

HOMEWORK AND STUDY BEHAVIOURS BEFORE THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE AMONG TRANSITION YEAR PARTICIPANTS AND NON-PARTICIPANTS

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This article describes the self-reported homework and study behaviours of almost 5500 students from Third Year to Sixth Year in a representative sample of 20 Irish schools. In particular, the studying habits of Fifth Year and Sixth Year students are examined with reference to their previous participation or non-participation in Transition Year, which is intended, in part, to help students to become more self-directed and effective learners. Students who took part in Transition Year are found to be more likely to engage in additional study and to persist with difficult questions in Fifth Year and Sixth Year. Overall, they report spending significantly more time on homework in the years leading up to the Leaving Certificate than their non-participating classmates, after controlling for home background and educational aspirations.

This paper discusses patterns of homework and study behaviours of students in Irish post-primary schools. Homework is traditionally considered to encompass all 'tasks assigned to students by schoolteachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours' (Cooper, 1989, p. 7), a definition that includes specific teacher-assigned tasks to be carried out in students' own time but excludes voluntary extra-curricular activities and work carried out during the school day (e.g., during free classes). Some of the suggested benefits of homework to students include enhanced retention of factual knowledge and deeper conceptual understanding; improved study skills and a better attitude towards school; greater self-discipline, self-regulation, and time management skills; and a greater connection between the students, their parents, and the formal learning environment of the school (Cooper, 1989; Cooper, Robinson & Patall, 2006). These benefits may accompany a range of more negative implications of homework, such as the risk of physical and mental fatigue; loss of interest in a topic (satiation); loss of time for other extra-curricular or social activities; and acting as a focus for parental pressure on students to study hard

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and do well in school (Cooper, 1989; Cooper et al., 2006).

The relationship between homework-setting and academic achievement is not straightforward to establish. Cooper (1989), in a classic review of the literature, noted that studies showing negative associations of homework with achievement were outweighed by studies showing positive associations. However, he then went on to note the poor quality of many of those studies, rendering the conclusions somewhat tenuous. Subsequent reviews (Cooper et al., 2006; Sharp, Keys & Benefield, 2001) have generally reported negligible or slightly positive associations between the time spent on homework and achievement at primary level, with increasingly stronger associations at higher grade levels. Cooper and Valentine (2001), for example, report effect sizes of .04 (elementary school), .14 (junior high school), and .53 (senior high school) associated with the time spent on homework by students. Broadly speaking, the evidence suggests that a shorter or medium-length period of managed and focused study is much more beneficial than longer periods of unfocused or disengaged study (Rogers, 2012; Sharp et al., 2001). The 'optimal' duration of homework at secondary level has been suggested as being around five hours (Fernández-Alonso, Suárez-Álvarez & Muñiz, 2015) or between 5-10 hours per week at lower secondary level (Cooper et al., 2006), and up to 12 hours per week at upper secondary (Cooper et al., 2006). Beyond this point, further time spent on homework appears to lead to diminishing marginal gains. The caveat underlying all of these recommendations is that the reported associations are correlational, and cannot be taken to infer that more homework in itself leads to higher achievement.

Developmental differences further complicate these interpretations. For example, there is evidence to suggest that lower-achieving students tend to spend more time on their homework at primary level, but that higher achievers invest more time in homework and study in senior grades (Sharp et al., 2001). Girls are reported to spend more time on homework than boys during the senior cycle years in Ireland (Smyth, Banks & Calvert, 2011), a pattern which has also appeared internationally (Sharp et al., 2001). However, in contrast to the international research reported above, Smyth et al. (2011) reported that the amount of time spent on homework by Leaving Certificate students is not associated with their examination performance once their choice of subject levels (the number of subjects taken at Higher, Ordinary, or Foundation level) is considered. Given the interrelationships between students' choice of subjects, choice of subject level, and related factors such as their educational aspirations, socioeconomic background, and prior experiences in school, Smyth et al.'s

finding underlines the difficulties involved in isolating associations with the simple duration of time spent on homework in relation to academic achievement. Indeed, the frequency of homework assignments may be a more important factor in supporting learning than their duration (Fernández-Alonso et al., 2015).

Aside from academic achievement, homework-setting is often also intended to support the development of broader self-management and self-regulatory skills in students (Muhlenbruck, Cooper, Nye & Lindsay, 2000; Sammons et al., 2012a; Zimmerman & Kitsantis, 2005). In this view, the time spent on homework is not simply aimed at learning content, but is a way to provide students with opportunities to develop study skills and strategies for self-regulation. In England, Sammons et al. (2012b) have found strong positive associations between the amount of time spent on homework and students' self-regulating and pro-social behaviour, and strong negative associations between time spent on homework and hyperactive (lowered self-control) and anti-social behaviour. Cooper and his colleagues (Cooper, 1989; Muhlenbruck et al., 2000) suggest that the very act of engaging in homework itself may be useful in developing self-management skills and discipline. In this light, it should be noted that young children tend to have less well-developed self-regulatory capabilities than older adolescents (Bempechat, 2004; Warton, 1997), which may go some way to explaining the smaller association between homework time and achievement found among younger age groups. This observation also serves to re-frame the primary purpose of homework at lower grade levels as being about the development of study skills and time management for younger children, rather than the learning of specific content (Bempechat, 2004). The same point is further developed by Fernández-Alonso et al. (2015), who conclude that their data 'send a clear message' (p. 1083) to teachers of lower secondary students that homework should be seen primarily as a tool with which to instil work habits and promote self-regulated learning among students. In this view, homework should be assigned regularly and systematically, and should provide some level of challenge to students in preference to any overuse of tasks focusing on repetition or simple revision of content.

In terms of homework strategies and behaviours, the existence of several distinct patterns of study behaviour among mid-adolescent (16-year-old) students in England has been reported by Rogers (2013). The six main typologies were characterised as: first, students who lack efficiency (putting in good effort but exhibiting poor time management); second, hard-working

students with high anxiety; third, students with little directed effort; fourth, students with a reasonable perception of studying but without much anxiety; fifth, hard-working and effective students; and finally, students who lack focused effort or concern. These groups were categorised on the basis of students' answers to Likert-type items in a questionnaire. However, differences between the groups were also evident on other measures.

For example, the amount of time spent by Rogers' (2013) students on homework ranged from 8.4 hours per week among 'students with little directed effort' to 11.2 and 11.5 hours per week among (respectively) 'hard-working and effective' students and 'hard-working students with high anxiety'. The two categories of 'hard-working' students, together with students who had a 'reasonable perception of studying but little anxiety', outperformed all other categories in their GCSE examinations. The latter grouping reported only 9.8 hours of study per week, demonstrating again that the amount of time spent on homework is not necessarily directly predictive of academic success. These students were, however, noted for their use of self-checking strategies during studying. This suggests that their working time may have been spent more efficiently than by other students, highlighting the importance of metacognitive and organisational strategies to successful studying.

The acquisition of such strategies is key to successful performance in school examinations, and, not least, in the world outside school. In general, higher academic performance tends to be associated with a deep approach to learning (where the student is focused on understanding meaning), in contrast to a surface approach, where the student focuses more on learning and reproducing isolated facts (Rogers, 2012). Students are aware of this, as is clear from the concerns commonly expressed by students while preparing for examinations – including worries about managing their time appropriately, not having sufficient study skills or knowing 'how to study', and being unsure about who to talk to if they need help (Rogers, 2013).

Although Rogers' study dealt with students in England, it is worth noting here that students in Ireland who have gone through Transition Year (TY) are often described in subsequent years as having developed better organisational and time management skills (Jeffers, 2007; Smyth, Byrne & Hannan, 2004). They also tend to be more willing and able to approach teachers with queries, which can help to clarify or elaborate on points of confusion. Thus, in addition to the socioemotional outcomes more commonly associated with TY, there is reason to believe that TY participation might help to foster self-regulatory skills that should support independent learning in the senior examination cycle.

In fact, the Transition Year Guidelines (Department of Education, 1993) are clear that participating students 'should be better equipped and more disposed to study than their counterparts who did not have the benefit of this year' upon entering the Leaving Certificate programme. TY participants do tend to perform better in the Leaving Certificate than non-participants (Millar & Kelly, 1999), even controlling for socioeconomic status (Smyth et al., 2004), although the reasons behind this association remain unclear.

This paper focuses specifically on students' self-reported homework and study behaviours, which are relevant in the context of the self-directed learning that TY is intended to promote. Data are reported for all grade levels from Third Year to Sixth Year, with a particular focus on differences in the senior examination years between students who had previously taken part in TY and those who did not. For example, it might be expected that students who have taken part in TY would report self-directed study and homework completion behaviours to a greater extent than their peers who did not participate in the extra year. Other cognitive or socioemotional indicators related to TY participation are not considered here. Further discussion of these outcomes can be found in Clerkin (2012, 2016), Jeffers (2007), and Smyth et al. (2004).

PARTICIPANTS AND MEASURES

The data described below were collected as part of a three-wave longitudinal study of socioemotional outcomes associated with participation in TY.¹ Twenty schools around Ireland were invited to take part in the study after being sampled from the most up-to-date list of all schools providing TY at the time the sample was drawn (for the 2008/09 academic year, in 2010). Schools were sampled randomly from this list, which was stratified by school size, socioeconomic characteristics and gender mix so that sampled schools can be considered as providing a nationally-representative reflection of students' experience of TY. The programme was optional in 13 of the 20 participating schools, and was compulsory for all students in the remainder. In each wave, an information sheet, consent form, and questionnaire were administered to participating students by their teachers. The questionnaire was designed to take no more than one class period to complete for most students.

The first wave took place in March/April 2011 (Third Year, TY, and Fifth Year students), the second wave in March/April 2012 (TY and Fifth Year

¹ Previous and future publications arising from this study can be viewed at: www.erc.ie/programme-of-work/transition-year-survey.

students), and the third wave in March/April 2013 (Fifth Year and Sixth Year students). All students in the respective year groups were asked to participate at each wave, and response rates were generally high. 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 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.

If all enrolled students had been present when questionnaires were administered, the participation rates shown below (Table 1) 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 overall percentages presented below can therefore be regarded as highly conservative – almost certainly underestimates of the true response rate. The most conservative calculation provides an overall participation rate in each wave of between 69% and 77%, while, if a 12.5% absenteeism rate on the day of administration is assumed, participation rates range between 78% and 88% (Table 1). For comparison, participation rates ranging from 45% (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012) to 69% (Freeney & O’Connell, 2012) to 84% (Perkins et al., 2013) have been reported with similar cohorts of second-level students in other recent Irish surveys.

In total, 5472 individual students took part in at least one wave of the survey, providing 9058 completed questionnaires across all grades in all three waves.

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

Grade	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
<i>(assuming 12.5% absenteeism)</i>	<i>(4603)</i>		<i>(88)</i>	<i>(2973)</i>		<i>(85)</i>	<i>(3174)</i>		<i>(78)</i>	

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

The primary outcome measures of the survey were indicators of students' socioemotional development, including social self-efficacy, personal responsibility, and engagement in school.² However, participants were also asked to think about specified practices related to homework and study outside school. These questions were written in response to suggestions of greater self-directed learning among senior students following TY (Department of Education, 1993; Jeffers, 2007). Students were asked to think of their homework over the weeks prior to the survey and to say how frequently, on a five-point scale (*Rarely/never* to *Every day*), they engaged in a number of study or revision behaviours – for example, practising exam questions, thinking of different ways to solve a problem, or not doing the homework given by teachers. Along with these specific studying behaviours, students were asked to describe the amount of time spent on homework or revision at home in a typical week (in hours and minutes, as a self-generated number). Their responses to these questions form the focus of this paper.

In addition, participants were asked about some background information such as their home language (English, Irish, or another), their parents' educational qualifications (as a proxy measure for socioeconomic status) and the highest level of educational qualification that they would like to achieve. Future-oriented cognitions such as educational aspirations are strongly related to subsequent academic achievement and attainment, both in Ireland and internationally (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Rothon, Arephin, Klineberg, Cattell & Stansfeld, 2011; Shiel, Cosgrove, Sofroniou & Kelly, 2001), and also tend to be positively associated with higher parental qualifications and more positive attitudes towards school (Geckova, Tavel, van Dijk & Reijneveld, 2010). These factors are therefore worth considering alongside students' study behaviour.

RESULTS

The reported behaviour of TY students was similar to that of students at other grade levels in some respects, but not in others (Table 2). The most marked differences were apparent in behaviours involving additional or self-directed study. For example, doing extra study and using lists of bullet points or flash cards (e.g., with summaries of a particular topic) to revise were most common among Third Year and Sixth Year students in advance of their Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations. These practices were least common among TY, reflecting the absence of a formal high-stakes examination in the programme.

² Longitudinal analysis of these outcomes will be reported in forthcoming publications.

Table 2
Homework/study behaviours and time spent on homework/study, by grade level

In the last few weeks, how frequently did you...		Third Year (N = 1563)	TY (N = 2297)	Fifth Year (N = 4010)	Sixth Year (N = 1188)
Revise with bullet points or flash cards (%)	Rarely / never	52.1	77.4	56.5	45.5
	A few times a month	19.9	13.7	22.7	16.7
	Once a week	10.3	5.5	9.9	14.3
	2-3 times a week	13.5	2.6	8.9	16.8
	Every day	4.3	0.8	2.0	6.6
Practise exam questions (%)	Rarely / never	8.8	68.6	40.2	11.5
	A few times a month	15.0	15.1	29.0	15.1
	Once a week	18.5	7.6	16.3	22.0
	2-3 times a week	32.4	6.5	12.6	36.3
	Every day	25.2	2.2	2.0	15.1
Do extra study (%)	Rarely / never	22.3	66.3	34.2	17.6
	A few times a month	17.3	18.5	23.1	12.8
	Once a week	16.3	7.4	17.2	16.3
	2-3 times a week	25.6	5.4	18.2	28.4
	Every day	18.6	2.4	7.5	24.9
Think of different ways to solve a problem (%)	Rarely / never	15.6	25.0	20.0	17.2
	A few times a month	16.7	18.8	19.6	17.4
	Once a week	18.8	19.8	20.9	21.5
	2-3 times a week	25.9	20.0	24.1	26.6
	Every day	23.0	16.4	15.5	17.3
Give up on a question because it's hard (%)	Rarely / never	31.4	34.7	23.6	21.8
	A few times a month	23.8	29.2	27.7	28.2
	Once a week	22.1	17.2	23.4	23.0
	2-3 times a week	15.3	12.1	17.9	19.5
	Every day	7.4	6.8	7.4	7.5
Not do the homework given by teachers (%)	Rarely / never	43.9	39.9	43.1	37.5
	A few times a month	24.0	24.3	24.2	22.0
	Once a week	15.9	15.7	15.6	18.0
	2-3 times a week	11.3	12.4	11.9	15.8
	Every day	4.8	7.7	5.2	6.7
Hours per week: mean (SD)		8.8 (6.5)	2.3 (3.1)	8.3 (6.2)	12.7 (8.8)

Similarly, practising exam questions was reported most frequently by Third Year students (25% of whom practised questions *every day* and 76% at least weekly) and Sixth Years (15% practising *every day* and 73% at least weekly). TY students, again, engaged in this practice least often. However, about one-sixth of students (16%) reported practising exam questions at least once a week, and nearly one-third of students (31%) at least a few times a month, even when they were in TY.

In contrast, the extent to which students reported trying to think of different ways to solve a particular problem was relatively similar across all grade levels. Similarly, the frequency with which respondents reported giving up on difficult questions and the frequency with which they neglected to complete their assigned homework was similar across all grades, although it was slightly more common among senior cycle students (TY, Fifth Year, and Sixth Year).

Third Year and Fifth Year students spent approximately equal amounts of time on homework and study at home, averaging 8.8 hours and 8.3 hours per week, respectively. Sixth Year students invested about 1.5 times as much time on study, at nearly 13 hours per week, as students in Third and Fifth Years. TY students spent the least time on homework after school, at just 2.3 hours per week. This is equivalent to less than half an hour per day over five days (compared to one hour and forty minutes daily among Fifth Year students, for example). As is evident from the large standard deviations associated with the mean homework hours (Table 2), these figures provide a broad view of students' practices. Substantial variation was apparent at each grade level, with some students reporting no time or negligible amounts of time on homework each week, and others reporting the equivalent of several hours' work each night.

Beyond grade-based comparisons, the reported homework behaviours can also be examined within the senior examination grades (Fifth and Sixth Year) with reference to students' former participation, or non-participation, in TY. For both grade levels, the students within a given school can be expected to be exposed to broadly similar demands, so the behaviour of students who experienced TY and those who did not can be compared more directly. These comparisons are shown in Table 3.

A consistent pattern emerged at Fifth Year, with more students who skipped TY saying that they rarely or never engaged in self-directed study behaviours (revising with bullet points, practising exam questions, doing extra study). Similarly, non-participants reported giving up on difficult questions and not doing their assigned homework on a more frequent basis than their classmates who had opted for TY. By contrast, TY participants practised exam questions and engaged in extra study more frequently, and said that they completed their assigned homework more often. These patterns are reflected in the estimated time that students spent on their homework each week in Fifth Year, with TY participants reporting an average duration almost 50% higher than that of non-participants (8.9 hours vs 6 hours).

A similar pattern of responses is reported by Sixth Year students, albeit to a less pronounced extent. Most notably, students who did not take part in TY remained more likely to say that they rarely or never engaged in various forms of self-directed study, and to say that they gave up on difficult questions or didn't complete their homework every day. A significantly greater proportion of TY participants reported doing extra study a few times a week or every day.

Table 3
Homework/study behaviours and time spent on homework/study, Fifth and Sixth Year students, by TY participation status

In the last few weeks, how frequently did you...		Fifth Year (N = 4010)		Sixth Year (N = 1188)	
		Non-TY	TY	Non-TY	TY
Revise with bullet points or flash cards (%)	Rarely / never	63.6	54.6	54.4	43.1
	A few times a month	19.2	23.7	12.9	17.7
	Once a week	8.7	10.2	15.3	14.1
	2-3 times a week	6.9	9.4	12.9	17.8
	Every day	1.6	2.1	4.4	7.2
Practise exam questions (%)	Rarely / never	47.0	38.3	18.5	9.6
	A few times a month	28.6	29.1	12.9	15.8
	Once a week	13.8	17.0	18.1	23.1
	2-3 times a week	8.6	13.7	33.7	36.9
	Every day	2.1	2.0	16.9	14.6
Do extra study (%)	Rarely / never	47.6	30.4	30.5	14.1
	A few times a month	21.6	23.5	10.0	13.5
	Once a week	13.9	18.1	17.3	16.1
	2-3 times a week	12.2	19.8	22.5	30.0
	Every day	4.8	8.2	19.7	26.3
Think of different ways to solve a problem (%)	Rarely / never	24.6	18.7	17.3	17.1
	A few times a month	16.4	20.5	15.3	18.0
	Once a week	18.7	21.5	20.2	21.9
	2-3 times a week	21.7	24.7	26.6	26.5
	Every day	18.6	14.7	20.6	16.5
Give up on a question because it's hard (%)	Rarely / never	24.8	23.3	25.8	20.7
	A few times a month	25.1	28.4	28.6	28.0
	Once a week	21.7	23.9	16.1	24.9
	2-3 times a week	16.7	18.3	17.3	20.1
	Every day	11.8	6.1	12.1	6.3
Not do the homework given by teachers (%)	Rarely / never	38.5	44.4	34.0	28.4
	A few times a month	20.9	25.2	21.1	22.3
	Once a week	16.7	15.2	18.2	17.9
	2-3 times a week	14.8	11.1	15.8	15.8
	Every day	9.1	4.1	10.9	5.6
Hours per week: mean (SE)		6.0 (.21)	8.9 (.12)	10.5 (.59)	13.3 (.30)

Where significant differences ($p \leq .05$) between TY participants and non-participants exist within a grade, the higher value is shown in **bold**.

The estimated time spent on homework in Sixth Year was substantially higher than in Fifth Year among both groups of students, but TY participants continued to spend almost three hours per week more on homework and study than non-participants (13.3 hours vs 10.5 hours).

In order to explore these differences in time spent on homework in more detail, a series of regression analyses was performed. These regressions first controlled for a number of background variables (gender, maternal education, and home language) and students' educational aspirations, before adding students' TY participation status at the final step. Dummy variables were created for all categorical variables. Separate analyses were performed for students in Fifth Year (Table 4) and Sixth Year (Table 5). The final models accounted for almost 14% (Fifth Year) and 13% (Sixth Year) of the variance in students' homework time.

Table 4

Factors associated with weekly time spent on homework in Fifth Year

	Step 1 (Background)		Step 2 (Aspirations)		Step 3 (TY)	
	b	β	b	β	b	β
Constant	9.21***		6.48***		5.02***	
Male	-2.03***	-.16	-1.79***	-.14	-1.94***	-.16
Maternal education (ref: Leaving Cert.)						
Lower secondary	-1.68***	-.10	-1.37***	-.08	-1.18***	-.07
Any 3rd level	1.33***	.11	.83***	.07	.77***	.06
Don't know	-1.01**	-.05	-.58	-.03	-.37	-.02
Another language	-1.48**	-.05	-.93*	-.03	-.21	-.01
Educational aspirations (ref: Leaving Cert.)						
PLC/Diploma			.84*	.05	.74*	.04
Degree			3.81***	.29	3.47***	.26
Don't know			.96**	.04	.70	.03
TY					2.17***	.14
ΔR^2	.064		.059		.018	
F	48.01 (5, 3490)		77.68 (3, 3487)		71.85 (1, 3486)	
p	<.001		<.001		<.001	
(Overall) Adjusted R ²	.063		.121		.138	

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

The regression models provided broadly similar results at both grade levels, with some small differences. Among both Fifth Year and Sixth Years, boys and students whose mothers had not completed a Leaving Certificate spent significantly less time on homework each week. Students whose mothers had completed any third-level education spent more time on homework in Fifth Year, but this association was not significant among Sixth Year students. Speaking a language other than English or Irish at home appeared to be negatively associated with the time spent on homework when only background variables were considered, but this was no longer the case when students' educational aspirations were added to the model.

Table 5
Factors associated with weekly time spent on homework in Sixth Year

	Step 1 (Background)		Step 2 (Aspirations)		Step 3 (TY)	
	b	β	b	β	b	β
Constant	14.74***		11.07***		10.10***	
Male	-2.95***	-.17	-2.80***	-.16	-2.82***	-.06
Maternal education (ref: Leaving Cert.)						
Lower secondary	-2.94***	-.13	-1.98**	-.09	-1.79*	-.08
Any 3rd level	1.07	.06	.73	.04	.65	.04
Don't know	-2.23*	-.06	-1.05	-.05	-1.08	-.03
Another language	-3.01*	-.06	-2.21	-.05	-1.77	-.04
Educational aspirations (ref: Leaving Cert.)						
PLC/Diploma			-.46	-.02	-.67	-.03
Degree			4.98***	.26	4.70***	.25
Don't know			1.82	.05	1.75	.05
TY					1.49*	.07
Δ R ²	.064		.065		.004	
F	14.36 (5, 1048)		26.08 (3, 1045)		5.04 (1, 1044)	
p	<.001		<.001		<.05	
(Overall) Adjusted R ²	.060		.123		.126	

* p ≤ .05 ** p ≤ .01 *** p ≤ .001

Students who aspired to a degree spent significantly more time on homework at both grade levels. Students who aspired to a post-Leaving certificate course or a third-level diploma (not to degree level) reported significantly more time on homework in Fifth Year, but slightly (and non-significantly) less time on homework in Sixth Year. Finally, students who had previously taken part in TY reported spending more time on their homework,

even after the background variables and their educational aspirations were taken into account. Examination of the standardised beta coefficients indicates that, at both grade levels, TY participation was the second-strongest indicator of spending more time on homework ($\beta = .14$ at Fifth Year and $.07$ at Sixth Year) after aspirations to attain a degree ($\beta = .26$ and $.25$).

CONCLUSION

The results described here show some notable differences in the homework and study behaviours of second-level students, particularly in the years leading up to the Leaving Certificate examinations, with regard to students' prior participation or non-participation in TY. The questionnaires used for the study were completed by students in March and April in each wave, at a time when end-of-year and State examinations – and preparation for examinations – are likely to be at the forefront of students' consciousness. The responses given should therefore provide a reasonably accurate account of students' behaviour in the weeks leading up to the survey.

In general, the amount of time spent on homework by most students was broadly in line with the recommendations outlined by previous research. Third Year students and Fifth Year students spent an average of between eight and nine hours per week, while Sixth Year students spent almost 13 hours per week on homework and study, on average. The figures at Third Year were above the five hours per week recommended by Fernández-Alonso et al. (2015) for lower secondary students, but all grade levels were close to the 5-10 hours (at lower secondary) and up to 12 hours (upper secondary) that Cooper et al. (2006) suggest as being optimal based on their review of the literature. However, a lot of variation around these averages was evident, with some students spending substantially more of their free time on homework each week.

In Fifth Year and Sixth Year, students who had previously taken part in TY were found to spend more time on homework than their classmates who had progressed to the senior cycle directly from Third Year. This relationship held even when students' home background and educational aspirations were considered; in fact, students' TY participation status was among the strongest predictors of spending more time on homework. The finding that a comparatively stronger association was found between TY participation and homework hours among Fifth Year students than Sixth Year students can be interpreted as reflecting the more engaged and school-oriented profile that is typical of TY participants (Clerkin, 2016; Smyth et al., 2004) and the presence

of the State examinations acting as a strong external stimulus to study for most students in Sixth Year that is absent in Fifth Year. This is further supported by the finding that almost one-third of TY students reported practising exam questions a few times per month or more frequently while in TY, more than two years in advance of their Leaving Certificate.

Cooper and Valentine (2001) note, as one of the negative effects of homework, the fact that time spent on homework is time that has been taken away from other extra-curricular activities, many of which can also provide valuable educational, social, and developmental opportunities. The relatively low time spent on homework during TY brings this point into focus; in stark contrast to the other grade levels, TY students spent only two hours per week on homework during the extra year. However, TY is unusual in international terms as being a feature of the mainstream national education system that provides a sanctioned space for students to devote school time, and their own time outside school, to developmental and social activities just as much as more traditional academic activities (Clerkin, 2016; Le Métais, 2003). Therefore, as the purpose of TY stands apart from those of the more conventional school years (Clerkin, 2012), the relevance of Cooper et al.'s (2006) guidelines to TY students is a matter for debate.

In this sense, the TY programme cannot – and should not – be judged solely on the examination results or academic behaviours of the students who participate. Nonetheless, the tendency to spend more time on their homework in the years leading up to the Leaving Certificate – and the associated finding that students who took part in TY reported doing extra study more frequently and failed to complete their homework less often in Fifth Year and Sixth Year – may go some way towards explaining the consistent evidence that TY participants perform better in the Leaving Certificate than non-participants (Millar & Kelly, 1999; Smyth et al., 2004). Examination results for the students who participated in this survey would be needed to clarify these associations further. These results were not available at the time of writing, but a follow-on study may be possible. It is also likely that other factors – such as student engagement, maturity, and the nature of the TY programme in a given school – play a role in the development of self-regulatory and self-management skills during TY. These factors should be considered and explored in future research.

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