Wellbeing in personal development: Lessons from national school-based programmes in Ireland and South Korea

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Abstract This chapter describes two programmes, with significant similarities and differences, that have been available in Ireland since 1974 (*Transition Year*; TY) and South Korea since 2013 (*Free Year Programme*; FYP). TY takes place over one full year as an integrated part of mainstream secondary education. TY students engage in developmental activities, vocational work experience, and increased interaction with the adult world. These experiences are intended to facilitate enhanced maturity and broadened horizons, supporting young people in becoming fulfilled citizens. Although TY is well-established within Ireland, it is an unusual innovation internationally. However, 2013 saw the introduction of FYP, which was partially informed by TY. South Korean policy-makers recognised concern about student wellbeing and stress in a high-stakes academic environment, and challenges relating to students' readiness for the working world. FYP is a response to those concerns. This chapter offers an overview and comparisons between the two programmes. We argue that both are founded on a eudaimonic view of wellbeing in education, aiming for more holistic and rounded student development. Significantly, both programmes emphasise community engagement and interpersonal development, alongside personal development and self-directed learning. The challenges and practices identified offer lessons for educators in Ireland, South Korea, and other jurisdictions.

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Policy interest in personal development and wellbeing in school settings

Recent years have seen a burgeoning use of phrases such as '21st century skills', 'non-cognitive abilities', and 'social-emotional competencies' among policy-makers, think tanks, and in media discussion of educational outcomes (see, for example, Fadel, 2008; OECD, n.d.; Schleicher, 2018). Such discussion is usually in the context of claims that an education system is in need of modernisation by placing more emphasis on critical thinking and interpersonal characteristics, which are seen as being more important for current and future cohorts of students than has been the case for previous generations. As well as exerting pressure on governments to bring their national curricula into line with these '21st century' norms, this has contributed to the development of a variety of school-based programmes, including interventions targeted at particular groups and universal programmes, that are intended to enhance students' social and emotional learning (Belfield, Bowden, Klapp, Levin, Shand & Zander, 2015; Bywater & Sharples, 2012; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schllinger, 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

In parallel, a policy-level focus on wellbeing among young people has become prominent over the last decade. A variety of initiatives can be seen across jurisdictions and among non-governmental think tanks (e.g., NEF, 2011; NICE, 2009; OECD, 2011) In Ireland, the development of a dedicated Wellbeing strand was a major component of significant reforms to junior cycle education (Grades 7-9), alongside broader changes which were collectively aimed at encouraging a more holistic and less exam-driven educational experience (DES, 2015; NCCA, 2017). These reforms were built on earlier consultation and advocacy, fuelled by a growing emphasis on monitoring various indicators of wellbeing both in school settings and in broader society (Brooks & Hanafin, 2005; DCYA, 2014; NESC, 2009). However, it should be recognised that schools themselves – in their structures, curricula and practices – can add to young people's stress. Therefore, an ongoing challenge is to ensure that structures, curricula and practices nurture wellbeing in realistic and sustainable ways.

It should also be recognised that despite this policy attention, contention remains over how best to conceptualise and operationalise wellbeing in schools. Spratt (2016) has identified four distinct themes in policy discourse around wellbeing: *physical health promotion* (drawing from a medical perspective of wellbeing), *social and emotional literacy* (drawing from a psychological perspective), *care* (drawing from a social care perspective), and *flourishing* (drawing from philosophical and liberal education perspectives). This disjointed landscape suggests that intentions of supporting the wellbeing and holistic development of young people could be undermined by a lack of clarity in focus, or mismatch in approach, between various agencies or between agencies and practitioners. The fuzziness inherent in the term 'wellbeing' prohibits an easy summary by a single indicator or perspective, but also more appropriately (and necessarily) represents wellbeing as a multidimensional construct.

There are two main goals of this chapter. The first is to provide a detailed description of two policy-led programmes that seek to support the development of students' socioemotional skills and interpersonal competencies in a structured way within regular formal educational settings. The second goal is to identify lessons that can be drawn from the implementation of both programmes in their two different cultural and educational contexts, which may be used to inform the development and implementation of programmes with similar aims in other jurisdictions or in other contexts.

One of the programmes discussed here (the *Transition Year programme*, or **TY**)[4] has been running in Irish post-primary schools for almost 50 years, and the other (the *Free Semester Program*,[5] which is in the process of becoming the *Free Year Program*, henceforth **FSP/FYP**) is a newer programme that has been introduced gradually into South Korean middle schools since 2013.[6] FYP shares some features with TY, but also exhibits some important differences.

To the degree that such efforts are successful, both programmes would be expected to contribute to students' wellbeing under a eudaimonic[7] conception of the term (i.e., with an emphasis on 'flourishing', as an individual and socially, rather than on individual 'happiness' or on the mere absence of ill-being). Mapped onto the themes in wellbeing discourse described by Spratt (2016), these programmes assume aspects of each of the four themes, most clearly in relation to care (both in terms of student-teacher relations, and in an awakening of care for others in the community), the psychological (social skill and emotional literacy), and the holistic education (flourishing as a whole person, beyond narrow instrumental consideration) conceptions of wellbeing.

As described in the following section, student wellbeing has become a key focus of debate in Ireland in recent years amid an ongoing review of education for senior students (aged approximately 15-18). TY has featured prominently in this discussion with respect to specific features that are seen as enhancing students' wellbeing in TY but lacking to one degree or another at other grade levels. In particular, TY is regarded as helping to promote wellbeing, or flourishing, both individually

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[4] See https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Transition-Year-/Transition-Year.html and https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/programmes-and-key-skills/transition-year.

[5] Although 'programme' is the spelling used in relation to TY and generally throughout this chapter, 'program' is maintained as the convention used in South Korea in direct reference to FSP/FYP.

[6] See http://english.moe.go.kr/sub/info.do?m=040101&s=english and http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20130530000379.

[7] The concept of *eudaimonia* as one conception of wellbeing –in contrast to *hedonic* conceptions of wellbeing – is often attributed to Aristotle (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics). While hedonic wellbeing focuses on experienced happiness or pleasure, eudaimonic conceptions incorporate an ethical dimension and give more weight to the process of working towards a 'life well-lived' or a 'good life', rather than happiness as an outcome.

(greater maturity, competence, confidence, reflectiveness) and interpersonally (stronger relationships with teachers and peers, greater involvement with the school and wider community).

This view of flourishing emphasises active participation in community life as both a source and an indicator of healthy individual development, in a reciprocal virtuous circle. That is, it rejects a narrow view of wellbeing as a collection of states of affect and attitudes, such as happiness or feeling included. Instead, wellbeing is understood as a multidimensional and relational process, with individual students' wellbeing inseparable from their interactions with the social systems of which they are part, such as their peer group, school community, and wider society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; NCCA, 2017). The role of schools in this regard is to "enable children and young people, individually and collectively, to develop their personalities, talents and abilities, and to live a full and satisfying life within society" (DCYA, 2014, p. 65), including especially students who, for various reasons, may need additional supports to do so (DCYA, 2014).

Some differences in conceptions of education and wellbeing may be expected in two countries as disparate as South Korea and Ireland, given previous findings of variation between West Europeans/North Americans and East Asians with regard to cognitive processes and conceptions of the self (Nisbett, 2003), attitudes and values towards education (Li, Martin & Yeung, 2017), and attributions of subjective wellbeing (Layous, Lee, Choi & Lyobomirsky, 2013; Wirtz, Chiu, Diener & Oishi, 2009).[8] Nonetheless, the centrality of interpersonal relationships and social participation espoused in this view of wellbeing differentiates TY from other grade levels in Ireland and in many other European education systems, aligning to a degree with the more typically East Asian conception of the individual as a more closely-integrated part of the wider society (Choi, Kim & Lee, 2020; Nisbett, 2003). Reflecting this perspective, Choi et al. (2020) argue for a wider consideration of community wellbeing, as opposed to subjective or objective wellbeing, and demonstrate its value by estimating community wellbeing for several districts in a number of Korean cities (using indicators of human capital, natural capital, cultural capital, economic capital, and infrastructure).

A key policy issue in South Korea is concern over the very high levels of stress and anxiety reported among young people. This has been linked to the dominant focus in schools on academic achievement and high-stakes examination, which leaves little opportunity for students to develop their "full potential beyond cognitive skills" (OECD, 2016, p.4) or to reflect on, for example, their own interests and their preferred courses of study or careers after school (Kwon, Lee & Shin, 2017). In particular, academic stress has been identified as a significant factor contributing to Korean adolescents' suicide ideation and suicide attempts (Juon, Nam & Ensminger, 1994). This has led to calls for reform of the high-stakes examination

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[8] However, note that much of this research has been conducted with small samples, American university students, or with Asian-Americans representing all of Eastern Asia, which means that generalised conclusions should be interpreted cautiously.

system and the resulting backwash effects throughout the education system (Kwon et al., 2017). The FSP/FYP is one response to these concerns – intended to facilitate greater personal reflection, career exploration, collaboration, and artistic and creative education, driven by a desire among policymakers to increase happiness among young people in Korean schools.

The next two sections present a brief overview of TY and of FSP/FYP. The final section draws out key observations arising from the implementation of the two programmes.

Transition Year

The stated function of TY, which is offered in Grade 10, is to provide students – during a sensitive developmental period in mid-adolescence – with the opportunity to broaden their horizons and to develop personally, socially, intellectually, and vocationally in the absence of high-stakes examination pressure. The *TY Guidelines* (Dept. of Education, 1993) set out three main goals:

1. Education for maturity, with the emphasis on personal development, including social awareness and increased social competence;
2. The promotion of general, technical and academic skills with an emphasis on interdisciplinary and self-directed learning;
3. Education through experience of adult and working life as a basis for personal development and maturity.

In the original vision, TY was intended to be an opportunity for students to "'stand and stare', to discover the kind of person he [sic] is, the kind of society he will be living in and, in due course, contributing to; [and to learn about society's] shortcomings and its good points" (Burke, 1974; cited in Jeffers, 2007). Both in conception and in operationalisation, then, TY seeks to promote wellbeing and personal development within a holistic and society-oriented framework.

The underlying thrust of TY is outward- and forward-looking, beyond the school towards working life, the wider society and active citizenship, locally and globally. Individual wellbeing is seen as being enhanced through social engagement, whether as a team member in school-based projects, as a participant in adult work environments through work experience placements, or as an active citizen through community service activities. In this vision, a student should emerge from TY as a more rounded, confident, competent, and socially participatory individual.

The latter aspect is important to note even though the long-term effects of TY participation are often absent from discussion of the programme. Figure 1 depicts a conceptual framework within which students' experiences and characteristics

prior to, during, and after TY may be interpreted.[9] As well as immediate school-based outcomes, it highlights the intended relevance of TY to more distal outcomes such as vocational and career choices, personal goals, civic awareness, and active participation in civic society.
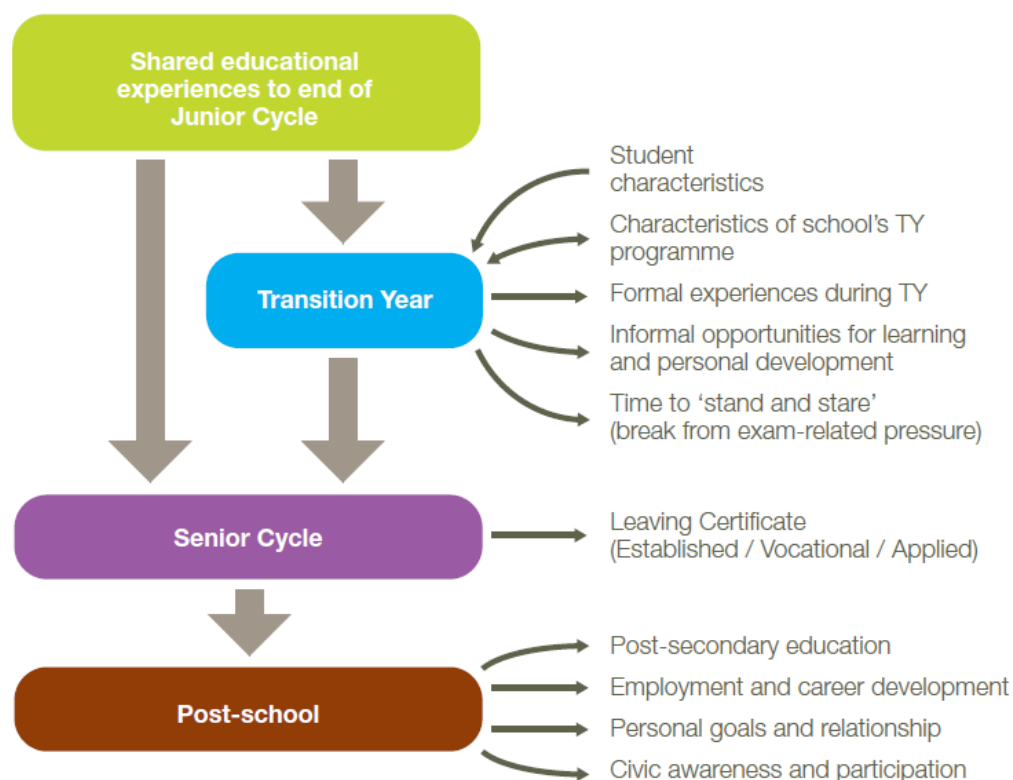
Fig. 1. Conceptual framework for the role of Transition Year in Irish education (reproduced with permission from Clerkin, 2019a)

The research evidence is clear that TY is generally positively regarded by students, as well as by their teachers and their parents. Initial findings (Egan & O'Reilly, 1979) that, through TY, students become more self-aware, more confident in social settings, better informed about the world outside school, and surer about the careers they might follow have been reinforced by subsequent research (Clerkin, 2012, 2019a; Jeffers, 2007; Smyth, Byrne & Hannan, 2004). Most TY participants report that they enjoyed their time in TY and found it to be a useful experience, with

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[9] 'Junior Cycle' corresponds to Grades 7-9 and 'Senior Cycle' to Grades 10-12. TY corresponds to Grade 10, but is not taken by all students. At the end of Grade 12, students sit a high-stakes terminal examination known as the Leaving Certificate.

– notably – some students going so far as to describe it as a life-changing experience (Clerkin, 2019a). Positive reports of TY are often linked to students' participation in work experience placements, which can clarify vocational intentions and subject choices for senior cycle or third-level education, as well as other aspects of community involvement outside school, and more active, experiential learning methods in class.

Students and teachers both also report that student-teacher relationships are strengthened during TY and that a more mature and respectful relationship develops, which then carries through into Grades 11 and 12. The formation of strong friendships and new friendship groups among TY classmates is also common. In addition (and reminiscent of the rationale for introducing FSP/FYP in South Korea), students appreciate the freedom to develop their interests and to try new skills both within and outside school in a less stressful environment and with less pressure to study for important examinations. Finally, TY participants tend to achieve significantly higher scores than non-participants in examinations at the end of post-primary school, even controlling for prior performance (Millar & Kelly, 1999; Smyth et al., 2004). Although the factors or mechanisms behind this difference remain unclear, such findings have been regarded as reassuring by parents, teachers, school leaders, and policy-makers.

As Jeffers (2010, 2011) has shown, schools tend to 'domesticate' the TY programme, shaping TY to their own specific contexts. This has a positive function in the sense that schools can be responsive to the needs and interests of specific cohorts and individual students or teachers in the school, which is likely to be a contributory factor towards the stronger student-teacher relationships and levels of school involvement often noted in TY. However, domestication can also imply some downplaying or even omitting some of the more challenging features of TY, such as interdisciplinary work, a wide range of teaching/learning methodologies, a coordinating team, whole-school programme planning, appropriate assessment aligned with methodologies, and meaningful consultation with parents. In addition, in an examination-dominated system, TY is at risk of being colonised by the two years of the senior examination cycle. Anecdotal evidence of schools operating 'a three-year [course]', particularly in some subjects, is widespread, highlighting the constant risk that more instrumentalist concerns may infringe on the intended use of TY as a space for personal and social development. The challenge for TY to be continually refreshed (Jeffers, 2015) should not be underestimated.

TY has proved to be a popular innovation. Provision of TY by schools and uptake rates among students have increased consistently in recent decades (Figure 2). More recently, 93% of schools offered TY and 72% of eligible students were enrolled in 2017/18 (Jeffers, 2018).
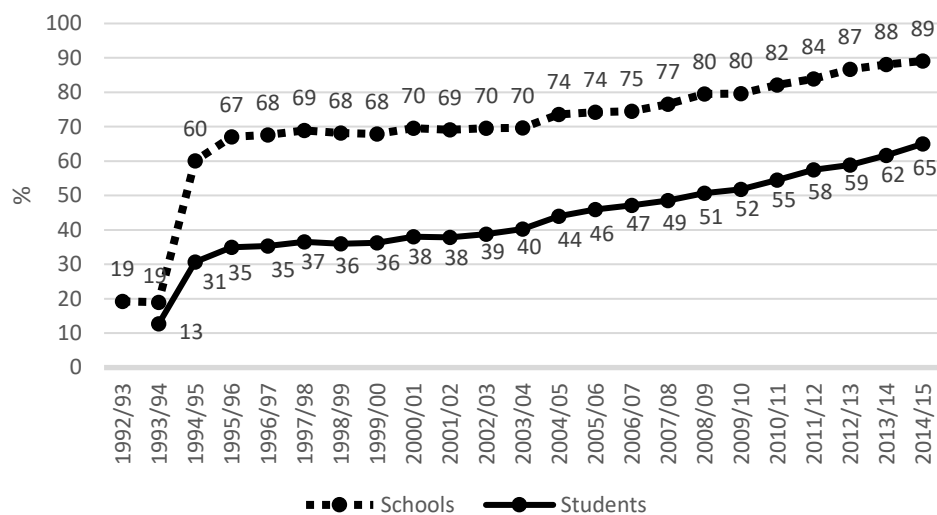
Fig. 2. Rates of (school-level) provision and (student-level) uptake of Transition Year, 1992-2015 (reproduced from Clerkin, 2018a)

The issue of TY provision raises serious questions regarding equity of access to any benefits that may arise from TY participation. For example, in some cases students may wish to take part in work experience placements or community activities, but are reluctant to commit to a full additional year at school or cannot afford the extra expense (Clerkin, 2019a). Disparities in TY uptake by students' home language background, educational and vocational aspirations, and their prior levels of engagement in school have also been noted (Clerkin, 2018b).

Questions such as these have formed a major point of discussion during a wide-ranging review of senior cycle education in Ireland that has been ongoing since 2016 and is expected to continue into 2020 (NCCA, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Smyth, 2019). This review includes a major consultation exercise, with stakeholders in the education system – students, teachers, and parents – asked for their views on an iterative basis. It takes place in the context, noted in the introduction, of a growing awareness of mental health and wellbeing in school settings.

Although a final report of the review is not available at the time of writing, the indications emerging from interim reports are that TY is seen by all stakeholders as a very valuable feature of the current system (NCCA, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Smyth, 2019), particularly from the dual perspectives of personal development (e.g., increased maturity) and wellbeing. Many junior cycle students "were negative [about their school experience] apart from their views on TY" (Banks, McCoy & Smyth, 2018, p.34), which was seen as "the most exciting part of senior cycle" (p.37). Banks et al. add that "many of those interviewed in senior cycle spoke positively about TY and the impact it had on them" (p.38). In the same study, parents who had

experience of TY were largely complimentary about it: "they felt their son/daughter had benefitted greatly from participating in the programme, and noted the impact that the programme had on their personal development and maturity, in creating more positive relationships with their teachers and providing them with a valuable opportunity to try a diverse range of subject areas, enabling more informed subject choice [in subsequent years]" (Banks et al., 2018, p.52). In all these respects, the capacity for TY to support student wellbeing is noted. As a result, there have been suggestions that aspects of TY (such as work experience and a more sustained focus on holistic development of the student) may become more prominent at other grade levels in any forthcoming reforms.

For a more comprehensive review of the extant literature on TY, please see Clerkin (2018a, 2019b) and, for case studies of TY practice in schools, see Jeffers (2015).

Free Year Program

The experience of South Korea, with a population more than 10 times greater than Ireland, offers both striking contrasts and similarities between TY and what is now known as the Free Year Program (FYP). Despite consistently high levels of school participation and achievement in Korea, as seen for example in TIMSS and PISA results, young people's wellbeing, mental health and general happiness has been a persistent concern (Choi, 2014; Lim, Lee & Kim, 2017).

With echoes of TY (as a response to schools as 'academic treadmills' (Burke, 1974)), the impetus in 2013 for what was first introduced as a 'Free Learning Semester' and then as a 'Free Semester Program' (FSP) was a disquiet that many young people were not happy at school and that the education system itself jeopardized their wellbeing (Ji-Yeon, 2013). Rising rates of school violence, youth suicide, and anxiety about further education, combined with low levels of career exploration, were significant factors in prompting the initiative (Ji-Yeon, 2013). Furthermore, the voices of industry were loud in contending that the education system did not sufficiently develop core competencies such as creative thinking which are seen as essential to an innovative economy (Choi et al, 2014b).

The FSP was piloted among Grade 7 students (age 12-13) in 42 middle schools in 2013. In 2014, 38 more schools took part, including 29 that focused on Grade 8 students. By 2017, three of the 17 regional Offices of Education had adopted FYP (i.e., with the Free Semester extending to a Free Year). In 2018 almost half of Korea's 3713 middle schools were implementing FYP.

The overarching goals of FYP are to provide opportunities for students to explore their 'dreams and talents' and to develop '21st century competencies including creativity, character building, social skills, and self-directed learning' (MOE, 2013). The FYP framework addresses wellbeing by a curriculum that includes core and elective dimensions (Figure 3). The term 'free' should not be seen as exclusively referring to an 'exam-free' programme. The more proactive meaning of the word

implies the centrality of widening opportunities for young people, for nurturing their capabilities and enabling them to experience 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) in learning by exploring their own interests.

Career exploration and a general focus on students' interests and strengths are features of the 10 hours per week devoted to elective courses. From a teaching point of view, again with echoes of TY's emphasis on a wide range of teaching/learning methodologies, debates, experiments and project based-learning are encouraged. Importantly, in an educational system dominated by examinations, FYP does not have mid-term or end-of-term examinations; each school has the freedom to devise its own assessment system, although results cannot be used for high school entrance. Building partnerships between schools offering FYP and external agencies – including government ministries, local authorities, employers, the media and parents – has enabled the development of a learning ecosystem to support successful implementation of FYP (Choi, 2014, 2019).

Ⅱ-1. Framework of the FSP

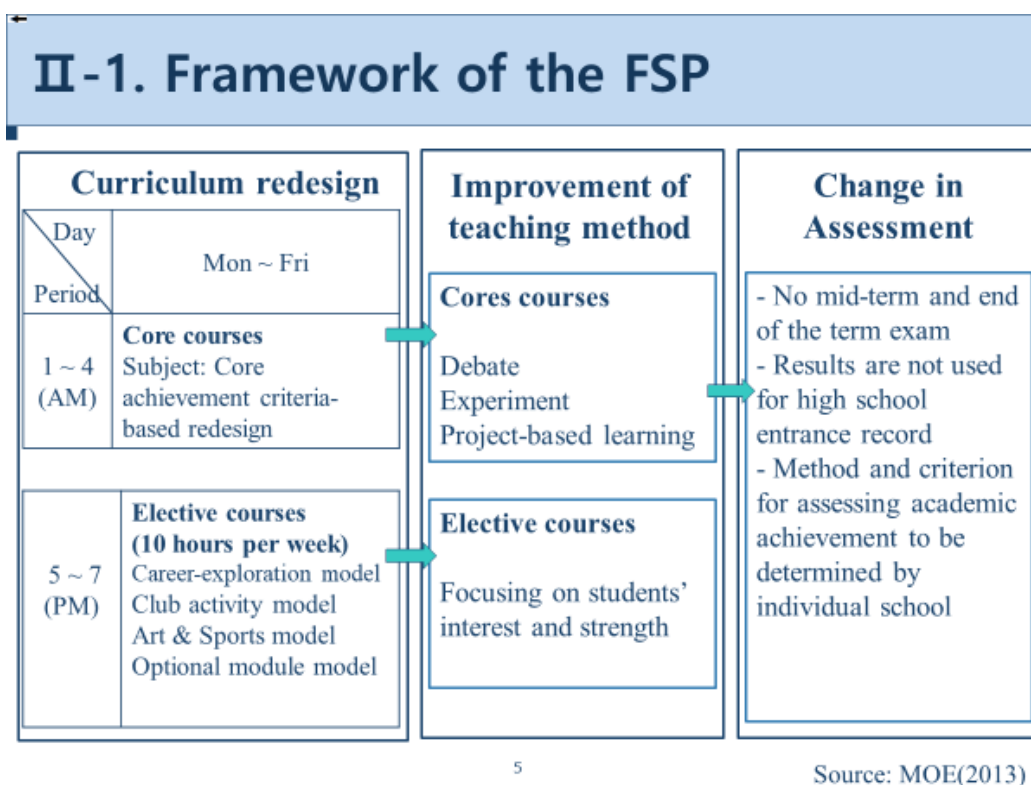| Curriculum redesign		Improvement of teaching method	Change in Assessment
Day \ Period	Mon ~ Fri	**Cores courses** Debate Experiment Project-based learning	- No mid-term and end of the term exam - Results are not used for high school entrance record - Method and criterion for assessing academic achievement to be determined by individual school
1 ~ 4 (AM)	**Core courses** Subject: Core achievement criteria-based redesign		
5 ~ 7 (PM)	**Elective courses (10 hours per week)** Career-exploration model Club activity model Art & Sports model Optional module model	**Elective courses** Focusing on students' interest and strength	

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Source: MOE(2013)

Fig. 3. Framework for Free Semester Program curriculum and assessment (from Choi, 2019)

Korean policy makers built their programme by learning from initiatives to enhance young people's well-being in other jurisdictions. For example, the Korean Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training organized a conference in 2013 with guest speakers explaining the development, strengths and weaknesses of: the 'Gap Year' in the United Kingdom; the Folk High Schools,[10] the 'After-School' residential programme[11] and the '10th Class'[12] in Denmark; and Ireland's TY (KRIVET, 2013).

Careful and regular monitoring of the FSP/FYP, including surveys of students, teachers and parents, has been led by the Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI) since 2013. Results suggest a notable increase in young people's satisfaction with schooling (Choi, 2019   ), especially the shift to more student-centred learning. Increasingly, phrases such as 'joyful learning', 'self-directed learning experience', 'knowing oneself while learning', 'learning together', and 'doing rather than knowing' are associated with the innovation (Lim et al., 2017). These researchers also found the programme enhances the possibilities of lifelong learning.

As with Burke's (1974) initial vision of TY and recent discussion of TY by Kelly (2014), FYP sees itself as benefitting teachers as well as students. FYP aims to increase teachers' professional autonomy and nurture their development by encouraging innovative teaching and learning methodologies. Teachers report an increase in their self-efficacy, professionalism, co-operation with colleagues and an appreciation of the greater sense of autonomy FYP brings to schools. Emerging links between schools and various local community resources is also a positive outcome, while additional funding – between $20,000 and $35,000 per school – is seen as a valuable support. Reported difficulties encountered by teachers with the FYP include limited awareness of the rationale for change, lack of support for new teaching methods, absence of a clear alternative assessment system, extra workload, and an unease about academic achievement (Choi et al., 2014b, 2014c). Links between the FYP and learning in other school semesters has also been a challenge for its wider adoption. For further insights into FYP readers are referred to Choi et al. (2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015) and Choi and Hong (2016).

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[10] The Folk High School offers residential adult education across a variety of subjects, depending on individuals' interests, mostly for students aged 18-24 years old. The typical stay at a Folk High School is four months, although students can attend for longer or shorter periods. The Schools focus on personal and professional development. There are no exams but students receive a diploma to certify attendance.

[11] The After-School is a residential school where students aged 14-18 years old can attend for 1, 2, or 3 years in order to complete primary education. They seek to provide a general education, but with an awareness of encouraging democratic citizenship and personal development.

[12] 10th Class is intended for students who have completed primary education but need further qualifications, time, or support in making choices for their further education. It includes short tasters of difference educational tracks and the option of attendance at short voluntary training courses.

Lessons from Transition Year and Free Year Program

The experiences of educators, policy-makers, and students in South Korea and Ireland described in this chapter suggest a number of insights that may be useful to programme developers in other countries. The history and development of TY and FSP/FYP make clear that there are some common points of success, some common problematic features, and some points of difference in the respective goals and approach of each programme.

Despite policy-level supports, the status of programmes such as FSP/FYP and TY may be more precarious in practice. Parents (and teachers) are sometimes wary of diverting time, and students' focus, from traditional academic activities towards 'softer' approaches with less easily-measurable outcomes, not least claims to support wellbeing and (inter)personal growth. For example, reservations about the introduction of FSP were initially expressed by a number of Korean teacher unions (*Korea Times*, 9 December 2014). As noted above, these tensions have also been observed clearly in some instances in Ireland, where a school's TY programme has become 'colonised' through pressure to cover examination material over three years (including the year in TY) rather than two. A constant reinvigoration of commitment to the intended goals is needed from school leadership in order to guard against creep in the types of activities or methods that are given priority during (what is supposed to be) a dedicated developmental programme.

Another risk factor is simple inertia or status quo bias, which can manifest as resistance to the introduction or expansion of innovative programmes. O'Toole (2017) notes, in the context of school-based mental health interventions, that such programmes tend to be "more successful when programmes are embedded within a whole-school approach, rather than implemented as a curriculum 'add-on'" (p. 458). A similar observation has been made by Smyth et al. (2004) and Jeffers (2007) in relation to TY. In fact, the intended conception of the programme explicitly advocates for a whole-school ethos with involvement from all school staff (Department of Education, 1993, 1996).

However, achieving a coherent whole-school approach to a programme such as FYP or TY requires ongoing work and leadership within the school. For example, it is not enough to prepare a programme outline once, to be re-used in future years. The risk of 'fossilisation' in such a scenario is high. This would undermine the programme given that part of its function is to facilitate student growth by providing hands-on opportunities to explore their interests and skills. In practice, this means that teachers must be able to respond to the changing needs of individual cohorts and changes in the broader school, community, or societal contexts by 'freshening up' or even customising their teaching materials year-on-year – a responsibility which Kelly (2014) notes is often grasped enthusiastically by teachers who are eager to rejuvenate their lessons and share their own interests with students.

The micro-political climate among school staff or between 'competing' schools in a locality, which can either encourage fragmentation of subject areas or facilitate their coherence, can also pose challenges to the embedding of good practice within

schools (Jeffers, 2007, 2010). Jeffers and Smyth et al. (2004) have identified a range of views towards TY, from highly positive to dismissive, among school staff in Ireland. In South Korea, a high level of satisfaction among teachers was reported following the initial implementation of FSP in 42 pilot schools (Choi, 2014). Teachers reported satisfaction with the level of autonomy granted to them to engage in re-designing teaching methods, assessment, and curriculum, despite the additional workload entailed by these tasks (Choi, 2014). While the initial feedback from Korean teachers is encouraging is this respect, follow-up evaluations in the coming years will help to determine whether a broader range of views emerge as the programme becomes embedded in all schools in South Korea. The issue of re-designing, or refreshing, instructional and cross-curricular materials and methods is also likely to become more prominent as time goes on and as teachers and students gain experience within the programme. A comparison of schools' organisational practices in Ireland and South Korea within the next five to ten years would be instructive.

In terms of key aspects of programme content that are highlighted by students as positively impacting their experience of school and their own maturation, it is clear that students appreciate the opportunities provided for sustained engagement with adults and with the wider community beyond school – work experience placements, community involvement (e.g., teaching IT skills to retirees), cultural activities, and so on (Clerkin, 2019a; Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004). In broader terms, the more experiential and active learning methodologies that characterise TY and FSP/FYP provide a welcome respite from an otherwise-omnipresent focus on written examinations and narrower modes of learning, and a chance to develop new skills. Similarly, opportunities for collaborative and creative work with classmates and teachers in FSP/FYP and TY offer a change from highly-pressurised individual work at other grade levels. In this more collaborative environment, students learn to work within a team, and gain confidence and competence as leaders and contributors. As a result, students report emerging from these programmes with greater maturity and a greater appreciation for the wider social context in which they participate (Clerkin 2019a; Jeffers, 2007; Lim et al., 2017).

Teachers can also contribute to the development of students' attitudes and behaviours (Blazar & Kraft, 2017), and many teachers do appreciate the opportunity to work with their students in a more holistic fashion in FSP/FYP and TY (Choi, 2014; Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004). Teachers in South Korea have reported a renewed appreciation for the strengths and potential of their students in the context of FYP, and the freedom afforded for students to develop their interests (Choi, 2014). More active cooperation between teachers and students, and an increased ability to seek to engage students who had previously been disengaging during 'regular' semesters, are also noted. Similarly, many Irish teachers note TY as being their favourite grade level to teach and view it as a de facto opportunity for professional development, citing the freedom (or requirement) to be creative in developing modules and teaching materials, a wider variety of teaching methods, and connecting with their students in a more positive and constructive manner (Jeffers, 2007, 2015; Smyth et al., 2004). These features combine to reinforce a more interactive, creative

approach to teaching and learning, underpinned by strong and respectful student-teacher and peer-to-peer relationships.

An important difference between FYP and TY is the issue of compulsory or optional participation. Schools in South Korea that provide FYP do so on a universal basis; that is, all students in the relevant middle school cohort take part. This is also the case in a minority of schools in Ireland that offer TY (the proportion of schools falling into this category is unknown, but may be around one-quarter; Smyth et al., 2004). However, in most Irish schools, TY is provided on an optional basis.[13] Students who wish to take part in TY must actively enrol in the programme, or make the choice to skip it to continue to the final two years of secondary education. There are several reasons why a school might prefer to provide TY on a compulsory basis. However, students in schools where participation is compulsory tend to report more negative views of their time in TY (Clerkin, 2019a; Smyth et al., 2004), suggesting that this decision is not without trade-offs.

There will not be a simple one-size-fits-all answer to these issues, particularly in cultural and educational contexts as distinct as South Korea and Ireland. However, ambitions to provide comprehensive, holistic, and constructive programmes to young people – supporting wellbeing, personal development, and social development – in any context are hindered by gaps in knowledge and an uneven research base. This means that we do not always have clear answers to questions such as "how do we know that students gain what we want them to gain from participation?" or "what aspects of the programme are most (in)effective – or are effective in which contexts?" (see also Clerkin, 2019b).

These gaps would ideally be addressed through ongoing focused research programmes, with stakeholder consultation to inform the identification of priority questions. An immediate step could be the introduction of a formal evaluation structure with the aims of highlighting and sharing best practice and addressing potential problems as they arise. Using TY as an example, this could be done via an annual review of a sampling of TY programmes across a range of school contexts. The Department of Education could consider initiating annual reviews, perhaps in conjunction with other education agencies, with a view to enhancing the implementation of TY in future. An annual self-evaluation of the programme within each school, as recommended by the TY Guidelines, would provide a starting point from which to build.

Through the engagement and commitment of enthusiastic teachers, TY has progressed significantly over the last 45 years, and a wide range of resources have been developed by teachers that can be shared with other schools. However, this teacher-led progression, and the school-level variation it entails, also means that the overarching goals of TY have evolved in a relatively atheoretical manner (Clerkin, 2018a). The success of TY despite a firm theoretical grounding highlights the importance of having a committed group of teachers to lead a programme of this nature within schools, and nationally. It also suggests one reason for the uneven evidence

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[13] And, as noted earlier, there is a small percentage of schools in which TY is not available to students.

base – namely, a lack of cohesion in programme goals and methods, leading to a wide range of disparate outcomes through a variety of pathways.

In establishing FYP and scaling it up rapidly, South Korea provides a useful point of contrast. FYP has spread to all schools quickly as part of a universal reform to the national curriculum. Since 2013, equity has been one of the major issues that has arisen as a point of discussion in implementing FSP. In particular, there has been concern about the relative lack of infrastructure in agricultural and fishing villages when compared to big cities. Therefore, the Ministry of Education has made efforts to support more funding and infrastructure for small village schools in order to ensure that the curricular reforms take root in the system and are implemented as intended. In contrast, no special provision or funding for TY is made available to smaller schools, schools in rural areas, or more socially-disadvantaged schools in Ireland. Perhaps not coincidentally, the minority of schools that do not offer TY to students tend to fall into one or more of these categories (Clerkin, 2013; Jeffers, 2002).

In both countries, this question of equitable provision is notable as a recurring theme. TY and FYP are valued in part because of the relative freedom afforded to schools to customise the programmes to their own circumstances. However, this also poses a risk of perpetuating social and economic inequalities. For example, all participating students may take part in work experience placements but, depending on the manner in which those placements are sourced and who is responsible for organising them, some students are likely to have more options, or be more likely to access their preferred option, than others. We might expect to observe differences related to geographic location (large city, small town, rural), social capital, gender, and parental educational or occupational background, for example. Creative ways of mitigating these risks are needed in order to ensure a fair distribution of resources and opportunities.

Conclusion

Transition Year and Free Year Program both provide examples of relatively low-stakes environments in which schools are encouraged to come up with appropriate responses to local challenges. In so doing, they provide opportunities for experimentation with a view to finding solutions to a range of issues related to students' wellbeing and their development as citizens.

Among the most notable features of this experimentation is that both programmes are clear in their aims of forming stronger and more cohesive links between students, the school, and wider society, with an unusual emphasis placed on providing students with opportunities to engage with the community around them. This is, perhaps, especially noteworthy in two countries that have evolved significantly as modern democracies over the late 20th and early 21st centurie s. Another key feature is the provision of time and space that is explicitly made available

for students to explore their interests and capabilities in the absence of high-stakes examination pressure, with guidance and support from teachers.

The combined effect of these characteristics is that students and teachers alike tend to associate participation in FYP and TY with greater wellbeing in the form of stronger interpersonal relationships in school, greater intrinsic motivation to learn, a stronger sense of belonging at school, and enhanced personal satisfaction arising from personal growth and achievements (Choi, 2019; Clerkin, 2019a; Lim et al., 2017; Smyth et al., 2004;). Positive effects are reported by both teachers and students to be observable even after participation in the programme, through the remaining years of students' secondary education (Clerkin, 2019a; Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004).

Nonetheless, substantial work remains to be done in adopting more systematic approaches to understanding the psychological processes by which such programmes are expected to operate (Clerkin, 2018a), to gathering and interpreting information about the implementation of TY and FYP in practice across the range of school contexts that they serve (Jeffers, 2010, 2011) and to robustly assessing the outcomes of participation from a variety of perspectives, including through the lens of wellbeing (Clerkin, 2019a, 2019b). An important issue to consider is the extent to which any benefits of participation in such programmes accrue evenly across the student population and the ways in which some students face explicit or implicit barriers that could make it more difficult to engage in the types of personal, vocational, and social development enjoyed by many of their peers (Choi et al., 2014b, 2014c; Clerkin, 2018b).

A separate, but related, issue is the question of what lessons could be drawn from FYP and TY – for example, relating to pedagogical approaches, cross-curricular learning, community involvement, artistic and cultural activities, methods of assessing students' progress, or work experience – and applied to other aspects of the education system or other grade levels in their respective countries with a view to strengthening students' educational experience. Given the positive associations of both programmes with enhanced wellbeing in school and with substantive personal and social development, such questions merit attention from researchers and policymakers.

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