-integrated into more traditional classes. They may be able to make observations, in retrospect, that are not apparent to students who are still more closely involved with the programme.

Feedback on TY outcomes from the Likert-style items are shown for both Fifth Year and Sixth Year students in Section 5.1. With regard to the open-ended questions, only the written responses of Fifth Year students were transcribed for the subsequent sections due to time and space constraints, and to avoid repetitiveness. (Samples of the written feedback from Sixth Year students in each school were also reviewed by the author and were found to present a similar picture to that provided by their Fifth Year counterparts, both overall and within schools.)

Fifth Year students who had previously taken part in TY were asked three questions: the best thing about the year, the worst thing about the year, and whether or not they would recommend TY to Third Year students. Their classmates who had moved directly from Third Year to Fifth Year, opting to skip Transition Year, were asked one alternative question: if there were any parts of the programme they would have liked to have had the opportunity to experience.

5.1   Variation in the Transition Year experience

Fifth and Sixth Year students who had previously taken part in TY were first asked to respond to two main statements: whether they were happy with their TY experience and whether they would recommend the year.
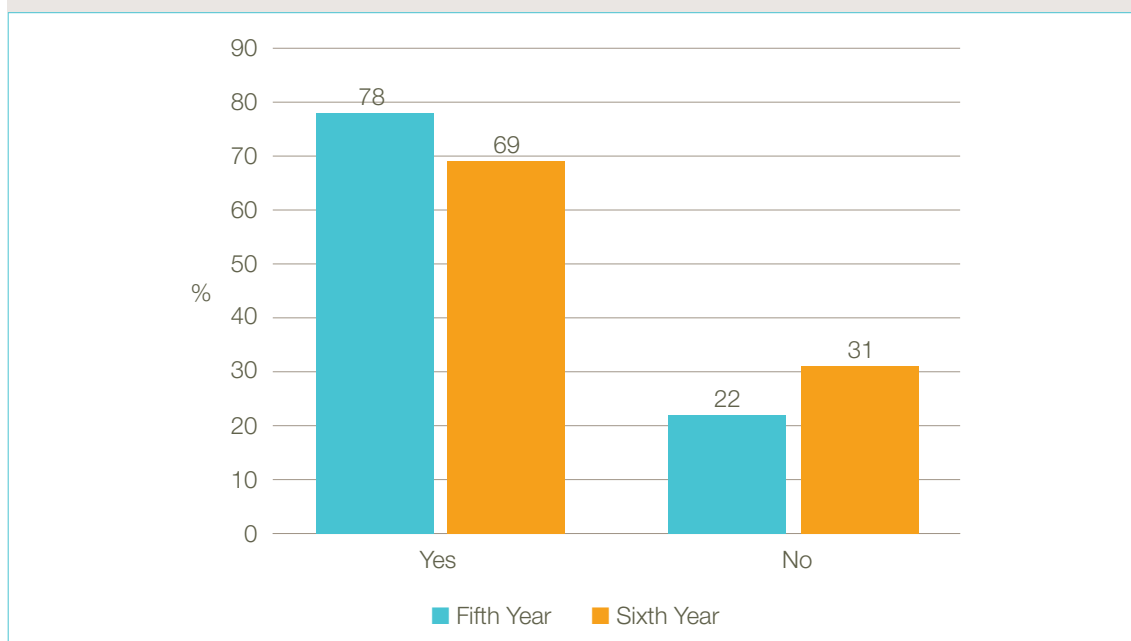
Overall, both year groups remained *at least satisfied* with the experience (78% of Fifth Years and 69% of Sixth Years), although small minorities in both grades were *very unhappy* with TY (Figure 5.1). The percentages of students who would recommend TY to Third Year students mirrored the reported satisfaction levels, with 78% of Fifth Years and 69% of Sixth Years saying that they would recommend TY (Figure 5.2). In general, Sixth Year students tended to express slightly less positive views of TY than Fifth Year students.

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Figure 5.1: Fifth Year (N = 3116) and Sixth Year (N = 933) students' satisfaction with their TY experience (Ns refer to the number of students in each grade who had previously taken part in TY.)
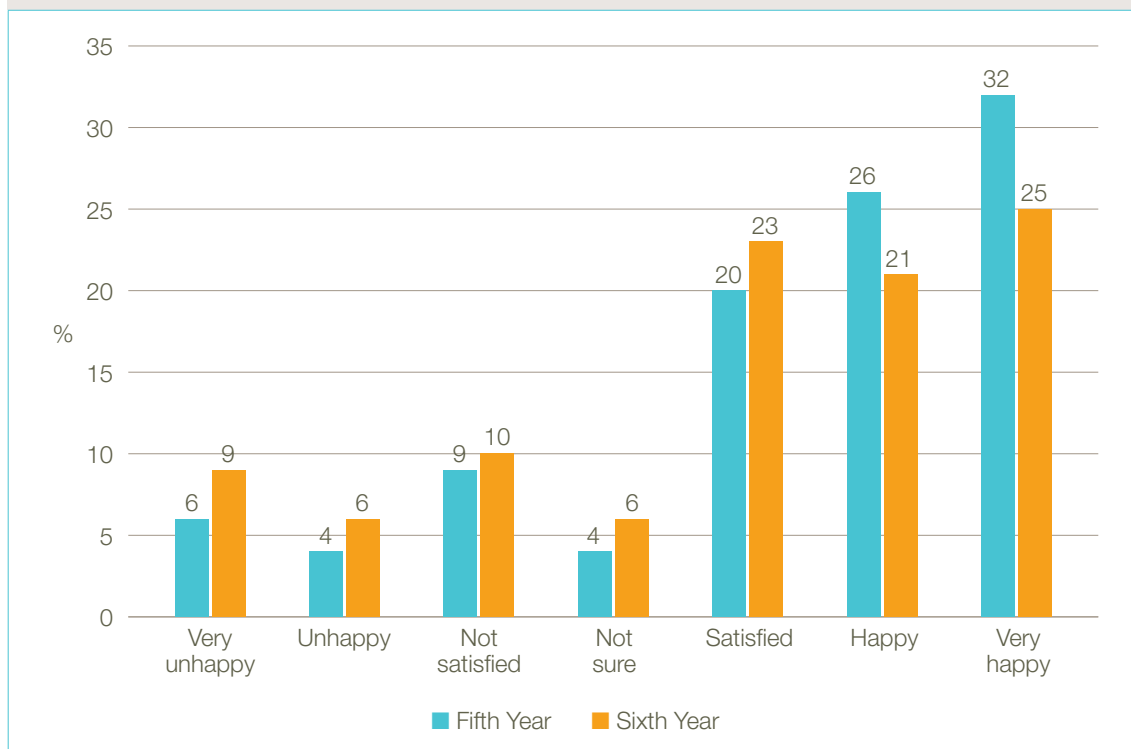
The pattern of responses in schools where TY was compulsory compared to where it was optional was similar to that reported for TY students in Chapter Four (see Table 4.3). Thus, even in senior grades, students tended to be less positive about the year and less likely to recommend it if they had taken part in a compulsory Transition Year.

Figure 5.2: Percentage of Fifth Year and Sixth Year students (who had previously taken part in TY) who would recommend TY to Third Year students

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In addition to these general attitudes towards Transition Year, Fifth and Sixth Year students were asked to respond to a series of additional statements reflecting on some of the perceived outcomes of their participation in the programme. These statements were written to represent traditional perceptions and concerns relating to TY that are frequently expressed by parents, teachers, and students (Smyth et al., 2004; Jeffers, 2007). The responses received from Fifth and Sixth Year students were similar, so both grade levels have been combined here (Table 5.1) for clarity of presentation.

The strongest consensus (perhaps notably, given an increasing focus on wellbeing in schools in recent years) was that TY had led to the creation of strong friendships. As shown in Table 5.1 (where responses are ranked in descending order by the percentage of students selecting 'Very True') 87% of students considered this to be *a bit true* or *very true*. Other positive perceptions of TY that remained, a full one or two years after participation, included: feelings of increased confidence when trying new things (74%), learning how to work as part of a team (68%), making a better choice of subjects for the Leaving Certificate than would have been the case without the year out (65%), having a stronger idea about what the student wants to do after school (65%), and acquiring and implementing new organisational and time management skills (53%).

Together with these positive outcomes, some of the traditional concerns about TY participation were also endorsed by the students. Many Fifth Year students reported that it took a long time after TY for them to settle back into a routine (67% saying that this was *a bit true* or *very true*). An analogous question for Sixth Year students ('I find it harder to settle to study') was at least *a bit true* for 57% of students. Forty-three per cent of students reported finding it harder to pay attention in class, and that it was harder to learn for the Leaving Certificate after TY.

Table 5.1: Fifth Year (N = 3116) and Sixth Year (N = 933) students' evaluations of TY participation, %

Because I did Transition Year…	Not at all true	Not very true	Not sure	A bit true	Very true
I have made good friends	2.7	3.6	6.3	33.0	54.3
It took me a long time to get into a routine in 5th year [a]	8.1	19.0	6.0	29.8	37.0
I am more confident about trying new things	4.7	7.0	13.3	41.9	33.0
I made a better choice of Leaving Cert. subjects	7.2	12.4	15.6	36.4	28.4
I have learned a new skill outside school	9.3	14.8	14.8	33.2	28.0
I know more about what I want to do after school	8.1	14.8	12.5	37.1	27.4
I find it harder to settle to study [b]	10.6	19.8	13.2	29.8	26.6
I learned how to work as part of a team	5.8	11.0	15.1	42.5	25.6
I feel like I've wasted a year	33.0	20.0	12.0	16.7	18.2
I think it's harder to learn for the Leaving Cert.	17.5	24.2	15.8	24.6	17.9
I am better at organising / managing things	11.9	18.7	16.2	37.1	16.0
I see more practical uses for things I learn in school	9.7	17.5	24.9	32.2	15.7
I find it harder to pay attention in class	15.2	26.5	15.9	28.6	13.8
It's hard to catch up to classmates who skipped TY [a c]	19.9	24.0	20.3	22.9	12.8
I am at a disadvantage to classmates who didn't do TY [b c]	39.4	25.7	21.5	11.2	2.2

Ns refer to the number of students in each grade who had previously taken part in TY.
Items are ordered in descending order by the percentage selecting "Very True".
[a] Item administered to Fifth Years only.
[b] Item administered to Sixth Years only.
[c] Analysis restricted to schools with optional TY only.

While the TY experience seems to have had mixed outcomes for some students, it is apparent that many feel strongly about the benefits of the year. This is supported by an examination of the

two items that received particularly high levels of disagreement. These were, firstly, the suggestion that TY could be considered a 'wasted year' (53% saying *not at all true* or *not very true*), and secondly, the question of whether Sixth Year respondents felt that taking part in TY had put them at a disadvantage to their peers who skipped the year (65% considered this to be untrue). Regarding the latter, it is worth noting that a similar statement presented to Fifth Year students (*it is hard to catch up to classmates who skipped TY*) received a somewhat higher level of endorsement, but that these perceptions of disadvantage compared to students who didn't do TY seemed to have largely dissipated by Sixth Year.

Table 5.2 shows how Fifth Year students' evaluations of the effects of their participation in TY are related to their experience of the programme at the time. Students who (a year prior, at the end of TY) had said that TY had *not* turned out to be as they expected were significantly more likely in Fifth Year to report feeling that they had wasted a year, that they found it harder to pay attention in class, and that they found it harder to learn for the Leaving Certificate examinations.

In contrast, students who had previously held the view that TY had matched their expectations were significantly more likely to say at the end of Fifth Year that they had made good friends because of TY, that they were more confident about trying new things, that their choice of subjects for senior cycle had been improved, that they know more about what they want to do after school, that they had learned a new skill outside school settings, that they had learned how to work as part of a team, that their organisational skills had improved, and that they see more practical uses for the things they are learning in school. The more positive view of TY expressed by these students at the end of the programme carried through to their evaluations of the longer-term outcomes of their TY experience at the end of Fifth Year.

Table 5.2: Differences in Fifth Year students' evaluations of TY participation with respect to their previous views (as TY students) on whether TY had matched their expectations

	Because I did Transition Year…
Significantly stronger agreement among students for whom TY **was** what they expected	I have made good friends.
	I am more confident about trying new things.
	I made a better choice of Leaving Cert. subjects.
	I have learned a new skill outside school.
	I know more about what I want to do after school.
	I learned how to work as part of a team.
	I am better at organising / managing things.
	I see more practical uses for things I learn in school.
No significant difference	It's hard to catch up to classmates who skipped TY.
	It took me a long time to get into a routine in 5th year.
Significantly stronger agreement among students for whom TY **was not** what they expected	I feel like I've wasted a year.
	I think it's harder to learn for the Leaving Cert.
	I find it harder to pay attention in class.

Differences are identified as statistically significant on the basis of a series of one-way ANOVAs, corrected for multiple comparisons using the Holm-Bonferroni procedure (Abdi, 2010).

Both groups of students – those whose TY had matched their expectations and those for whom it did not – reported some perception that their TY participation had resulted in taking a long time to get settled into Fifth Year, and that it was hard for them to catch up to their classmates who had skipped TY. There were no significant differences between the two groups on these statements.

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5.2   What were the best things about TY?

In general, the most positive aspects of TY identified by Fifth Year students were similar to the reports of those students still in TY. Among the most common themes were getting to take a break from stressful exams; developing a newfound confidence, independence and maturity; having an extra year to think about the future; learning new skills, trying new subjects, and having new experiences; forming new friendships; and participating in work experience. However, having settled into senior cycle at the time of the survey (towards the end of Fifth Year) and being in a position to reflect on what TY meant to them, the feedback from the older students elaborates on the lasting impact of these outcomes.

The potential value of the programme is put forward by the responses of Fifth Years who suggest that TY represented, in retrospect, something of a transformative experience for them. Their time spent in the programme was described by these students as a turning point, with the positive outcomes attributed to participation going beyond narrowly-defined specifics (such as learning a new skill or the chance to relax) into wholesale changes of attitude towards school, towards life, and towards themselves:

"It was a once in a lifetime opportunity"

(School 12, female)

"I became a lot more confident. I also learned a lot of things to help me, not only to get a job, but to enjoy life"

(School 20, female)

"Doing things I had never done before – things like work experience and extra subjects helped me realise what I did/didn't want to do in college, and trips to different countries and places helped me become more independent and confident"

(School 27, female)

"Experiences outside the classroom, the real world, learning and trying new things, realising what I liked and didn't like. TY opened my eyes to life after school"

(School 27, female)

"Growing as a person, becoming less judgemental of others, more time to discuss what I wanted to do in college, confidence to express my views, learning to go after what I want"

(School 40, female)

Experiences such as these can imbue, or accelerate the development of, a greater sense of responsibility in participants. The chance to build team skills and work on collaborative projects with fellow students, teachers, and non-school organisations was, for most students, rarely available outside TY, and TY was seen as providing a welcome opportunity to showcase their abilities. Reflecting this, 'responsibility' emerged as a core theme at the heart of several key outcomes reported by students here, manifesting in diverse situations. For example, the following selection of quotes represents a snapshot of personal development in a 'real world' or 'adult' setting on

work experience placements; in a social and professional capacity through group activities and self-organised events; in terms of community participation and social work; and educationally, through sharpened focus for the Leaving Certificate:

> *"I got to experience different subjects and gain different skills. School was more interesting to go to"*
>
> (School 12, male)

> *"There was much less pressure, but we still did useful things. I improved on maths a lot. Having responsibility for things like a food appeal was nice"*
>
> (School 16, male)

> *"Participating in the Saint Vincent de Paul charity (weekly initiatives for old people, organising events). Community care. Irish wheelchair assistance and [local] hospital. Work experience. [Local] Youth Club service"*
>
> (School 18, male)

> *"Gave me time to clean my head of things from Junior Cert. Made me realise how much hard work I would have to do in 5th year and that I did in 3rd year"*
>
> (School 33, female)

> *I learned a lot about entrepreneurship completing the [AIB] build-a-bank challenge, working in the school canteen, getting work experience and raising €2200 for charity. I learned an awful lot as it brings the year group together as everyone must work together, e.g. creating stage sets and doing a musical. It definitely lets people shine and instils confidence and atmosphere similar to the work place"*
>
> (School 33, male)

> *"I loved TY because we got to do work experiences and we went on residential trips. I loved having the responsibility and freedom with the mini-companies"*
>
> (School 35, female)

The idea of responsibility also features indirectly in another recurring theme – that of improving student-teacher relations. Teachers were referenced in a positive light by Fifth Year students in a manner that was not as noticeable among students still in Transition Year. This may be an indication that the experiences and skills gained by students during TY facilitate an easier working relationship with their teachers after they return to a more structured learning environment. It may also suggest that more personal and supportive relationships were formed during TY but perhaps not fully appreciated as such by students while they were still in the 'gap year' frame of mind, becoming more apparent in senior cycle classes. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to suggest that the sense of responsibility and desire to improve themselves that is noted in other contexts by students may also be recognised by teachers, contributing to a greater level of mutual trust and respect. Improvements in student-teacher relations of this nature are important in themselves but can also contribute to a more general improvement in school engagement:

> *"The freedom to do what you wanted to do. To finally have the teachers trust you with tasks about school show"*
>
> (School 22, female)

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> *"The work experience and the way that teachers began to respect me more"*
>
> (School 40, male)

Another notable feature of the Fifth Year responses was the extent of interaction between the key benefits that were cited. For example, aside from the intrinsic reduction in stress, having an extended break from more pressured schoolwork was credited as a reason why students were able to get involved in extracurricular activities and community events. These activities, in turn, were associated with broadened horizons, new skills, and greater confidence and maturity. The lack of high-stakes exams also functioned – in conjunction with the availability of subject taster modules in school and work experience placements – as a facilitator for discovery and reflection on what subjects were the best choices for senior cycle and third-level, and what sort of career might be desired after leaving school:

> *"A year off from intense work. A chance to try new things. I got my bronze Gaisce award, went on an exchange to [the USA]. Went to Calcutta [with the Hope Foundation]. Great experiences"*
>
> (School 18, male)

> *"Less homework = more time to play music (violin and piano). Helping people with special needs. Visiting the elderly. Time to relax"*
>
> (School 20, female)

Seen in this way, the various aspects of TY participation can – in the ideal scenario experienced by some students – contribute to a positive cycle of development where new experiences promote new skills and encourage personal growth in a self-reinforcing loop. Of course, not all students have this ideal experience. The next section deals with Fifth Year students' criticisms of the programme.

5.3   What were the worst things about TY?

Participants' feedback on the worst aspects of TY covered a series of distinct, but related, themes. The most prominent criticism of the programme was the level of boredom or a general sense of aimlessness:

> *"Being bored in class most days, having nothing to do but talk"*
>
> (School 14, male)

> *"The monotony"*
>
> (School 15, male)

> *"Constantly doing nothing"*
>
> (School 22, female)

As shown in previous sections, one of the main attractions to Third Year students is the chance to have an extended break from schoolwork in Transition Year. However, it seems that many would not have chosen to take part if they had anticipated remaining idle to the extent reported by some TY and Fifth Year students. Students who cited boredom as the worst thing about TY often left it as

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a one-word answer or short paraphrase (as above), and it may be constructive to view this boredom as a symptom of more general dissatisfaction with the TY experience. More extended responses provided by other students suggest two key proximate factors that may have contributed to this state of dissatisfaction.

The first of these key factors is one also referenced by the TY students (see Chapter Four) – namely, the disparity between what students expected to happen during TY and what they actually experienced. Students may have entered TY expecting a variety of exciting experiences and trips but instead found a more underwhelming reality, whether because of the disappointing quality of the activities provided or because of the limited range of activities that were available in the first place:

> *"A lot of things had been promised but not given (e.g. trips, tours)"*
>
> (School 14, male)

> *"It was boring. We repeatedly watched movies. Few things were taken seriously by students and teachers alike"*
>
> (School 27, male)

> *"Too much hype, didn't do anything they said we would"*
>
> (School 36, male)

An additional point here is that students may have been generally satisfied with some aspects of the year (e.g., having access to a range of subject taster modules in school to help them think about choices for the senior cycle). However, the *balance* of activities inside the school and outside the school also appeared to be very important to participating students, as was the balance of 'serious' activities to 'fun' or 'independent' activities. In addition, the manner in which students felt they were treated by teachers was crucial – for example, the extent to which they were given more freedom and encouraged to take more responsibility for their own learning, as opposed to being monitored to the same extent as they were in junior cycle. Where the balance tipped too far towards schoolwork and strict supervision, there appeared to be a danger that TY was not sufficiently differentiated from the experience of other grade levels. It seems that if TY comes to be seen as just another school year for any of these reasons, it can negate the very essence of the programme – again, fostering a disparity between expectations and reality:

> *"It is a waste of a year. Teachers are still really strict"*
>
> (School 12, female)

> *"Too many projects, not nearly enough fun activities outside school. All trips were open days which are important, but trying new things would have been good too"*
>
> (School 27, female)

> *"The worst thing was that we did little work outside of school"*
>
> (School 36, male)

Students' reactions to the discrepancy between their expectations of the year and what they found ranged from a general sense of disappointment to a more focused feeling of having been misled by teachers.

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The latter feeling, particularly, comes with worrying implications for student-teacher relationships and sense of connectedness, and hints at the second key factor contributing to boredom and unhappiness with the year. TY is more dependent than more mainstream grade levels on having a particular person, or group of people, to drive the initiative within the school. The importance of a committed and enthusiastic TY coordinator – or, ideally, a coordinating team – is crucial to the success of the year (Jeffers, 2010, 2015). However, the delivery of the programme cannot rest solely on one person, and in order to deliver full effect the wider body of school staff must attain a certain level of investment in ensuring a positive experience for the participating students. Students are sensitive to the behaviour of their teachers, and in some cases here they reported the perception that their classes were not being taken seriously. If teachers are seen as treating their TY classes as a nuisance or as a free class for themselves, their students are very likely to disengage:

> *"[The worst thing was] the lack of interest our teachers expressed in our year"*
>
> (School 15, male)

> *"Complete waste of time, the school staff [made] no effort to engage students in beneficial exercises"*
>
> (School 15, male)

> *"Class was boring as teachers didn't take TY seriously and neither did the students"*
>
> (School 28, female)

> *"Lazy attitude by some teachers, feeling like you're wasting valuable time"*
>
> (School 40, female)

When such experiences cause students to lose interest, particularly if it happens early in the year, their apathy – or disruptive behaviour stemming from boredom – can have knock-on effects on the rest of the class group, further contributing to disengagement:

> *"[The worst thing was] other people's pessimistic attitudes. They said that TY was a waste of time and they wish they did Fifth Year instead. I feel that a retreat in the early months of the year would have helped"*
>
> (School 25, female)

Organising a TY programme comes with complications and stresses that are unique to the year. TY coordinators are expected to find and book speakers from organisations and business to come into the school; to help students source and apply for work experience placements; to devise, organise, and timetable engaging activities and modules both inside and outside the school, often involving non-school staff; to find, budget for, and organise trips away, often involving overnight stays, and so on. Such outings tend to be among the aspects of the year most remembered by participants. However, in the midst of these activities students still remain in more traditional classroom settings for substantial periods of time, and if these classes fail to engage TY students it can undermine the rest of the experience.

Some students, in response to the question heading this section, said that the worst thing about TY was that they had too much work to do in class. Others said that they enjoyed the year but would have preferred more work that would have warmed them up for Fifth Year. Reconciling

these disparate preferences may be easier said than done – particularly considering the guidelines that prohibit beginning Leaving Certificate material – and is likely to depend on the school context to an extent. The Professional Development Service for Teachers (www.pdst.ie/TY), incorporating the former Transition Year Support Service, aims to support teachers of TY classes and makes available resources and expertise aimed at assisting in developing classwork for TY groups.

A final point worth making is that a lot of Fifth Year students who answered the other questions left this one blank – presumably because they had no strong feelings about any negative aspects of the year. A number of students – particularly in School 35 and School 40 – went further to remove this ambiguity by explicitly writing "*nothing*" (i.e., there was no worst thing about TY) or, in one case, "*the worst thing is that it had to end*". In other cases an answer was provided, but the problem identified might fairly be described as minor:

> "*There wasn't really anything bad about TY. Just maybe we were made help out with setting up for parent teacher meetings*"
>
> (School 16, male)

> "*There was so much going on, so it was tiring*"
>
> (School 20, female)

Although perhaps not adding to an understanding of why some students are dissatisfied with the TY experience, the choice to decline to criticise any aspect of the year, even when specifically invited to, is worth noting in itself.

5.4 Why would you [not] recommend TY to Third Year students?

The answers of Fifth Year students here tended to cover similar territory to the responses of TY students discussed in Chapter Four. The two main reasons given for recommending against the year were boredom in class and the risk of losing one's work ethic and thus finding it harder to get back into the habit of studying in Fifth Year. Reasons given in favour of taking part included becoming better-prepared for the Leaving Certificate (both in terms of subject choices and greater maturity); the benefits of knowing more or having made decisions about potential careers and third-level options; being more confident, more socially skilled, more independent, etc.; the idea that it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and Third Year students should make the most of it; and more general positive comments about how much fun was had or how interesting it was.

It was noticeable that more students chose to articulate quite complex answers in responding to this question than for the other questions described above. This suggests a deep level of reflection on why TY should be recommended for or against, so the responses should provide a good indication of what the most important features of the TY experience are perceived to be, in hindsight, by former participants.

Among the most striking endorsements for participation were several comments that credited TY with a personal transition from childhood to young adulthood:

> "*It is a year that helps mature you. I feel like I changed from a child to a young adult during it*"
>
> (School 15, male)

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> *"You can change from a young person who's childish to an experienced person who has grown up a lot in the space of a year"*
>
> (School 18, male)

> *"If you have the opportunity to do TY and become better, more experienced and mature you should do it. There is no reason to go into 5th year feeling out of your depth"*
>
> (School 40, male)

This feeling of greater adulthood may be linked to – or representative of – other reported outcomes suggested by students, such as more mature relationships with teachers, more focused motivation towards work, and community participation. For example, the increased sense of maturity that often accompanies participation in TY was linked directly by some Fifth Year students to improved attitudes towards schoolwork and study. By giving students a taste of life after school, showing them the range of experiences and what can be achieved in the real world, and helping them to decide what sort of work they want to get into, motivation to work and engagement with school are supported:

> *"Yes [I would recommend TY] because you mature and you're a year older. Have more cop on towards Leaving Cert"*
>
> (School 12, female)

> *"Going straight from 3rd year to 5th year is a massive jump, with no break. TY shows you other aspects of life and education and helps you to mature"*
>
> (School 25, female)

> *"It helped me decide what I want to do after school. Helped me mature and am now studying better"*
>
> (School 40, male)

> *"You're more motivated in 5th year after a year off and you grow up so much in the year"*
>
> (School 40, female)

Such comments may go some way to allaying the commonly-held fear that students could lose whatever habit of study was gained in preparation for the Junior Certificate examinations. However, they must be counterbalanced by a recognition that a small but non-trivial proportion of Fifth Years nonetheless reported finding it hard to settle back into study. Coming from Fifth Year students, it seems reasonable for Third Year students to consider these reports seriously:

> *"Work is harder to get back into"*
>
> (School 14, male)

> *"I think it is too difficult to get into the study routine for Fifth Year. I think that 5 years of secondary school is enough"*
>
> (School 20, female)

> *"Yes and no; transition year definitely forces people to mature and be independent but it also ruins any work ethic you built up during 3rd year"*
>
> (School 22, female)

One possible way for schools to deal with concerns of this nature would be to look at re-balancing their TY programme with a greater focus on classwork, particularly where more students are likely to be at risk of academic disengagement. A similar notion has been suggested by Joanna Siewierska (Irish Second-level Students' Union), who notes that some students "almost found [TY] too loose" and might have appreciated more structure in their classroom experience (Jeffers, 2015, p. 8). As discussed above, this runs the risk of defeating the purpose of the year out (if it becomes simply another year of normal schoolwork). However, the feeling from students' responses here suggests that a certain level of 'traditional' schoolwork – leavened with more novel project- and team-based work – would be tolerated by most students as a reasonable compromise, as long as there were also non-traditional activities and trips for them to experience outside the school:

> *"I felt TY would work for some people but not enough emphasis is placed on the people it might not work for. I feel a more honest depiction of TY should be given to Third Years"*
>
> (School 22, female)

This idea – that Third Year students should be given an accurate account of what TY is like – is crucial. Here, as in previous chapters, the importance of the flow of information to students who are making the choice to participate is noted.

Alongside this responsibility that senior students place on their teachers, though, is the responsibility that they also demand of the younger students who make that choice. This was apparent in the responses of some TY students, but was expressed more strongly by Fifth Year students. In this viewpoint, students must accept that they are accountable for their own actions and are partially responsible for creating their own Transition Year experience:

> *"Yes [I would recommend TY] if you're going to work but no if not, as it's hard to get back into the routine"*
>
> (School 12, male)

> *"If they are willing to try new things and be proactive and not waste the year I would definitely recommend"*
>
> (School 22, female)

> *"Yes – it was a good year to try new things, but you get out of it what you put in"*
>
> (School 25, female)

The advice being given here is that if Third Year and Transition Year students are willing to accept this responsibility, TY is generally seen by Fifth Year students (in retrospect) as being a positive experience. In most schools, the programme that is offered to students provides plenty of novel experiences and good information. In a minority of schools where the TY programme, as implemented, seems disappointing to participants – for example, because of a lack of activities – they still have a lot more free time available than students in other senior grade levels, which can be used to get involved in

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extra-curricular activities or to learn a skill. In addition, the chance to experience work placements and get information on possible careers, and to listen to outside speakers, is widely-provided and in itself is a key experience for many students. Thus, although not necessarily enthralled with the year, Fifth Year students with specific reservations nonetheless often took care to note the overall value of TY:

> *"I learnt a lot about myself in TY but I forgot how to study. It's a mixed bag of emotions, but I think it's an important year"*
>
> (School 28, female)

> *"A difficult question as it very much depends on the student. However, though the year was not the great experience I thought it would be, I do feel more suited to Fifth Year than students who skipped TY"*
>
> (School 40, female)

> *"Yes – I didn't want to [do TY] but I think it was a good period to consider jobs and think about life and myself"*
>
> (School 40, female)

In responding to this and previous questions, a majority of students chose to recognise that TY can contribute positively to students' personal development, whether in a holistic sense or in certain specified aspects. Beyond this widely-held acknowledgement, some students who felt that they benefited from their experiences expressed very strong feelings in favour of the year, becoming almost evangelical in wanting to promote participation as widely as possible. The following comments correspond to similar comments made by TY students who regarded their participation as a unique and potentially life-changing experience. For many students, it is described as the best year of their educational careers or, indeed, of their lives to date:

> *"If you do it then you'll have the best year of your lifetime once you make the most [of it] and get involved in it"*
>
> (School 12, female)

> *"I think it is important to have a year that is not academically focused. I feel that most people matured a lot [in TY]"*
>
> (School 20, female)

> *"I feel TY was one of the most beneficial years of my school life. I learned so many practical skills. If I could give anyone doing TY advice, it would be to get involved in everything"*
>
> (School 25, female)

> *"It's a chance for self-development and it helps you build your confidence by doing things you wouldn't ordinarily do. I don't understand why every year isn't like TY. It's not as if I didn't do any work. I worked and I learned things relevant to me and the world when I leave school… In my opinion TY was the only useful year"*
>
> (School 33, female)

Such a profoundly positive impact is noteworthy and is a strong endorsement from these students as they approach adulthood.

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5.5   Are there any parts of TY that you would have liked to take part in?

The final question in this survey was given to students who preferred not to take part in TY at all – those in schools where TY is optional who chose to move from Third Year directly to Fifth Year. These non-participants were asked if there were any aspects of the programme that would have appealed to them, had they been given the opportunity in other circumstances. As this question was directed at the minority of students who did not take part in TY, it received fewer written responses among the Fifth Year transcripts than the previous items. However, from the responses given, some consistent patterns emerged.

Most respondents were happy with not having taken part in TY in general, but regretted missing out on specific parts of the experience. The three main aspects of TY that appealed to students who did not experience them directly were the work experience placements; the trips outside school; and the availability of one or several specifically-identified (named) activities or modules that were not typically available at other grade levels, including the chance to try a range of subjects before choosing senior cycle subjects.

Work experience placements were cited as being desirable in the context of students not knowing what they wanted to do after school, and as a way for them to try different things. The experience was regarded as one of the most valuable aspects of the year for students who did take part, and this is something that their non-participating peers became aware of in conversation:

> *"Yes I would have liked to do work experience"*
>
> (School 16, male)

> *"Work experience. I would have liked to do many different things to make sure I know what I want"*
>
> (School 40, female)

Similarly, the trips out of school that are offered to TY students – exchanges with other schools, trips to universities or outdoor centres, or tours abroad – were missed by students who moved directly from junior cycle to senior cycle. Word-of-mouth from peers was, again, a factor in underlining what was missed by non-participants. Such trips were associated with the social element of TY and having a break from 'normal' school, getting to know classmates and teachers, learning new skills and, not least, having new experiences that may be unlike anything normally available in other school years:

> *"The outings – when they go on tours. They seemed to have a great time and have lots of stories to tell. But other than that I am happy with the decision I made (by not choosing TY)"*
>
> (School 22, female)

From a similar point of view – that of having new experiences, broadening horizons, and learning new skills – a range of specific activities or modules were named as things that non-participants would have liked to have taken part in. The variety of activities reflected the fact that the implemented TY programme can vary greatly between schools and between localities. Modules involving community awareness or participation (including Young Social Innovators) and entrepreneurial activities, such as running a mini-company, were particularly prominent choices. The chance to try subject taster

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modules in order to inform subject choices for the Leaving Certificate, or potential third-level options, was also missed by a number of respondents who would have preferred the opportunity:

> *"YSI [Young Social Innovators] and foreign trips"*
>
> (School 12, female)

> *"Trying different subjects for a certain length of time"*
>
> (School 35, female)

> *"I would have liked to be part of a team for the mini-company because not only do you get the chance to be creative, you gain the experience of running your own business"*
>
> (School 40, female)

These features of TY are, at the moment, mostly lost to students who do not take part in the extra year. Third Year students who choose not to take part in TY do so consciously and rationally (see Chapter Three), and there is little indication in the comments of these Fifth Year students that they would make a different choice if given the chance to go back. However, it is clear that there would be some appetite for making certain elements of the TY experience available at other grade levels, if this were feasible. How this might be organised at a practical level, and how closely such an experience would correspond with its TY equivalent outside the environment of the ring-fenced 'year out', is less clear, and would require significant consideration.

Chapter 6:
Discussion

The views detailed in the preceding chapters provide a wealth of information about what students think of Transition Year at several key stages of their post-primary careers – before, during, and after the year. The overriding impression, generally, is of great consistency among the views of students from each of the 20 schools that were surveyed. Nonetheless, participants reported some distinguishing characteristics that highlight notable differences between the TY programmes of particular schools, as well as differences in certain aspects of student opinion both within and between schools.

6.1   Main findings

Several points worth highlighting emerge consistently from this feedback.

6.1.1   Providing information about TY to junior cycle students

The flow of information about TY to Third Year students demands further attention. Nearly two-fifths of all students who had gone through TY said that it wasn't what they had expected. One-quarter of students said that their own school had not given them enough information about TY. In rare cases, very high proportions of students within a school were unhappy with the level of information given, but the desire for greater clarity was noted to some degree by students in all participating schools. The consequences of being insufficiently-prepared for the highs and lows of TY are hinted at by much of the subsequent criticism that was expressed – with some students feeling bored in class and others surprised at the level of work, or being disappointed by certain activities, not being able to participate in certain activities, not fully realising the additional expense of the year, and so on.

Peer reports are clearly an important informal source of information about TY for many students, and it may be worth exploring how further advantage could be taken of the experiences of past participants in the programme. Many schools already involve former participants in information sessions attended by Third Year students, but there seems to be demand for a more systematic way of passing on these personal insights and experiences. Any testimony from previous participants to younger students should be clear about both the high points and the downsides of the year, and should be informed by the expectations and questions of potential participants (Third Year students) in their school. This is particularly important in schools where greater proportions of students may be at risk of disengagement if they enter TY and begin to feel as though they are drifting.

In all cases, Third Year students should receive an accurate depiction of what Transition Year is before making the choice to participate. This was not always felt to have been the case by participants in this study, which clearly contributed to later disaffection with what some regarded as an underwhelming experience.

6.1.2   TY as a 'doss year' or as 'a break'

The extent to which a minority of students reported having nothing to do during their Transition Year is concerning (and possibly linked to reports that students did not know what they were getting into due to insufficient information in Third Year). Boredom was not explicitly asked about in the Likert-style items used in this survey, so the precise percentage of students who felt this way is unknown. However, it can be said that 6% of TY students were unhappy or very unhappy and a further 8% were dissatisfied with TY, and that, when asked why they felt this way, boredom in class was one of the strongest reasons given in their self-generated written responses. Students' responses to the questionnaire make clear that in some cases students have an expectation (in Third Year) or report a perception (during TY) of TY being a 'doss year'. This phrasing should not be confused with the alternative perception of TY as a respite from the high-pressure exam-centric environment of more junior and senior grade levels. Students' descriptions of *TY as a doss year* can be clearly distinguished from their descriptions of *TY as a break*.

The defining feature of *TY as a doss year* is that students feel as though they are being left to drift. They report a lacklustre, bored experience characterised by perceptions of doing nothing. This means that the extra year ends up being regarded as a waste of time by students, even when they might have been more positively disposed towards it at the beginning. The very different conception of *TY as a break* aligns more closely with the image of a successful Transition Year experience. Here, the reduction in pressure to study is transmuted into greater freedom for students to spend their time in other positive activities. Positive reports from students who describe new skills, mind-broadening experiences, and increased confidence derive from their engagement with these opportunities, which are afforded to students by the absence of high-stakes examination pressures in TY. At both extremes, students' perceptions likely reflect a combination of the characteristics of the TY programme in their school, the nature of interactions between students and teachers, and the extent of students' own active engagement, motivation, and participation.

Unfortunately, the negative feeling caused by doss year impressions can drain the energy and enthusiasm of both teachers and other students (see, for example, interviews reported by Smyth et al., 2004, and student feedback reported in Section 5.3 of this report). As seen in this study, problems are magnified when teachers who are involved with the year are regarded by their students as not taking the programme seriously or as treating TY as unimportant. One finding worth noting in this regard is Jeffers' (2007) observation that, even in schools chosen specifically for their successful TY programmes, substantial minorities of the teachers surveyed said that they did not like teaching TY classes. It is likely that negative attitudes or apathy from teachers can filter down to participants and undermine the ethos of the programme. In other words – from a student's point of view – if they feel their teachers aren't taking the class seriously, why should they? In this way, disengaged or unenthusiastic teaching in TY can pose a real challenge to the success of a school's TY programme, and may contribute directly to inhibiting students' motivation and opportunity to engage in growth-promoting activities. In such a scenario, neither the disillusioned students nor their fellow participants, whose TY experience may be diluted by unenthusiastic classmates (Smyth et al., 2004), are likely to unlock the full potential of the year.

The Transition Year guidelines document (Department of Education, 1993) is worth considering in this context. In the absence of a centrally-prescribed curriculum for the year (p. 2: "curriculum content is a matter for selection and adaptation by the individual school"), individual teachers and teams within schools are free to innovate both the content and the teaching methods used during TY. Many teachers embrace this opportunity enthusiastically, which has led to the creation of a wide range of interesting modules and approaches to learning that have not previously gained much

traction at other grade levels (Jeffers, 2015).[5] This variety, often drawing on the local community and individual circumstances for inspiration, is integral to the nature of the programme and can provide some of the most memorable aspects of the year for participants. The extent of differences in programme make-up is reflected in students' experiences across the 20 schools involved in this study. In this aspect more than most, a committed coordinator and support from the wider school staff are critical to the creation and ongoing rejuvenation of a school's Transition Year programme (Jeffers, 2015; Smyth et al., 2004; Transition Year Curriculum Support Service, 2000).

Despite these positive aspects to the curricular freedom of TY, there may be a case for refreshing the 1993 Guidelines by drawing more explicitly on the wealth of experience and expertise that has been developed among teachers over the last 20 years. In core or 'continuity' subjects, for example, recent studies have highlighted how mathematics (Moran et al., 2013) and science (Garner, Hayes & Eilks, 2014; Hayes, Childs & O'Dwyer, 2013) classes in TY are failing to reach their potential. For both subjects, teachers were found to rely heavily on traditional teaching resources, including Leaving Certificate material, and reported uncertainty as to how to develop their own material for TY classes.

Helpful resources and examples of successful practice are available and could go some way towards addressing such concerns. For example, Jeffers (2015) includes chapters of relevance to teachers of science, mathematics, history, and Irish, and the NCCA provide sample Transition Units for various topics on their website. As a further response to the problem, professional development to help teachers deal with the challenge of individualising courses should be provided, and examples of resources should be more widely advertised to teachers who are not entirely confident with the approaches that are expected of TY classes (and now also, arising from recent reforms, in junior cycle classes). Ideally, this would help to ensure that students in all schools could experience a 'minimum acceptable' type, and standard, of Transition Year, reducing the risk of unfocused drifting in the classroom. Notwithstanding more widespread use of well-structured resources in this manner, the freedom to innovate and broad curricular independence of individual schools should be maintained for teachers who do want to go a step further by continuing to create their own resources or focus on particular topics.

Although periods of boredom or disenchantment are to be expected in any classroom or on any given day – in school as elsewhere in life – the feedback from some students stated very strongly that their boredom was not an occasional experience, but the norm, with most of their days spent doing nothing very much inside a classroom. One response from a teacher's perspective might be that students are learning relevant skills even if they feel that they are doing nothing. Even so, the mere perception of wasted time is damaging in itself when held by students to extreme degrees, and such reports were widespread enough here to merit further attention. Conversely, students who enjoyed TY – the majority of students – often linked their praise of TY explicitly with recognition that they had been kept busy with a variety of activities and events by the school, or that they had taken their own initiative to spend much of their free time getting involved with organisations outside school. From this it appears as though the *density*, or spread, of activity throughout TY is of some importance to students. That is, it is not sufficient to have one (or even several) major event(s) if the rest of the year is spent listlessly. Therefore, in the small number of schools where students reported the perception that they were always in the classroom and always doing the same things, enhancing the variety and breadth of the TY experience may be rewarding by helping to raise interest in the year.

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5   However, ongoing reforms to the junior cycle (DES, 2015) are intended to facilitate a broader range of pedagogical approaches for current and future cohorts at lower secondary level. A review of senior cycle was initiated in February 2018. At the time of writing, it is unclear what proposals will emerge from the review.

6.1.3   TY and educational disadvantage

The role of the TY programme in relation to student disadvantage deserves further examination. Provision of the programme has been known to be less common in DEIS schools, vocational schools, and schools where relatively more students are from socioeconomically-disadvantaged homes (Clerkin, 2013; Jeffers, 2002; Smyth et al., 2004). The findings reported here show that, where TY is provided, Third Year students in DEIS schools were less likely than other students to think that the TY in their own school would be a good experience, and were nearly four times more likely to believe that TY is not a good experience in general. In addition, feedback from Third Year students suggested that, even if they are positively disposed towards the idea of TY or think it can be a worthwhile experience in some circumstances, they may not see it as the best choice for themselves. Skipping TY in favour of moving directly towards the senior cycle was seen as a more pragmatic option in some cases, either because of concerns about losing the habit of study, or because the opportunity cost (spending an extra year in school rather than getting out into the real world a year earlier) would not be worth the experience. Economic factors – most clearly, the additional direct costs to students that are often entailed by participation in TY activities (invited speakers, trips, transportation costs, overnight accommodation, etc.) – also place significant pressure on families with limited financial resources. For some students, these considerations may tip the balance away from participation in TY.

The responses discussed in this report show that skipping the year out is not a decision taken lightly for many students. Rather, it is a considered and rational response to the perceived pros and cons of participation. It must be noted that this line of reasoning is not unique to students in DEIS schools – it occurs to varying degrees everywhere – and also that many students in DEIS schools do take part in TY enthusiastically. However, it is clear that the pattern of regarding TY as a worthy but unviable option occurs with greater relative frequency in schools with more disadvantaged student populations. This suggests a need for additional targeted financial and educational support in such cases.

Considering the extent to which TY was reported as having positive, even life-changing, effects for some participants, it is disappointing if the social experiences and skill development that occur during the year are not seen as being realistically available to some of the students who might gain most from the experience. Concerns relating to ongoing academic performance and study habits were repeatedly cited as being among the biggest contributing factors to students' doubts about taking part in the year, suggesting that clearer or more focused support for academic subjects during TY may help to make it a more viable option for students who are interested in some aspects but otherwise unwilling to take the risk.

6.1.4   Compulsory vs optional provision

The opposite problem is raised by the issue of compulsory TY programmes. While in Third Year, students in schools where participation in TY was mandatory were as enthusiastic about TY as students in optional schools, with most (83%) endorsing the TY programme in their school. However, having gone through the year, TY students who had been part of a compulsory TY programme were more likely to say that they were unhappy with the year, that they hadn't enjoyed it, that it wasn't useful, that it wasn't what they expected, that they weren't given enough information about the year, and that they felt (relatively) less well prepared for the Leaving Certificate. They were also more likely to recommend against TY participation – 25% of TY students where participation was compulsory, compared to 16% of students who opted into the programme. This pattern remained even as the students moved further through senior cycle into Fifth Year and Sixth Year.

Although the majority of students were positive about their experience, these figures highlight the negative feeling that could be engendered by forcing a minority of students to spend an extra year in school if they are strongly against doing so. For example, feelings of having wasted a year or losing the habit of study are likely to increase the risk of disengagement from school. In some circumstances, particularly in smaller schools, running a TY programme is not administratively or financially feasible unless the full cohort takes part. In other schools, the decision to make TY compulsory is policy-driven; if the principal feels that participation is beneficial and wants all students to experience the benefits, for example (Jeffers, 2010, 2015).

Notwithstanding the potential benefits of engaged TY participation, the critical feedback of students here suggests that – in the latter scenario, particularly – the decision to make TY compulsory creates an added responsibility for school staff to ensure that participation is, in fact, engaged. If students remain staunchly unwilling participants throughout the year, they are unlikely to reap the full intended benefit of the experience in any case. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) highlights the importance of attending to students' needs for *autonomy, competence,* and *relatedness* (strong interpersonal relations) in order to support motivation and engagement in school. Where the autonomy to choose to take part in TY is denied to students, when participation is compulsory, providing them with ways to shape and take ownership of the resulting TY experience becomes even more relevant (Clerkin, 2018a, 2018b).

6.1.5   Expectations and engagement in TY

The preceding discussion leads to the fifth observation. One thing that becomes clear from the collected transcripts is that any individual student's experience of TY can be hugely different from another's, both between and within schools. The success of TY is particularly vulnerable to the interaction between two of the main determinants of student expectations for the year.

The first is that the nature of TY as a standalone 'gap year' means that students entering the programme implicitly hold TY to a higher standard than other grade levels (in terms of interest, novelty, and enjoyment) and, simultaneously, to a lower standard than other grades (in terms of the nature, level and quantity of academic work). However, the balance between these standards, to a Third Year student, is an unknown quantity – and one which is unknowable, except in broad outline. Because of this, and particularly in cases where the provision of TY within a school is liable to annual variation, individuals' expectations are likely to differ from each other more widely at the beginning of TY than at any other point in the post-primary cycle except, perhaps, at the transition point from primary education into First Year.

Secondly, on top of this, TY coordinators are tasked with designing a programme that achieves an appropriate balance of the activities that students are generally most eager for (e.g., work experience or trips to adventure centres) with other activities that elicit more varying degrees of interest (e.g., particular modules or speakers) and those that may be seen as less exciting again (e.g., English, Irish, or maths classes). The content and delivery of material in TY has to respond to a wider range of student expectations than at any other grade level. The idealised TY programme would succeed in upholding and consolidating basic academic standards following from the junior cycle while also providing novel, interesting experiences inside and outside the school on an ongoing basis, including large-scale events and a reasonable opportunity for interaction with real-life workplaces. In addition, reports from students here and from previous research (Jeffers, 2015) make it clear that engagement and enthusiasm by the wider teaching staff, not just those directly responsible for organising TY, is crucial to unlocking the full potential of the year.

Creating a successful TY programme is clearly a significant challenge, which is ably faced by coordinators in many schools across Ireland. However, the wide range of student expectations for the year, coupled with variation in the make-up of the programme within a school, can lead to frustrations being expressed in opposite directions even by students within the same school. Students' responses here suggest that, where frustrations exist, they tend to be accentuated by the perception of TY as an 'extra' or 'add-on' year in the post-primary system. In other words, if TY comes to be seen as a waste by a student, it is a bigger frustration than if they had wasted their time in a junior cycle or senior cycle year because (unless TY is compulsory in their school) they were always likely to go through the other school years but did not necessarily have to sign up for TY. Transition Year, in this light, may be seen as coming with a high opportunity cost if it does not meet expectations. This potential for mismatch between students' expectations and experience of TY poses a significant challenge to schools and policy-makers.

6.1.6   Most students report a positive experience of TY

The discussion has, thus far, mostly dealt with aspects of the programme that require some attention. However, the final point to be made is that despite these specific critiques, by far the most consistent feature to emerge from the student feedback to this survey is that TY was a very positive experience for the vast majority of students. About four in every five TY students said that they were satisfied or happy with the experience. A similar proportion would recommend TY to Third Year students, having taken part and knowing what is involved. Three-quarters of TY students found the year to be enjoyable, increasing to almost 90% if more ambivalent responses ("*ok*") are included. Three-quarters of students felt they were given enough information by their school before beginning the year.

Almost half of all TY students felt better-prepared for the Leaving Certificate than they would have without TY, and another one-third of students reported that the year out did their Leaving Certificate preparation no harm. Given the real concerns about TY and subsequent academic performance held by many students and parents, these figures are worth noting. Fifth and Sixth Year students noted the new friendships that were made during TY, their increased confidence following the year out, their better subject choices for the Leaving Certificate, the new skills they learned and are learning, their greater knowledge about what they want to do after school, their experience of learning to work collaboratively in a team, their improved organisational and self-management skills, and the benefit of seeing more links between their schoolwork and how it may be applied in the real world.

These figures give some sense of the extent of students' positive impressions of the programme. The depth of this feeling is best appreciated through the additional comments provided by students across all grade levels – Third Year students who were very much looking forward to it, TY students who didn't want the year to end, and Fifth Year students who looked back and described TY as the best year of their lives. Although the feeling was not shared by all students, many participants provided highly positive comments on their time in TY – in some cases crediting it as a turning point that may turn out to have changed their lives. In that light, the concerns expressed above should be regarded as constructive criticism that is aimed at improving and making more widely accessible a programme that appears to be regarded, in general, as a valuable experience for most participants.

6.2   Recommendations

Following the findings described above, this section presents some suggestions for teachers (drawing on students' feedback to the survey) and recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners

in agencies such as the DES, NCCA and PDST (aimed at addressing some current issues and maximising the future potential of the TY programme). Following these recommendations, a final section presents some suggestions for further research that would be useful in developing a deeper understanding of the role played by TY in Irish education.

6.2.1 For teachers

For teachers and TY coordinators to consider:

1) A substantial proportion of students – more than one-third, on average, but higher in some schools – reported that their TY experience was not what they had expected. Similarly, almost one-quarter of students explicitly said that their school had not given them enough information about TY before beginning the programme. Supporting comments suggest that there are at least two key areas where communication to Third Year students could be improved, where feasible. These are, firstly, by going beyond general outlines by clarifying the day-to-day details of what happens in TY and how it differs from other grade levels; and, secondly, in being careful that participants do not begin their TY with unrealistically rose-tinted expectations of trips, events, and the daily classroom routine. The mismatch between what students expect and what they report actually doing can be one of the major contributory factors to negative perceptions of the year.

2) Students consistently report more negative experiences of TY in schools where participation is compulsory. Although it is recognised that there may be good reasons for considering compulsory provision of the programme, such a decision should be taken carefully if providing the programme on an optional basis is a viable alternative. Engaged student participation in the opportunities offered by TY should be seen as key to achieving positive outcomes (Clerkin, 2018a, 2018b). If the school policy is for compulsory participation, all teachers involved with TY classes (not just TY coordinators) should be mindful of the likelihood that some students may not want to be there and take steps to maintain their active participation. This could include, for example, ensuring active student involvement and input in the assessment of their activities, or building up a portfolio of achievements and learning experiences on an ongoing basis (Jeffers, 2015).

3) Many Third Year students, in self-generated comments, described how they were looking forward to TY either because it would give them a chance to spend more time on particular sports that they were already involved with, or because they wanted to get fitter generally and were hoping for more time for P.E. during TY. Comments of this nature were given by many students across all school types. Coming from 15-year-olds – at an age when physical activity and exercise rates often decrease sharply, particularly among girls[6] – the comments highlight the potential that TY holds as a year during which substantial time and attention could be devoted to health awareness and the promotion of physical and mental health among Irish adolescents.

4) TY is a natural space within which positive personal development, social confidence and skill, and student wellbeing can be supported and enhanced. These ambitions are in

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6 For example, a brief summary of findings from the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children survey shows frequent exercise among boys in Ireland going from 67% to 55% between the ages of 12-14 and 15-17, while frequent exercise among girls drops from 51% to 28% over the same period. See http://www.nuigalway.ie/hbsc/documents/fs_17_2006_july09.pdf for details.

line with the stated purpose of the year and also with Third Year students' hopes for the programme. The quarter-century since the mainstreaming of TY has seen the creation of many innovative, resourceful and popular in-school modules and out-of-school initiatives by participating teachers. Accessible examples of some of these are presented in Jeffers (2015), and through the PDST (www.pdst.ie) and NCCA (www.ncca.ie) websites. Some further ideas and perspectives on positive education are given by Norrish et al. (2013), who describe a pioneering programme aimed at promoting positive development in Geelong Grammar School in Australia (their article is free to download here: www.aweschools.com/files/An_applied_framework_for_Positive_Education.pdf). White and Waters (2015) provide detailed examples of a similar programme in a different school, discussing English lessons, physical education, student leadership, and counselling. Resources such as these should be shared widely, and collaborative discussion between teachers and coordinators across schools encouraged, in order to promote and disseminate examples of good practice. This would provide support for teachers who may not yet be comfortable in creating content or adapting their teaching methods for TY classes. It would also help to ensure that teachers have a wide range of options around which to design their school's TY programme, given local circumstances. Finally, these TY-based educational resources and the associated acquired teaching experience could also be utilised more widely as schools adapt to the pedagogical aims and approaches of the revised junior cycle (DES, 2015).

6.2.2   For policy-makers and educational agencies

In order to improve the TY experience for future cohorts:

1) The Transition Year Guidelines for schools (Department of Education, 1993) should be updated and refreshed with examples of good practice and links to relevant resources. The guidelines should include a commitment to making participation available to all students, as far as possible, regardless of their socioeconomic background or other potential barriers.

2) Continuing professional development should be provided to explicitly address the concerns of teachers who are unsure or lacking in confidence with regard to adapting their teaching for TY classes, and should encourage them to make use of already-available resources and ideas. Teachers' requests for updated in-service training related to TY – and sufficient working time to plan and implement ideas following such training – have been identified in previous surveys (Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004; see also Lewis & McMahon, 1996), and issues with teaching TY classes are indirectly implicated in much of the negative student feedback to the current study. Professional development is particularly needed for subjects such as mathematics, English, and science, where teaching during TY most often falls back on traditional teaching methods using Leaving Certificate material. By elaborating on models of good practice, drawing attention to external organisations that provide a natural focus for TY activities (e.g., Young Scientist, Young Social Innovators, AIB Build-a-Bank Challenge, etc.), and identifying examples of innovative modules that could be transferred from one school to another with minimal adaptation, the pressure to create content would be eased and teachers who are not as energised by TY might find it easier to maintain momentum and retain student engagement through the year. This may help to address the persistent problem of 'doss year' perceptions (and experiences) of TY.

3) In light of TY's status as a programme that is custom-made for supporting student autonomy, TY-related professional development should emphasise and elaborate on teaching

approaches that support learners' autonomy in the classroom (see, for example, the work of Johnmarshall Reeve and colleagues; Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Reeve, 2006, 2009; Reeve & Cheon, 2016; Su & Reeve, 2011). Autonomy-supportive teaching is described as "a set of beliefs and assumptions about the nature of student motivation, [rather than being] a prescribed set of techniques and strategies" (Reeve, 2006), and includes principles such as providing rationales and explaining the value of classroom activities, and encouraging students' effort and persistence. As well as enhancing students' active participation in TY, Transition Year classes offer teachers a chance to hone their autonomy-supportive teaching skills in a relatively low-stakes environment, with positive implications for teaching at more junior and senior grade levels. Professional development of this nature represents one route through which "the aims and philosophy" of TY could "permeate the entire school" as intended (Department of Education, 1993).

4) A number of studies have described how provision of TY is lower in schools with greater levels of student disadvantage (Clerkin, 2013; Jeffers, 2002; Smyth et al., 2004). This gap in provision has not narrowed since mainstreaming in 1994 (Clerkin, 2013). (With that said, it should be acknowledged that there is evidence that a considerable proportion of schools that do not offer TY may have done so in the past, but discontinued the programme due to lack of student interest or parental support; Smyth et al., 2004). Where TY is available, student uptake is also somewhat lower in schools with higher concentrations of disadvantage, largely due to a combination of limited student interest in the extra year – including concerns about negative effects on academic performance – and reservations about the financial implications of participation. Even a basic TY programme can involve substantial additional expenses over other grade levels, for both the schools and for students' families. These costs are heightened by out-of-school trips and activities which are, as seen in the preceding chapters, often among the defining experiences of the year for students. With this in mind, further resources should be made available to support provision of the TY programme nationally. Any additional resources should be directed, in the first instance, towards schools serving more disadvantaged intakes and towards students from socioeconomically-disadvantaged backgrounds (in all schools) in order to ensure that participation in TY is feasible for all students who wish to take part, and so that they may experience an effective programme.

5) In the absence of additional resources – and remembering that participation in TY is not currently a realistic option for a substantial minority of students – a more radical approach would be to look at ways of allowing these students to experience some elements of the TY programme, at a key stage in their socioemotional development, without having to commit to a full year away from traditional education. A review of senior cycle provision, including TY, is currently underway, having begun in February 2018. Previous proposals to integrate TY as part of a compulsory three-year senior cycle (e.g., NCCA, 2002) may go too far, given the consistent evidence that students who are currently forced into TY tend to feel more negatively about their experience. Nonetheless, in schools without a standalone TY programme, could space be made for work experience placements early in Fifth Year, with career-related and personal development support following alongside more traditional classes? It may be worth exploring possibilities for extending important areas of learning – such as work experience – from TY to other grade levels for the benefit of students who do not have the opportunity to take part in the full year. However, in considering any such options, it should be remembered that one of the key distinguishing characteristics of TY at the moment is the extended space and time that it affords students to develop their own skills and interests in the absence of

high-stakes pressure. For these reasons, the full impact of TY may not be easily replicable outside the ring-fenced setting of a standalone programme. (See also the next point.)

6) The revised junior cycle – which stresses more active learning methods, formative assessment, the development of short courses, and a greater focus on wellbeing (DES, 2015) – could usefully tap into the wealth of professional expertise that has been amassed by TY coordinators and teachers since the programme's foundation in the 1970s, and particularly since its expansion in the 1990s. (In several respects, the junior cycle reforms can be seen as building on an openness to the student voice and pedagogical principles that have been illustrated in TY classes for several decades.) For example, experienced TY coordinators could provide professional support to teachers of junior cycle classes with regard to the creation of short courses and the use of teaching and assessment methods that have traditionally been more commonly-found in TY classes.

7) Future reforms should examine linkages between the junior cycle, TY, and the rest of the senior cycle with a view to maintaining a coherent and holistic educational philosophy throughout all years of post-primary education. At the time of writing, the NCCA is engaged in a review of senior cycle education (including TY), including consultations with teachers and students around the country. This consultation offers an important opportunity for students' voice and the experience of practitioners to come to the fore in identifying – and potentially showcasing – examples of good practice (and unsatisfactory practice) in TY. Such a showcase would provide exemplars for other schools in Ireland to learn from and adapt, as well as educators and programme developers in other systems (Clerkin, 2018a, 2018b). The role of (various aspects of) TY in a possibly-revised senior cycle structure in future years remains to be seen. However, it is clear that a majority of students who have gone through TY, from the 1970s to the present day, have found merit in their participation.

8) This study, and others, have highlighted several areas in which further information is urgently needed on if, how, and to what extent the aims of TY are being achieved in practice. These include the need for greater detail on the social and personal outcomes associated with participation, on the characteristics of effective TY programmes, and on possible associations between TY outcomes and academic achievement (Clerkin, 2012, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Smyth et al., 2004). Some suggestions for study are given next. The Department of Education and Skills and other relevant agencies should commission ongoing research with the aim of enhancing our understanding of TY and its role in Irish education.

6.3   Further study

The findings discussed above rely heavily on students' perceptions, attitudes, and reports of the year, self-reported via a written questionnaire. No equivalent data from TY coordinators or other teachers in the participating schools, or from students' parents or friends, are available. Similarly, school-level information is limited to broad categories (e.g., school type, compulsory vs optional TY).

Corresponding information from other sources, particularly teachers, would help to cross-validate and complement the findings reported here. For example, interactions between students' attitudes, TY coordinators' attitudes and ideas for the programme, and levels of enthusiasm for the novel approaches of TY among the wider teaching staff could be explored. In addition, coordinators' responses to the feedback given by students about TY in their own school would help to contextualise elements of especially strong criticism or praise that were noted in the preceding chapters.

There are several ways in which these findings could be extended, including further use of the existing longitudinal dataset created for this study, additional studies that would provide complementary information, and more detailed analysis of socioemotional development among adolescent students in Ireland. Some suggestions for future study are made below.

6.3.1   Analysis of the ERC's longitudinal dataset

Several empirical analyses of the quantitative data provided by students for the ERC's longitudinal study have been published or are in progress.[7] Clerkin (2016) presents data on students' reported homework and study behaviours across the four grade levels – Third Year to Sixth Year – and differences in students' study activities in senior cycle (for example, Fifth and Sixth Year students who had taken part in TY reported completing their assigned homework and doing extra study significantly more frequently than their non-TY classmates). Clerkin (2018c) describes a series of logistic regression models that were used to identify the characteristics of Third Year students, in schools where TY is optional, that predicted their participation in TY during the following school year. (Some of these findings are noted in Chapter One.)

Clerkin (2019) presents latent growth curve models in an initial analysis of students' socioemotional development over the three waves of the study, relating their baseline characteristics in Third Year and any changes over time to their participation in TY. These models showed significant differences on several indicators between TY participants and non-participants while still in Third Year (i.e., before TY), but fewer differences in developmental patterns than were expected based on qualitative reports of psychosocial growth and maturity that have been associated with TY. For example, no significant differences over time were found between TY participants and non-participants on measures of student-teacher relationships and social self-efficacy. The disparity between (on one hand) the non-significant findings with these quantitative indicators of socioemotional characteristics and (on the other) the consistent qualitative evidence of strong perceptions of improved student-teacher relationships, and social competence and confidence, merits further investigation.

These findings are particularly interesting because both the qualitative and quantitative data were provided contemporaneously by the same group of students. In qualitative terms, as shown in this report, the views of the student participants in the ERC longitudinal study corresponded closely with the positive and negative reports of TY that have been provided by previous studies over many years, including Egan and O'Reilly (1979), Smyth et al. (2004), Jeffers (2007), and the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (2014). However, in quantitative terms, the results of the growth models – the first of their kind in research related to TY – were surprising.

Further analysis of these data is required. Two immediate priorities present themselves. First, it is possible that the averaged patterns of student development described by the latent growth models mask substantive variation in students' development (i.e., it is possible that a subset of students may experience significant growth on a given outcome, but that others do not, or even decline slightly). In such a case, identifying the proportions of students fitting various developmental profiles, and the school- or individual-level characteristics that are associated with differing developmental patterns, would be of interest. Second, the substantial positive association between TY participation and Leaving Certificate achievement (Millar & Kelly, 1999; Smyth et al., 2004) should be explored in greater detail using these data, which provide an opportunity for academic achievement to be examined with

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7   All publications relating to this study are available from www.erc.ie/TY or by contacting the author.

reference to aspects of students' engagement at school, social and personal characteristics, and their homework and study behaviours.

6.3.2 Topics for additional future study

The data collected here provide a detailed outline of the student experience of TY. However, without similar information from teachers it is impossible to know how closely students' views correspond to teacher reports of their TY programme or how much disagreement there may be. For example, would teachers in schools where students' comments imply low teacher interest in TY actually report more negative attitudes to the programme? Or might it be the case that a teacher with positive attitudes towards the programme but who uses traditional teaching methods with TY class groups is perceived negatively by students?

It is clear from previous research, and from students' ratings here, that there are substantial differences between schools in the structure and content of a TY programme and in how well it is received by students. As reported here and elsewhere (Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004), teaching practices in TY classrooms and teachers' relationships with their students are important factors in how students regard their time in TY. It would be worthwhile to gather data on teachers' attitudes and practices in order to examine their relationship with student outcomes. As well as seeking the personal views of individual teachers within schools, school principals and TY coordinators could be asked about the content, organisation, teaching support, and other structural aspects of their school's TY programme, as well as about their own background and perspectives on TY. This would provide the additional benefit of updating and expanding on the information given by Smyth et al. (2004). Considering the changes in provision and uptake of the programme since their data were gathered (Clerkin, 2018a), it would be constructive to examine changes that may have occurred in the meantime. For example, neither the Department of Education and Skills nor the PDST collect information on the compulsory or optional nature of TY programmes (E. Herlihy, PDST, personal communication, 27 January 2016; H. Maxwell, DES, personal communication, 28 January 2016), which means that the extent to which Smyth et al.'s estimate (that one-quarter of TY programmes are compulsory) is still accurate is unknown.

Ideally, a survey of this nature would be combined with a collection of student outcomes in participating schools. Both teachers and students could be asked to provide information focused on priority indicators, with follow-up surveys of the students in order to examine changes over time that could be linked back to characteristics of the school and the school's TY programme. This would produce a much-needed resource for examining interactions between students' socioemotional outcomes, teacher attitudes and practices, and how both relate to the implemented TY programme.

Future research could also go beyond the relatively short-term longitudinal outcomes reported here by following students over a longer time period – both backwards, to earlier ages, and forwards to the end of secondary school and into early adulthood. Examination of non-linear patterns of development, such as curvilinear growth, require at least four (and ideally more) waves of data for full model specification. Taking a broader view of social and personal development among young people in Ireland would help to place the impact of the TY programme in a more complete context. Further, as noted in Chapter One, the potential long-term impact of TY participation (represented as the fourth stage in the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1.1) remains unexamined to date.

Finally, although student reports consistently paint a generally positive view of the TY programme, further quantitative evidence regarding the outcomes of participation is needed. In the first instance, the findings reported by Clerkin (2019) should be replicated. In addition, more information on the

development of metacognitive and self-regulating behaviours (Dent & Koenka, 2016) during TY would be useful. Individual differences in personality may also play a role in the nature or extent of students' engagement in the range of opportunities available during TY. In addition, TY students' extra-curricular activities and any paid work outside school are relevant factors worth considering for their contribution to students' personal development outside school, and have received relatively little attention to date. These studies could expand the evidence base by including specific indicators of positive development, wellbeing, and preparedness for life. Any such studies should involve a minimum of 30-50 schools – or ideally more – so that school-level effects can be examined robustly in a multilevel framework, and stronger inferences drawn about the characteristics of effective Transition Year programmes.

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