

# **The Transition Year: A Unique Programme in Irish Education Bridging The Gap Between School and The Workplace**

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## **Abstract**

Transition Year is a unique and exciting programme situated in the middle of the six year second level education system in Ireland. Since its introduction in 1974, the programme has experienced unprecedented growth now being offered in over 80% of schools on the island. Transition Year seeks to emphasize alternative learning methodologies including self-directed learning and experiential learning; intellectual, social and personal development; community and inter-school communications; exposure to careers education and the world of work. The latter occurs predominantly through actual work experience. This paper situates and explains the Transition Year Programme in Irish education as well as outlining the significance of the essential work experience component. Transition Year work experience is the bridge that connects young people in the classroom with adult life and the world of work.

**Keywords:** Transition Year, Experiential learning, Work Experience, Socio-cultural learning, Career path.

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## **Introduction**

The Transition Year Programme (TYP), also known simply as Transition Year (TY) is truly a unique feature in Irish Education. Based on its significant success over a 40-year period in Ireland, it is surprising that currently, there does not appear to be a programme that compares adequately with it anywhere else in the world. The TYP is “pioneering in an international context with no comparable educational intervention existing in similarly standardised systems” (Smyth , Byrne and Hannan, 2004, p. 7). These authors make reference to the “Seconde” in France which does have some similarities, as an orientation year, to the TYP. They add though, that the French system differs considerably due to nationally prescribed coursework in core academic subjects as well as national evaluation in some subject fields. The Irish Department of Education (DE) describes the TYP as offering pupils

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*... a broad educational experience with a view to the attainment of increased maturity, before proceeding to further study and/or vocational preparation. It provides a bridge to help pupils make the transition from a highly-structured environment to one where they will take greater responsibility for their own learning and decision making (DE, 1993c, p. 1)*

Ireland has a long and noble tradition of respect and concern for education (Coolahan, 2009). This, Coolahan adds, is reflected in the monastic schools, which were seen as the “lights of the north” (p. 8) during the dark ages of Europe. O’Buachalla (1988) describes the developments in Irish education through the 19<sup>th</sup> century as *remarkable* particularly when set against the backdrop of economic deprivation and deep political unrest of the times. Educational innovation has been part of Irish education throughout its long and vibrant history. The Irish Education system was traditionally divided into three distinct sectors:

- 1) Primary Education (8 years, age 5-12)
- 2) Secondary Education (5 or 6 years, age 12-18)
- 3) Third Level Education (age 17+)

In the latter decades of the twentieth century and the early twenty first century, the system expanded to include:

- Pre-school Education (age 3-5)
- Adult and Further Education

These additions came about as the concept of life-long learning began to gain momentum and the DE tried to meet the demands of a population that was becoming more *academically aware* and intent on responding to market demands in a rapidly growing knowledge economy.

Second level education in Ireland caters for students from around age 12 years to 18 years. Students commence year one at the age of 12/13 years. The next three years are spent pursuing a programme which ultimately prepares the students for their initial State Examination, namely the Junior Certificate. On completion of the Junior Certificate Examination students can choose one of the following routes:

- a) Participate in the Transition Year Programme (a one year programme in year four of a six year cycle)
- b) Advance to fifth year and begin the terminal Leaving Certificate programme including its variants Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).
- c) Leave school, by law having reached the age of 16 years, the current legal minimum age to exit compulsory education in Ireland.

Ever since its introduction over 40 years ago, an increasing number of students are choosing the TY route.

#### *The Transition Year Programme*

The TYP first appeared in 1974 when it was offered in just three schools as a pilot programme. It experienced its greatest expansion throughout the 1990s (Smyth, Byrne & Hannan, 2004). Its introduction was brought about by the recognition of the Irish DE, at that time, of the overly academic nature of the senior cycle. The then Minister for Education, Richard Burke, summed it up when he said:

Because of growing pressures on students for high grades and competitive success, educational systems are becoming increasingly academic treadmills. Increasingly, too, because of these pressures the school is losing contact with life outside and the student

has little or no opportunity “to stand and stare”, to discover the kind of person he is, the kind of society he will be living in and, in due course, contributing to, its shortcomings and its good points. The suggestion was made that perhaps somewhere in the middle of the course we might stop the treadmill and release the students from the educational pressures for one year so that they could devote time to personal development and community service (Burke, 1974).

The Transition Year can be seen as *transitional* in two specific ways:

- 1) The *transition* between school and the world of work for those who were ready or wanted to leave school.
- 2) The *transition* between the junior cycle and the senior cycle for those who wished to remain in second level education.

Today, the Transition Year Programme involves an impressive number of students across Ireland (Table 1). The table clearly shows how the programme has gathered serious momentum and has become a significant feature on the Irish educational landscape. With over 600 schools now offering the programme, it continues to grow and would appear to have a bright future. The programme continued to attract students right through the economic crash of the 1980s and the unrelenting recession experienced in Ireland and many other nations since 2007. Despite direct financial cuts to the programme as a result of restricted DE spending during the economic downturn, the TYP continued to develop and grow. This was largely due to the commitment of schools, teachers, students and parents to a programme that has a truly astounding track record of success.

**Table 1.** Number of schools and students in Transition Year 2001-2013

School Year	No. of Schools	No. of Students
2001/2002	500	22,773
2002/2003	510	23,299
2003/2004	526	23,772
2004/2005	522	24,798
2005/2006	528	25,862
2006/2007	524	27,090
2007/2008	546	27,760
2008/2009	544	27,800
2009/2010	560	28,635
2010/2011	574	30,536
2011/2012	589	32,673
2012/2013	601	-

Data Source: Department of Education & Skills, Database Section, December 2012

Students find themselves immersed in an alternative learning environment where the focus is no longer on rote learning but on more socio-cultural and experiential learning styles. Young people in TY have the opportunity to participate in various mutual arrangements where they have much to learn from experienced others, but they too, have much to share with their older counterparts. They are coming from an intensive education setting. In most cases, today’s students are quite comfortable with technology and innovation. This new way of learning for them does not just apply to work experience, but also to the many other tasks and challenges that they will encounter during the TY experience.

The actual mission of Transition 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” (DE, 1993 p. 3). The overall aims of the TYP are to educate young people for maturity, promote general, technical and academic skills and support learning through the experience of adult and working life (DE, 1993). There was a clear desire on the part of the DE to bridge the gap between school and working life.

#### *Transition Year Curriculum*

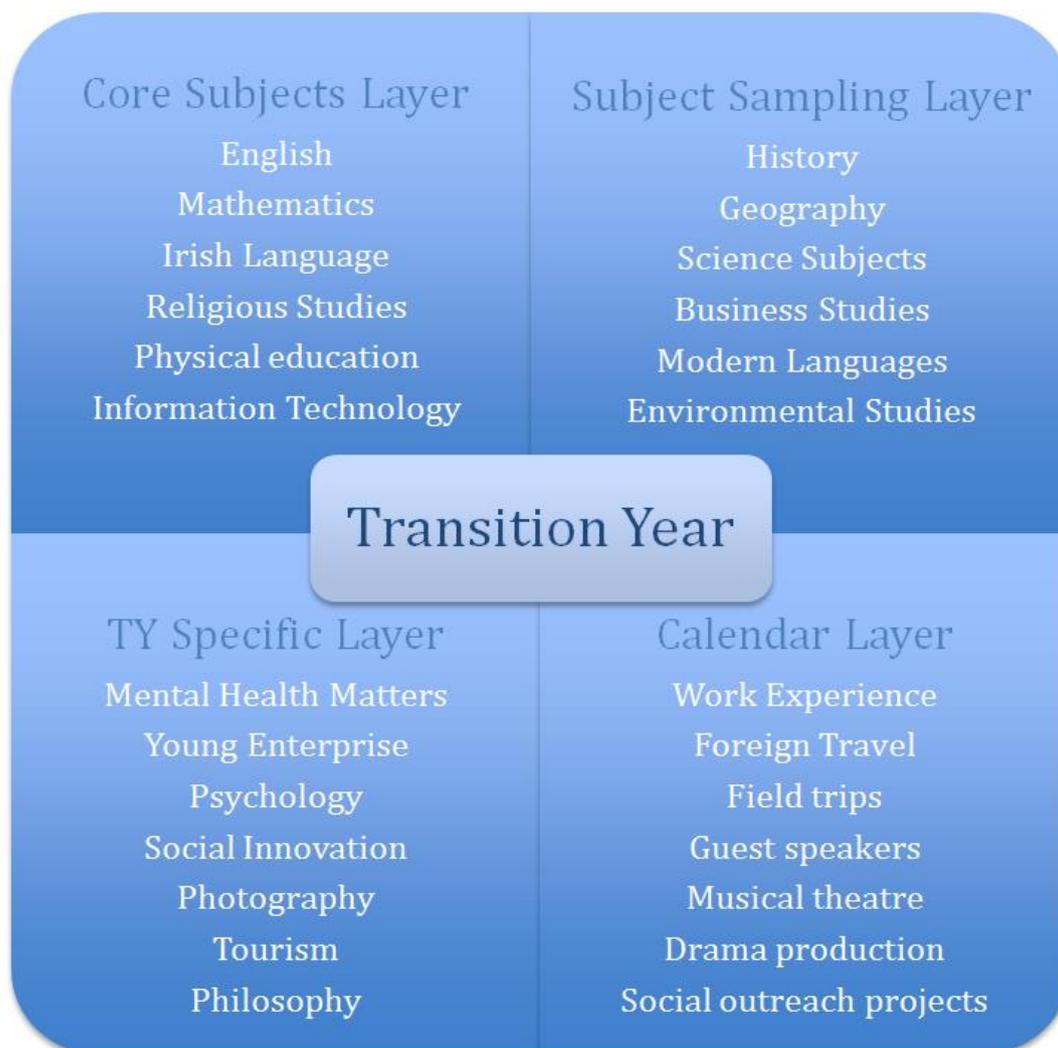
In terms of curriculum, the DE offers ample suggestions with an open invitation for each school to take the lead in designing its own, based on the needs of its student population. The teaching and learning methodologies proposed are varied, exciting and very achievable in any school with a well-structured programme and a sound core team in place. The assessment of the programme is intended to be *diagnostic* and *formative* with the opportunity for the learner to participate in the procedure via dialogue with the tutor and, in some instances, self-rating. The DE suggests that this should lead to greater self-awareness and an increased potential to take responsibility for both performance and personal learning. A whole school approach is highly recommended along with the necessity for clear co-ordination and teamwork on the part of the staff charged with the responsibility of TY.

The DE has produced very detailed guidelines to facilitate this process within schools. Any written programme devised by a school is based on four key layers:

- 1) The Core Subjects layer
- 2) The Subject Sampling layer
- 3) The TY Specific layer
- 4) The Calendar layer

Schools have the freedom to decide what specific subjects to offer and what modules to develop depending on the skills of the teaching staff, the general resources of the school and the access it has to outside expertise in the community. The TY Specific layer and the Calendar layer are subject to some extent to the level of funding available in each school. While schools offering the TYP receive an annual per capita payment from the Department of Education and Skills, the vast majority of schools also charge a TY participation fee to offset the additional cost of engaging specialist speakers and presenters as well as organising off campus events and activities.

The following chart outlines the possible content of each specific layer:



**Figure 1.** Suggested areas of study

(Based on *Professional Development for Teachers (PDST) website, 2015*)

### *TY and Work Experience*

A key constituent of twenty first century schooling in Ireland, and in many other countries across the globe, is the availability of work experience schemes to students who attend formal second level education. Such schemes evolved throughout the twentieth century and now have become quite sophisticated programmes which, in Ireland, include career investigation programmes, work shadowing programmes and work experience placements. The Work Experience Programme (WEP) is a fundamental component of TY. Work experience has been described as a paradoxical phrase in that it is clearly distinguished from actual *work* and is used to describe schemes where students are only exposed to part of the full experience of work (Miller, Watts & Jamieson, 1991). These authors add that a key difference is that the role of the student on work experience is that of a *learner* and not of an *employee*. Miller et al. (1991) state that a further paradox is that the learning yield will be “substantial and distinctive” (p. 16) only if the experience gets the student as close as possible to actually being an employee.

The key objectives of TY for students participating in a work experience programme are to:

- link the core academic curriculum with the world of work
- promote the school-to-career transition for students
- increase students' confidence levels
- assist students in the development of attitudes, skills and habits conducive to job success and personal development
- increase student understanding of enterprise and working life
- use the local business community as an incubator to help students develop a positive work ethic
- help students to make better informed decisions about their future
- help students acquire, or indeed refine, work related skills and job performance in a real work environment.

Work experience in Ireland presents young people with “engaging and relevant learning opportunities” (Jeffers, 2006, p. 409). Jeffers comments that following the restructuring of senior cycle education in Ireland in the 1990s, preparing young people for adult and working life became a more explicit goal within the new programmes developed. Work Experience is an important part of TY, offering students personal growth, maturity and preparation for adult and working life (Smyth et al., 2004). In the 2011 longitudinal study entitled *From Leaving Cert to Leaving School*, work experience was highlighted as a very valuable component of the school lives of Irish adolescents. In this study, 6<sup>th</sup> Year students “highlighted the need for greater preparation for adult and working life, suggesting that a life skills course and access to *work experience for all students* [emphasis added] would enhance their overall educational development” (Smyth, Banks & Calvert, 2011, p. 192).

Students generally spend an average of 15 days on work experience, with most schools involved in the programme usually offering a minimum of five days. A minority of schools offer three or even four weeks in the workplace. The Department of Education *Evaluation of the Transition Year 1994-1995* (DE, 1996) points out that the variation in duration seems to be influenced, in some instances, by the ethos and traditions of schools as well as the long term intentions of the students: “schools whose curricula had traditionally an academic orientation having shorter periods with those of a more vocational bent opting for longer periods” (p.15). The report claims that pupils were found to be well prepared for their work experience placements. The three key partners in this preparation were usually the TY coordinator, the guidance counsellor and the potential employers. Employers were found to be co-operative and very willing to provide the schools with feedback on completion of the placement (DE, 1996). Preparation of students for work experience varies from school to school. Some schools have no formal training programmes while others have work experience preparation time-tabled on a weekly basis. The time allocated for that preparation is subsequently used for monitoring while students are on placement, and de-briefing when students return to school.

#### *TY and Socio Cultural Learning*

Experiential learning, as defined by any of the major theorists in this field (Kolb, 1984; Dewey, 1991; McElhaney, 1999) effectively underpins the Transition Year programme. Contemporary conceptualisations of socio-cultural learning theories draw heavily on the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky who believed that social events have learning embedded within them (Vygotsky, 1978). This is a fundamental concept underpinning the work experience programme in TY. Vygotsky proposes that what a child can learn with the assistance of others (social learning) is more indicative of his/her mental development than what s/he can learn alone. While he acknowledged the role of the teacher as vital to a child's learning, he also saw the classroom itself as a social setting and quite

representative of larger society. The Department of Education (DE) saw TY as a means of varying the learning environment and “helping to dispel the notion that learning is something that happens only, or most effectively, within the classroom” (DE 1993b, p. 3). They perceived work experience as one method of achieving this. TY has many other examples of experiential and socio-cultural learning in the form of Young Entrepreneur Schemes (YES) where students set up and run small companies; school musicals where students take on all sorts of roles from acting and singing to design, production, and direction; social innovation programmes where students work with others in the community dealing with social issues; foreign travel offering students an opportunity to interact with other cultures and in some cases total immersion to develop their language skills. An article by Barbara Scully (2015) in the Irish Independent recently described TY as a “bright light” (p. 31) in Irish second level education. This writer offers a contemporary description of TY saying it “embodies what education should be - an opening of minds, an exploration of our world, a pause in which to think and debate and sing and climb and challenge” (Scully, 2015, p. 31). TY, as the name suggests, is a year of transition. Perhaps a further conceptualisation of this could be to see TY as a vehicle for the *transition* of Irish classrooms from traditional centres of learning to active centres of learning, as suggested by the OECD (1991).

Transition Year, with its focus on active learning and experiential learning, combines the best of both these worlds in terms of how students learn. They have the benefit of the teacher in the classroom while, at the same time, having substantial access to the many more experienced or more knowledgeable others within the school or the wider community. The work experience programme gives students the opportunity to access the world of work and expose them to adult and working life. Moving from the safe and familiar school environment into the world of work can be a daunting experience for students. Whatever the school can do to facilitate this and make the transition as comfortable as possible for the student can be crucial to the success of the programme. The change and development in young people that can arise out of the move from one learning context to another, in this instance from the school to the workplace, is an important outcome of any work experience programme. Engeström (1996, as cited in Guile & Young, 2003), describes this “boundary-crossing” as a form of “horizontal development” (p. 70). By boundary-crossing he means “learning how to cross the social and cultural borders between different activity systems” (p. 70). The idea of horizontal development was a significant advance in socio-cultural theory contrasting with the traditional concept of vertical development, which was more concerned with intellectual development. Each person’s growth was based on navigating a hierarchical body of knowledge and skills which Gick (1995, as cited in Guile & Griffiths, 2001) described as the cornerstone of most cognitive development theories. Vertical and horizontal learning tend to be treated in isolation from one another which, really is a reflection of the institutional separation of formal learning from informal learning (Guile & Griffiths, 2001). Such separation had been “a feature of most academic communities for many years” (Bourdieu, 1988, as cited in Guile & Griffiths, 2001, p. 3). Engeström argues that learning how to cross social and cultural borders is one of the main challenges faced by people and groups in modern society. TY offers an appropriate and safe space where students can encounter and face up to such a challenge.

A well organized and successful placement can be an immersive experience, a metaphor Boud (2008) defines, in the positive sense, as “being deeply absorbed or engaged in a situation or problem that results in mastery of a complex and demanding situation” (p. 1). While every student may not necessarily experience *mastery* of the work undertaken by them during their placement, there is still, nonetheless, significant learning involved. When Transition Year students enter the workplace, they engage in a new

*community of practice*, a term developed by Wenger and Lave (1991), describing the social learning process that takes place when people are actively involved in a common pursuit. Interaction is the key to a true community of practice where individuals build relationships and learn from one another (Wenger, 1999). Such interaction is reflected throughout much of Transition Year as well as specifically during work placements. This same practice is now set to play a significant role in the new Junior Certificate and revised Leaving Certificate programmes currently being developed by the Irish Department of Education and Skills (DES). Such developments in education indicate that the next major transformation in Irish education may well be the transition from traditional individual learning to a more participative, interactive process where students will play a more active role in a more experiential learning environment. Boud (2008) who prefers the term experience-based learning over experiential learning posits that "all learning needs to be seen as coming from experience" (p. 2). He argues that learning can only take place through engagement by the learner with whatever activity is being conducted inside or outside of the classroom. However, true experience-based learning, he adds, is concerned with instances where learning activities are arranged with the clear goal of substantial engagement with the learner's actual experience and where the learner occupies the central place in all aspects of teaching and learning. Transition Year students have many opportunities to experience this through general classroom activities specific to a well written and well implemented TY programme, along with other activities such as the aforementioned YES, musicals and community and socially based innovation. More specifically, work based learning (WBL) occurs through participation in the work experience programme. Raelin (2000) argues that there are clear distinctions between traditional classroom learning and WBL. A significant example of this is that WBL should be centred around reflection on the work practices experienced. Primarily, he stresses the importance of reviewing and learning from what has actually been experienced by the participant. Boud (2008) too attaches major importance to reflection portraying debriefing and reflective thought as crucial to the process.

#### *TY Work Experience and Possible Career Choices*

Moynihan (2013) conducted a mixed methods study of work experience in TY and its effect on subject and career choices. The research was carried out across three schools involving 323 students. The schools consisted of a single sex male school, a single sex female school, and a co-educational school. The quantitative element of the study showed students' attitudes to work experience to be very positive. The general feeling among students was that the time spent on work experience was not only very worthwhile, but actually a highlight of the entire TY programme, with females shown to be more likely than males to believe this. Those who had existing career ideas, especially the female students, agreed that their career choices had been reinforced by the opportunity to participate in adult life and the world of work. This proved to be particularly true of those who had ideas about their future careers for a long time and even dating back to early childhood. The very narrow margin of students who believed that work experience was a waste of time for them, were predominantly those who expressed low self-esteem, had poor academic performance records, and whose placement choices were either poor or careless. The majority of students however, did make careful and valuable selections with those in the former category openly admitting that they should have been more vigilant in their selection. While the majority of students either had their career choices confirmed or found new career directions, a significant minority were *put off* their career idea. This was more applicable to boys than girls. In general, most students agreed that the work experience process, at the very least, crystallized their career ideas for the future.

The analysis of the qualitative interview data generally supported the findings from the quantitative analysis. Again, it showed students to be very positive about the work experience element of the TY programme. Even those who believed that they had made poor selections agreed that there was significant learning there for them nonetheless. Many students talked about being put off a particular career while the majority believed that they either had their career idea confirmed or that they were switched on to a new career goal. Boys were shown to be more likely than girls to actually be put off a career but this is not that surprising when one considers that boys proved to be more careless in their placement selections in the first instance. A significant number of students, especially girls, had career ideas dating back to quite a young age. Super (1957) and Ginzberg (1966) refer to the time when this occurs as the fantasy stage in their career development theories. The interview results highlighted a more significant number of students claiming a link between their subject choices and work experience. This time it proved to be a majority of students who agreed there was a definite influence. The figure was highest in the co-educational school with a significant majority of those interviewed identifying a link. Another interesting development from the qualitative interviews was the extent to which students agreed that, subsequent to work experience, they had an increased awareness of the importance of study in the following years. Students, right up to their terminal year in school, still agreed that their Transition Year work experience caused them to work harder in school thereafter.

Students responded very positively to questions on their experience of adult life and the world of work. They expressed a strong sense of satisfaction and excitement when talking about the experience. They contrasted the independence and freedom of working life with the overly controlled environment of the classroom. They used words like *restricted* to describe learning in school while words like *insightful*, *responsible* and *enjoyable*, were associated with work-based learning. Similarly, positive words like *confident*, *mature* and *independent* were used when students spoke about themselves and how they were personally affected by their time in the world beyond the school walls. They were clearly aware of the development within themselves as young adults and the ever-changing identity that defines them. Overall, students were overwhelmingly in support of the work experience programme and the Transition Year as a whole. The vast majority agreed that age 15 or 16 was an ideal time to develop some sort of career goal. They also saw significant value in discovering that a career was not right for them. When it came to advising others who are about to embark on a work experience programme, they were most willing to give sound advice with the very strong recommendation to choose something in which one is genuinely interested. They openly cautioned against convenience and careless placements.

## **Conclusion**

Transition Year is a widely accepted success in Irish schools, with much research supporting the predominantly positive attitudes towards the programme from all of the education partners. It is still difficult to comprehend that, based on its phenomenal success in Ireland, a Transition Year model, or similar programme, has not appeared in any other education systems. Work experience is evidenced throughout the research of Moynihan (2013) as a powerful programme within the overall TY experience. That research has shown a clear and important link between participation in the work experience programme and the subjects chosen thereafter by students for their senior cycle education as well as their potential career path. This contributes to previous studies on subject choice and decision making theories. While there are many factors that influence subject choice, work experience has been proven to be one worthy of serious consideration. It is a factor that has a knock-on or domino effect. The subject combinations fashioned by

students in the senior cycle inevitably lead them in a specific direction in terms of further study and a possible career. Slaney (1988) claimed that most college students already have expressed vocational interests. Decisions that carry that much weight need to be well thought out and this is where the education system, along with its various actors, can seize the opportunity to exercise their significant role in this process. Students participating in work experience need to be provided with adequate advance preparation, well planned placements and efficient monitoring. Post placement, they also require appropriate guidance in terms of debriefing and reflection.

Most career development and occupational choice theories are relevant in part or in whole to how students develop their career ideas and aspirations. Most researchers agree that the study of career theory started with trait and factor theory. This was built upon by a host of theorists working in the field. Lent, Brown and Hackett's Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) serves to bring together the various threads of career theory. It incorporates the evolutionary process dealt with in detail by Ginzberg (1966) and Super (1957) while having much in common with the work of Krumboltz (1976), which like SCCT, is fundamentally based on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. In summary, Brown et al. advocate that beginning in early childhood, and extending through adulthood, people narrow their scope with a view to forming or pinpointing a career goal or, indeed, a career choice. They add that the likelihood of success can reinforce career choices. This was a significant outcome for students who participated in work experience (Moynihan, 2013). The vast majority of those who participated in that research had their career goals reinforced if their placement proved to be an agreeable experience. Where barriers are perceived, according to Lent et al., then the interest and choice actions are much weaker. Some of the barriers perceived by a minority of students in Moynihan (2013), were things like students' inability to attain grades, not liking the work, the difficulty of the work, low self-esteem and lack of confidence in their ability to pursue a third level qualification.

Moynihan (2013) also demonstrated the significant effect of work experience, and the broader TY programme, on students developing identities and their emerging vocational identities. Holland's Career Typology (1959) illustrates a strong relationship between personality and the occupational environment. This suggests that one's identity, ultimately, has a significant effect on the selection of a suitable work environment. Transition Year assists with maturation and the development of personal identity. Vocational identities emerge or are honed by participation in the work experience programme. Through this combination, a career path, leading to the development of a potentially successful future self, is laid.

In sum, the TY work experience programme influences senior cycle subject choices by students. It helps students fashion a clear focus on their future career possibilities while in some cases causing students to generate entirely new career paths or directions. Work experience contributes to improved academic performance. A significant number of students, who participate in a work experience programme while still at school, can have existing career ideas reinforced, including ideas they may have held since childhood, or even early childhood. Students experience personal growth during the TY experience with work experience contributing to the development of their confidence and their self-esteem. Following on from this, students are helped with the clarification and the further development of their gradually emerging vocational identities. All of this contributes to their developing overall identity. Finally, and of great significance, young learners are exposed to alternative ways of learning both within the school community and outside in the adult world of work. TY and its crucial work experience component form a gateway to effective subject choices and a pathway to a positive career trajectory.



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