Sustaining innovation in schools: the challenge of Transition Year

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With a focus on sustainability, a horticultural metaphor offers a good starting point. Not only does the history of Transition Year since 1974 points to it as an idealistic project, from the outset it has been a fragile plant in the educational garden. It lives in continual danger of being colonised by more pragmatic values and impulses, being trampled underfoot by other users of the educational garden. Thus, we can view TY as the site of ongoing struggle, between the mainstream and the margins, between pragmatism and idealism, between what’s already established and innovation, between conformity and originality (Jeffers, 2015, p.3)

A contention in this paper is that the more we recognise the dimensions of the struggle, particularly how the struggle impacts on teachers, the better equipped we will be to navigate our way through the tensions and in so doing are more likely to sustain the TY programme.

Challenges of innovation

Research on educational innovations is replete with warnings. Hoyle (1972) highlights the difficulties of ‘institutionalising’ educational change. The structure of schools, with teachers isolated in classrooms – what Lortie (1975) compares to an egg-crate – inhibits innovation. Huberman and Miles (1984) observe that schools often attempt to implement innovations that are beyond their ability to carry out. Sarason (1990) contends that an innovation that doesn’t face the ‘changing patterns of power relationships is likely to fail’. Eisner (1992) observes that ‘it is much easier to change educational policy than to change the ways in which schools function’. Fullan (1999) asserts that ‘routinising’ an innovation is often more challenging that ‘initiating’ or implementing’. Fullan also observes that ‘change unfolds in non-linear ways’ and ‘that paradoxes and contradictions abound’. House (1974), Blase and Anderson (1995), Blase (2005) all draw attention to the political dimensions of educational
innovations that challenge the status quo. Hargreaves and Fink (2000) signal the difficulty of transferring school innovations across contexts. Datnow (2002) proposes that while transferability is possible, context matters. In her research she found that innovations ‘were modified at school sites in response to the constraints, circumstances, and ideologies of local educators.’ In the Irish context, Gleeson (2004), building on House (1974), looks at the technological, political and cultural dimensions of innovation and concludes that the technological approach, followed by the political has been the most dominant. A neglect of the cultural has led to a situation where, after quarter century of ‘innovation’ in Irish schooling, ‘little has changed in the culture of our schools or in classroom practice’. Part of the explanation Gleeson offers for this is what he calls ‘loose curriculum discourse’. One might speculate that this ‘looseness’ results from a very limited discourse on curriculum generally in schools and in the wider society.

**Domestication**

One concept that captures some of the above strands as they apply to Transition Year is that of ‘domestication’.

At its most positive, TY can be viewed as a national programme with sufficient flexibility to enable genuine accommodation to the specific circumstances of individual schools, respecting their particular histories, traditions, values and contexts, playing to the strengths of teaching teams and geared to the developmental needs of students. In this sense, each school domesticates TY. However, the very flexibility that facilitates imagination and innovation can be invoked by schools to justify a narrow selectivity that ignores key features of TY (Jeffers, 2007, p.18)

Among those key features were cross-curricular work, innovative assessment and relevant health education.

The almost inevitable thrust towards a more negative rather than a positive view of domestication is especially challenging. Two decades on from the mainstreaming of Transition Year, a key question is: how do we keep TY fresh? One potentially productive route is to learn from the practices and experiences of other schools. Culturally, Irish schools tend to compete rather than co-operate with other schools, especially neighbouring ones. Thus, I am particularly grateful to those schools and teachers, students, co-ordinators and principals who not only agreed to share their TY related stories, but were prepared to be named, for *Transition Year in Action* (Jeffers, 2015). Their contributions give powerful
testimony to how TY’s mission ‘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’ (DE, 1993) is implemented on the ground.

**Outside interests**

An attractive feature of TY is the autonomy given to individual schools to shape their own unique programmes (DE, 1993, p.5). One way of injecting ‘freshness’ to TY is to add something new each year. Ironically, the dilemmas associated with such additions have increased as TY has become more widely accepted. As the evidence in any TY co-ordinator’s postbox illustrates, many agencies outside the educational system often see TY as an opportunity to advance their agendas. Undoubtedly, some of what such organisations offer can enhance TY programmes. Young Social Innovators, to cite one example, is an excellent vehicle to advance social awareness on specific issues and promote personal development (Gleeson *et al.*, 2008). On the other hand, walk down Grafton Street in Dublin on a Friday afternoon and ask TY students why they are rattling collection boxes; many seem stuck for an answer. There are anecdotes of some schools being approached by as many as 50 charities at the start of the year, requesting students for fundraising efforts. Clearly, decisions to engage with fundraising – or not - need to be informed by educational principles. Other dilemmas arise when, say, a higher education institution, as part of its student recruitment campaigning, targets a small number of TY students with very attractive weeks in laboratories, at the expense of a ‘normal’ week of the TY programme. As Michael Stanley remarks in *Transition Year in Action* (Jeffers, 2015, p.52)

> ‘It can be a delicate balancing act.... Flexibility is a hallmark of TY but if you are out of school specialising in one activity you may be missing other important aspects of TY. We look at requests on an individual basis.’

Furthermore, there are services, agencies, even businesses that are especially sensitive to the financial demands TY can make on students and their families. Others, regrettably, seem to target TY primarily as a profit-making opportunity. For principals, co-ordinators and teachers then, a certain wariness and critical analysis seems called for rather than immediately embracing this year’s TY novelties, or, as it were, ‘sub-contracting parts of TY to outsiders’ The freshness or sustainability in TY requires digging deeper in the garden of educational ideas, making connections between possible additions to TY and the
programme’s core mission.

**Digging down into the rationale**

According to former national co-ordinator of the TY Support Service, Michael O’Leary:

> In my opinion, the best co-ordinators are totally enthused by the TY rationale. They really understand and appreciate it. They have a real strong belief in the power of TY to benefit students. They are the people who are always looking for something to keep TY fresh, to keep it evolving. They have to be both creative as well as organised. (Jeffers, 2015, p. 134)

Returning to the TY rationale, as he suggests, gets us in touch with important core ideas. Careful reading of the short document, *Transition Year Programmes, Guidelines for Schools* (DE, 1993) still yields innovative ideas. In the context of this paper, I wish to focus in particular on the section headed ‘Teaching Methods and Approaches’ (DE, 1993, p.8) as it captures what should be core practices in every TY programme.

A key feature of Transition Year should be the use of a wide range of teaching/learning methodologies and situations. The goals and objectives of the programme can best be achieved by placing particular emphasis on:

- negotiated learning;
- personal responsibility in learning;
- activity based learning;
- project work and research;
- group work;
- study visits and field trips;
- work experience and community service;
- cross-curricular work

Educational activities undertaken should enable students to have a valid and worthwhile learning experience with emphasis given to developing study skills and self-directed learning (ibid, p.8)

This offers every teacher in TY an attractive framework for devising ‘valid and worthwhile learning experiences’ bearing in mind what Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) identified as three key requirements needed in school programmes for adolescents: They should be
Individually and collectively these methods and approaches point to a strong shift from the rote learning associated with terminal examinations to experiential learning. Learning from experiences is very appropriate to TY. However, perhaps the challenges in making such a shift have been underestimated. Structurally, many school timetables are built around learning blocks of 35 or 40 minutes. Experiential activities typically require substantial time but changing to classes of 60 minutes or longer is rarely a simple switch. Even more importantly, experiential learning needs thorough de-briefing. The importance of building teachers’ confidence and competence to engage in such de-briefing may also have been under-appreciated. It is worth noting that a combination of the exam system’s grip on schools, the high value attached to rote learning and teachers’ own experiences of learning at school and college result in experiential learning being generally under-valued and at times poorly understood. Thus it is worth reminding ourselves of Kolb’s cycle of experiential earning.

This reflective focus on ‘act, explore, analyse, decide, act again’ has powerful potential for learning. I followed this approach in the book *Learning Through Work Experience* (Jeffers,
‘Poorly understood’ is not always a welcome message to teachers who have become very good at responding to the demands of terminal examinations for their students. It is worth recalling Friere’s analysis of where this can lead. He said:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits that the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat. This is the banking concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. (Friere, 1971, p.35)

I suspect that we seriously underestimate how difficult it is to imagine and to implement alternative approaches, such as experiential learning. Genuine respect for learners’ viewpoints and voices demands very different classroom cultures from those associated with the banking concept.

**Teacher morale**

The emphasis on digging down in the educational garden to the roots of TY, it’s original vision and rationale, is closely linked to teachers’ motivations and morale. Fullan (1993, p.8) argues that ‘the moral purpose of the individual teacher’ is the building block of educational change. Thus, supporting and sustaining teachers is fundamental to building and maintaining a truly value TY. This is neither easy nor straightforward. One of the tensions indentified in the 2007 research was:

Striking a balance between what might be described as TY values, such as the centrality of personal and social development, intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning, and the pragmatic reality that students will proceed to a LC course immediately after TY, is especially challenging (Jeffers, 2007, p.23).

There is good evidence in many schools of how TY can be very nurturing of teachers. The following three examples are relevant:

We talk about TY being great for students and their personalities, I feel it works that way for me. I’m ‘human’ in TY classes, not an information machine. Teacher 34, Beech School (ibid, p. 91)
TY has had a very positive impact on the life of the school. It has changed the relationship between the teachers and the senior students very much for the better. Teacher 78, Beech School (*ibid*, p. 95)

Big impact on school life; greater range of activities in the school curriculum, greater resources, more scope to be creative. Teacher 104, Chestnut School (*ibid*, p. 96)

We know that teaching involves emotional labour, that teachers aspire to make a difference in the lives of their students, that ‘caring fatigue’ even ‘caring burnout’ is a reality (*e.g*. Hargreaves, 1998, 2001; Näring *et al* 2006). Indeed, TY as the site of strong mentioned earlier often involves strong emotional dimensions. The literature around teacher motivation is rich in insights into ‘sustainability’. But low morale and flagging motivation can and does visit staffrooms. There is a growing concern with teacher morale and wellbeing. And there is also a growing recognition of teaching as emotional labour. There is evidence that ‘caring fatigue’ even ‘caring burnout’ are real.

A key message from the VITAE study in the UK is:

> Creating positive work conditions, meeting teachers’ professional and personal needs and minimizing teacher burnout is the key to encouraging teachers’ resilience, promoting teacher well-being and positive professional life trajectories, improving the conditions for teachers’ effectiveness in relation to pupils’ performance and, ultimately, school improvement. (*Day et al*, 2007, p.214).

TY can contribute positively to this complex reality. I think those who believe passionately in the values of TY, can be of real support to colleagues, especially through professional conversations.

If, for some teachers, TY is seen as an ‘add-on’, an extra burden, it is likely to sap their morale. Furthermore, when students detect such teacher attitudes their own motivation can also be dented. Engaging in professional conversations with more reluctant colleagues can be a robust reminder of the TY struggle and the importance of colleagues in schools talking to each other about educational values and moral purpose. While this is challenging, in many ways it is at the heart of a teacher’s professional identity and a key component of reflective practice (*Brookfield, 1995*, Ghaye, 2011). Listening carefully to colleagues’ concerns and trying to relate them to the core values of TY should be a core activity of teachers committed to sustaining TY in schools.
I have heard people respond to the above along the lines of ‘it’s not so much my teacher colleagues as the principal’. Anecdotally, the evidence is building that this is often a very legitimate concern. Growing demands on principals can mean that innovations like TY get squeezed further down the agenda. Some of this may arise from the growing stress associated with school leadership. A recent survey (Riley, 2015) noted that ‘the average principals’ and deputy principals’ wellbeing survey scores are lower than the average citizen’. Thus, teachers committed to sustaining TY also need to engage in professional conversations with principals and deputy principals about the programme. Sarason has noted:

> The importance of the principal to both short- and long-run effects on innovations can hardly be overstated. The principal’s unique contribution to implementation lies not in ‘how to do it’ advice better offered by project directors, but in giving moral support to the staff and in creating an organisational climate that gives the project ‘legitimacy.’

A telling phrase encapsulates the role: all told, the principal amply merits the title ‘the gatekeeper of change’ (Sarason, 1996, p.77).

**Conclusion**

In summary, five points in particular may be worth taking away from this address. Firstly, teachers committed to sustaining TY in schools need to recognise that they are engaged in a struggle for educational values, a struggle to protect and nourish a delicate flower in the educational garden. Next, great learning about innovations such as TY can take place when schools share their stories. This Transition Year Teachers Professional Network is an excellent structure to facilitate such learning. Thirdly, we need to revisit TY’s origins, digging deep into the roots of the programme and its rationale and what is known about adolescent learning, particularly experiential learning. Fourthly, the TY programme is most likely to be sustained if teachers’ motivations and morale are nurtured. Finally, those committed to sustaining TY need to engage in regular professional conversations about the programme with students, parents, colleagues and school leaders.

**References**


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