The Student Voice in the Transition Year Programme

## A school based case study

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Date: July 2001
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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own work and has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree in this or any other university.
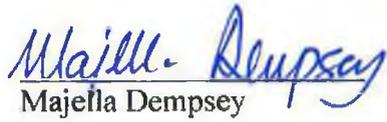
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This thesis is dedicated to my father, William Coyne and my late mother Kathleen Coyne, my first and best teachers.

Majella Dempsey

Contents

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

Tables

Introduction

If Transition Year were a film, I would describe it as an action-comedy. There were plenty of laughs and even more of the other. Throughout the year, spirits were constantly high and there was always an air of enthusiasm and excitement bubbling to the surface.... It was a brilliant experience but it was about so much more than school. It was about getting to know each other, meeting people and gaining confidence....And so, the final scene of our action-comedy is upon us and I think I echo everyone's thoughts when I say that the final day of this school year will be a sad one, as it will represent the conclusion of one of the best years of our lives. For it has given us the greatest gift of all, and that is the power to believe in ourselves and the fact that if we try hard enough and believe strong enough we can make it. (Transition Year Student Diary, May 2001)

What follows are the results of a case study on the impact of the Transition Year programme. The key actors in this action-comedy are consulted in order to gain an insight into the factors contributing to the success of this course. Students transported the researcher into their world via their diaries. This view from within was then used to probe for a better understanding of their experience. On analysis, the positive impact of the programme was highlighted. The student's perceptions may provide teachers with a more accurate and relative understanding of what the students perceive they are experiencing in the course. This information may assist teachers in providing more student-centred approaches that develop from known student perceptions.

Transition Year acts as a bridge between junior and senior cycle. It is a year for students to acquire better knowledge of themselves and of their world by allowing them time to reflect, relax and renew themselves in an atmosphere free from the pressure of State examinations. The programme has gone through three phases of development since its introduction in 1977. The philosophy, rationale and overall aims of the programme have stayed much the same over the years. Throughout this time there have been many changes and developments.

One cannot underestimate the importance of this curricular innovation in the Irish educational system. For the first time, teachers have been given the freedom to design and pilot their own material. The impressive resourcefulness of teachers is evident in how they respond to this task. The support for the programme, especially evident since 1994, in the form of continued in-career development, a capitation grant for participating students and the provision of a curriculum support service, has contributed to the growth in the numbers of schools participating. However, while schools need support from the outside, it is the creativity of teachers, working as a team within a school that makes for a successful Transition Year.

Back in 1977, Egan and O'Reilly commented on how Transition Year had impacted on the character of some of the schools they visited (Egan and O'Reilly, 1977). Clearly, as teachers gain confidence working in this way, with this freedom, it will have a ripple effect on the school community.

The nineties have been a period of unprecedented development in Irish Education. During the recent industrial action teachers were complaining of 'innovation fatigue'. However, the majority of junior cycle and Leaving Certificate reforms have primarily involved a change in subject content (Gleeson, 2000). Transition Year, on the other hand, has called on teachers and schools not only to change the content, but the way the course is delivered. The emphasis is on methods such as active learning, discovery learning and negotiated learning.

During this 'transition', teachers move from being transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of learning. Students therefore must change also. What impact has this change on the students? Discussion, debates, committees, mini-companies, role-play, drama, project work and so on must contribute immensely to their self-confidence. The year must allow for personal, social and academic maturity to develop. What is it about this year that students find different? What is it they bring with them into senior cycle? These are some of the questions this study endeavours to answer.

Chapter one describes the introduction of this programme into Irish education. While Transition Year is designed at a local level there are very clear guidelines available on the characteristics of it. These characteristics are explored, highlighting the emphasis of the programme at a National level. The general perceptions of the course are presented through a review of key writings in this area. This study asks the following key question namely; why is there a tendency to neglect the student voice when evaluating educational experience? It is submitted that when consulted, student views in fact prove to be incredibly insightful.

Chapter two describes the programme in the school where this study is carried out. This is deemed necessary, as each programme is unique to each school. The reader needs to have a clear picture of the research context in order to appreciate the richness of the student's comments on their experience.

Chapter three outlines the objectives for this study. The mode of research undertaken is qualitative, in that, the data gathered is in the form of words. Interviewing by itself was inadequate for the purpose of establishing a clear picture of the experience of this unique year. The researcher was uncertain of the right questions to ask. The student's diaries opened up rich data, which would otherwise have remained inaccessible. Their attitudes, beliefs, evaluations, boasts, complaints, moods were all evident in their words. The method of diary – interview is explained in this chapter.

Chapter four presents the results of the research. This chapter is structured around the students/teachers comments in an effort to transport the reader into the world of their experience. Some initial analysis of data is engaged in.

Chapter five conducts a wider analysis of some of the key issues. It makes recommendations for the future planning of the programme within the context of the school where the study is carried out and within the wider context of the system of education.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.1   Introduction

This chapter outlines the context in which the study is carried out. There are four aspects to this: a description of Transition Year, a consideration of the evaluations of this year, an outline of the current view of the programme as described in literature and an argument for the inclusion of student voice as a key element in evaluation.

The historical background of Transition Year and the chronological development of the course are explored. In particular, the most recent phase of development, phase three, is discussed. The aims and objectives of the current programme are presented. An outline of the current views of the programme as described in literature is evaluated. Finally, this chapter concludes with an argument in favour of the inclusion of the student voice as a key element in evaluation.

1.2   The Research Context

1.2.1   Introduction

In the last thirty-six years, Ireland has moved from a country where only twenty per cent of the population completed second level education to the situation we have today where almost eighty per cent now do so. (Fig.1.1) This increase is due to many factors, including the introduction of free education, free transport and the raising of the school leaving age to fifteen (Coolahan, 1981).As a result, the student population today is far more diverse than that of thirty-six years ago. In the past three decades there has been widespread acceptance that the system was not catering for this diversity.

Rate of Retention at Second Level
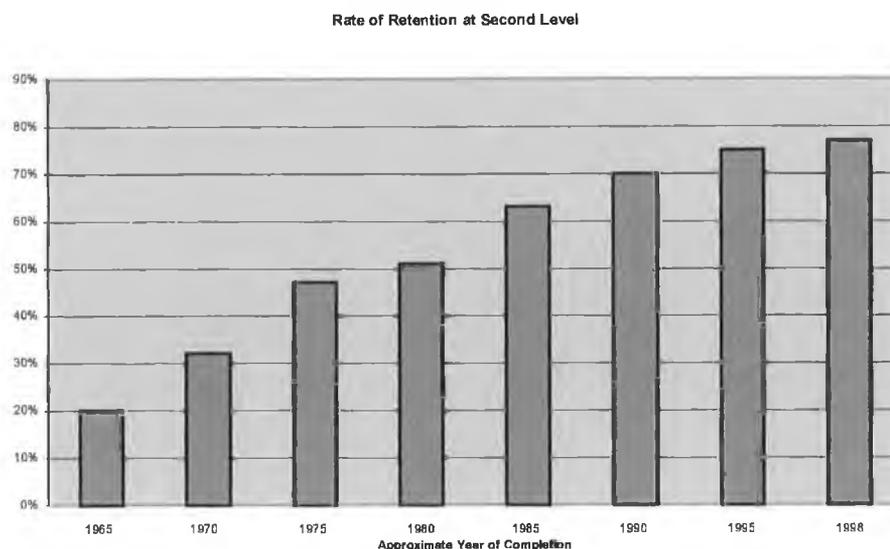
Fig 1.1 [1]

In an effort to respond, Education Minister Richard Burke introduced the Transition Year Project in 1974, in three schools as a pilot project. This year long course commencing after Junior Certificate, which would enable students to develop socially, intellectually and emotionally has evolved considerably in the past twenty-seven years. There is no prescribed syllabus for the programme, although the Department of Education provides guidelines to assist schools in planning the programme. This has meant choosing the curriculum, using a wide range of teaching and learning methodologies and devising methods of assessing students learning. Curricular content alone is not the key to a successful Transition Year. Content varies from school to school, indeed from year to year within schools, and has changed to keep pace with advancements in industry, technology and culture. However, the central philosophy of the programme has remained the same, that is, the concentration on personal development, education for maturity and the promotion of skills, with each school having freedom to shape its own individual, distinctive Transition Year.

The initial programme was referred to as the Transition Year Project until 1985. From 1985 to 1994 it was referred to as the Transition Year Option. In 1994, the Option was renamed the Transition Year Programme.

During this time there were three phases of implementation and development. The first phase was the introduction of the original programme as a pilot scheme. Between 1974 and 1983, on average eleven schools per year participated in the Transition Year project. There was considerable variation in programmes between schools. In some schools, the programme was regarded as a transition to work programme, while in others it was aimed at providing students with social and life skills to facilitate the transition to adult life (O'Dalaigh, 1992). In most cases it catered for students who were likely to leave school after completing the programme.

Phase two of development came in 1985 with the publication of The *Ages for Learning* document in May of that year. This proposed that the junior cycle would be of three years duration in all schools and the Leaving Certificate would be of two years duration (Department of Education, 1995). Circular letter M85/85 led the way for a wider provision of the programme, now called Transition Year Option, for the 1986/87 school year. Schools were permitted to offer the option as part of a three-year senior cycle. Approximately 180 applications were received from schools for that school year. However, many were "in effect proposals for a three-year Leaving Certificate and were consequently rejected…80 schools were selected to provide the course" (O'Dalaigh, 1992,p.18). By 1990/91, there were 124 schools offering the option. (Fig 1.2)
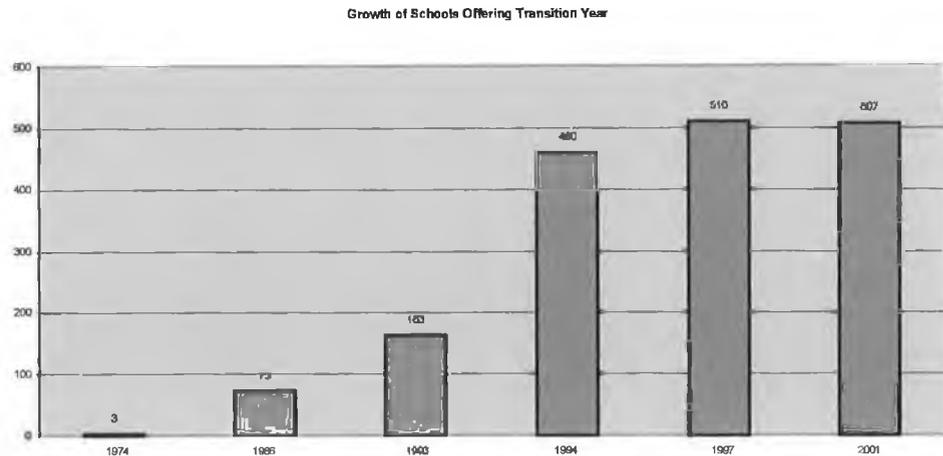
Fig.1.2 [2]

The most recent implementation of the programme, in 1993/94, has been part of an overall restructuring of the senior cycle (Department of Education, M47/93). As previously mentioned, it is now referred to as the Transition Year Programme. The restructuring of the senior cycle was influenced by a number of factors. For the majority of students the Junior Certificate was not the final examination with over seventy per cent going on into senior cycle (see Fig.1.1). The traditional Leaving Certificate programme was not catering for the varying needs and aptitudes of all students. A three-year senior cycle was, therefore, introduced as an option for second-level schools in September 1994. The overall objective of restructuring the senior cycle was:

To provide for the holistic development of all students and to foster a sense of self-esteem, self reliance and innovation to help them to be involved actively in the social and economic future of society (Department of Education, 1994).

The programmes now available at senior cycle include:-

1. Transition Year
2. Established Leaving Certificate

4

3. Leaving Certificate Applied

4. Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

The three phases of development of the Transition Year programme reflect different ideologies and these differences affect the curricular content of the programme being delivered. Phase one emphasised the link with the world of work. At this time participating students were more likely to leave school on completion of the course. Phase two reflected the expansion of the programme to a greater number of schools. Students were now less likely to leave school after completing the course. At this stage the Vocational Preparation and Training Programme, with its emphasis on the vocational development of students, was running concurrently with Transition Year. Schools had the choice of which programme to offer. Schools with an academic focus tended to opt for the Transition Year programme (Humphreys, 1996). The third phase eradicated this distinction and caters for all students wishing to participate in a three-year senior cycle.

It is this last phase of development, which is of interest to this study, because the Transition Year programme was introduced into the study school in 1996.

1.2.2   Phase Three Development

Several factors have contributed to the relatively successful implementation of the programme since 1993. During this phase there was increased Department of Education support for the programme, illustrated by the provision of a special grant to schools of £50.00 per student participating. This may be used for any expenses relating exclusively to the Transition Year Programme (M36/94). In preparation for the widespread introduction of Transition Year programmes, a national programme of in-service education and training was provided for staff in approximately 600 second-level schools. This in-career development programme was based on a training of trainers model. The scale of operation and the tasks undertaken by the participants are described in an

5

outline of the personnel structures in the programme (Appendix.1.1). An evaluation of this programme found that overall reactions in schools, to Transition Year in-service education and training, were positive (Lewis and McMahon, 1996). The report lists the following positive outcomes associated with this phase development:

- The programme was perceived to provide valuable opportunities for professional development of teachers.
- The school-based component was effective in reaching whole-staff groups including principals.
- The non-school-based cluster days were welcomed by participants for the opportunity they afforded to meet, and exchange information and ideas, with colleagues in other schools.
- The dissemination of documentation associated with Transition Year was effective. (ibid, p.viii)

The school where the present study was carried out was involved in this programme of in-service; therefore it is reasonable to conclude that it benefited from these positive outcomes. However, the emphasis during the in-school sessions was on designing a programme, with very little emphasis on assessment. Teachers in this school felt that this was a weakness in the in-service provided. This was a need identified by Lewis and McMahon in their evaluation, as follows.

attention should be directed towards developing expertise in assessment. A stronger emphasis on appraisal of personal and social development by teachers and students will be required if the advantages of a non-examination programme such as Transition Year are to be fully realised. (ibid, p.64).

The availability of the Transition Year Curriculum Support Team to support schools in the day-to-day implementation of the programme has also proved invaluable. Dean concluded that the effect of this was evident in the positive attitude of teachers to the programme (Dean, 1997). The Transition Year Support Team was set up in 1995 and consisted of a team of fourteen people. The Transition Year Curriculum Support Service with six seconded teachers and a secretary replaced this in 1998. They are available to work with the individual teacher, co-ordinator and the entire school staff. In addition they will consult with parents and students about the programme. From a recent survey of co-ordinators of Transition Year, ninety five per cent cited the Transition Year Curriculum Support Service as being the most useful source of support in their work (TYCSS, 2000). The importance of this continued support and training in the implementation and continued success of the Transition Year Programme should not be underestimated. A chronology of the development of the programme from 1977 can be seen in Figure 1.3 (Fig.1.3).

A CHRONOLOGY OF THE DEVELOPMENT
OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

1974/75

PHASE 1
'74 – '85

| TY Project introduced in 3 schools |

1977/78

| T.Y. Appraisal by Eagan and O'Reilly |

PHASE 2
'85 – '94

1985/86

| T.Y. Option Introduced | ← | Guidelines for T.Y. (CEB) |

PHASE 3
94-Present

| TY Support team set-up | → |
| TY Support Pack Introduced | → |

1994/95

| TY Programme Introduced Part of restructured senior cycle |

| ← | National Programme of In-Service |
| ← | £50/Student Participating Grant |

1995

| Department of Education Evaluation |

Dec 1999

| Final report of NCCA longitudinal study |

8

1.2.3 The Transition Year Programme

This programme contains many of the same aims and objectives as the Transition Year project and the Transition Year option. Indeed the 1994 guidelines "do not envisage major change in the nature of Transition Year where it is currently demonstrating good practice". The Transition Year is described as a programme which "provides for a broad education of students" and to encourage students to " find and develop their own special academic, career and leisure interests as well as making them more socially aware". The mission of this year is,

> *To promote the personal, social, educational and vocational development of pupils and to prepare them for their role as autonomous, participative and responsible members of society.* (Department of Education, 1994)

The following aims are interrelated and interdependent and should be strongly reflected in every Transition Year Programme:

(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* (ibid)

The guidelines to the restructured senior cycle outline the flexible nature of the Transition Year curriculum and give the following as its main features:

- Short study units (modules)
- Cultural and Social Studies
- Environmental Studies
- Technology (from electronics to surfing the net)

9

- Choice of Languages
- Field Trips
- Leisure programmes
- Work Experience
- Operating a business (mini-companies)
- Projects/Assignments (rather than traditional homework)

(Department of Education, 1996,p.3).

As previously mentioned there is no prescribed curriculum, however a Resource Pack has been issued to assist schools in devising their programmes. This pack offers an outline of forty-five different areas of experience. These are "merely a random selection for consideration…to stimulate other perspectives and possibilities" (Department of Education, 1994). It is recommended that subjects be taught in a way, which reflects the more general purposes of the Transition Year programme. For example, the Department's Guidelines for Transition Year in relation to Mathematics state that, "the approach taken to Mathematics is as important as the content itself" (ibid). Schools are encouraged to include activities that relate to the application of mathematical skills to real life situations.

This is a unique situation in Irish education, which allows teachers to design the programme in a very personal way. It is personal in that it is designed specifically with the student of the individual school in mind. In addition teachers can, in most cases, opt to teach areas they are interested in, and are given the freedom to move into areas that would never be considered in other aspects of second level schooling. Schools are permitted to cover some Leaving Certificate material but should not use the year to operate a three-year Leaving Certificate programme.

Work experience is encouraged as a component of all programmes. This can be in the form of work shadowing, work simulation or actual work placement. There is widespread acceptance that work experience is a vital element of the course. McKenna and O'Maolmhuire in their study of work experience in Ireland,

conclude that significant identifiable learning can be tracked and point to the 'great strategic significance' of this experience in the context of 'globalisation, emerging technologies, learning organisations and the changing nature of work'. They emphasise the need for providers of work experience to engage 'energetically to develop partnerships' that will enable participants to 'de-construct and reconstruct their understanding of the world of work'. They point to the need for training and time allocation in this area.

> *A major difficulty ...is the lack of understanding of the pedagogy appropriate to work experience. Androgogy, that is an adult pedagogy, needs to be adopted in supporting students...this is not the pedagogical training which has been given to second level teachers of adolescents.*
> (McKenna and O'Maolmhuire, 2000,p.54)

A key feature of Transition Year should be the use of a wide range of teaching and learning methodologies and situations. The resource pack suggest that the aims of the programme can best be achieved by placing particular emphasis on approaches such as negotiated learning, activity-based learning, team teaching, group work, discussions, debates, role play, and project work (Department of Education, 1994). This can cause problems for teachers who have always taught using 'chalk and talk'. The emphasis is on skills acquisition in this programme. Students must collect, analyse and interpret knowledge. To teach in this way requires teachers to change and acquire new skills.

The Guidelines recommend that students should be assessed on all aspects of the programme and that such assessment should be diagnostic and developmental in emphasis with the aim to reinforce the learning experiences of the students.

> *Pupil participation in the assessment procedure should be facilitated.... Dialogue with tutors and self-rating on various performance indicators should lead to greater self-awareness and an increased ability to manager*

11

and take responsibility for personal learning... (Department of Education, 1994 B, p.9).

Transition Year takes the responsibility for assessment away from the State and places it in the hands of the class teacher where the student's individual improvement is at the heart of the process. Classroom assessment uses a far wider range of assessment evidence than is possible for external state examinations. Such a range has to be used if a valid picture of an individual's progress is to be obtained. This form of assessment, which is in progress parallel to learning, is called formative assessment and encompasses,

> *all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, that will provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged* (Black and William, 1998).

Taking into account the way that a piece of work was produced, the context of the performance and the teacher's personal knowledge of the pupil increases the validity of this form of assessment (ibid). Pen and paper tests can fail to capture much of students learning therefore assessment needs to be structured in a more practical and context-related way. In this way students can show what they know, what they understand and what they have learned (Naughton in Hyland, 2000).

Idiographic assessment is described as that which is designed to understand the individual in her/his own right without comparison with others (Satterly, 1981). The aim of Transition Year is to give each individual the space and experience to mature and to take control of her/his own learning. Involving students in negotiated learning, problem solving, group work, project work, portfolios and so on, encourages this. This mode of assessment can be diagnostic such as, providing information on aspects of the curriculum that is problematic for some individuals. This allows a teacher to adjust the pace and style of teaching or even the curriculum to suit the learner. This is possible during Transition Year

12

because the curriculum is within the control of the classroom teacher, and not externally prescribed.

The Transition Year Programme calls on teachers to develop their curriculum, to use new teaching methodologies, to develop new assessment techniques and in essence to have a different relationship with their students. The motivation of the examination is removed, as is the support of prescribed texts and teaching materials in many areas. The emphasis shifts from extrinsic motivation towards intrinsic motivation. Nevertheless, teachers and students have embraced this programme, as indicated by the fact that almost 23,000 students in 507 schools are following the course in the current school year. (Fig 1.4)

Number of Students Participating in Transition Year Programmes
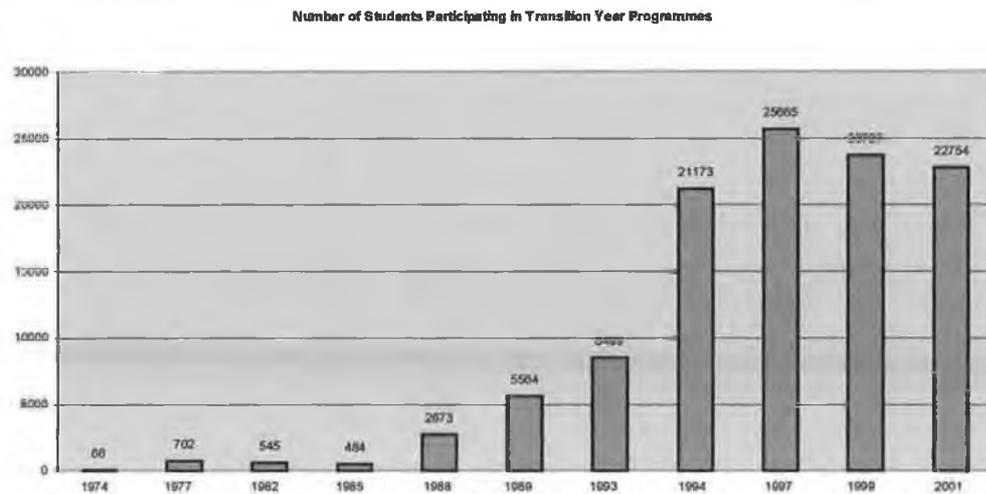
Fig 1.4[3]

1.3 Evaluations of Transition Year

There have been three evaluations of the Transition Year programme since 1977. Eisner lists five functions of evaluation.

1. To diagnose
2. To revise curricula
3. To compare
4. To anticipate needs
5. To determine if objectives have been achieved.

These five functions can be directed towards three subject matters, the curriculum itself, the teaching that is provided and the outcomes that are realized (Eisner, 1979, p168 and p246).

In 1977/78 sixteen schools were offering the Transition Year Project. During that year an evaluation of the project was commissioned by the Department of Education. This report outlined some problems in implementation but overall, the report found much to recommend the project. Both students and teachers felt the programme was beneficial in a number of areas, especially in the preparation for the world of work. Egan and O'Reilly found that the students attributed a wide range of good effects to participation in the Transition Year Option (Egan and O'Reilly, 1979,p.57). Another evaluation of the programme was not undertaken until 1995.

In March 1995, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education undertook an evaluation of the Transition Year Programme in 146 schools throughout the country. This was "designed to affirm good practice where encountered, to promote it where it was absent and to ensure that the new programme was developed and nurtured" (Department of Education, 1995, p.6). This evaluation did not involve in-depth qualitative work with students. It found that the programme was satisfactory in 89% of the schools evaluated. This evaluation was undertaken in the following way. Two inspectors were assigned to visit each school and report on "the structure, appropriateness and effectiveness

14

of the Transition Year Programme" in the school. Documentation supplied by the principal before the visit included timetable, work placement information, teacher self-evaluation sheets, Transition Year evaluation sheets, assessment information, booklets and details of expenses incurred in offering the programme. The evaluation team spoke to the principal, vice-principal, Transition Year co-ordinator and other teachers involved in the programme. They also visited classrooms and appraised various projects. At the end of the monitoring period, which consisted of one day, there was a closing meeting with the principal and co-ordinator of the programme (ibid, p.6, 7). Following the inspection, individual confidential written reports were issued to each school. The National report found that,

> *The consensus among principals, teachers and pupils is that Transition Year is a very worthwhile initiative, allowing the school to engage in genuine in school curriculum development, affording teachers the opportunity to break free of overly compartmentalised subject teaching, and giving pupils the space and time to grow in maturity and to develop self confidence.* (ibid, p 1).

In addition, it found most schools had a wide range of stimulating activities and learning experiences with activity based learning projects very much in evidence. Orientation towards community service was encouraged by a significant number of schools (ibid, p1). This evaluation by the Department of Education indicated clearly that the national implementation of the programme had been successful. However, it also identified areas for possible improvement. Twelve recommendations were made, among which were the following:

- There should have a whole school approach at all stages and in all aspects of the Transition Year Programme.

- Schools should seek to make connections with parents, work providers, the wider community and with other schools offering the programme, with a view to networking.
- Teachers, parents, work providers and pupils should be involved in assessment procedures, which could greatly improve the process.
- Schools should engage in internal evaluation of the programme on a regular basis. (Department of Education, 1995)

In the school year 1998/1999, the Department of Education and Science carried out on evaluation of the Transition Year programme in eighteen schools. The schools were selected with a view to sampling a variety of school types in different parts of the country (Murphy, 1999).

In the school, the inspector discussed the Transition Year programme with the principal, coordinator and in some cases the core team of teachers. The file of the Transition Year programme documents was studied. A number of Transition Year classes were visited. Before leaving the school, the inspector reported back to the principal and outlined the strengths of the schools Transition Year programme and suggested measures for improving it. A written report was later sent to all schools (ibid).

Among the findings of this evaluation were the following:
- Many pupils appreciated the bonding effects of the Transition Year programme, on inter-pupil relationships and on pupil-teacher relationships.
- Pupils enjoyed the programme and valued the opportunity for personal development.
- Some of the most dynamic teachers in the schools were heavily involved in the Transition Year programme.

- Parents attitudes to the programme underwent a significant transformation in the course of the year as they saw their children mature through their participation in the Transition Year programme.

The report concluded that in all schools visited the teaching in the Transition Year programme was based on experimental learning strategies. However, again cross-curricular studies needed to be enhanced. In addition, the report recommended regular evaluation of the school's Transition Year programme by pupils, teachers and parents (ibid)

The flexibility of Transition Year is a key factor in its success. For the first time in Irish Education, schools are asked to design a full year's programme and individual teachers are empowered to design individual subject modules. Being convinced of the benefits of Transition Year is not enough. Schools need to embrace the shift in emphasis demanded by the course. The inspectors' report (1995) and the recent report from the TYCSS (2000) both point to the difficulties in the implementation of the programme, in particular to the need for a whole school approach. This necessitates the involvement of all school personnel in planning the programme. The whole school must own it from the outset. It is suggested that all curriculum innovation requires imaginative school leadership.

The introduction, implementation and continuous co-ordination of a major curricular innovation such as Transition Year will have a substantial impact on a school. This impact necessitates a 'reculturing' of pupils, teachers, parents and indeed the wider community. Without doubt the success of any curriculum innovation depends on teachers. However, as Fullan advises, if students do not also play a meaningful role in change, it will be doomed to failure (Fullan, 1991). The following section examines some recent publications on Transition Year and its impact on the student.

1.4   Current Views of Transition Year

There was growing evidence throughout the nineties that the Transition Year Programme was beneficial to students. This was apparent both in the growing numbers of schools providing the course, and in publications throughout this time.

Research showed that an education with a narrow academic focus was not satisfactory. Students felt that education should include personal and social development, and also prepare them for adult and working life and to some extent civic life (Hannan and Shortall, 1991). Like previous studies, (Raven et al, 1975 and Madaus et al, 1979) this review of the objectives and effectiveness of education found that satisfaction with general education on the achievement of the 3Rs was high, but, that of personal and social development was not so satisfactory (ibid). Humphreys found that Transition Year Programmes were successfully making up this deficit. Students in this study expressed satisfaction with the achievement of the aims of the programme that catered for the broader aspects of education, such as personal and social development (Humphreys, 1995). The programme offers opportunities and challenges for students, which they may not have within an education system that is exam led. It also fulfils student needs that other courses in the school may not fulfil.

Dr. Emer Smyth of the Economic and Social Research Institute quotes a Vice-Principal as saying that those who take Transition Year,
definitely do better in fifth and sixth year. Those who don't do it miss out socially, in interacting with their peers, to be able to work with other people, and in setting and achieving goals (Smyth, 1999, p.177).

Students were found to have more positive self-images in schools characterised by positive relations between teachers and students. The six schools in this study tended to stress similar objectives in relation to Transition Year provision, including maturity, personal development, development of social skills,

widening the scope of learning opportunities and enhanced subject choice for fifth year (ibid).

Clearly, while programmes in various schools are organised very differently taking the local context into account, all schools seem to have similar objectives, reflecting the overall objectives of the course. In a study carried out by Marino Institute of Education, students interviewed spoke favourably of Transition Year and in particular they focused on their social development and on the benefits of work experience in the local community.

> *Transition Year would have been my favourite time in school, because it was different...the stuff I did, I was good at...more socially oriented* (Male, 23-24)

> *I would recommend it because you have work experience...I felt really grown up...the communication was very good.* (Female, 17-18)
> (Tuohy and Cairns, 2000, p.118).

The Commission on the Points System points to the "growing anecdotal evidence that students who have taken the Transition Year Programme are more self-reliant learners when they enter third level education than their peers" (Government Publication, 1999, p. 46). This is significant when one considers that 26% of students who entered college in 1992 had not been awarded any qualification by 1998, that is, they had either left college or failed their exams (Government Publication, 1998, p.85). There is a need for further research to ascertain whether participation in the Transition Year programme could reduce this percentage.

Throughout the nineties many groups got involved with Transition Year in formulating teaching materials and competitions for the course. At every curriculum support meeting new materials were being disseminated, for example:

- The Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland
- Midland Health Board Project with Board Bia
- Hotels Federation
- Project Forest
- Legal Studies Modules
- Many more (over sixty to date)

Some of these initiatives represent large investment by the bodies involved, for example Project Forest represented a investment of £300,000 which was part funded by the EEC for the Tree Council of Ireland. It has been described as "some of the most innovative resource material yet developed for Transition Year Programmes" (Transition News, 1998, p.9). That so many agencies would invest time and money in developing modules for Transition Year is testament to the feeling in the nineties that this was a very worthwhile initiative.

In some areas Transition Year was used to introduce intervention programmes with great success. Smith introduced Science, Technology and Society (STS) education into Transition Year in an effort to broaden students' understanding of the powers and limits of science. This study found that participation in this module heightening students interest in science education with the numbers opting for Physics and Biology doubling after instruction (Smith and Mathews, 2000). Many schools use the year to allow their students participate in a 'taster' curriculum, where students would do short modules in all Leaving Certificate subjects. This could lead to better subject choice for senior cycle, which has obvious implications for Leaving Certificate performance.

Some of these implications are evident in the final report from the NCCA longitudinal study of the 1994 Junior Certificate cohort. From a Transition Year point of view this study is of special interest. Of the 67,008 1994 Junior Certificate students, 20,955 did not sit Leaving Certificate until 1997. This 20,955 represents 31.3% of the cohort, it is reasonable to presume that the

majority of this group followed a Transition Year Programme during the school year 1994-95.

The comparison between the '94-95 and the '94-97 cohorts reveals a number of differences between the two groups. The study notes that these two groups represent different students, who sat different Leaving Certificate examinations. However, bearing this in mind the following are among the main findings of the NCCA study.

- Candidates in the '94-97 group were more likely to be 'educationally adventurous' than those in the '94-96 group. They were more likely to retain subjects at Higher Level, to move up from Ordinary to Higher Level and from Foundation to Ordinary Level. They were also more likely to take up subjects, which they had not taken before (p.115).

- Overall, '94-97 candidates scored higher Leaving Certificate results than candidates in the '94-96 group. When school and previous performance factors are taken into account, the '94-97 candidates are 26 CAO points ahead of their '94-96 counterparts (p.214).

- Furthermore, when the '94-97 group are compared with the 3323 candidates who repeated their Leaving Certificate in 1997, these students only scored on average 5 CAO points ahead of those who had completed the Transition Year Programme (p.214).

- The Transition Year in schools designated as 'disadvantaged' seemed to have a very positive effect, especially for boys, with a marked improvement in Leaving Certificate Education

achievement compared to Junior Certificate Education achievement. (p. 216).

The report concludes:

While participation in the Transition Year would seem to have a considerable effect on Leaving Certificate education performance, it is not possible on the basis of our data to identify aspects of the programmes that might be beneficial (NCCA, 1999, p 223).

If students who have taken the Transition Year Programme are more likely to move from taking a subject at lower level to taking the same subject at higher level in Leaving Certificate, they will obviously have an advantage considering a grade A1 in lower level earns the same CAO points as a grade C3 in a higher-level paper. There is relatively little upward movement from ordinary level in the Junior Certificate to higher level in the Leaving Certificate among students who had not availed of the Transition Year Programme (NCCA, 1998). This study was undertaken in an effort to identify the aspects of the programme that might be responsible for students being more educationally adventurous and scoring higher Leaving Certificate results.

Clearly, the literature confirms that Transition Year appears to have support from both inside and outside the system. There is both anecdotal evidence and hard factual evidence indicating that students who participate in this course benefit from their experience. Programmes such as the Transition Year Programme are difficult to evaluate as their aims are broad and virtually defy measurement. To get to the heart of the matter one must ask the people who experience the course, namely, the Transition Year students.

1.5   The Student voice

This study adopts the position that in order to understand, and evaluate curriculum one must determine the student's experience of it. To find out what is educationally good in Transition Year, this study looks to the students for the

answer. There is much that "can be learned from listening to the key actors on the classroom stage" (Morgan & Morris, 1999, p.2).

There is a need to listen to what students have to say about their schooling experiences if we are to evaluate whether we are providing an educational climate conducive to quality learning and personal development. The literature available on this type of emphasis, that is, the students being used as the key research respondents is not extensive. Many researchers both in Ireland and abroad note this void. This neglect of student perspectives on school has been a persistent concern over many years, (Lang, 1993). Their perspective is insufficiently valued (Rudduck et al, 1996). In Irish education there is a lack of research-based microanalysis, with much of the research being carried out at a macro level (Rath, 2000). Students as the major participants in education have been denied a voice in research (Lynch, 1999).

Power relationships, as defined and experienced by young people, have not been a major research subject in education...While power and control have been examined from a teacher perspective, the same attention has not been devoted to student views (Lodge and Lynch, 2000,p.47)

In evaluating programmes, student's perspectives must be sought, listened to and acted upon. Eisner advises that because curricula are intended for people and because people have different priorities, any appraisal of curriculum needs to take the population for whom it was intended into account. He gives concrete examples of how this can be achieved:

Interviews, open-ended essays, and projects whose parameters provide opportunities for students to reveal what personal meanings they have constructed for themselves need to be made available (Eisner, 1985,p.251).

In the National evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied, evidence of the views of principals, teachers and students were obtained through discussion

and questionnaires. However, in the report on the evaluation, the student voice is neglected to a large extent. For example the evaluation report states as follows,

In order to give the reader a flavour of the Leaving Certificate Applied in operation, principals, teachers and inspectors have been quoted directly throughout this report" (Department of Education and Science, 2000).

In addition, there is no copy of the student questionnaire included in the appendices, while there are those for teachers and principal.

In evaluating the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme (LCVP) the inspectors were generally impressed with the level of maturity and confidence shown by the students (Department of Education and Science, 1998). Granville in an evaluation of the LCVP in-career development programme carried out interviews with current and former LCVP students. He used the perceptions of LCVP students to assess the impact of the programme on their learning experience. The bias was in favour of positive experiences. The purpose of the study was to generate data that could ultimately impact on in-service provision (Granville, 1999). This focus on student outcomes, rather than merely on teacher competence enhanced this evaluation.

In the Department of Education and Science pilot project on Whole School Evaluation the students' perspective was not included (Whole School Evaluation Report, 1999). However this was noted and it is intended that student's views be included in subsequent evaluations (OConluain, 2001[4]). This will greatly enrich the process for all involved.

In his authoritative review of how school reform is implemented, Fullan asks, "What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?" (Fullan, 1991, p170). In his research project on the role of students in Ontario schools, he found that a minority of students feel that teachers understand their point of view, less than one fifth of the students were asked by teachers for

their opinion on what or how to teach, management were not seen as listening to students and most students found classes boring. He concludes that,

Involving students in a consideration of the meaning and purpose of specific changes and in new forms of day- to- day learning directly addresses the knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary for all students to become engaged in their own learning. (ibid,p190).

Nieto argues that "Reforming school structures alone will not lead to differences in student achievement…. if such changes are not accompanied by profound changes in how we as educators think about students. One way to begin the process of changing school policies is to listen to students' views about them" (Nieto, 1994, p395 – 396). Initially students may be reticent and reluctant to offer their views but this will improve when they find "their experiences respected and reaffirmed by others" (SooHoo, 1993, p 386). Rudduck advises "that what pupils say about teaching, learning and schooling is not only worth listening to but provides an important – perhaps the most important – foundation for thinking about ways of improving schools" (Rudduck, et al., 1996, p1).

Researchers such as Nieto were surprised by the insights provided by students and the "depth of awareness and analysis" they were capable of (Nieto 1994). A two year study carried out in the nineties discovered that students' views on teaching and learning were remarkably consistent with those of theorists concerned with learning theory, cognitive science and the sociology of work (Phelan et al, 1992). In a study with children as young as seven, McCallum found them able to conceptualise learning and describe a variety of learning strategies, with some able to articulate their own thinking processes. She found that at times, the children's thinking "resonated with formal theories of learning" (McCallum et al., 2000, p 287).

Researchers like those cited above are committed to giving students a voice and it can be seen, when students were given a voice they were found to be

articulate judges of their learning. The following section explores some research where students were given a voice and endeavours to demonstrate further the value in such an exercise.

1.6   The Student View

The E.S.R.I. study, *Quality of their Education* involved extensive interviewing of school leavers aged between 15 and 18 years (Hannan and Shortall, 1991). This study found that while students were relatively satisfied with the 'Cognitive Development' goals of education they were very dissatisfied with the 'Personal and Social Development' and the 'Preparation for Work and adult life' goals of education (ibid). This level of dissatisfaction was remarkably similar to that outlined in earlier studies by Raven et al., (1975) and Madaus et al., (1979) despite the changes in education in the intervening years.

Kathleen Lynch and Anne Lodge used essays completed by 1,202 students in their study on Equality in Education (Lynch, 1999, ch 18). They examine equality issues in schooling from the perspective of young people. They showed that the view from young people is not the same as the view from the researchers or the view from the top in terms of equality priorities. They conclude that above all young people are "calling for the introduction of democratic... systems in schools which show greater respect for them as individuals with views, wishes and ambitions which are not synonymous with those of adults" (ibid, p 253).

Students in the Lynch study described the 'ideal' teacher as someone who had a sense of humour, an attitude of respect, was an effective communicator, in command of their subject and able to maintain control without being aggressive (Lynch, 1999). This correlates with the image of the 'ideal' teacher from international research. Students want teachers who can socially connect with them (SooHoo, 1993, Phelan, et al, 1992, Rudduck et al, 1994, Nieto, 1994, McCallum, 2000). Students want to have a say in what they are learning and how they are learning (Brooker, 1999, Nieto, 1994, Rudduck, 1996, Morgan, 1999). Brooker advises that the challenge is to "embrace curriculum-making practices that are

26

more inclusive and valuing of student voice" (Brooker, 1999). Clearly, curriculum making practices include curriculum evaluation.

Scott Boldt interviewed early school leavers in order to gain an in-depth understanding of their post-school experiences (Boldt, 1994). There is a tendency to attribute early school leaving to home factors, however Boldt found that the quality of relationships with teachers and authority in the school is critical, according to young people who leave school. Boldt emphasises the need for their voices to be heard and their perspectives to be considered by policy makers and programme developers (Boldt, 1996). It is surely possible that some degree of student apathy and their subsequent drop out from school could be a result of not being heard, and of their feeling that no one wants to listen? Glasser found that students felt that "no one listens to me" and "...they never try to find out what I want to do"(Glasser, 1997,p.598).

The National Children's strategy proposes to listen to children. The plan says,

We want to hear what children think about what is important in their lives. We will listen to what they say and we will try to take children's ideas into account when we are making laws and plans for children and families. We want other people to listen to children too, like teachers, youth-club leaders and other people who help children (Government publication, 2000).

In the Report on the Public Consultation for this strategy it is noted that in relation to learning and education virtually all the focus was on 'skills of relating and personal and social development', the skills promoted by the Transition Year Programme. In addition it notes that there was 'little comment on any area of 'academic' learning, beyond challenging the 'academic focus' of schooling' (Government publication, 2000 A). In a system that is a product focused and exam-oriented, there are few opportunities, other than during Transition Year, for students to have the time and space to develop life skills. The Junior Cycle

Review highlights how the dominance of the terminal exam has led to teachers focusing on what is relevant to the exam not what is relevant to the student. What is certified is the quality of performance and not the quality of learning. This type of assessment excludes from the process the "affective development of the students, their ability to work as part of a team, individual contributions to group projects, autonomous potential, and personal initiative"(NCCA, 1999). These are the qualities encouraged and assessed during the Transition Year Programme.

1.7   Conclusion

Transition Year represents a period in young people's lives when they are developing their roles and values and exploring their identities. It is a time characterised by a strong focus on peer friendships, and a need to identify with the wider world (Hargreaves et al., 1996). The programme offers the student an opportunity to fulfil many of the above needs. Group work, field trips, practical work and other in school activities encourage peer relationships. Their participation in autonomous learning activities means they have time and space to explore their identities. Their involvement in community service and environmental education allows them connect with the wider world.

In reviewing literature for this study the striking feature was that many publications in the nineties had positive points to make in relation to Transition Year. Many school programmes are criticized as they are too rigid and academic in focus to the detriment of personal and social development and they are not tailored to the individual's needs. The Transition Year programme is characterised on its flexibility and focus on the personal and social development and its ability to be tailored to individuals needs, as it is school specific.

In reviewing literature where students were used as judges of their educational experiences it was clearly evident that this is an area under-researched at present. When students were asked for their opinion on their learning and other issues, their observations were remarkably lucid and informative. There is a growing demand for talking with students rather than talking about them.

Transition Year is considered to be an ideal curriculum innovation to study in this way, that is, using student's observations of the course to evaluate it. Students already have a 'voice' during Transition Year. As already mentioned the research undertaken for this study is qualitative in nature. The data collected is descriptive and representive of the participants view. In this type of research, the natural setting is used as a direct source of data. The following chapter describes the design and operation of the programme in the school where the research was carried out.

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[1] The rate of retention at second level corresponds to the estimated percentage of entrants to Junior Certificate in a given year who complete second level in a publicly aided school with a Leaving Certificate (including Leaving Certificate Applied) Source: Department of Education and Science Statistical Report (1998, pix)

[2] Source; Department of Education and Science statistical section.

[3] Source; Department of Education and Science statistical section.

[4] Gearoid OConluan spoke at a lecture in Maynooth College on 14th of March. He expressed the Departments intention to include the student perspectives in future school evaluations. He acknowledged that this was an omission from the pilot project.

Chapter 2: The design and operation of a Transition Year programme.

2.1   Introduction

This study focuses on the student's own thoughts, feelings and experiences of a Transition Year programme in a second level school. As outlined in the previous chapter, the main feature of this programme is that it is school specific. There is no prescribed curriculum, however, guidelines have been issued to assist schools in devising their programmes. While these programmes will have common elements of design, there are distinguishing characteristics to each.

This chapter provides an overview of what is meant by the term curriculum. Furthermore it describes the design and operation of the curriculum programme in this second level school. This is undertaken in order to 'set the scene' and give the reader a flavor of Transition Year in the research setting.

2.2   Curriculum

The term curriculum means many different things to different people from definitions that tend to emphasise the content of a programme, the ground to be covered and to some extent the methods to be used, to definitions that are more likely to consider the whole learning situation. Curriculum can be defined as "all the learning, which is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually, inside or outside the school" (Kerr quoted in Kelly, 1982, p.10). There is growing literature on 'the hidden curriculum' leading many in education to realise that many of the most important lessons that students learn are not those taught in the official curriculum. Eisner describes the three curricula all schools teach. There is the explicit curriculum; this would represent the written programme for Transition Year. There is the implicit curriculum; this represents what the school teaches because of the kind of place it is, that is, the hidden curriculum. The null curriculum is what the school chooses not to teach. There are two dimensions to this null curriculum, the intellectual processes that schools emphasize and neglect and the content and subject areas that are present and

absent (Eisner, 1979). An examination of the null curriculum during Transition Year is outside the scope of this study.

Sizer further divides curriculum into the following parts:

- The 'official'   – i.e. course programme
- The 'enacted'   – i.e. course offered
- The 'delivered'   – i.e. by the actual teachers
- The 'experienced' or 'received'   – i.e. by the students
- The 'hidden'   – i.e. unplanned but systematic
- The 'null'   – i.e. that which is not taught

(Sizer, 1992)

There are different levels at which the official curriculum is planned. At the National level, for example the Leaving Certificate curriculum. At the Regional level, for example, the Shannon Senior Certificate course. At the local level as is the case of the Transition Year programme. When the official curriculum is planned at the local level, the enacted and delivered aspects of the curriculum reflect the official curriculum to a greater extent.

This work is focused mainly on the 'experienced' curriculum. However, all other aspects of the curriculum impact on this one.

2.3   Context

The cultural context of this analysis is a Girls Voluntary Secondary School under the trusteeship of the Presentation Sisters. The school has five hundred and thirty six students on its roll with thirty-five teachers on its staff. It is located in a midlands town of mixed social class. The Transition Year programme has been offered since September 1996. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme was introduced in 1997.

2.4 Introduction of Transition Year

The planning for Transition Year spanned a two-year period involving all staff members with the introduction of an agreed programme in 1996. All staff were involved in Department of Education in-service prior to its introduction. Initially there were many problems with the implementation of this programme. Students, teachers and management were all learning how to adapt to this new, exciting, frightening and always changing programme. Fullan advises that this "implementation dip is intrinsic to the change process" and that "smooth early use is a sure sign that not much is being attempted" (Fullan, 1993). This initial conflict and willingness to learn from it has resulted in the present programme in the study school.

2.4.1 Aims

The aims of Transition Year in this school reflect the overall aims of the course as recommended by the Department of Education and Science namely:

- To provide students with the space and experiences to promote the personal, social and educational development of the individual student.
- To give students opportunities to experience a year where the emphasis is on individual responsibility and the nurturing of thinking, caring, articulate and self-confident people.
- To provide students with experiences that will help them to prepare for their role as autonomous, participative and responsible members of society.
- To provide students with the skills and supports necessary to discover their individual talents, aptitudes and abilities.
- To develop self-reliance, creativity and independence.
- To develop student's ability to work effectively within a group and to enhance their communication skills.
- To develop skills of constructive criticism of their own work and the work of others.

The programme provides the students with opportunities for developing their intellectual, imaginative and emotional life. It provides them with practice in thinking for themselves, in decision-making and in assuming responsibility. They are encouraged to develop a positive approach to learning and to their own education.

2.4.2 Co-ordination and Teamwork

The programme has evolved from a situation where there was one person, the co-ordinator, in charge of all aspects of the programme to the present situation where a core team assist in the co-ordination of the programme.

This team is made up of the following.

- A Career Guidance teacher, with responsibility for work experience and world of work education.
- A Music teacher, with responsibility for co-ordinating Music and Drama, including a fashion show.
- A year-head, who is in charge of monitoring absences and general behavior.
- A Business teacher, who is responsible for mini-company and enterprise education.
- The co-ordinator works with each of these people in their areas and has ultimate responsibility for liaising with the principal, school management, parents, community agencies and the staff. The co-ordinator has many other responsibilities including, collection of Transition Year fee, budget for each subject area, accounts for end of year returns and co-ordination of the Gaisce award (Presidents award).

The core team organizes the interview of applicants, the induction of students including away trips, the co-ordination of transport, correspondence with

parents, Transition Year newsletter, an information day for third years and a talk about the programme for parents.

This system of teamwork has proved very successful in the implementation and continued management of this curriculum innovation. The effectiveness of an 'efficient co-ordinator backed up by a committed and representative co-ordinating team' was acknowledged by the Inspectors of Transition Year in 1994 (Department of Education and Science, 1994-1995).

2.4.3 Students

Students apply to take part in Transition Year in March during their Junior Certificate year. One or more of the core team interviews all applicants. This interview is used to gain an insight into the student's reason for wanting to do the course and to give them a clear picture of what the course entails. The information from these interviews is used when planning the programme for the students. Every effort is taken to accommodate their particular interests.

Occasionally a student will be advised not to take the option, usually because of a poor attendance record or poor behaviour. It is felt that participation in the programme may be of great benefit in improving behaviour, therefore the decision to exclude a student on these grounds is not made without a great deal of consideration. All staff of the school are consulted before any applicant is deemed unsuitable.

Students pay £125 for the programme; this is paid in installments over the course of the year. This, in addition to the school contribution of £50 per student pays for all expenses accrued in providing the programme.

2.5 Transition Year timetable

On average forty students take this option. These students are allocated to two classes. All efforts are made to ensure that these classes are mixed ability,

with staff involved in this process. These two classes follow a different timetable until Christmas and then these timetables are exchanged for the second half of the year. Students participate in modules, for example Transition Year F21 will have Geography until Christmas and then History from Christmas to summer, whereas, F22 have history until Christmas and Geography from Christmas to summer.

Some subjects are timetabled simultaneously to allow students remain with one teacher for the year and to allow for team teaching. These subjects are:

- Irish
- English
- Mathematics
- French
- Mini Company
- Physical Education

This system of timetabling evolved for various reasons. Initially, in 1996 both classes followed independent timetables. However, on evaluation with students, parents and teachers the following problems presented.

- Students had one class period per week of Politics, Architecture and German. These classes could be missed for up to three weeks due to the nature of the year, with visiting speakers, trips and so on. This led to discontinuity and frustration for both student and teacher.
- In an effort to give students an experience of all subjects to assist them in their subject choice they ended up with a very fragmented course with breadth and very little balance.

The present system, that is the modular timetable, is not perfect and presents its own problems. Some teachers find the limited time they have with a group does not allow them to explore their area in any depth.

2.5.1 Content

The areas covered this school year were as follows:

- *Leaving Certificate Subjects*; Mathematics, English, Irish, French, History, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, Accounting, Economics, Biology, Home Economics, Music and Art.

- *Business Expertise*; Computer Studies, Typing and Mini Company.

- *Development Education*; Justice, Poverty and Environment Studies.

- *Education for living*; Personal Development, Yoga, Personal Hygiene and Self-analysis.

- *Religious Education.*

- *Aesthetic appreciation and expression*; Exhibitions, Drama, Film Studies.

- *Leisure Activities;* Physical Education, Adventure sports, Golf, Horse riding

- *World of Work*; Work experience, Careers class.

During Transition Year, students have two work placements, one week in October and two weeks in March. In addition students have one class period per week to study the world of work, careers, practice the skills needed to apply for work and to participate in mock interviews. For a placement to be a worthwhile learning experience, students need to be well prepared beforehand and thoroughly debriefed afterwards (McKenna and O'Maolmhuire, 2000). This component of the course plays a very important role in student formative assessment. They obtain feedback from people other than teachers in the form of employers, interviewers and work colleagues.

2.5.2 Distinctive features

School Magazine

The Transition Year class, with the assistance of their two English teachers, publish a school magazine each term and a yearbook at the end of the year. This helps the students acquire many skills, such as teamwork, leadership, communication and the importance of working to deadlines, to name but a few.

Fashion Show

Each year, the school runs a fundraising fashion show. The Transition Year students organise this event in conjunction with the parents' council. This involves forming groups to coordinate the modeling, choreography, set design, advertising, sponsorship and promotion. The show is extremely enjoyable and a highlight of the course.

Gaisce

Gaisce is the National challenge award from the president of Ireland to the young people of Ireland. All students participate in this award, with on average seventy five percent completing the challenge and obtaining their bronze award. The purpose of the award is to encourage young people to set and achieve a demanding challenge for themselves in each of four different areas of activity. The challenges must be achieved outside class time. The areas are as follows:

- Community Involvement
- Personal skill
- Physical recreation
- Venture activity

Health Food Snack Shop

As part of a course on healthy eating, the students opened and ran a Health Food Snack Shop for break time. This proved very popular with all students.

Toastmasters

The students participate in an eight-week course in public speaking. This occurs after school and is attended by the students on a voluntary basis.

2.5.3 Competitions

Competitions play an important role during the course. There are a variety of competitions, both locally and Nationally open to the students during this year. Some or all students entered the following competitions during this school year.

- Snacks project, organized by the Midland Health Board.
- The Coca-Cola Form and Fusion Design Awards.
- Ballygowan/ECO Young Environmentalists Award.
- European Young Consumer Competition 2001.
- Young Scientist.
- National reading Initiative.
- Earth 2001.
- Young Entrepreneurs Scheme (Golden Vale).
- Young Enterprise Ireland (BUPA).
- County Council Litter Competition.
- Irish Debating.

2.6 Transition Year Programmes for individual subjects

Planning should take place within the context of available resources and their efficient use; it should be informed by the need for balance, flexibility and realistic perspective; and it should facilitate programme development and documentation.

(Transition Year Guidelines, 1994/1995)

A clearly documented programme was collated in the study school. All staff members were involved in this process. Each subject department contributed a subject programme to this document, which was written up using the following common format:

1.   Title of subject or module
2.   Duration of module
3.   Aims
4.   Objectives
5.   Teaching and learning strategies
6.   Content
7.   Assessment
8.   Resources
9.   Links with other subjects
10. Evaluation

The programme is updated each year as new personnel come on board. To facilitate the writing of the programme the Transition Year support service issued a leaflet to assist schools. This proved to be very helpful as most teachers found framing their programmes in aims and objectives a difficult task. Previously most programmes had a long detailed list of content with little real indication of the objectives of the course.

2.6.1   Transition Year Resources

There is an area in the staff room where Transition Year resources are available for teachers to use. The Resource folder provided by the Department of Education and Science is kept here. In addition, there is a Transition Year notice board where the calendar of events is on display. Notices are posted daily to keep teachers updated on the activities of the Transition Year students.

2.7 Teaching and Learning strategies.

The guidelines state that the use of a wide range of teaching and learning methodologies should be a key feature of a Transition Year programme. Teachers in the study school employ a wide variety of teaching methodologies during the year (Fig. 2.1). This provides a list, which is representative of those methodologies or activities mentioned in student diaries.

- Group Work	- Library Visits
- Role Play	- Field Trips
- Debating	- Negotiated Learning
- Project Work	- Team Teaching
- Visiting Speakers	- Oral Presentations
- Problem Solving	- Formal input by teacher
- Video	- Classroom discussion
- Interviews	- Demonstrations
- Audio Tapes	- Computer-based learning
- Drama	- Practical work
- Project-based learning	- Research
- Quizes	- Verb races
- Games e.g. French hangman	- Discussion

Methodologies and Activities In Transition Year

Fig.2.1

2.7.1 Assessment

This shift in emphasis to active learning and extending the learning environment beyond the classroom necessitates a major shift in assessment practices.

To assess learning experiences as varied as above it is necessary to use a wide range of assessment techniques.

Students are assessed in four main areas:

1. Skills
2. Knowledge of subject
3. Attitude
4. Initiative

Teachers rate students on a scale of one to five in the four areas above. Teachers are free to decide with students what constitutes knowledge of subject, initiative and so on. Teachers can use a range of assessment techniques within their subject areas to obtain the information they require to fulfill the criteria. There is a wide range available which includes the following:

Written

- Short answer tests
- Extended answer tests
- Essays
- Objective tests

Practical

- Experiments
- Assignments
- Oral work
- Aural work

Projects

- Research projects
- Design brief projects
- Action projects

Others

- Profiling
- Portfolios
- Student diary
- Work experience report

The fact that Transition Year moves away from the dominance of a terminal written examination has succeeded in instigating a change in attitude to assessment in this school. This change is evident in the way teaching, learning and assessment are recognised as being interrelated. Most of the assessments carried out by teachers during this year are formative. With the exception of economics, all other subjects use project work as a form of assessment. Only six subjects use written tests for assessment purposes.

Projects allow students to work alone in teams where they can experience a sense of success on completing a piece of work, working in stages and getting affirmation as they progress. Transition Year as stated previously is concerned with process therefore criteria that reflect skills development and personal qualities are important e.g. effort, participation, attitude and initiative are all emphasized. Because projects are ongoing over a period of time teachers can identify learning difficulties thus offering alternatives, giving positive reinforcement, and providing ongoing monitoring and feedback. In this way the assessment is built into the learning. This encourages students to see that mistakes are part of learning.

Feedback is most effective when it is designed to encourage correction of errors through thinking about them in relation to the original learning relevant to the task. Feedback, therefore, must be directed towards the task rather than the student and must be 'differentiated' to suit the needs of the student. (Black and William, 1998). For this feedback to be meaningful, students must have clear instructions on the learning goals of the project, on how to put the project together and on how the project will be assessed.

At the start of the year, Transition Year students take part in a workshop on project work. Here they explore the many skills involved in this type of learning. They are involved in workshops on the layout of projects, how to carry out interviews, oral presentations and so on. Students are given a general marking

scheme for projects, which will be adapted to suit various subjects. For assessment to be formative, student and teacher must be clear about the criteria that will be used to assess the project. As Gipps advises *"the teachers standards must be available to the student and feedback from the teacher must allow the student to reach this standard"* (Gipps, 1994, p. 128).

All Transition Year students keep a daily diary in which they record their thoughts, feelings and experience of the course. They are encouraged to use the diary as a reflective tool, to reflect on their learning. To encourage conscientious effort, the diaries are awarded ten per cent of students overall mark for the year. To obtain this mark students are required to hand up their work at regular intervals, non-completion is the only way one fails to get this mark. The diaries play an important role in student self-assessment where students take time to reflect on their performance against previous performance, that is, ipsative-referenced assessment.

Student's personal development and maturity is enhanced by the key role they play in assessment. They are involved in talking and negotiating with teachers, employers and others during the year leading to increased social confidence and an awareness of others.

2.7.2   Certification

At graduation from Transition Year, students are awarded a certificate, which is graded at three levels – Distinction, Merit and Pass. This is calculated using Christmas and summer reports, giving the following weighting to each area,
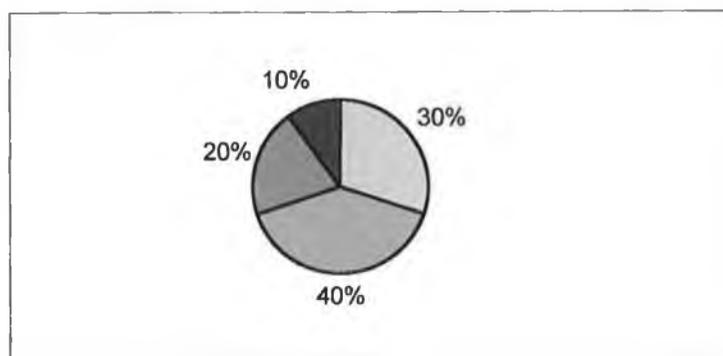
Fig. 2.2

Skills and Knowledge of Subject	30%
Attitude and Initiative	40%
Attendance	20%
Student Diary	10%

On graduation night the students display their work on all aspects of the course. Parents, work experience providers and any outside agencies involved during the year are invited to this event.

2.8   Evaluation

Parents, students and teachers, using evaluation sheets provided in the Department of Education resource pack, evaluate the programme. In addition, the co-ordinator can use the student diaries to evaluate the programme. Class teachers use evaluation sheets to evaluate visiting speakers and other events. The core team consults with work providers in evaluating work experience.

2.9   Conclusion

This chapter has explained the context of this study. It provides an overview of the design and operation of the Transition Year programme in this setting. Curriculum is defined in its broadest sense, encompassing all the activities students participate in during their time in school and all other activities organised by the school. As stated above this work is focused mainly on the curriculum as

experienced by the student. In order to gain an insight into this aspect of the curriculum there was a need to gain entry into the world of the students, to understand the meaning they construct around events in their daily lives. This required qualitative research where the data collected would be descriptive.

The Transition Year diaries contain a wealth of information on their daily activities and classes. It was felt that these diaries gave the researcher a glimpse of their reality and the naturally occurring sequence of events as they experienced them. The methodology employed in collecting and analysing this data is discussed in chapter three.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1   Introduction

Chapter one summarised the introduction, implementation and evaluation of the Transition Year programme according to the literature available. There is evidence, both anecdotal and quantitative, that the experience of this course is both personally and academically enriching for students. However, there is an absence of qualitative data as to why this is so. The need for research into student's perceptions of their education is emphasised.

The previous chapter provides a description of the Transition Year programme in the research setting. The distinctive characteristics of the programme are documented. The researcher's current position as co-ordinator of the programme has afforded her with significant background knowledge of the course. In addition, it has allowed her to enter the world of the student through their accounts of the programme in their diaries. This proved to be an essential component of this study.

This chapter explores the rationale for undertaking this body of research. Furthermore explores the objectives of this work and explains the mode of research employed in meeting those objectives. The methodology used in gathering the preliminary information and in undertaking the primary research component of this study are outlined. Finally, the reliability and validity of the research is discussed.

3.2   Rationale for the Study

The impetus for this research began with the researcher's professional and personal experience of teaching Transition Year and acting as Transition Year Co-ordinator. It was generally accepted within the study school that students who took the Transition Year option seemed more at ease as they manoeuvred their way through senior cycle. Was it just the fact that they were one year older or was

there something else in their repertoire of skills that they had gained from their experience of transition year helping them?

Various educational publications discussed in chapter one further highlighted the need for research in this area. Dr Emer Smyth's study (Smyth 1999) found that most students benefited from taking Transition Year. The Commission on the Points System referred to the "growing anecdotal evidence that students who have taken the Transition Year Programme are more self-reliant learners when they enter third-level education than their peers" (Department of Education, 1999, p 46).

The NCCA study, which tracked the cohort of students who completed their Junior Certificate in 1994 through to their Leaving Certificate, yielded a great harvest of data regarding student performance in relation to students who had taken part in Transition Year. Results of this study showed an improvement in the subsequent Leaving Certificate performance of students who availed of Transition Year. However, the report points to the need for more information on the programme, as to how it operates in schools and on which features of the programme in fact enhances performance (NCCA, 1999).

Each study highlights the merits of Transition Year but fails to explore specific aspects, or good practice employed by schools in delivering these programmes. These issues provided the rationale for the undertaking of a case study on Transition Year at this time. Information from this study will assist programme development in the researcher's own school and may aid further development of Transition Year programmes in general.

3.3 Aims

1. The purpose of the preliminary research was to ascertain if the case study school conforms to the findings of the NCCA study.

2. The primary research aims to explore the student's personal view of Transition Year in an endeavour to identify the factors, which contribute to enhanced performance.

3. To establish whether these factors transfer into senior cycle.

3.3.1 Objectives

The objectives of the research, deriving from, the foregoing aims, are as follows:

1. To Validate whether students in the study school conform to the findings of the NCCA study, in two areas:

    a. Are they 'educationally adventurous'?

    b. Do they out perform the students who have not taken the Transition Year?

2. To explore and record the student's views of the Transition Year course.

3. To identify and establish the contributing factors which underlie the Transition Year student's enhanced performance.

4. To ascertain whether these factors influence performance at senior cycle.

From these macro-objectives the following micro-objectives emerged: -

Under one above

-   To establish whether students moved from Foundation Level in Junior Certificate to Ordinary Level in Leaving Certificate in any subject.

-   To establish whether students moved from ordinary level in Junior Certificate to higher level at Leaving Certificate in any subject.

-   To establish whether students took up a new subject at Leaving Certificate.

-   To measure students overall performance scores for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate.

- To compare overall performance scores for one group that had taken Transition Year and one group that had not taken Transition Year.

Under two above

- To explore the student's record of their own experience throughout Transition Year.

- To probe this record in order to extrapolate their views of this experience.

Under three above

- To Explore students perceptions of the key strengths of the course.

- To explore teacher's views of the factors that contribute to enhanced student performance.

Under four above

- To explore if these key strengths transfer into senior cycle.

- To establish if these are the underlying factors that lead to enhanced performance in leaving certificate.

- To identify how students are empowered or de-powered, motivated or de-motivated to maximize their learning strategies.

3.4   Research Mode

Qualitative researchers set up strategies and procedures to enable them to consider experiences from the informants' perspectives. For some, the process of doing qualitative research can be characterised as a dialogue or interplay between researchers and their subjects (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p7).

This study shares common elements with the concepts of qualitative research in that it complies with the following features of qualitative studies.

Naturalistic

The research uses the school, the natural setting within which the phenomenon being studied takes place as the direct source of data and the researcher is the key instrument in the collection of the data.

Descriptive Data

The data collected takes the form of words rather than numbers. The student's own words describe their experiences.

Inductive

The study did not begin with a theory, and then prove it, rather it began with an area of study and what was relevant to that area was allowed to emerge.

Concerned with Process

The purpose of the study is discovery and not verification of the phenomenon.

Meaning

Meaning is of central concern in this study as its interest lies in the participant's perspectives of the Transition Year Programme.

(Bogdan & Biklen 1998).

Qualitative research necessitates participant observation. Classroom observation was not possible in the time available for completion of this study. However, the research as co-ordinator of the Transition Year programme in the study school, was in the position as a participant to make observations. Fig 3.1 outlines for the reader the four phases of this research, and the methods employed during each phase.

Figure 3.1

	METHODOLOGY	
PHASE 1	Preliminary Research	⟶ AIM 1
PHASE II	Journal Analysis	
PHASE III	In-Depth Interview Students	⟶ AIM 2
		AIM 3
PHASE IV	In-Depth Interview Teachers	
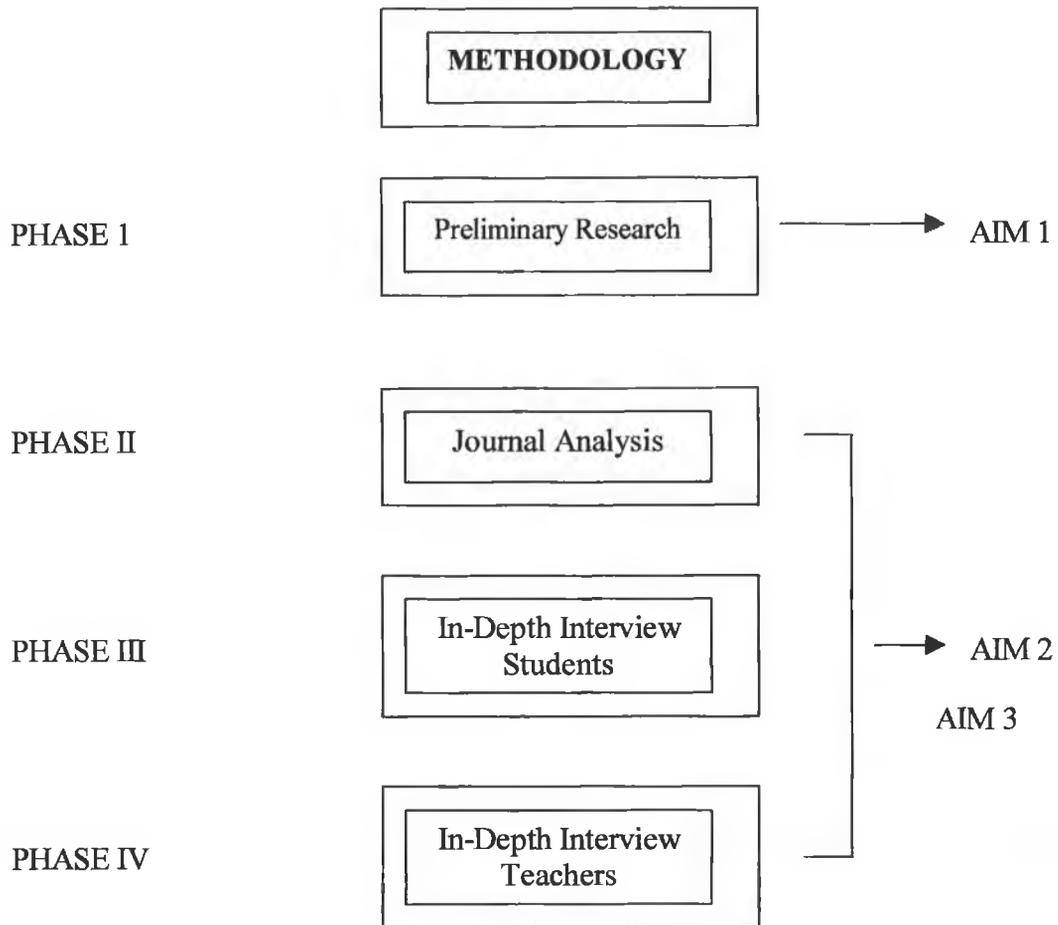
3.4.1   Research Method

Within qualitative research, as stated previously, the researcher is the key instrument and data is collected in the form of words rather than numbers. This mode of research predominantly involves the use of observation, participant observation, interviews and document analysis all of which have to be applied to a specific social setting (Burgess 1984).

The preliminary research involved desk research of Junior and Leaving Certificate examination results. Document analysis was undertaken in the form of diary analysis. This was followed by interview using the 'diary – interview'

method (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977 and Burgess 1984). Fig.3.2 illustrates the sample details of each of these phases of research.

Figure 3.2

PHASE 1	Analysis of Junior and Leaving Certificate Results for evidence of students being educationally adventurous			
	Total	97 Students		
		59 Students	Group 1	No T.Y.
		38 Students	Group 2	Did T.Y.
	Comparison of overall performance scores for 5 students who sat the Leaving Certificate in 1999 - Group 1 no Transition Year. 5 Students who sat the Leaving Certificate in 2000 – Group 2 Transition Year.			
PHASE 2	Journal Analysis	60 Student Journals from three different years.		
PHASE 3	In-depth T.Y. student interview			12 students
	In-depth 5th year student interview			4 students
	In-depth 6th year student interview			4 students
PHASE 4	In-depth teacher interview			6 teachers

The decision to confine the research to one school rather than comparing data across a range of schools was taken for a number of reasons.

The researcher's prior knowledge of the context and culture of the school in question was considered an advantage, and essential in order to identify the source of positive influence. Furthermore the researcher's prior experience of being Transition Year Co-ordinator in the study school meant that there was a relationship built up with students and teachers, which led to greater co-operation. This, in addition, meant the researcher had significant background knowledge of the programme implementation and the processes involved in delivery of the course. This enabled the researcher make observations as a participant in the

course. As there is no single programme for Transition Year and the quality of programmes varies between schools, comparison between schools is therefore difficult. Finally, confining the research to a single site improved the ease of access to the research participants for diary analysis and interviewing.

3.5   Gaining Access

At its most basic, access involves getting permission to carry out research in a particular setting, in this case a school. As a teacher in the school the researcher already had access to the site by virtue of employment. This dual role as teacher and teacher – researcher was not without problems. In his paper on teacher-based research, Burgess advises, "research activities are permeated by practical, political and philosophical problems related to research process" (Burgess 1980, p 166). He contends that if the researcher is aware of these problems and deals with them it will improve the quality of their work. Rather than exploit the teacher role to carry out covert research, the research proposal was shared with the Principal of the school and permission to carry out the research was granted.

Gaining access to students took various forms. The entire class could be met during lunchtime and free periods. However, access to individuals could only take place outside the framework of formal classes, which proved more complex. While students were prepared to be interviewed during class (and preferably those classes they disliked) this was not considered viable. It was felt students should not miss class if possible. Therefore, interviews took place outside school time. This represented a significant commitment from the students involved, as some interviews were lengthy.

Due to the age of the students being studied permission was also sought from their parents/guardians, who unanimously complied. As advised by Burgess,

anonymity and confidentiality was discussed with all individuals who agreed to co-operate with this research (Burgess, 1984).

3.6 Preliminary Research; Desk Research

The desk research component of this study involved the analysis of Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate State examination results.

The 1997 Junior Certificate cohort were divided into Group 1 (those who had not subsequently opted to do the Transition Year) and Group 2 (those who had opted to do the course). The results were used to examine the subjects the students took in Junior Certificate and to compare these to the subjects they took in Leaving Certificate. This was undertaken to establish three things namely:

1. Whether the students moved from taking a subject at foundation level in Junior Certificate to ordinary level in Leaving Certificate.
2. Whether the students moved from taking a subject at ordinary level in Junior Certificate to higher level in Leaving Certificate.
3. Whether students took up a new subject at Leaving Certificate (Appendix 3.1 illustrates the matched subjects in the JCE and the LCE).

For example, if a student had not taken Science in the Junior Certificate, and subsequently took Biology in Leaving Certificate, this was listed as a new subject for that student.

Overall performance scores were calculated using Overall Performance Scales (OPS) used by the NCCA National study. (Appendix 3.2) Five students from each group were then matched on performance. Using their Leaving Certificate results from 1999 for Group 1 and 2000 for Group 2, their performance in Leaving Certificate was calculated, again, using the same scale as the NCCA national study. (Appendix 3.3)

With a sample this size random sampling would not have yielded satisfactory results. It was felt that when these students were matched on Junior Certificate performance, a comparison of Leaving Certificate performance yielded a more precise comparison than possible with random sampling.

3.7 Document Analysis

3.7.1 The Diary Method

The diary provides a first hand account of a situation to which the researcher may not have direct access (Burgess 1984, p 135).

The diary method was used in this research to enable detailed information to be collected from students on the experience of participating in the programme. The diaries were used as a resource to raise questions and queries that would generate further data. The advantage of this method is that it provides a wealth of information about the participants' experiences, feelings, thoughts and concerns surrounding the delivered course, as they perceive it.

The rational for using this method in the study was primarily because the researcher wished to use the students as both observers and informants. Thus students, by keeping the diaries, observed and recorded their experiences but also reported the performances of others with whom they interacted. These diaries gave the researcher a view from within. In this way students served as adjunct ethnographers of their own circumstances (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977, p 484). This has the effect of transporting the reader into the scene, into secret places (Woods, 1986). This 'worms eye view' of Transition Year is what this study was interested in and it was felt that it could not be obtained by interview alone. It was evident also that the diaries on occasion captured the emotional state of the moment which otherwise would have been lost over the distance of time.

Because a diary is usually written under the immediate influence of an experience, it can be particularly effective in capturing peoples' moods and most intimate thoughts (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p 135)

The very act of writing down the experience causes connections and integrations to occur to the writer and, as writing unfolds, it jogs the memory and new thoughts emerge which, are written down. "The simulative effect of the physical act of writing serves as a catalyst for introspective juices" (Mezirow, 1990, p 216). However, all diaries are selective and prone to bias. They record what the individual concerned wishes to record. It is inevitable that there will be self-indulgence, which may or may not reflect the circumstances of the case (Woods, 1986). This bias may be intentional in that students may wish to report what they think the co-ordinator wants to hear. They want themselves shed in a good light, or just wish to act out against a particular teacher they dislike. However, it may not be intentional in that not all people are naturally good observers, and most have selective recall.

However, if students used their diaries in this way it showed up as inconsistencies with other accounts from the same period. Validity checks could be made on the basis of common sense and during the diary-interview, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

3.7.2 Character of the Diaries

At the beginning of Transition Year all students were asked to keep a daily diary in which they recorded their thoughts, feelings and experiences of the course. They were encouraged to use the diary as a reflective tool, to reflect on their learning. Lukinsky contends that 'meaning is emergent, kinesthetically felt in the course of the writing'. He suggests three ways in which diary writing can be beneficial in education, reflecting before learning something new, reflections

while learning and post reflection (Lukinsky, 1990, p.218). All three types of reflection were evident in some of the diaries.

Students were shown an example of a diary from a previous year, but this example is not prescriptive. The guidelines for the type and amount of content were general so that the students were not bound to report on specific issues, or to document a certain amount of information (for example ten pages). Many students used more than one diary, because they used it as a scrapbook to stick in pictures, tickets and other memorabilia from various trips and so on. This further served to transport the researcher into their private world. Appendix 3.4 gives some examples of diary entries.

3.7.3 Analysis of Diaries

All diaries were read and themes were developed from the data rather than being structured beforehand. Quotations from the diaries were used to illustrate each theme.

The text was read several times, while asking which statements seemed particularly revealing about the phenomenon being described. At this stage it was important to take long, undisturbed periods reading. This was required to obtain a sense of the totality of the data. (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Van Manen describes 'themes as the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through'. He describes how one must read a text several times and ask, 'What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing' about the experience being described. (Van Manen, 1990, p.90 –93). These emerging statements were copied and highlighted; each was grouped with similar pieces of data in a matrix until clear categories emerged. These themes then formed the basis of the research.

A random sample of twelve diaries was taken from these, for more in depth analysis. These diaries were read and questions were formulated based on the written narrative and put to the diarist.

> *The diarist's statement is used as a way of generating questions for the subsequent diary interview. The diary interview converts the diary – a source of data in its own right-into a question – generating and, hence, data-generating device* (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977, p 489)

Diary comments were interpreted from the learner's perspective. The emphasis in the analysis was on how the individual student interpreted the course. For this reason it was particularly important to bracket the researcher's own experience. While carrying out research of this nature it is important to develop personal qualities of curiosity, insight, discretion, patience, determination, stamina, memory and the art of good listening. It is equally important to develop the personal quality of being able to neutralise our own views, opinions, knowledge and biases and open ourselves to the understanding of others (Woods, 1986). One can never accomplish complete impartiality but this method of analysis, where themes and questions are triangulated by means of in-depth interview, ensures greater reliability.

3.8   The In-depth Interview

Interviews were used in this research to enable issues that arose in response to diary – analysis be examined in more depth.

> *The interview allows one to check up on facts, seek clarification and exemplification* (Woods, 1986, p111).

While the diary analysis allowed one to scratch the surface of what was 'good' about student's experiences of Transition Year, more in depth probing was

needed to get beyond the surface into the underlying meaning of the impact this course had on the students. This in-depth probing was only possible by interviewing the participants. The type of interview being described here is one that

> *Is used to gather descriptive data in the subjects own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world* (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Like the diary analysis there are weaknesses with this method also, as there are with all self-reporting methods. There is the danger that respondents will report a projected viewpoint rather than their own. Also, because of the relationship the researcher had as Transition Year co-ordinator, there was a danger of students reporting what they felt the researcher wanted to hear, or reporting what would shed them in good light. During this research it was necessary to ensure that the relationship was one based on openness and trust. This openness and thrust was evident in the character of the interviews. This, in tandem, with crosschecking different data sources, meant this weakness in the method was avoided to a large extent.

It is also vitally important to avoid 'leading' the interview to suit ones own views of what the interviewee is trying to articulate. "The participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participants views it and not as the researcher views it" (Rossman & Rallis, 1988 p125). As noted in the discussion on diary analysis one must bracket their experience and presuppositions, which they bring to the study.

3.8.1 Character of Interviews

It is essential for the researcher to establish procedures around which the interview is based. This research used an open, democratic, two-way, informal, free-flowing format for the interviews (Woods, 1986). Throughout the interview,

every attempt was made to ensure that each subject felt relaxed and were open to talk about their experience in a meaningful way. To this end the interviews were conducted with students in the student study room. Students and researcher began each interview with a cup of tea or coffee to put the students at ease. Teacher interviews were carried out in the career guidance room. Both rooms ensured privacy for the duration of the interviews.

While there were questions arising from the student diaries, there was also willingness to let go of the planned sequence and being able to 'jump on the opportunities the interview situation presented' (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Students liked being treated as experts in the area, being able to express their opinions and they felt it was important to do so especially if this would influence future planning of the programme.

3.8.2 Content of Interviews

The interview has been described as a conversation with a purpose (Burgess, 1984). This type of interview cannot be started without detailed knowledge and preparation. At the beginning of each interview the reason for conducting the interview was fully explained. Interviewees were informed that the interview was being recorded. They were free to seek clarification and in fact many questions were asked before any interview commenced. The student interviews lasted from forty minutes to one hour, while the teacher interviews lasted thirty minutes.

Interviews also involve observation; one can observe an estimation of the strength of an attitude. This was evident when students spoke about subjects/classes/trips they enjoyed. They moved about on their seat, used their hands, facial expressions, all to convey their enjoyment and excitement. Equally when they felt ill-treated they showed the strength of conviction in their every movement. It was very important to note the foregoing for analysis. After each

interview time was taken to note any relevant details, which would not be evident on the tape transcript, for example facial expression, or posture.

The diary analysis focused the themes that needed to be explored during interview. An example of how this was achieved is shown in Fig 3.3. While no two interviews asked the same questions, elements of all interviews were similar as they focused on the themes that had emerged from diary analysis.

The interview proceeded with reading a section form the diary and asking the student to elaborate. The researcher would listen to the interviewee's response and communicate personal interest and attention by appropriate nods, shakes of the head, smiles and using appropriate facial expressions (Woods, 1986).

Figure 3.3.

Sample Interview Procedure

Journal Entry	Possible Questions
I enjoy attending normal classes as we work in a more interesting way	• What do you mean by normal classes? • Could you list any? • Can you describe your work in these classes? • Why do you find this type of work interesting? • Could you explain what you mean by that? • Did you have classes like that before this year? • When? • Where? • What did you do?
I get to do activities with people I normally wouldn't and therefore I get to know more about people and learn to co-operate and work as a team.	• You wrote this last Monday what was it that led you to write this? • Are there other classes where you work as a group? • Could you describe your work? • Do you have any problems during group work if so could you describe them? • What do you mean by getting to know more about people? • Did you get to work as a team prior to this year? • When? • At What? • What do you mean by co-operating? • What did you learn about your team members? • What did you learn about your subject? • Did you find this learning easy?
I feel how, that in T.Y the teacher's attitudes towards us change for some strange reason. (Probably the whole maturity thing?) The teachers trust us. They feel that we are older and wiser and better equipped to handle ourselves in tricky situations.	• In what way do teacher's attitudes change? • Why is it strange? • Can you give me any examples? • What do you mean by the whole maturity thing? • Give me some examples of how teachers show they trust you? • Why do they feel you are wiser? • What do you mean by a tricky situation? • Could you expand on that?

A number of phrases were used to assist the interviewee and give guidance. These included:

* Asking for clarification
    - I'm not sure I am following you?
    - What difference did that make?

* Asking the respondent to be specific
    - Could you give me an example of that?
    - Can you possible tell me the day that...?

* Asking of elaboration
    - Could you tell me more about that?
    - What do you mean by that?

* Summarising and Searching for connections
    - I think this is what you are saying?
    - Do you think there is a link between?

* Searching for opinions
    - Do you have any ideas why?
    - What would you give as the main reasons?
    - Why would that happen?

* Looking for comparisons
    - Some students say...would you agree?
    - Would you have a similar experience?

* Asking for prioritisation
    - What is the most important?
    - What is your favourite.....?

(For classification see Woods, 1986, 79-80)

During the in-depth interviews with teachers some student observations were read to the teacher and their comment sought. The above types of questions were used to probe their responses. These interviews also followed the same focus on the themes, which emerged, from diary analysis.

For an interview to be good it must involve deep listening (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). An important part of the interview is forming rapport with the informant. The best way to do this is by being a good listener. It is crucial to listen far more than talk in the interview. Treating the person being interviewed as an expert and allowing them to talk without interruption, if possible, is very important.

3.8.3 Use of Tape Recorder

A tape recorder was used for all interviews. Burgess contends that most researchers advocate the use of a tape recorder and that important data could be lost without one (Burgess, 1984). At the outset of each interview students and teachers were asked for permission to use a tape recorder. They were assured that what was on the tape was confidential and that they would not be named in the transcript. They were reassured that they could read the transcript of the interview and make changes if they desired.

Field notes were taken after the interview to record the atmosphere of the interview, body language and any conversation that happened before or after the tape recorder was switched on or off. These would be noted on the tape transcripts during analysis.

3.8.4   Analysis of Interviews

Data analysis is the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes and other materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others. (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p.157)

Before any transcribing commenced the interview tape was listened to several times. Each interview transcript contained the code name of the person interviewed, the time and date the interview occurred, the site of the interview and a general description of the character of the interview. The transcripts were read several times and categorised and coded. Quotes from each interview were gathered together under various headings.

This was achieved using a highlighting technique. Different colours were used to signify different emerging themes. Initially there were twelve themes. Some were interrelated and overlapped; therefore, on final analysis seven themes emerged. These were collated with the diary data and the writing up procedure began.

3.9   Reliability

In qualitative studies, researchers are concerned with the accuracy and comprehensiveness of their data. Qualitative researchers tend to view reliability as a fit between what they record as data and what actually occurs in the setting under study, rather than the literal consistency across different observations (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p36).

While it cannot be guaranteed that the findings of this research represent the same interpretation as any other person, every effort was made to allow the student voice speak for itself. To this end it is hoped that the reader will be able to make his or her own interpretation of the experiences described. However, it

would have been possible for students to distort their responses. Such distortions would show up as inconsistencies. The researchers prior knowledge of the schedule of classes and activities allowed for crosschecking. In addition when reading other diaries from the same period, crosschecking was possible. All interview transcripts and themes were shown to students and teachers allowing them to make changes if required.

This research demonstrates good internal reliability in that data collection, analysis and interpretation were carried out consistently among all subjects. Good external reliability exists when a study is described in enough detail to facilitate its replication (Silverman, 2000). Every effort has been made throughout this study to fulfil these criteria. To this end the following are included: -

- Detailed description of the study's design
- Detailed description of the population
- Explanation of the data collection strategies and procedures
- Detailed explanation of analyses procedures.

It is felt that this study could be implemented in other schools as a means to exploring the student's experience of Transition Year.

3.10 Validity

For research to be considered valid, it must be based on fact or evidence. Therefore, it must be capable of being justified. Good internal validity refers to the accurate interpretation of the results. Interpretation will always be open to inconsistency.

> *Our appropriation of the meaning of lived experience is always of something past that can never be grasped in its full richness and depth since lived experience implicates the vitality of life. The interpretive examination of lived experience has this methodical feature of relating the particular to the universal, part to whole, episode to totality* (Van Manen, 1990, p36).

This is a qualitative study, therefore interpretations are made in the context of the relationship the researcher had with the respondents. Allowing for this, every effort was taken to validate the accounts.

The major means of validating accounts and observations is through 'triangulations'. The use of three or more different methods to explore an issue greatly increases the chances of accuracy (Woods, 1986,p87). In this study, diaries, in-depth interviews and observations were used to validate accounts.

Good external validity refers to the generalizability of the results. This is a case study of one school; therefore it is very context specific. However, the findings of this study may add to the research on the Transition Year programme in general and may help other teachers in planning their programmes.

3.11   Conclusion

The objectives of this research are listed in this chapter. The methodology employed to meet those objectives has been discussed. The four phases of this research study yielded data that was analysed as outlined. This data is now presented in chapter four.

Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

Participation in Transition Year appears to have a significant positive impact. (NCCA, 1999, p.xxv)

This study aimed to discover what it was about the Transition Year programme that enhanced student academic performance and enabled them become more educationally adventurous, as found in the National study carried out by the NCCA. The preliminary research involved demonstrating that the results of the study school corresponded to the findings of the National study.

This chapter concentrates on presenting the data according to the themes that emerged from the research. These themes emerged from analysis of sixty student diaries and in-depth interviewing with twenty students as described in chapter three (Fig 3.2). The diaries were analysed and this analysis generated questions for interviews. Following interviews, broad themes were identified and these are detailed further below.

Six teachers were interviewed about their experience of both teaching Transition Year and of teaching students in senior cycle who had taken the option. These teachers were selected because of their involvement with the students in Transition Year and in senior cycle namely, the Careers teacher, the Mini-Company teacher, the English teacher, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme co-ordinator, the Drama/Music teacher, and the Science/Biology teacher.

Discussion of findings will be presented throughout this chapter. Section one presents the findings of the preliminary research. Section two is divided into seven categories representing the themes that emerged from the data analysis. Data from three sources will be included here, the student diaries, student interviews and teacher interviews.

4.2 Preliminary Research

4.2.1 Introduction

The impetus for this research was provided by the publication by the NCCA of the second part of a longitudinal study of the cohort of students who completed the Junior Certificate in 1994. The preliminary research for this project involved ascertaining whether the school involved correlated with the National findings in this NCCA study (NCCA, 1999). Two areas were examined, first the National study found that students who had taken the Transition Year option were more likely to be 'educationally adventurous'. Students were termed educationally adventurous if they:

- Moved from Ordinary to Higher Level.
- Moved from Foundation to Ordinary Level.
- Took subjects they had not taken before.

Secondly, these students scored higher Leaving Certificate results than students who had not taken Transition Year. (ibid).

4.2.2 Subject Choice and Subject Level

Table 4.1 shows the results for the analysis of the Junior and Leaving Certificate examination papers in the study school. Group 1. represents the fifty-nine students who sat their Junior Certificate in 1997 and their Leaving Certificate in 1999. This group did not take the Transition Year option. Group 2. represents the thirty-eight students who sat their Junior Certificate in 1997 and their Leaving Certificate in 2000. These students participated in the Transition Year programme.

Table 4.1 Results of desk analysis for evidence of students being Educationally Adventurous.

	Moved from Ordinary to Higher Level	Moved from Foundation to Ordinary Level	Take up subject not taken in Junior Certificate
Group 1 No Transition Year N = 59	1	0	0
Group 2 Transition Year N = 38	6	0	8

Clearly, students who participated in Transition Year are more educationally adventurous than those who had not taken this option. Of the eight students that took up new subjects for Leaving Certificate, five were in Economics, two in Biology and one in Home Economics. Of the students who had not taken the Transition Year option, none took up a subject ab initio. One student moved from having a subject at Lower Level to taking a subject at Higher Level, compared to six students from the Transition Year group.

The study school thus correlated with the NCCA National findings about students who have participated in the Transition Year programme, that is, they are more likely to move from ordinary to higher level and take up subjects they had not taken before.

4.2.3 Leaving Certificate Examination Performance

Ten students were chosen to compare Leaving Certificate performance, five who had taken the Transition Year option and five who had not. The mean overall performance score (OPS, Appendix, 4.1) in Junior Certificate for these two groups were the same. Their Leaving Certificate OPS scores were then calculated. The

70

difference between the groups in Leaving Certificate Examination performance was 24 LCE OPS scores see Table 4.2.

Table 4.2   Results of desk analysis of Examination Performance.

	Average OPS for Junior Certificate	*Average OPS score for Leaving Certificate*
Group 1 No Transition Year	93.6	140.4
Group 2 Transition Year Programme	92.8	164.4

Clearly, the students who have taken the Transition Year option, out perform the students who had not taken the option.

4.2.4   Conclusions from preliminary research

From the preliminary research the study school is seen to correlate with the National findings for students who have completed the Transition Year programme. These students are more educationally adventurous and have enhanced academic results.   The following section focuses on the student's perspectives of their experience during and after the Transition Year programme.

4.3   Primary Research
4.3.1   The Student Voice in the Transition Year programme

In this section the student's views on various aspects of Transition Year are presented.   These views are based on analysis of diaries and interviews.   Teacher views are included here in tandem with those of the main respondents, the students. This section is divided into seven headings representing the themes that emerged from the analysis.

The following themes emerged from analysis of the student voice:

1. Student – Teacher Relationship
2. Peer – Relationship and Group Identification
3. Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
4. Group Work and Cooperative Learning
5. Assessment
6. Work Experience – World of work
7. Subject Choice

Occasionally, what is recorded may be very close to the boundary between one theme and another and could potentially be put either way, in all cases every effort had been made to be true to the intention of the student.

The enhanced relationships of students, both with their peers and teachers during the year are evident in all the accounts. That these relationships develop and mature is clearly linked to the curriculum during the programme. How this impinges on teaching and learning, specifically the group work and cooperative learning engaged in by students, is explored. Teaching and learning is inextricably linked with assessment practices during the course and the formative function of these are highlighted. Finally, the student's experience of the world of work and their ability to make informed choices at their senior cycle stage is documented.

Most quotes are from students who have taken part in Transition Year, some quotes are taken from ex Transition Year students whose current position will be indicated in parentheses. For example, '5th year, interview', would mean that the statement is taken from a fifth year student who had taken the Transition Year programme whereas 'Transition Year, interview' means the student being interviewed is presently in Transition Year. Throughout the quotes taken from teachers and student 'Transition Year' are mentioned, meaning students who have followed Transition Year, these students may now be in fifth or sixth year. For example, when a fifth year talks about the 'Transition Years' she means the girls in fifth year who did Transition Year the previous year and on occasion students and teachers refer to

'third years' meaning girls who have come directly from third year into fifth year. All teachers are referred to as Ms Smith or Mr Smith.

4.3.2 Student – Teacher Relationship

The most evident theme running through the student diaries was that of the quality of student- teacher relationships. Various aspects of this relationship are apparent in statements made by students from each year group. The way in which students perceive teachers as 'real people' for the first time is identified strongly.

I always, I suppose knew teachers were people but this year I see them different as individuals with personalities, you can have a laugh with them. (Transition Year Diary)

Our attitudes towards the teachers change. This year everything is more informal and personal. Last year, we saw the teacher up at the desk, giving homework and shouting. We basically paid no attention whatsoever to the person only the teacher – if that makes sense. We never looked beyond. (Transition Year Diary)

I can't get over Ms Smith, last year all she did was Irish she didn't even smile; it was work, work, work. This year she's brilliant we do debates, plays and look at T.V. 4 and at the same time learn Irish. I can't believe how different she is; you can talk to her now. (Transition Year Diary)

From this last comment it is evident how both content and delivery contribute to this enhanced relationship. This student reports how in third year 'all she did was Irish', while she is still doing Irish in Transition Year, it is not in any way connected with the stereotypical image of the subject from her previous experience. Clearly, the student is enjoying the subject and consequently thinks her teacher is 'brilliant'. The teacher's personality is given expression in the different teaching methodologies employed.

Another aspect of the student – teacher relationship is how teachers in Transition Year treat students as individuals, not as a class group.

They are seeing you as an individual, you are no longer a member of a class, and you are no longer a poor unfortunate. (Transition Year, interview)

When this student was pressed to explain what she meant by being 'a poor unfortunate' she explained how in third year she felt invisible most of the time and in Transition Year she felt so important, vital to the course. She looks at the present third years in her school and feels pity for their plight. At interview she appeared almost superior, her body language, voice and everything about her exuded an air of confidence. She reported how all her Transition Year teachers knew her name. She did not believe this was true of her third year teachers. She had never spoken on a one-to-one basis to a teacher on her own prior to Transition Year. According to her, no teacher knew anything about her as a person prior to Transition Year.

This particular point was taken up and put to teachers during interview and indeed some were not surprised. Up until Transition Year teachers spend most of their time engaged in whole class teaching. The timetable would not allow time for students to wait back after class to have a chat. Students like this girl who are quiet and shy and do not cause any trouble would not be met by a year head or class teacher for any reason. If a student did not take part in after school activities when would they find themselves in a situation of talking to a teacher one-to-one? This represents a major weakness in the system, that a student can be three years in a school and not get this kind of individual attention. (It should be noted that there was no tutor system in the study school until September 2000).

In addition, the student's perception of the principal of the school and their relationship with authority has changed also. This has led to the students being unafraid of management and respecting what it stands for.

In first to third year I would have been petrified of her, (the Principal) *but in Transition Year she would be coming into class talking to you, you would meet her in the corridor because you were kind of going here and there all the time, you would be talking to her. It wouldn't bother me she is just like a normal person.* (6th year interview)

Another student spoke of how in third year she *wouldn't be able to look at her sideways, you would be terrified* and now the principal knows her name from Transition Year and would often say *'hello'*. Now her classmates who did not participate in Transition Year see her as being different.

It is much easier even to meet her on the street, she is like' hello', whatever, and your having a chat with her on the street and you would never have done that before. People look at you stopped talking to the Principal, and they'd look at you and say what is wrong with you, as if you are doing something abnormal. (6th year interview)

This student goes on to describe how she is made to feel odd because she can talk to teachers and the principal like 'real people'. Other students according to these Transition Year girls miss out on this opportunity to get to know teachers on a one-to-one basis. This is significant when one considers that in a study of equality issues in Ireland it was found that the exercise of power and authority in the school was the greatest single equality concern expressed by students. The researchers called it the phenomenon of 'us and them'(Lynch, 1999). Throughout student's diaries and interviews, there is a sense of 'we are all in this together'. The relationship is described by one student as, *I don't see her authority, I see her as a person, I still respect her, probably more now, that I realise she's human like the rest of us.* (5th year interview)

Students give very definite examples of how this change in relationship helps them when they move into senior cycle. The fifth and sixth year girls interviewed were conscious of their difference in class.

It's like your walking into a class but you're not a student anymore because they know you outside school and really know you inside school. They treat you as an individual and we treat them as an individual more than a teacher as well. (5th year interview)

Teachers are friendlier with us, it's not all about studying for the Leaving, like you can stay and have a chat with the teacher in the classroom and stuff. (5th year interview)

In class she will have a laugh with us, but she will have one eye on the third years, the few sitting in one corner, but where she knows we are going to work, she can trust us. She knows what we can do from last year. (5th year interview)

This student felt that she had a significant advantage over 'third years' due to her enhanced relationship with this teacher. She gave many examples of when the teacher needed something done, that it would always be a Transition Year girl that was asked to carry out the task. Another student echoed this sentiment when she said:

In fifth year if there is a job to be done it is always a Transition Year student they look back on because they know they can rely on them. In a way you have an edge over the third years. (5th year interview)

This student did not have the same teacher as the previous student; therefore, this implied that teachers generally treat students whom they knew during Transition Year differently. This was explored with a group of sixth year students and all emphatically agreed that they felt they had 'an edge' over students who had not taken Transition Year. This confidence was of particular advantage when it came to doing oral examinations

When it came to the orals we were not nervous about going in to talk to a stranger, we had done it so often during Transition Year; it was easy for us apart from the different language. (6th year interview)

If a teacher says there is a mass coming up what do you want to do, Transition Year girls will without a doubt stand up and say well I want to do a reading, I want to do this, I want to do that, other girls wouldn't. (6th year interview)

The other girls spoken about here are the girls who had not done Transition Year; they are seen to sit back and not take on responsibility. Teachers were asked during interview whether they noticed this happening.

I do treat the fifth years who have come from Transition Year differently, certainly, I suppose you would have more open interaction, more spontaneous discussion, more relaxed atmosphere, but that is because I can trust the Transition Year to know when something is to be taken seriously and when something is an open forum. I would not have the same trust in girls who come directly from third year. (Career teacher interview)

One of the hardest things for me to do as a teacher of fifth year is to get used to teaching students who have just completed Transition Year and those who have just moved straight from third year to fifth year. The difference between the two groups is quite startling. The Transition Year student, for the most part, has had her break and has a mature and informed outlook on the next two years whereas the straight from 3rd year student is still looking for the break from study... and has a whole years less schooling and moulding behind them. (Business teacher interview)

The experience of Transition Years in forming mini-companies and organising events is crucial. They have the ability and confidence to take direction and lead other students. The numbers of students who have not taken Transition Year with this ability are very limited (LCVP teachers interview)

This experience in enterprise education affords Transition Year students an advantage when they do their Leaving Certificate Vocational Examination. This could contribute to their enhanced performance in the Leaving Certificate.

Why and how this relationship of mutual trust develops is evident in all the themes as they emerge. Another aspect of this relationship, which arose often in analysis, is that of the care and support students get from teachers during Transition Year. One of the major reasons students leave school early is because they feel teachers do not care for them, do not understand them and are not able to relate to them (Boldt, 1994, 54). Throughout the school year, Transition Year students are made aware that they matter and that the teachers care for them. This sense of having someone who cares remains with them for the most part until they leave school. The Leaving Certificate students said that they felt they could talk to many of their Transition Year teachers at any time during fifth and sixth year, and many had availed of this opportunity.

Even if you had a problem, and you knew the teacher from Transition Year you feel more able to go up to that teacher to talk about the problem. If I had a teacher that didn't have me it would be kind of more like, what would she think if I say this to her. (5th year interview)

I think Ms Smith is a really good teacher – she's really helpful and spends the same amount of time with all groups. She talks to you with respect as well, I find that with most teachers, you can have a conversation with most of them and they listen to you and value your opinion – like they are not your teacher but someone who is on the same level as you but just giving advice. (Transition Year Diary)

She was like a friend to us more than a teacher; you could have a laugh with her. (5th year interview)

It wasn't like she was pure strict.... but she was so friendly you would be embarrassed or ashamed if you didn't have the work done,... you wouldn't let her down. (6th year interview)

The Transition Year curriculum gives us space to get to know our pupils as people searching for their own identities and true personalities and in Transition Year a teacher has a chance to allow her pupils to do just that, but importantly, to be the sincere shoulder to lean on when they are unsure of themselves and the direction life is leading. (Business teacher interview)

Having a good student-teacher relationship leads to better motivation for students, all the students state that they work harder in the subjects for the teachers that they like. On school trips students got to know a teachers 'other side' and responded better in class as a result of this knowledge. The 'trust' spoke about by both students and teachers is interesting in that it is something that is built during Transition Year but is with the student until they leave. The 'individuality' that students speak and write about is, for some, not as straight forward. Some students found the transition back into whole class teaching difficult.

The downside for me was going back into fifth year, was being an ordinary class, although I enjoy getting back into the books, you are only one of the class, you are no longer an individual, you are no longer on a one to one basis as an individual with the teacher... in fifth year they fly by you and don't even notice and it's like they're taking away your identity when you go back into a class group. (5th year interview)

However other students did not agree with this assertion and their responses show enhanced maturity.

You are treated like a class but in my own head, I am an individual so that means I know what I have to do, like last year we were made do all our own things,

our own projects and things like that, and this year, okay this teacher doesn't know me but I am going to show her... (5th year interview)

It is obvious from the tone of these comments that these students have a belief that success is possible as a result of ones own efforts. Clearly, this belief should lead to enhanced performance in senior cycle.

In a sixth year interview, a student made the point that she felt that teachers who taught Transition Year were themselves different. Teachers who have taught Transition Year *would find a way of communicating better... they know students... they understand and they would ask you what you wanted to do.* Teachers were asked in interview whether Transition Year has an impact on teacher communicating skills and ability to negotiate with students.

Prior to the introduction of Transition Year to our school I had a type of 'assembly line' approach to my students. As they passed through each stage of the production process, the Leaving Certificate course, I added bit by bit to the raw materials and the information necessary to complete the final product, that is, the student prepared for the Leaving Certificate exam. Today as a teacher of senior accounting, whilst the procedure of teaching the course is much the same the mechanics are different. I now see the girls in front of me as young adults who have varying needs, abilities and skills who suit different approaches... I see them as an individual needing praise and affirmation instead of just one of ninety items being processed on the assembly line of the classroom waiting for final shipment to the Leaving Certificate. (Business teacher interview)

Transition Year gave me the space to try out new and different teaching strategies and as my confidence grew I introduced these into my mainstream classes with great success. (Music teacher interview)

In conclusion, the importance of the student – teacher relationship is highlighted throughout this section. Students need to be seen as individuals,

especially adolescents who are still searching for their identity. Positive student – teacher interaction can enhance developmental outcomes, 'including lower stress levels, more positive self-image and greater sense of control' among students (Smyth, 1999, p223). Students place tremendous value on having teachers who care, when a teacher is viewed as not caring students can lack the incentive to work (Phelan et al, 1992). That teaching Transition Year has an effect on the teachers, as highlighted by the sixth year students in this study is very significant. It would suggest that Transition Year while enhancing student confidence also plays a part in enhancing teacher confidence. Students in this study like the Kathleen Lynch study wanted a teacher who would treat them as individuals and have a sense of humour (Lynch, 1999). Clearly, when circumstances within school and classrooms have a positive impact on the experiences of students, this will support and foster positive learning experiences. This is evident in much of what students in this study have to say.

4.3.3   Peer Relationships and Group Identification

As children grow, develop, and move into adolescence their involvement with peers and the attraction of peer identification increases. Group affiliation is one of the central preoccupations of early adolescence (Hargreaves et al, 1996, p.11). This period of rapid physical, emotional and social change is when young people begin to question adult standards and they turn to friends for advice on a variety of issues. When peer pressure is mentioned most parents cringe because of the negative connotations. In this study the only 'peer pressure' spoken about appeared to be positive. Students found their peer group a source of affection, sympathy and understanding. This provided them with a supportive setting for learning to occur. This positive collaboration persisted beyond the school day.

As everyone in Transition Year is a friend we work well together as a group. (Transition Year Diary)

Basically the group in general in Transition Year got so close... such a great friendship developed between everyone you just had to work hard not to let anyone down in your group. (Transition Year Diary)

You get to spend time together on trips, working for competitions; there were people up in my house most evenings making bags for mini-company. Mammy couldn't believe how hard we worked. (Transition Year Diary)

My friends from Transition Year are very important to me, you definitely bond more, you definitely become like sisters. (6th year interview)

Throughout their diaries students wrote about the 'pressure' they put on themselves to work for the group and the teacher. Students would not let Transition Year down, it appeared they were a group that had to do better than last years group, to be the best ever. This did not appear to come from teachers. It was the students themselves that strived for perfection. With friends students feel less isolated and vulnerable. Phelan advises that classrooms where peer interaction is supported a greater degree of participation in learning is promoted (Phelan et al, 1992).

I would be a very shy person, but I was able to just get out on the night, (Fashion Show) and go out in front of everyone and do the dance, everyone encourages you, you get confidence. (Transition Year interview)

The Transition Year students felt they were different, that they were important. This sense of importance came from the trust the teachers placed in them and from their freedom to move around the school and outside it for different activities.

It was a year you were recognised for doing different things apart from other years. (Transition Year interview)

We ran the canteen, did all the ordering, bank deposits and sold the stuff, we were in charge it was amazing, no other year would be let do that. I got to make phone calls to order the yoghurts it was so cool being so important. (Transition Year interview)

Definitely when you are a Transition Year you are somebody, I look at them now organising the fashion show, so busy, and I think 'oh I wish I was back at it again'. (6th year interview)

To examine where and how this group affiliation comes about one must look to the programme itself. Group work and co-operative learning are encouraged throughout the course and are discussed under a separate theme. Certainly during Transition Year students spend more time working together than in any other year in the school. They spend time on buses and trains on their many away trips, including two overnight trips. All this affords them time to build up peer relationships, as one student said in interview they become like sisters. This impacts on all aspects of the course and their ability to learn together.

4.3.4 Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

In this section we hear students comments on their curriculum, teaching and learning. Early in September their diary entries are full of how different it is from third year.

Chemistry is brill; we get to do experiments every week not like last year. (Transition Year Diary)

Classes are a lot different this year even maths. (Transition Year Diary)

We have classes as normal, but they are totally different to third year classes. It's practically all projects. I'm so used to being told exactly what to do and when to do it ... but I love this. (Transition Year Diary)

Irish I like very much this year. I've enjoyed this subject for the last three years but this year the work we do is very different as we've no exam to prepare, for example, we get homework to watch TG4 and write about it, we do debates and loads

of oral work. This class is effective as we are learning and enjoying class.
(Transition Year Diary)

The experience of doing rather than being told what to do is the essential difference between third year and Transition Year. In all subjects teachers have a practical element built into their courses from doing traffic surveys for Geography to physically getting into a river in Biology. This is what the students' thought of their various experiences.

A chance to really explore the subject. (Transition Year Diary)

I liked the way we could openly discuss ideas and opinions. Discussion is much better than reading from a book. (Transition Year Diary)

I enjoyed being able to do something practical. (Transition Year Diary)

Class was not just reading from the book, I was more interested and the class kept my attention. (Transition Year Diary)

Students were very definite that this type of work in class helped them learn. Students prefer to have an active role in their learning rather than a passive one. This tells us a lot about their learning prior to Transition Year and the teacher's reliance on textbooks and blackboards.

You spend a lot more time on practical work and there is no rushing to finish the course. I find it easier to learn the experiments if you actually do them instead of just writing them out the whole time. (Transition Year Diary)

I think Biology is great this year, you get to do a lot of practical stuff not just learn from a book... making slides... I definitely learned more than I would if I was just to sit at a desk for 80 minutes. (Transition Year Diary)

Film in French, not something we could have done last year but come to think of it I don't know why we didn't. I really learned from it and loved the class. (Transition Year Diary)

In many classes students could choose a topic to study, therefore, it was their own experiences that formed the basis for the learning. This drawing on student's prior knowledge and including them in decision making is vitally important in stimulating interest in what they learn, and in this way, developing their intrinsic motivation.

Most topics were our decision, it wasn't forced on us, we had a decision, and therefore, we were interested from the start not like third year where you study stuff you couldn't care less about. (Transition Year interview)

It was definitely more student orientated, because at the beginning of the year the teacher would get a feel for what the student wanted to do... you got to express your opinion. (Transition Year interview)

For example in one class we could write down anything we would like to do in that class, we put it up on the board and then decided what we all would do, it was more what the students wanted to do than the teachers. (Transition Year interview)

When classes are conducted in this way they are seldom boring for the students. A student described during interview how in Mathematics class one day that she said 'ahh' when a concept became clear to her. She went on to say that in Transition Year the 'ahh' of many subjects became clear to her. For the first time she saw what some subjects were all about. Consequently,

I understand what I am doing in class for the first time ever. I'm looking forward to next week's class, which makes a change.

(Transition Year Diary about Mathematics in Transition Year)

Transition Year is so much better than third year because in class there is so much activity that there isn't time to be bored in class. (Transition Year Diary)

Teachers have different attitudes in Transition Year I think this is the main reason why classes are so relaxed... you are always busy. (Transition Year Diary)

At the end of class the bell rang and we all just sat there for 5 more minutes... she had to tell us to go... normally everyone is fighting to put things away but we all love this class. (Transition Year interview about History)

When students move back to senior cycle they notice the difference.

When you go into an exam class everything goes out the window and you concentrate totally on the exams and all the information. (5th year interview)

You can't stop a class to talk about something because you wouldn't have the material you wanted covered. (5th year interview)

However, the fact that the students got to like the subject during Transition Year helps when it comes to study in Leaving Certificate. They appear to make a connection between what is learned and why it is important to learn.

The French teacher I had last year, I have this year, last year it was different just a way of learning, it was like French wasn't boring anymore that you could just go in and sit down it was fun, it was French projects, discussions, send away letters, enter competitions, it was all in French, it was no longer a boring subject. This year, now I know that I like it I'm actually more prone to going home and doing my homework and sitting down and studying. I am interested in it, as before I would go home and its French, oh no I am not doing that, so now I am more enticed to do it. (5th year interview)

Students have important messages for teachers about what works for them in learning. At the root of this is the quality of the relationship and trust that develops between student and teacher as outlined at the beginning of this section. Students mention group work, project work and cooperative learning throughout their narratives, which are dealt with as a separate theme. One student asked the following question which all educators should consider.

One of the teachers we had, right away she had a set learning plan, we still learned a lot from it but it is a total different way that you enjoyed it, she had hangman, reading French magazines and oral French. I think they should bring that into normal classes, because in practice it works so well in Transition Year, why not bring it in?

She then answered herself with

Then again you're set to a set course. (6th year interview)

4.3.5 Group Work and Cooperative Learning

During Transition Year teachers use varied teaching methodologies many of which involved group work and co-operative learning. With this type of learning very little time is devoted to teacher directed 'chalk and talk' and students in fact spend the majority of their time working on their own or in small groups. Students typically spend time conducting their own research or making their product rather than being presented with material to be learned.

Cooperative learning is 'the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximise their own and each other's learning, (Johnson and Johnson, 1989). Not all projects result in cooperative learning but many do. Where cooperative learning was most evident was in the student's descriptions of mini-company and English. In English two teachers worked together, team teaching the forty students. Part of the curriculum was to produce a Transition Year magazine called 'Scribble'.

87

I got to do activities with people I normally wouldn't and therefore I got to know more about people and learn to co-operate and work with a team. (Transition Year Diary)

In first to third year it is mainly all individual work for the exams but this year we use group work for projects in most classes and it is an awful lot harder than I thought it would be ... I was used to working by myself and doing what I wanted to do, all my own opinion. Now I have to listen to everyone else's opinion and the work turns out better in the end. (Transition Year interview)

...because you had to work together and with other girls in your class, even if you didn't know them or if you were shy around different people, you had to because you needed to as part of the course, it gave you confidence and you felt more at ease to ask for help. (Transition Year interview)

Students need to develop interpersonal skills, learn how to work as a team and how to deal with conflict. Conflict resolution can increase creative problem solving and enhance the quality of decision making, while at the same time promote caring and committed relationships and a sense of joint identity (Johnson and Johnson, 1995).

There was four in the mini-company and at times the tempers really flared... we just had to talk through them... in the end we realised that it was no good screaming at each other, so we just kind of had to sit back and talk it through as best we could.
(Transition Year interview)

It helps you with anger management we now can talk and negotiate with each other better. (Transition Year interview)

Project work helped students learn time management skills, which has helped them in senior cycle. In addition they seemed to learn that the work was for them, that is, they seem to have heightened their intrinsic motivation to learn.

It helped for this year, if I know I have a test in a week, I will start learning tonight, if it is only a bit I will learn it, because I learned from last year the projects I left were crammed and not done properly. (5th year interview)

The teacher will give us questions to do at night, and you know she won't check them, but I will do it anyway, it's not for class, it's for my own benefit. A lot of stuff last year wouldn't be checked by a teacher but you still did it because you were in a group. (5th year interview)

We work on our own initiative now we don't wait to be told to do homework to actually go home and do it... in Transition Year there was loads of projects and stuff that we got to do and if you didn't do it like no-one really gave out to you too much, you did it for yourself, it's the same now. (6th year interview)

This change in teaching has an impact on the teacher. It changes the relationship between teachers and students. Students now explore ideas together, the teacher is not the keeper of the knowledge and often will know as much as the student. When students work together it reduces the competition, students no longer work against each other, they work together.

You have to rethink your whole relationship with students, become more of a facilitator and coach. I had to unlearn the idea that teaching was about my content, I had to learn it was about their learning. (English teacher interview)

When we were doing the web site we learned literally as we went along. We knew as much or as little as the teachers. It was strange to see that the teacher wasn't teaching. It made my learning much more interesting. We were all so excited when we got it going. It was the highlight of the year. (Transition Year Diary)

89

When questioned about this during interview the student elaborated as follows:

It was such a challenge because it was the first web site to be made at school and the two teachers worked with us, like one of us, a student, rather than teachers... I respect them for doing that. (Transition Year interview)

When asked about the management of project work and cooperative learning in the classroom teachers made the following comments:

I had to be patient as students developed adult time management and organisation skills. We don't generally teach students to manage time; we usually manage it for them. Some groups would end up doing hours of work before a deadline but they learned. (Science teacher, interview)

They cooperated totally with each other to get material from other classes. When there were problems we dealt with them positively and every student learned about themselves, each other and also a lot about me... We had deadlines to meet and we pulled together to meet them. (English teacher interview)

I put together teams that had students who were leaders, students who needed leadership and some strong and weak students. It didn't always work out but when it did it was brilliant. (Music teacher interview)

This type of learning has be shown to lead to:
(a) Higher achievement and greater productivity
(b) More caring, supportive, and committed relationships
(c) Greater psychological health, social competence, and self-esteem.
(Johnson and Johnson, 1989)

From the preliminary research the higher achievement is evident, from the previous two themes the quality of relationships during Transition Year is also evident. Evidence for greater psychological health, social confidence and self-esteem may be found throughout this study in the comments made by both students and teachers. In many studies the preference for working in groups is expressed. Students say group work helps them generate ideas, get to know each other and to participate actively (Phelan et al, 1992). Students love the discussions that emerged from working in groups (Nieto, 1994). Getting to express their opinions is important as students feel they have some control of their learning (Rudduck et al, 1996). When the learning environment is varied in this way so too must the assessment of the learning vary. This is the next theme for discussion.

4.3.6 Assessment

As emphasised in chapters one and two, the responsibility for assessment rests with the class teacher, where the student's individual improvement is at the heart of the process. Classroom assessment uses a far wider range of assessment evidence than is possible for external examinations. The student's comments about assessment during this year varied, but all students commented that they felt it was a more equitable system.

Because it is judged on the overall person on everything that you do, it is not just the one area of schoolwork... and that's really the best way to do it. (Transition Year interview)

Everyone has a fair chance of doing as well as each other, it's not just academic, where the same people get everything, and here everyone has a chance. (Transition Year interview)

We got a chance to assess ourselves, we had to look at our work and give it a mark. It was really hard at first but it got to be all right. When you knew you where you had to improve it helped me. (Transition Year interview)

When students move on into senior cycle, they notice the change in assessment practice. They feel they were assessed as an individual during Transition Year, even when they completed group projects, while in fifth year class tests are seen as not taking the individual into account.

For our assessment last year you were given a certain time of the year for your projects to be handed in by, so it was not all at the same time, you could plan, but this year all the tests are at the same time and all of them are written tests, no projects. (5ᵗʰ year interview)

Back in fifth year, you are no longer an individual you are assessed as a class. (5ᵗʰ year interview)

This system of assessment encouraged students to work more consistently during the year. In addition, they felt they had a chance to make up, if they had missed out for any reason. For assessment to be formative it must be used to give feedback about learning (Black, 1998).

Assessment is much better… because it is you and the whole year on what you have done, the teachers can actually tell cause they know you, not like an hour exam, your whole personality, how you face working, how you do it yourself, what you put into it, it is much fairer I think. (Transition Year interview)

I think you work better during the year as well, because you know you are being assessed, you have to keep going, you have to keep working hard, because if you have a bad week, you can make up for the next week… (Transition Year interview)

Because you know what you are being marked on and you can talk to the teacher, it's all out in the open not like last year, you got a C and never knew why or how you got it, it was like it was a secret. (Transition Year interview)

Honestly, I can say I have done more work this year than I have done any other year, because I was constantly on the go. (Transition Year interview)

Transition Year as mentioned previously, is concerned with process, therefore, criteria that reflect skills development and personal qualities are important e.g. effort, participation, attitude and initiative are all emphasised. Projects are ongoing over a period of time; therefore, teachers can identify learning difficulties, offer alternatives, give positive reinforcement and provide ongoing monitoring and feedback. In this way assessment is built into learning and students are encouraged to see mistakes are part of learning. In addition, the idiographic nature of assessment is evident in student comments.

We weren't afraid to try things we didn't know because the teacher said we could do things over until we got it right. (Transition Year Diary)

Like in music, some people hadn't done music for three years so she only marked us out of initiative, reliability, attitude and the skills we should now know whereas the girls who had done music, they needed to be able to read and write music, the same idea for art. (Transition Year interview)

It gives you confidence in yourself; you are not competing with anyone only doing well for yourself and to impress the teacher. (Transition Year Diary)

All of their assessment fed into their end of year graduation, that is, it determined if they graduated with excellence, merit or pass, yet students said they had less fear of it and found it a fairer system to their Junior Certificate. Stimulated by the challenges of rigorous curricula, problem solving involving higher order thinking skills and applying knowledge in real-world situations, all the while being assessed appears to help students gain an appreciation for how this knowledge might benefit them in life.

They were giving you an opportunity to show your individuality and they were assessing you on it, because that is what it is like in a job, they are going to be watching you, you need to know what it is like to be continually assessed... they are going to see how you work with customers, how you do certain things and that's pretty much what we learned. (5th year interview)

The integration of assessment into the learning process through its formative function has led to enhance learning outcomes for students. Black and Wiliam found in their review of research that improving formative assessment raises standards (Black and Wiliam, 1998). The NCCA found that participation in Transition Year led to enhance academic performance (NCCA, 1999). These findings reflect the experience of the study school.

4.3.7   Work Experience – World of Work

Transition Year aims to give students on opportunity to get experience of adult and working life. Students have two work placements, one week in October and two weeks in March. In addition students have one class period per week to study the world of work, careers and practice the skills needed to apply for work.

Work experience... worth doing Transition Year just for that experience. (Transition Year Diary)

The experiences of the students made them more responsible.

You are totally responsible for yourself and you can't really make mistakes like in school, you are on your own. (Transition Year interview)

I went to the Montessori School and I really loved it... it made me realise that I really want to stay in school because it was really hard work and I was glad for that, that I realised that, to just go and get your exams, that there is plenty of time to work. (Transition Year interview)

94

I was left on my own in the office, it gave me independence, made me see that people can rely on me and therefore I can rely on myself. (5th year interview)

Similarly, when students visited places of work for example when they visited Waterford crystal and Galway pottery they learned from the experience. One observation reflects the majority of student's perspectives.

...not being snobby but when I saw the jobs some of those women had in Galway, washing the same pot with a sponge all day, I just said I'd better work for the Leaving if I want any better for myself. (Transition Year Diary)

While this theme was not a very prominent one it is important in light of what this project sets out to discover, that is, what it is about Transition Year that leads to enhanced performance in Leaving Certificate. The motivation that students get to work either from their work experience or their experience of the world of work is significant in this regard.

Transition Year students demonstrate a breath of knowledge and depth of knowledge that even students in fifth year who have worked during the summer can't seem to articulate, they seem to have the vocabulary, they seem to be able to give you examples. (Career teacher interview)

The students learn because of the way the programme is structured, it is a process, which enables students to break the situation down and notice things in the work place. Their other experiences during Transition Year gives them the confidence to articulate their ideas and feelings.

It is a process they go through, in the end it just comes second nature to them, for example if I ask in a fifth year class, how did you get on with your supervisor or boss, typically a fifth year might say they were horrible, whereas the Transition Year will give me more specific things, examples of what they said, this is how I responded to what the boss said and this is how we negotiated, and this is how they got over the

difficulty…much more precise and much cleaner about describing and analysing situations. (Career teacher interview)

Another aspect of work experience is the fact that students can use it to help them decide on an occupation, like the student wanting to work with children but not Montessori teaching, and this focuses them when they make their subject choice. This has implications for senior cycle and is the topic of the next theme.

4.3.8 Subject Choice

Students do not make their subject choice until April of Transition Year. This gives them the benefit of having had modules on all subjects for the year and this coupled with work experience and added maturity should improve and enhance this choice.

I was going to spend a lot of time doing art because I wasn't going to do it next year. Now I'm really considering it as one of my subjects. If I hadn't done Transition Year I mightn't have realised that. (Transition Year Diary)

I found picking subjects easier, I knew an awful lot more about them than I would have done in third year… I would have been picking totally the wrong subjects if I hadn't done it. (Transition Year interview)

When interviewing fifth and sixth year students their experience having taken the Transition Year option proved very interesting when it came to this topic. One student transferred into Transition Year in September, and highlighted the advantage of having time to reflect on her Junior Certificate results.

I had to make a choice and I hadn't even done my Junior Cert, I wasn't ready at all. Then after Transition Year I had my Junior Cert results to go on and having done all the subjects, I knew exactly what to do. Also because you had the teacher in Transition Year and they had time they could talk to you, show you books etc, third

years don't get any of that, they are busy getting ready for the exams. (5th year interview)

I didn't take business at all in third year I am doing Economics this year and I love it, other than that I would have been stuck in History that I hate and I love Economics. (5th year interview)

This is what the NCCA study call being 'educationally adventurous'. (NCCA, 1999). Other students spoke about taking up Biology after not doing Science in Junior Certificate. They did not have a problem with the subject and worked hard at it because they were interested. This would not have been an option for these students had they not taken Transition Year.

Before I went into Transition Year I was full of doubt, I won't get into college, I won't be able to do that, you come out of Transition Year and you want to do everything, it was like I was being assured I could do it, I would have given up French after third year but now I am doing it, and doing ok at it. (5th year interview)

When students make informed subject choices there are obvious advantages for teachers. One teacher described her experience of this as follows:

I can honestly say that I've not had one Transition Year student sitting in front of me in fifth year that I can say made a poor subject choice. They may not all be A candidates but they are interested and willing to work hard at their choice, a choice that was an informed one. I only wish I could say the same for the 'straight from third year student'. (Business teacher interview)

We allow students who have taken Biology in Transition Year do Biology at Leaving Certificate even if they have no Science. We find they know what the subject entails and by in large are very focused and work hard at it. (Science teacher interview)

I could not believe how quickly they were able to choose their subjects, and how clear they were about the reasons they had for choosing subjects... we had no difficulty what so ever. Certainly the third years are not clear at all about what the subjects entail and what the implications are and so on for them. (Career teacher interview)

All the students stated that they work better at subjects they like and for teachers they perceive as caring. If students use the Transition Year programme to pick subjects they know they like, and in addition, to pick teachers they know and have a relationship with, it is suggested that this may give them an advantage over third year students.

I think it's because you kind of mature a little bit in Transition Year, that you know what to do and that you have to do it. (6th year interview)

4.4   Conclusion

I used to sit in class and be not understanding but I didn't have the confidence to put up my hand and ask, but now I do because I interacted with teachers doing lots of competitions with them and asking for help, so I have the confidence to put up my hand and ask for help now (5th year interview)

This chapter has focused on the experiences of students who have participated in the Transition Year programme. This programme aims to provide students with a year where they can acquire skills, be prepared for adult and working life and where they can mature both personally and socially. From all the comments throughout this chapter there is evidence for personal and social development. Students are more self-reliant learners as a result of their experience and have a better understanding of working life. The programme in this context achieves its aims. How this is achieved is clear in the following seven themes that were examined throughout the chapter.

1. Student – Teacher Relationship
2. Peer – Relationship and Group Identification
3. Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
4. Group Work and Cooperative Learning
5. Assessment
6. Work Experience – World of work
7. Subject Choice

The enhanced relationships that develop because of the curriculum on offer during this option lead to personal maturity. These students are given the space and the time to explore, to question, to experience, to have conflict, to make-up, and to show their individuality. This 'individuality' is in itself the greatest outcome of the year because it enables students to have the confidence in senior cycle to perform at their best. They can make informed choices when it comes to choosing subjects and because of this are motivated to work at them.

Clearly, the seven themes highlighted from student diaries and interviews show how and why these students are more 'educationally adventurous' and have enhanced Leaving Certificate results. The conclusions that can be drawn from this study are outlined in the next chapter and further discussed.

Chapter 5: Conclusions & Recommendations

5.1   Introduction

The 'student voice' on their experience of the Transition Year programme was presented in the previous chapter. On analysis, what these students reveal in their observations (and their teachers' to a lesser extent) provides a valuable resource. This will contribute to the development of the programme in the local context, and indeed, the wider National context of the programme.

Furthermore, certain conclusions may be drawn on what students are looking for in their general educational experience. While these conclusions are school specific, within this case study it is hoped that readers will be able to draw parallels with their own experience and that conclusions may be formed in the wider context.

This study concentrated on the positive impact of the Transition Year programme. From the preliminary research it was shown that participation in Transition Year enabled students to be more educationally adventurous and have enhanced Leaving Certificate results. Transition Year, as evident in the data presented, contributes to the overall aims of education in two ways. It gives students time to develop and mature within the security of the school environment, and the Transition Year programme makes up the deficit in terms of overall education provision, that is, it caters for personal and social development.

What follows is a discussion of key areas arising from further analysis of the data. Recommendations arising from this analysis will be made throughout this chapter, with general recommendations at the end.

5.2   Students

Early adolescents need independence but we show them indifference. They need kindness but we crush them with control. They are brimming with criticism and curiosity, but we bludgeon them with content and its coverage (Hargreaves et al, 1996, p. 159).

Hargreaves paints a bleak picture of education, one characterised by control, content and coldness. This picture bears little resemblance to the experience of the students in this study. Clearly, during Transition Year the students articulated the variety, independence, care and support they felt throughout their experience. However, this spoke volumes in relation to how they contrasted this experience with their earlier experience of junior cycle.

5.2.1   Independence / Individuality

When teachers work to promote student independence, they are really teaching students to be responsible for their own learning. One of the aims of Transition Year is that students become 'autonomous'. The students in this study talk about how they negotiated with their teachers, picked their own project topics and self-assessed some of their work. They were becoming, over the course of the year, increasingly independent. This autonomy was carried with them into senior cycle. Students reported that they did the work for themselves. They had learned that their success was linked to what they did, whether they worked or not. In the opening paragraph of this thesis the student, quoted from her journal, tells us that "the greatest gift of all, is the power to believe in ourselves".

This belief in oneself is what Bandura describes as self-efficacy. This is the belief in ones capabilities to organise and execute the source of action needed to manage any situation (Bandura, 1986). It is reasonable to infer that this self-efficacy will affect the choices they make, the effort they put into tasks, how they persist when they confront an obstacle and how they feel about learning. Clearly, students who believe in themselves will do better in senior cycle.

To understand how this self-efficacy comes about one must look to the programme, and two aspects of that programme in particular. Firstly, as described in chapter two, Transition Year Students enter competitions during the course. These competitions are entered as groups, with three competitions involving the entire class group. The students put tremendous effort into competing and were awarded prizes in all competitions in this school year. The ability to work together towards a goal, led to increased belief in their ability to reach that goal. For some students, this represented their first opportunity to achieve recognition.

The second aspect of the programme leading to increased self-efficacy was the assessment practices engaged in throughout the year. When students described their assessment as a system where 'everyone had a fair chance, not all about academic work'. The formative nature of this assessment was recognised when the student reported that 'you were assessed on how you face work'. The feedback students received enabled them to examine how they worked. In addition, students were given opportunities to assess their own work. The idiographic nature of this assessment was important. This evaluates the learner in light of their own goals and previous attainments and thus helps the student understand and further their own learning. In this way standards for the student's learning emerge from their work and their success and is linked to their effort. The result was students on entering senior cycle had positive academic self-image which enhanced their self-efficacy in later learning.

It is paradoxical that independence is encouraged and enhanced during Transition Year, where students say they work in groups for the most part. A fifth year student spoke of how individuality was absent with class tests. The students felt that they expressed themselves more, worked harder for and were assessed on that work, during project work. In junior cycle students fail to get the same opportunity to work in groups or to learn co-operatively. This represents a missed opportunity when one considers the advantages of working in this way.

Hargreaves advises that this is the natural approach to teaching young adolescents because, he contends,

> *It capitalises on their preoccupation with the social world around them and their dependence on the peer group. It creates a context for learning where students explore new ideas, examine their own positions and challenge their prior beliefs by examining them with other people.* (Hargreaves et al, 1996,p.152)

Cooperative learning requires teachers to work as a team and to organise the learning in such a way that students work together to achieve the end result. Teachers in Transition Year, work in teams in some subjects and cooperative learning is most evident in these subjects. To encourage this type of learning in other classes would require imaginative curriculum design, imaginative timetabling, and even more imaginative management. Could the dominance of the State examination be so all-pervasive that it influences teaching and learning to such an extent that this would not be possible? This study highlights the positive outcomes from students working together. These same outcomes could be possible during junior cycle classes. Schools must formalise opportunities for students to support one another in learning.

5.2.2   The 'ahh' of the Subject

Students during this study reported that they got to know the subject, got to like it and consequently enjoyed working at it. Teachers opened up their subjects to them, what the student in chapter four called the 'ahh' of realising what something meant. Of course, it is immediately obvious that one can pace Transition Year classes to allow for this 'opening up of the subject'. This may not be so straightforward in examination classes.

This was evident in a study carried out, on improving the quality of learning at junior cycle. Teachers reported that the more open approaches adopted during the study led to improved performances. However, they regretted that because there was a course to cover they would have to "change gears and speed up" (Murphy, 2000, p. 92).

The concept of exams reducing teaching to a technical art has been documented previously. Gleeson contends, "Changes in the curriculum/assessment relationship in Irish post-primary education will require technical and administrative readjustments and political negotiation and compromise" (Gleeson, 1998, p. 75). However, Callan contends that it is more than technical and administrative structures that need to change in schools, it is deeper ideological issues that need to be addressed.

> *Ultimately change is only effected when it impinges on the actions of the teacher in the classroom, and these actions are imbued with meanings.* (Callan, 1995, p.112)

This research shows that when the examinations and externally prescribed syllabi are removed the quality of experience for the student is enhanced.

In addition, students during Transition Year get to experience a level of interaction, which they then expect when they move into senior cycle. They have increased confidence interacting with teachers in the classroom. The teachers report how they treat fifth year students who have come from Transition Year differently. Perhaps it is more a result of the student's expectations for the quality of interaction that affects this relationship. In all classes teachers should strive to open up their subjects to their students and enable all students to have this quality of interaction in their class. Teaching that instils a liking for what is taught fosters self-initiated learning long after the class is over.

5.2.3 Verisimilitude

The Transition Year students in this study, learned Economics and Accounting and then used their skills to run a mini-company and organise a fundraising fashion show. They learned about body image and healthy eating and opened a 'Health Food Snack Shop' selling only healthy food. They studied Environmental Science and ended up in a river carrying out research, and organising a school re-cycling station. There are many other examples of where students made connections with their learning and real life situations. This is what Woods describes as 'Verisimilitude'

> *Where students are engaged in real science, real history, real authoring, with real scientists etc., then there is genuine discovery and creative opportunities which go some way towards producing authentic ways of knowing* (Woods, 1993, p45).

Inviting speakers, drama teachers, dance instructors and other 'outsiders' into the school during transition year help to dissolve the boundaries of school. These people enhance teacher professionalism. They are invited in at the teachers' request and the visit is evaluated afterwards with the students. 'Outsiders' are part of the Transition Year course, but why only the Transition Year course? Subject groups need to apply for budgets to allow for these outside professionals to become part of mainstream education. Equally, mainstream subjects need to ensure that every effort is made to relate their courses to the students' world.

5.3 Teachers

5.3.1 Teachers and Curriculum

The best place for designing curriculum is where the learner and teacher meet (OECD, 1979, p11).

The freedom within Transition Year is the key to its success. The Transition Year programme is in itself a most effective form of teacher development. The students learn by doing, so also do the teachers learn by trying out new things as they devise, develop, resource and evaluate their own teaching modules. Curriculum is planned in negotiation with students rather than 'planned for' or 'done to' students. When curriculum is planned in this way it is more relevant to students.

In the NCCA Report on the Junior Cycle Review, it is recommended that the direction of future development of the curriculum at junior cycle should be towards less prescription and greater flexibility at school level. However, if schools are to have greater flexibility in curriculum provision, they will require time to prepare and plan for taking on this responsibility (NCCA, 1999).

From students' comments on their learning it is obvious that the time and flexibility within the curriculum contributes considerably to the experience they have. Students report on debates and discussions that were so interesting that they were reluctant to pack their bags and move on to the next class. Students reported that this was in contrast to their experience in third year and certainly so in senior cycle.

While recognising the limitations imposed by the examinations system, it should be within the capabilities of teachers to have more discussion and debate during junior cycle.

The most effective strategies for increasing motivation have to do with treating students as capable persons, making material relevant by capitalising on their knowledge and interests and involving them in determining the goals, the learning methods and the criteria for success (Levin, quoted in Hargreaves et al, (1996), p153).

Throughout student diaries there is evidence of student involvement, creativity and enjoyment. They are asking questions and making observations on their learning. They work together in groups and this positive collaboration persists beyond the school day, when they congregate in each other's homes to finish work. Teachers talk about how the students persevere with projects to overcome difficulties in understanding. For example, when designing the school web site, students met many obstacles, but came back each day to try and solve them. Teachers and students in this case energised each other.

During Transition Year the emphasis is placed on the following higher order thinking skills[1]:

- Decision making
- Investigating
- Experimental enquiry
- Problem Solving
- Invention
- Self-regulation
- Creative thinking
- Critical thinking

Students enjoyed this form of learning far more than the passive absorption they experienced prior to this year. They respond to being intellectually challenged and when learning is a dynamic, engaging and empowering activity. Their interest and motivation is enhanced by questions that help them relate what they are learning to their own background knowledge, experience and values.

5.3.2 Teachers and Relationships

Relationships play a vital role in the student's learning during Transition Year. They described how their relationships with teachers and their peers was different during Transition Year, in that they were enhanced greatly. These social relationships and human interactions had an enormous impact on how they learned. Students worked because they like the teachers, and in order to avoid letting the group down. At the same time they had fun doing it.

Paramount to this was the fact that students felt they were important and that someone cared. This care and support that was felt during the routine relationships between student and teacher in the classroom was what mattered most. While pastoral care structures have been introduced in the study school, it is important that these are not seen as a substitute for the daily routine care in the classroom. Students' care and support cannot exclusively be channelled into guidance and pastoral care structures.

There is a need to build care and support into the community of the school. To facilitate this class numbers should be kept low. In addition, teachers need to encourage co-operative learning in their classrooms. In this way if a student is not getting care and support from the teacher, they will have it within the peer group. The focus needs to move away from the teacher and content, and move towards student centred learning. We need to ask questions like, who are the students? How do they learn best? How might they best master the content to be taught? . Teachers need to focus on student motivation and ways to direct students' interest and energy toward the material and the learning. In essence, teaching involves getting to know the students, finding out what they know and creating a context of learning, which encourages them to actively engage with the subject matter. Assessment requires thinking about the student and about the context in which the student is or is not successfully learning. Teachers who do not know their students cannot engage in this kind of assessment

Additionally, there is a need to raise awareness of and apply interpersonal relationship strategies in teaching. This will ensure a better balance between the affective and technical aspects of teaching (Morgan and Morris, 1999). To this end, as highlighted throughout this study, teachers will need to solicit feedback from their students. Interpersonal relationships require dialogue; therefore any method that encourages students to communicate will help form personal bonds. These two aspects of teaching are not mutually exclusive as demonstrated in this study. The Transition Year teachers used a variety of methods and through this technical aspect of their teaching their affective and student relationship aspect was enhanced.

However, Transition Year teachers have an advantage over mainstream teachers in that they spend time outside the classroom with students. They accompany students on various organised trips and to competitions and so on. Unfortunately this approach is not prevalent in junior or senior cycles.

5.4   Equality

Students should not be 'disadvantaged' by not participating in Transition Year. Clearly, the students in this study had greater self-confidence going into senior cycle as a result of their experience. In addition, they made enhanced subject choice. They knew their subject and in the majority of cases they knew their teacher. Students who came directly from Junior Certificate into Leaving Certificate did not take up any new subjects.

The study school needs to address this by having more information days/evenings on subject choice with parents and students. Teachers need to ensure that students have all relevant information in order to make informed choices.

As outlined throughout this discussion, the advantages of students working together co-operatively must be incorporated into junior cycle. This sense of self-

efficacy evident after Transition Year needs to be encouraged throughout the years. We need to raise student's feeling of self worth and help them feel good about themselves.

If teaching the Transition Year programme enhances teacher's confidence in trying out new material and teaching methods, then it is very important that all teachers get to teach a Transition Year class at least once during their career.

The school needs to incorporate more personal and social education across the curriculum. Students who do not participate in Transition Year are missing out on this aspect of education.

Additionally, students need to accept more responsibility for their learning in junior cycle. To do this they will need guidance and will need to develop a language for thinking about learning and thinking of themselves as learners.

The following general recommendations need consideration based on the findings of this study, and their implementation may enhance the educational experience for all involved.

5.5   General Recommendations

1.   There is an urgent need to include personal and social education into mainstream classes as not all second level students participate in the Transition Year programme.

> *If young people need a year's respite from the conventional curriculum in order to enjoy personal and social education, then we are conceding that education has little to do with the development of skills necessary in actual living and everything to do with narrowly conceived preparation for examinations* (Williams, 1996).

2. A system should be put in place where credits can be given for the work-experience and mini-company modules, for students who participate in the Transition Year programme and move on to do Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied.

3. A system of monitoring Transition Year, both internally and externally, should be established. There is still a danger of schools using the year as part of a three year Leaving Certificate. Student representatives should be included in planning and at core team meetings. In addition, there needs be a system in place to ensure that students are getting a 'quality' experience, with models of best practice being made available. More networking of schools through the Transition Year Curriculum Support Service is required. A 'workshop' type conference each September to share ideas, would prove beneficial.

4. Education evaluations, both internal and external need to ask students for their views. This can take the form of questionnaire interview, class discussion or diary analysis. Hargreaves reminds us that teachers and student's experiences are very different, 'and sometimes diametrically opposed, even within the same classroom' (Hargreaves, 1993,p.26). The curriculum should be looked at from our students' perspective and tailored to meet changing student needs. Asking questions is fruitless if we do not act upon what we learn from these questions. To this end, our processes and systems should be flexible enough to tailor the curriculum to meet individual needs.

5. There must be a move towards authentic assessment in junior cycle. This will require a serious reappraisal of the curriculum, the organisational structures and the way the course is delivered. Assessment activities that do not inform teaching practice on a day to day basis are misdirected.

Assessment must help students to regularly make judgements about their own progress as learners.

5.6   Conclusion

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child

(United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12).

When students were asked their views on their experience of the Transition Year programme, what was revealed in their collective voice was a powerful endorsement of the programme. This programme has a positive impact on students. However, in light of these findings, we, as educators must ask some critical questions about students experiences prior to Transition Year. In particular, teaching must recognise different ways of learning, must relate meanings to previous experiences and seek to make learning relevant to real life. In addition, schools must recognise the social and emotional nature of learning and in doing so encourage students to take a genuine role in their own learning through assessment practices.

Finally, we must listen to and take seriously what students tell us about learning. As teachers, we need to find ways to continually seek out these silent voices and use what they tell us as a basis for change.

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[1] See Bloom's taxonomy of thinking. A great deal of what students are asked to do, invites them simply to demonstrate knowledge. In Bloom's taxonomy, the acts of recalling and reporting knowledge are seen as less sophisticated than the alternatives of translating information into new forms, applying it to new contexts, analysing, synthesising, and evaluating it.

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Appendix 1.1.

Personnel structures in the transition year in-career development programme

Personnel   Input and Time Schedule

Department of Education
Senior inspector (1)   Provide overall direction

Inspectors (5)   Liaise with and support Action Group

Action Group (5)

                                                   Design and implement six-day training
                                                   programme for Regional Co-ordinators
                                                   (December '93 to January '94)
Comprising four teachers representing   Support Regional Co-ordinators in 15
each school type release full-time   regions during implementation of briefing
January/March '94 and periodically during   sessions and cluster days
November/December '93 and   Prepare reports (to include evaluation)
September/October '94 and one university   reports prepared, February '94 & June '94
lecturer, each member being responsible   Develop resource materials for schools
for three of 15 regions   resource materials published May '94
                                                   Provide two additional training days for
                                                   Regional Co-ordinators (September '94)

Regional Co-ordinators (63)

                                                   Attend six-day training programme
                                                   (December '93 to January '94)
recruited from 160 schools representing   Hold half-day briefing sessions in schools
all school types and in which Transition   (Spring '94)
Year programmes were already in operation   Implement two series of cluster days in
distributed over 15 regions in teams of four   selected venues (Spring and Autumn '94)
released periodically during January/   Attend two-day training programme
March '94 and September/October '94   (Autumn '94)

Teachers, TY Co-ordinators, School
Principals (2,005)   Attend briefing session (Spring '94)
                                                   Attend two cluster days (Spring and
                                                   Autumn '94) and disseminate outcomes
                                                   to school colleagues

Whole Staffs (583 schools)   Attend briefing session (Spring '94)

Source: Lewis and McMahon, 1996, p.4.

Appendix 3.1

Matched Subjects in the JCE and LCE

JCE Subjects	LCE Subjects
English	English
Mathematics	Mathematics
Irish	Irish
Geography	Geography
History	History
French	French
Art, Craft, Design	Art
Science	Biology
	Physics
	Chemistry
Business Studies	Business Organisation
	Accounting
	Economics
Home Economics	Home Economics (Social & Scientific)
Music	Music A
	Music B

Appendix 3.2

Overall Performance Scales

Figure 1
Overall Performance Scale (OPS) for JCE

Higher Level	Ordinary Level	Foundation Level	OPS
A			12
B			11
C			10
D	A		9
E	B		8
F	C		7
	D	A	6
	E	B	5
	F	C	4
		D	3
		E	2
		F	1

Figure 1 illustrates the JCE OPS scale, which is used in this study. The scale has been adopted directly from the scale in the NCCA Longitudinal Study, 1999. It allocates numerical values to the alphabetical grades awarded to candidates. The values are weighted relative to the level at which the examination was taken such that an A at Higher level is awarded a higher score than an A at Ordinary level.

Appendix 3.3

<div align="center">

Figure 2
Original OPS scale for LCE grades

</div>

Higher Level	Ordinary Level	OPS
A1		100
A2		90
B1		85
B2		80
B3		75
C1		70
C2		65
C3	A1	60
D1		55
D2	A2	50
D3	B1	45
	B2	40
	B3	35
	C1	30
	C2	25
	C3	20
	D1	15
	D2	10
	D3	5

Source; Adopted directly from the scale used in the NCCA Longitudinal Study, 1999.

Appendix 3.4

Sample 1 Diary Entry

Work Experience

Work experience began the 27th November till the 1st of December. I had chosen "The Coffee Shop", which was very had work if I do say so myself. I had to run up and down the stairs about 100 times a day and believe me that takes a lot out of you. All the workers were nice and they helped me along so much. The thing I did learn from my experience is that I should work hard in school, so I won't end up having a job that is so hard on my feet and body. But other than all the hard work I had a great laugh.

I have found all the teachers connect to us more now than last yr. They show more intrest. For example 1 week ago Mrs Smith had a conversation with the class for the hole 40 mins, which any other teacher would not usually do. Mrs Jones was a teacher I always disliked but she's grand now. Maybe because theres not a big deadline for things. I get to do things in my own way. Which I phefere. This yr shes a changed teacher.

I also find the teachers are more open to conversation this yr. Because we don't have a set schedule for everything.

We were told by Ms Smith and Mrs Jones we are going to Dublin the 6th and Waterford the 8th. I'd say Dublin might be boring but we'll have to wait and see. Waterford should be good. We are going to the Waterford crystal glass factory. I'm looking forward to that.

We have been having Mrs. Rodgers for chemisty on fridays & Tuesdays and I have to comment on how much of a good teacher she is. I mean we do an experiment she tell us the equipment and solutions needed and we have to figure out what to do. Its such a good way of doing things. It really makes you think. I quite enjoy her class.

Sample 2 Diary entry

Monday, 20th September 1999

We have made progress for our mini company. Jennifer is
doing out a questionnaire to determine what each business
would like and would'nt like. We still have to think of
the main thing first - the name! We are still making
things with clay, we started making slab pots today. For
our Dev. Educ. Classes, we have to do a project on
subjects concerning young people (Third World). Our group
are doing a project on the arms trade and how it effects
young people. We're watching the 'Butcher Boy' during
English as we have now finished the booklet on this story -
it should be funny.

Tuesday, 21st September 1999

French was unusal today because after we had finished
correcting homework, Ms Smith divided the class into half.
We played a game to do with verbs and X's and O's. When
each team gets a verb correct they try to connect 4 verbs
in a row. We missed our afternoon classes because of the
start of the school year mass. All transition years had to
sing for the mass, along with 3rd years, 5th years and 6th
years.

Wednesday, 22nd September 1999

We each had to decide on a different country to do project
on for Geography, I chose Lithuania Ms Jones gave me
handouts on the country. We made slab pots in Art, mine
turned out to be very uneven and messy. We have changed

our idea completely for our mini-company. We now are making mirrors with broken up mosaic tiles on the front of them.

Wednesday, 20th October 1999

We meditated during Religion today – very relaxing. We discussed our work experience letters in Career Guidance. We made our card-board flowers and mobiles During Art. I'm doing my history project on the Klu Klux Klan. We discussed our meetings during Mini-Company class and we're meeting tonight to make more pot stands. I did my card-board flowers well today and they look v. nice. I found Irish difficult because we had to make up sentences with difficult Irish words. I must get my swimming gear ready, think of a 'community involvement' for the Gaisce award and bring in my Geography project to be handed up.

Friday, 22nd October 1999 HALLOWEEN HOLIDAYS!

We discussed our projects during science. I got a lot of information for my project, on Obesity. We did a table quiz during Irish with the questions in Irish Mary Jane and I drew on 48 points with Suzanne and Sarah. We then continued on our 'weird' storyline in French and then we played hang-man with French words. We did production budgets during accountancy. We got our Halloween holidays today 1 week and 1 day.

Appendix 4.1

Calculations for students Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate OPS

		Group 1 No T.Y J.C OPS	Group 2 T.Y J.C OPS	Group 1 No T.Y L.C OPS	Group 2 T.Y L.C OPS
Student	**1**	68	77	136	163
	2	105	97	146	159
	3	98	89	161	183
	4	106	100	144	132
	5	91	101	115	185
Average		**93.6**	**92.8**	**140.4**	**164.4**