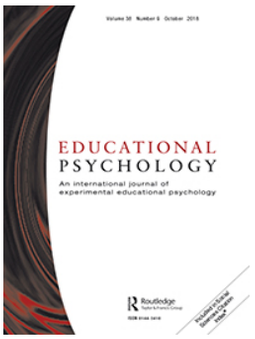

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Who participates? Predicting student self-selection into a developmental year in secondary education

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies student characteristics that predict participation in Transition Year, an optional developmental year (Grade 10) offered midway through secondary education in Ireland. One thousand eighty five students (51% female; mean age = 15.4 years) completed a questionnaire in Grade 9, providing information on demographic, attitudinal and socio-emotional characteristics. Multivariate logistic regression was used to identify characteristics that predicted students' choice to take part in Transition Year for the following school year or to skip it. The results point to a number of invisible barriers to participation, which indicate that some students, many of whom expressed some interest in Transition Year, could miss out on potentially positive elements of the extra developmental year. The findings raise issues for teachers and policy-makers regarding the promotion of programmes such as Transition Year and its targeting towards particular groups of students.

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Transition year; positive youth development; gap year; engagement; career exploration

'Positive youth development' is a term that encapsulates the increasing efforts made to promote the development of positive characteristics among children and adolescents – for example, self-determination, self-efficacy, resilience, social competence and positive relationships with peers and adults (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Young people are seen, in this view, as promising resources to be supported and developed by society – building on their potential, and their strengths and interests – rather than as problems to be managed (Damon, 2004; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003b). As well as taking a strengths-based approach to youth development, programmes aimed at promoting positive outcomes among youth are often characterised by the opportunities provided for young people to interact in a positive manner with adults and broader society (i.e. beyond the family and school), to build new skills, and to take on leadership roles in a supportive environment (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokras, & Lerner, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003b). Related to the underlying perspective of young people as a valuable resource for society, such programmes are often aimed at the general population rather than being remedial 'treatment' programmes for young people who have

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Table 1. School provision and student uptake of Transition Year for selected years.

	Schools		Students	
	N	%	N	%
1993/94	144	19.0	8493	12.7
1994/95	451	60.1	21046	30.7
2000/01	507	69.6	23247	38.0
2007/08	532	76.5	27759	48.5
2014/15	614	89.1	39347	65.0

Calculated by the author from figures provided by the Department of Education and Skills.

been selected due to antisocial behaviour or mental health difficulties (Catalano et al., 2004).

Transition Year

The Irish Transition Year programme (TY) provides an unusual example of a grade level integrated within the mainstream secondary education system that exhibits some similar features to youth development programmes. TY (Grade 10) is a quasi-'gap year' that is available to students in most post-primary schools in Ireland. It is positioned following the completion of three years of lower secondary education (Grades 7–9, known as First Year to Third Year in Irish schools) and before the final two years of upper secondary education (Grades 11–12, known as Fifth Year and Sixth Year). Therefore, all students who complete secondary education in Ireland experience at least five years of classes, while students who take part in TY enroll for an additional year. The idea underpinning TY at a policy level is that students should be offered a period of time in which they can devote their attention to developing their broader interests and enhancing personal and social maturity in the absence of high-stakes academic pressures. As shown in Table 1, this is an option that an increasing number of students find attractive.

There is no central curriculum for TY, although guidelines are available (Department of Education, 1993) and some centralised funding is provided to schools. Although the lower and upper secondary education cycles terminate with standardised national examinations, there are no comparable examinations or final grades at the end of TY – rather, the manner of assessment of students' learning is left to each school, and in many cases, students build portfolios based on their activities throughout the year. Afterward, students re-join more traditional and examination-oriented classes in Grade 11. These classes are often comprised of a mixture of some students who did TY for the previous year, and some students who came directly from finishing the lower secondary cycle.

The provision of TY varies between schools. At each school's discretion, TY can be provided to all students on a compulsory basis, offered as an option in which individual students can choose to participate or not, or it may not be provided at all. As noted above, the intended function of TY is to provide students with a broad educational experience that is focused on personal development, interdisciplinary learning in a low-stakes environment, and the chance to experience the world outside school in a more active, participative manner than is available in more traditional grade levels (Clerkin, 2012, 2018; Smyth, Byrne, & Hannan, 2004). Students continue to attend

classes in core subjects, as well as 'taster' classes for subjects that they might not have studied before but that may be available at the upper secondary level or at third level. In the absence of a set curriculum, schools are given more freedom to customise the nature and content of courses to the local context and to students' interests. Classes also tend to be somewhat more interactive, and project work is common. Students are encouraged to explore and develop a broad range of skills and interests and to take greater responsibility for their own learning.

Besides promoting personal development and maturity, the year seeks to provide students with the time and space to consider their futures, engage in vocational and career exploration, and interact with the world beyond school. For example, in most schools, students experience short placements in real workplaces as a way to learn about the hands-on reality of a particular occupation. These work placements are often credited by participants as being valuable and memorable experiences (Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004). Students gain occupational insights relevant to their particular placements and, more generally, the experience provides them with an opportunity to interact with adults in the 'real world' on a relatively equal footing. Activities outside school – within the local community or field trips further afield – are also common, with a view to broadening students' horizons.

Associated outcomes

Many TY participants report emerging from the extra year as more confident, rounded and mature individuals. This perception tends to be supported by students' parents and school staff as well (ISSU, 2014; Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004). Nonetheless, a substantial minority of students – until recent years, a majority – choose not to take part in TY even when it is available (see Table 1 for changing participation rates over the last two decades). Therefore, although TY could be universally provided to all students, in theory, it is not available in practice in a small number of schools and is declined by some students even where it is available. The most common reasons for skipping TY that have been identified in the qualitative literature are students' (or parents') concerns about losing good study habits due to a lack of examination pressure, financial considerations arising from the expense of additional out-of-school activities, and the desire to finish school a year earlier or to avoid 'wasting' a year that does not involve preparing for examinations (Clerkin, in press; Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004).

Despite these concerns, students who take part in TY tend to perform better in their final examinations than their peers who skip the year (Millar & Kelly, 1999; Smyth et al., 2004), and thus possess an advantage in the subsequent competition for places on third-level courses. Importantly, Smyth et al. (2004) highlight the importance of the nature of TY provision within schools by suggesting that students in more disadvantaged schools where TY is provided on a *compulsory* basis do not seem to accrue any such benefits to the same extent, but that disadvantaged students who *choose* to take part in TY when it is an option perform better than would otherwise be expected.

Although TY is not intended as an additional year to prepare for examinations, it is expected that the experiences and skills gained during TY should lead students to

emerge from the programme 'better equipped and more disposed to study than their counterparts who did not have the benefit of this year" (Department of Education, 1993, p. 2), predominantly due to the acquisition of self-regulatory and organisational skills. There is some evidence that this may be the case. Students who take part in TY have been found to spend more time on homework over the two years following the programme than non-participants, controlling for background characteristics and educational aspirations (Clerkin, 2016a). In particular, students who had previously taken part in TY reported engaging in self-directed study behaviours (doing extra study on a more frequent basis, giving up on difficult questions less frequently, and failing to complete their assigned homework less frequently) to a greater extent than their peers who skipped TY (Clerkin, 2016a). Similarly, interviews with students and teachers suggest that TY participants are perceived as being better-prepared, after their 'year out', for the rigours of the high-stakes senior examination cycle (ISSU, 2014; Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004).

Although not originally expressed in such terms, the thinking behind the development of TY in the 1970s was underpinned by the desire to enact positive growth among students in a manner consistent with self-determination theory (Clerkin, 2018; Deci & Ryan, 2000). For example, self-determination theory suggests that autonomy-supportive teaching behaviours that provide a platform for students' sense of autonomy and competence in the classroom and promote positive student-teacher relationships should support a stronger intrinsic motivation to learn and provide a more positive educational experience (Reeve, Bolt, & Cai, 1999; Reeve & Halusic, 2009). In practice, more participative classrooms where students are given a stronger voice are recognised and encouraged as a feature of TY, and stronger student-teacher relationships are noted by students and teachers alike following the extra year, as well as a stronger investment in learning among TY participants (Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004). This emphasis on interpersonal relationships, student competence, and personal growth are also clearly closely aligned with the perspective of youth development underlying standalone youth development programmes (Lerner et al., 2005) and the promotion of interpersonal, intrapersonal and intellectual character strengths in school settings (Park, Tsukayama, Goodwin, Patrick, & Duckworth, 2017).

The sustained growth of TY in Ireland, devoting a full academic year to developing non-cognitive outcomes, demonstrates an unusually strong commitment by a national education system to the explicit promotion of youth development (Clerkin, 2012, 2018; Le Métais, 2003; Smyth et al., 2004). Its increasing popularity among students is highly relevant in light of the increasing trend internationally for examining the role that formal education can play in promoting positive development among students, beyond the acquisition of examination-focused knowledge and skills (Ikesako & Miyamoto, 2015; Levin, 2012; Lippman, Ryberg, Carney, & Moore, 2015; Park et al., 2017). The potential value of ring-fencing an entire school year for personal development in this manner is supported by the observation that 'many students attribute the greatest change in their personal development [during their time in school] to their time in Transition Year' (Smyth, Banks, & Calvert, 2011, p. 182). It is important to note that, despite these consistent reports of psychosocial growth arising from students' participation in TY, the features of the programme that contribute most

clearly to any such development remain to be elucidated through further research. Interested readers are referred to Clerkin (2012) for a more extensive review of TY-related research, Clerkin (2018) for a discussion of the theory underpinning the programme, and Jeffers (2015) for detailed illustrative examples of the methods and approaches used in TY classrooms.

Only one study previously has explored student characteristics related to TY uptake, drawing on a survey conducted in 1994 (Smyth et al., 2004). Smyth et al. reported that students who chose to partake in Transition Year tended to be younger than their classmates who skipped the year. TY participants also reported higher educational aspirations and came from more socioeconomically-advantaged families. However, although TY includes a strong orientation towards vocational exploration, they found no association between students' occupational aspirations and the choice to enroll in TY.

As shown in Table 1, the school-level availability of TY has become much more widespread since 1994, with particularly marked growth in student uptake over the same period. It seems timely, therefore, to re-examine patterns of uptake with a view to identifying any changes in the composition of the student body that may have occurred over the intervening two decades. Recent figures show that 95% of TY participants in the cohort, but only 84% of non-participants, completed their post-primary education by sitting the terminal examinations at the end of Grade 12 (DES, 2016). The marked disparity in rates of early school leaving among the two groups suggests that a greater understanding of the type of students who do or do not take part in TY would be useful to policy-makers.

The patterns of participation identified by Smyth et al. raise the possibility that the outcomes reported to be associated with TY are confounded with selection effects. It could be true that TY leads to genuine increases in certain psychosocial outcomes (such as social self-efficacy), in which case, such benefits may be accruing mainly to more socioeconomically advantaged or younger students. Alternatively, the positive outcomes often reported by students and teachers might be, at least in part, a function of students actively self-selecting into TY and therefore forming a more invested and engaged cohort within the programme (leading to more positive experiences for students and teachers alike). There is some evidence that this may be the case: teachers report that students who are judged to be at risk of early school leaving and students who are described as having behavioural problems or as being disruptive are sometimes informally 'steered away' from enrolling in TY by their teachers (Smyth et al., 2004). However, Smyth et al.'s study lacked direct data on students' socio-emotional characteristics, making it difficult to determine whether students who opted into TY exhibited a different developmental or socioemotional profile than their peers who chose not to participate.

Current study and research questions

This paper further considers the issue of student selection into TY. The aim is to identify student factors that teachers and policy-makers should consider, for three reasons: (a) to identify current issues surrounding student self-selection into the programme, (b) to target the promotion of the year most effectively to students who may be expected to benefit from it, and (c) to target the content of the programme most

Table 2. Constructs associated with Transition Year participation (intended and reported outcomes).

Construct	Theoretical outcomes (intended)[a]	Empirical outcomes (reported)
Student engagement (school belonging, student-teacher relationships, cognitive engagement, attitudes towards learning outcomes).	TY participants should experience 'learning strategies which are active and experiential' and, after completion of TY, 'should be better equipped and more disposed to study than their counterparts who did not have the benefit of this year.'	Stronger and more positive relationships with teachers and classmates; TY participants are more focused and better able for senior classes; students view TY as a valuable part of the educational experience (reported by students & teachers).
Self-determination (teacher support, sense of competence, autonomous motivation).	'A negotiated approach to planning should seek to facilitate active involvement of the pupils' with a view to producing 'autonomous, participative, responsible members of society.'	Students become more independent and focused; enhanced self-regulatory capabilities; students feel teachers treat them with more respect and invite greater discussion (reported by students, teachers, parents).
Psychosocial maturity (personal responsibility, social self-efficacy, subjective age).	'Education for maturity' that should 'foster healthy growth and adjustment, and effective interpersonal communication and relationships' and lead to 'increased social competence.'	Greater functional maturity, enhanced social confidence, and stronger self-perceptions of maturity (reported by students, teachers, parents).
Life satisfaction (global life satisfaction, self satisfaction, school satisfaction).	Student wellbeing as young members of society and preparedness for adult life (Department of Education, 1995).	Social, personal and intellectual enjoyment of TY experiences, both in school and out of school (reported by students).

[a]Illustrative quotations taken from the Transition Year Guidelines (Department of Education, 1993).

effectively for the students who do enroll. Understanding who takes part in TY, and why they do so, is a necessary starting point that provides a foundation from which to evaluate subsequent programme outcomes more rigorously.

In order to examine socio-emotional development in TY, a three-wave longitudinal study was organised, starting at the end of Grade 9 (before students make the choice to take part in TY or to skip it) and following participating students for two subsequent years. As this is the first study to focus on socio-emotional development in TY, the preparatory work included a synthesis of the existing research evidence on TY participation and outcomes. National educational policy documents and guidelines were also reviewed. These sources, describing both the intended outcomes and reported outcomes of TY participation, were then analysed in light of the most relevant theories of psychological development in adolescence – most notably self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, Deci & Ryan, 2000) and stage-environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993) – together with international literature on positive youth development programmes (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a) and gap years (Jones, 2004).

A complete description of this review is beyond the scope of the current paper (see Clerkin, 2016b, 2018, for more detail). Briefly, however, a number of psychosocial constructs were identified as recurring key outcomes in the TY literature. These constructs were, therefore, identified as priority indicators for inclusion in the longitudinal study based on their empirical identification in previous qualitative research on TY and their theoretical correspondence with the goals of the programme (Table 2). They were categorised under four broad headings: (a) student engagement (incorporating *school belonging*, *student-teacher relationships*, *cognitive engagement in lessons*, and *attitudes*

towards learning outcomes (a cognitive evaluation of the value of their educational careers, or whether or not school is perceived to have prepared students for adult life), (b) self-determination (*students' experience of teacher support, perceived competence,* and *autonomous motivation for schoolwork*), (c) psychosocial maturity (*personal responsibility*, *social self-efficacy*, and *subjective age* [perceived age relative to one's peers]), and (d) life satisfaction (*global life satisfaction*, and domain-specific *self satisfaction* and *school satisfaction*). For a more extensive review of the relationships between TY and each of these constructs, readers are directed to Clerkin (2016b, 2018).

This paper draws primarily on data gathered during the first wave of the longitudinal study. It seeks to address gaps in the extant literature, as noted above, by including theoretically- and empirically- relevant psychosocial measures alongside more traditional predictors of programme participation such as sex, age and socioeconomic background. This provides a unique opportunity to compare the characteristics of students who go on to take part in TY and those who do not, at a time when both groups of students are still mixed together in one grade level. As this is the first study to focus on psychosocial differences between TY participants and non-participants, the examination of any pre-existing differences is, of necessity, somewhat more exploratory than the concurrent examination of background characteristics (which can be compared more directly against Smyth et al's findings on the 1994 cohort). This will provide a point of reference for future studies, as well as providing an immediate source of information for policy-makers and educators involved with the programme. There were three main research questions:

- What factors are associated with student self-selection into TY?
- In particular, are there psychosocial differences between participants and non-participants *prior to their entry* into TY?
- Has the increasing availability and uptake of TY since 1994 led to changes in the profile of students who choose to take part in the programme in the intervening decades?

In a broader context, it is important to note that the purpose of the current study is not only to identify predictors of TY participation in their own right but also to document differences between the type of students who take part in TY or do not. As a large-scale national programme for which provision varies between schools, it is not feasible to randomise students into the programme. Therefore, monitoring differences in patterns of participation and student characteristics – especially with regard to the intended outcomes, including students' psychosocial development and engagement at school – becomes especially important so that the reported *outcomes* of TY participation can be interpreted with appropriate caution and nuance.

Method

The analyses reported here are based on the responses of 1085 Grade 9 students who attended 13 schools where TY was provided on an optional basis. (478 Grade 9

students also participated in the broader study in seven schools that provided TY on a compulsory basis. As the issue of selection into TY does not arise in these schools – because all students take part – they are outside the scope of the research question under consideration here.) The selected schools were invited to take part in the study after being sampled randomly from a list of all schools in Ireland providing TY and taking school size, socioeconomic characteristics and gender mix into account so as to provide a nationally-representative sample of students. Enrolment records indicate that, in total, 1312 Grade 9 students were enrolled in the 13 schools. It is not known how many of these students were present in class on the day of the survey (i.e. how many actually had the opportunity to participate), but 1085 students (83% of the total enrollment) returned completed questionnaires, suggesting high-participation rates.

Students' participation in Transition Year (i.e. whether they took part in TY in the following academic year or moved directly to Grade 11) was ascertained in two ways. For most students (76%), it was observed directly one year later during the second wave of the longitudinal study. The remaining 24% of students took part in the first wave only and so longitudinal data are unavailable for them. As the purpose of this study was to identify student characteristics predicting TY participation among a representative sample of Grade 9 students, these students (some of whom may have become early school leavers and therefore unable to take part in Wave 2, while remaining valid members of the original cohort) were retained in the dataset and categorised on the basis of their stated intentions. Their TY participation can be inferred from their stated intentions in Grade 9 as elicited by the question *Do you think you will take part in Transition Year next year?*

These declarations were found to have high predictive validity. For comparison, among the 1004 students who declared a definite intention and were subsequently observed in the second wave, stated intentions in Wave 1 matched the observed (non-)participation status in Wave 2 in 974 cases (97%). It is unknown why the small number of students whose participation choice disagreed with their earlier intentions changed their minds between the time that these questionnaires were administered (in March/April) and the beginning of the next school year (in September). A small number of late changes of mind (for example, due to changing circumstances) would not be unexpected. The high agreement rate between intended participation and actual participation suggests that it is reasonable, nonetheless, to regard students' declared intentions as a useful proxy indicator for their future participation in the absence of other evidence.

In total, of the 1085 Grade 9 students who returned questionnaires from TY-optional schools, 753 students (69%) were categorised as *TY participants*. The remaining 332 students (31%) were categorised as *non-participants*. These proportions are broadly in line with national participation trends (see Table 1; also Clerkin, 2013, 2018).

Measures

An information sheet and consent form were administered to participating students by their teachers. Parental consent forms were also prepared and offered to schools if

they wished to use them; a small number of schools did so, but in most cases, the students in the target grade levels were deemed competent to decide their own (non-)participation in the study. One reason for leaving the decision in students' hands – given that the questionnaire used here did not seek sensitive personal information and did not carry much risk of causing distress – is that requiring active parental consent in school-based research can often lead to low response rates and biased samples that usually under-represent disadvantaged and marginalised groups (Esbensen et al., 1996; Rojas, Sherrit, Harris, & Knight, 2008), which would have been expected to disproportionately affect the validity of the current study. This approach to providing information to students and acquiring consent was approved by the institutional ethics board.

Students who had read the information and provided consent were asked to complete a questionnaire, usually taking about one class period. The questionnaire asked for three main types of information:

Background and home characteristics

Students provided information on their sex; date of birth (from which their age at the time of the survey was calculated); the highest level of educational qualification attained by their parents (a proxy indicator for socioeconomic status); and the primary language spoken at home (English, Irish, or another language).

Educational and vocational attitudes

Students were asked to describe their thoughts about the future using three single-item indicators. These were (a) their intentions after completing secondary school (presented as a choice between taking a year out, looking for full-time employment, continuing to further education, or 'don't know'); (b) whether they knew what type of job they would like after school (presented as a choice between 'yes – I am sure', 'yes – I think so', 'maybe', 'no – I'm not sure' and 'no – I haven't thought about it' and subsequently recoded into yes/maybe/no); and (c) their educational aspirations (identifying the highest educational qualification they would like to attain). Finally, students were asked to describe the amount of time they spent on homework in a typical week (self-generated in hours and minutes) as a proxy indicator for the effort invested in educational activities at home.

Socio-emotional characteristics

The psychological literature was reviewed for validated and published scales that had been developed for use with adolescent participants to measure the specific socio-emotional constructs identified as being of key theoretical and empirical relevance to TY (see Table 2 and Clerkin, 2018). For all scales, missingness rates were low (up to a maximum of 2.4%).

The Research Assessment Package for Schools (RAPS; Institute for Research and Reform in Education, 1998) provided scales assessing cognitive engagement in learning (8 items; sample item: *I pay attention in class*; Cronbach's α in this study = 0.79),

experience of teacher support (4 items; *My teachers are fair with me;* Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$), and autonomous motivation (4 items; *I do my schoolwork because I really want to understand what we are studying*; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.69$). Two items assessing students' sense of competence at school were also administered but (because there were only two items) were not treated as constituting a scale and are not included in the regression analyses described below.

Scales on school belonging (8 items; *I feel included in things*; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$), student-teacher relationships (5 items; *Most of my teachers are interested in my well-being*; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$) and attitudes towards learning outcomes (4 items; *School has taught me things which could be useful in a job*; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72$) were drawn from the student questionnaire used by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

Personal responsibility was measured using the self-reliance and work orientation components of the personal responsibility scale (14 items; *Someone often has to tell me what to do*; reverse-coded; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$) from the Psychosocial Maturity Inventory (Greenberger & Bond, 1984). Social self-efficacy (7 items; *How well can you have a chat with an unfamiliar person?*; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$) was assessed via the 'social' subscale of the Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Children (Muris, 2001). Subjective age was measured using four items drawn from the work of Nancy Galambos et al. (e.g. Galambos, Albrecht & Jansson, 2009; Galambos & Tilton-Weaver, 2000) (4 items; *Compared to most people my age, most of the time I feel [younger/the same/older than my age]*; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.69$).

The Students' Life Satisfaction Scale was used to measure global life satisfaction (7 items; *My life is going well*; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$) (Huebner & Dew, 1996). Finally, the 'self' and 'school' subscales of the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 2001; Huebner & Gilman, 2002) assessed students' self-satisfaction (4 items; *There are lots of things I can do well*; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.69$) and school satisfaction (4 items; *I look forward to going to school*; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$)

Analytic strategy

Following initial descriptive analysis, a series of logistic regression models were constructed in order to identify the characteristics of Grade 9 students that predicted their decision to take part in TY (Grade 10) or to move directly to Grade 11 for the following academic year. MPlus (version 8) was used to perform the analyses. There were too few schools (clusters) to perform a robust multilevel analysis; however, the COMPLEX command was used to take account of the clustered nature of student-level data within schools by correcting standard errors to produce more conservative parameter estimates. Students' TY participation choice was specified as the outcome variable. Continuous variables were standardised before being entered into the models. Categorical variables were dummy-coded before entry. Three models were run, in the following order. The first model (Model A) contained all of the baseline information gathered here (demographic, attitudinal, and socioemotional) that had been identified as relevant in light of previous research and the theoretical goals of the programme. This initial model was followed by a more exploratory approach. Specifically, the

Table 3. Characteristics of Grade 9 students in TY-optional schools, by TY participation choice.

		TY participants	Non-participants
Sex	% – Male	48.5	50.0
	% – Female	51.5	50.0
Age: years	Mean (SD)	15.4 (.39)	**15.6 (.50)**
Homework: hours per week	Mean (SD)	**9.5 (6.61)**	6.7 (6.53)
Educational aspirations	% – Lower secondary	2.0	1.9
	% – Upper secondary	11.9	**25.6**
	% – PLC / apprenticeship	2.3	**6.6**
	% – Short-cycle cert./diploma	14.8	14.2
	% – Degree	**62.8**	44.8
	% – Don't know	6.2	6.9
Mother's education	% – Did not complete primary	0.1	0.6
	% – Primary	2.0	**6.8**
	% – Lower secondary	13.1	**18.4**
	% – Upper secondary	27.9	27.4
	% – Cert./diploma	**18.8**	12.9
	% – Degree/ postgrad	**27.2**	15.8
	% – Don't know	10.7	**18.1**
Father's education	% – Did not complete primary	1.2	2.6
	% – Primary	4.3	**8.6**
	% – Lower secondary	21.3	20.9
	% – Upper secondary	22.2	24.5
	% – Cert/diploma	**15.4**	8.3
	% – Degree/ postgrad	**23.3**	15.2
	% – Don't know	12.3	**19.9**
Language spoken at home	% – English	**96.5**	88.2
	% – Irish	0.5	1.0
	% – Another language	3.0	**10.9**
Intentions after leaving school	% – Take a year out	10.0	**14.4**
	% – Look for a full-time job	4.6	**11.7**
	% – Further training/ education	**75.5**	62.9
	% – Don't know	9.9	11.0
Know what job would like when older	% – Yes, I am sure	21.3	**35.3**
	% – Maybe, I think so	29.5	25.5
	% – Maybe, I have an idea but am not sure	**31.0**	23.3
	% – No, I don't know	14.7	12.3
	% – No, I haven't thought about it	3.5	3.7
From what you've heard, do you think TY is a good experience?	% – Yes, it's good in my school	**93.4**	51.7
	% – Maybe, in some schools but not mine	5.1	**21.8**
	% – No, not a good experience	1.5	**26.5**
Do you think you will take part in TY next year?	% – Yes	**96.2**	6.1
	% – No	1.5	**84.6**
	% – Don't know	2.3	**9.3**

Where significant differences ($p < .05$) exist, the higher value is marked in bold.

second model (Model B) retained only the demographic and attitudinal indicators that were found to be statistically significant predictors in Model A by fixing the parameter values for non-significant variables at zero, while retaining all socio-emotional indicators (which had not been examined in any previous study). The final model (Model C) retained only those indicators that were statistically significant in Model B. This was done in order to identify the most parsimonious set of predictive characteristics that may be of most practical interest to educators and policy-makers who are interested in students' participation choices.

The results of the logistic models are presented in terms of the odds ratio associated with each variable. Odds ratio values greater than 1 indicate an increased

likelihood of subsequently participating in TY, and values lower than 1 indicates a lower likelihood of participation. Each odds ratio is accompanied by a 95% confidence interval that indicates the degree of precision of the estimate.

Results

Tables 3 and 4 present descriptive statistics for all measures. Most Grade 9 students who went on to take part in TY reported the belief that the TY experience in their school would be a positive one (93%), with only 1% reporting negative impressions (Table 3). By contrast, more than a quarter of the students who moved directly to Grade 11 (27%) held explicitly negative expectations of TY as Grade 9 students. However, interestingly, many other students were more ambivalent. Substantial percentages of non-participants endorsed either the belief that TY could be a good experience for students in some schools but not in their own school (22%), or the belief that the programme could be a good experience for other students in their school even though they did not personally intend to participate (52%).

As shown in Table 4, most of the socio-emotional variables were significantly intercorrelated, and significant differences in the mean scores reported by TY participants and non-participants were found (unadjusted for multiple comparisons). However, bivariate analyses such as these can lead to differences between groups appearing greater than they are when all measured variables are considered together. Therefore, a multivariate approach was used next to examine students' characteristics as a whole. Because of the high correlation observed between the RAPS experience of teacher support and PISA student-teacher relations scales ($r = 0.75$) and the similar pattern of correlations that both scales exhibited with the other measures (Table 4), only the RAPS scale was used in the multivariate analysis in order to guard against multicollinearity. (The same set of analyses was repeated using the PISA scale in place of the RAPS scale, with very similar results. Therefore, only the version using the RAPS scale is reported here.)

Table 5 shows the results of the series of multivariate logistic regressions. Model A, incorporating demographic, attitudinal and socio-emotional indicators together, showed that older students were significantly less likely to take part in TY, controlling for other factors. There were two other demographic factors that were significant predictors of TY participation: students whose mothers had not completed secondary education and students from another language background were less likely to go on to take part in TY. Two attitudinal factors – students' level of certainty about their desired future career and their educational aspirations – were significant, with students who expressed uncertainty about their desired career and students who aspired to a third-level degree being more likely to take part in TY. Finally, two socio-emotional characteristics significantly predicted TY participation when all measures were considered together: students who expressed greater cognitive engagement in learning were more likely to take part in TY, while students who expressed a high level of autonomous motivation for schoolwork were less likely to participate.

Non-significant demographic and attitudinal factors were dropped for Model B. However, all socio-emotional indicators were retained in order to gain a clearer

Table 4. Correlation coefficients and mean scores for socio-emotional measures.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Engagement in learning	1											
2. Teacher support	**0.42**	1										
3. Autonomous motivation	**0.56**	**0.29**	1									
4. School belonging	**0.34**	**0.34**	**0.25**	1								
5. Student-teacher relations	**0.42**	**0.75**	**0.32**	**0.34**	1							
6. Social self-efficacy	**0.12**	**0.13**	**0.09**	**0.45**	**0.08**	1						
7. Subjective age	0.02	0.04	0.05	0.06	0.02	**0.21**	1					
8. Personal responsibility	**0.48**	**0.22**	**0.35**	**0.35**	**0.22**	**0.24**	**0.09**	1				
9. Global life satisfaction	**0.31**	**0.36**	**0.22**	**0.53**	**0.35**	**0.29**	0.01	**0.32**	1			
10. Self-satisfaction	**0.31**	**0.25**	**0.26**	**0.55**	**0.26**	**0.43**	**0.13**	**0.35**	**0.58**	1		
11. School satisfaction	**0.55**	**0.49**	**0.48**	**0.46**	**0.51**	**0.19**	<0.01	**0.34**	**0.38**	**0.43**	1	
12. Attitudes towards learning outcomes	**0.39**	**0.42**	**0.26**	**0.41**	**0.46**	**0.19**	−0.05	**0.22**	**0.31**	**0.30**	**0.51**	1
Mean (SE) in Grade 9 for subsequent TY participants	**3.66 (0.65)**	**3.86 (0.79)**	2.73 (0.87)	**3.71 (0.61)**	**3.62 (0.89)**	5.08 (0.92)	4.22 (0.82)	**3.46 (0.61)**	**4.41 (0.90)**	**4.66 (0.82)**	**4.02 (1.02)**	**4.02 (0.75)**
Mean (SE) in Grade 9 for subsequent non-participants	3.37 (0.78)	3.60 (0.97)	2.66 (0.86)	3.49 (0.69)	3.39 (1.05)	5.03 (0.95)	**4.40 (0.97)**	3.33 (0.69)	4.19 (1.04)	4.46 (0.95)	3.60 (1.24)	3.70 (0.92)

Correlations marked in bold are significant at $p < .001$. Where significant differences in mean scores exist ($p < .05$), the higher value is marked in bold.

Table 5. Odds ratios (95% confidence intervals) predicting Transition Year participation from student characteristics in schools where Transition Year is optional.

Variable (comparison)	A		B		C	
Demographic						
Male (Ref: female)	1.23	(0.71, 2.13)	–	–	–	–
Age	**0.67*****	(0.55, 0.82)	**0.66*****	(0.54, 0.81)	**0.65*****	(0.53, 0.80)
Maternal education (Ref: Upper secondary)						
Primary or lower sec.	**0.66***	(0.47, 0.94)	**0.65***	(0.46, 0.92)	**0.62***	(0.42, 0.91)
Third level	1.40	(0.90, 2.18)	1.45	(0.93, 2.25)	1.42	(0.94, 2.15)
Home language (Ref: English/Irish)						
Another language	**0.20***	(0.05, 0.79)	**0.19***	(0.05, 0.74)	**0.20***	(0.06, 0.73)
Attitudinal						
Hours homework per week	1.22	(0.88, 1.68)	–	–	–	–
Plans after school (Ref: Don't know)						
Year out	0.61	(0.28, 1.31)	–	–	–	–
Full-time job	0.48	(0.17, 1.44)	–	–	–	–
Further education	0.78	(0.43, 1.42)	–	–	–	–
Know what job would like (Ref: Yes)						
Maybe	**1.43***	(1.06, 1.95)	**1.50***	(1.09, 2.07)	**1.64****	(1.16, 2.30)
No	1.54	(0.85, 2.79)	1.69	(0.97, 2.94)	**1.75***	(1.09, 3.03)
Educational aspirations (Ref: upper secondary)						
Short-cycle tertiary	1.24	(0.74, 2.07)	1.44	(0.84, 2.45)	1.39	(0.85, 2.28)
Degree	**1.62***	(1.06, 2.47)	**1.93****	(1.20, 3.10)	**1.90****	(1.23, 2.93)
Don't know	1.51	(0.75, 3.04)	1.66	(0.79, 3.46)	1.74	(0.83, 3.62)
Socioemotional						
Engagement in learning	**1.49****	(1.12, 1.97)	**1.55*****	(1.19, 2.02)	**1.71*****	(1.37, 2.14)
Teacher support	1.02	(0.89, 1.18)	1.02	(0.87, 1.21)	–	–
Autonomous motivation	**0.76***	(0.59, 0.99)	**0.76***	(0.60, 0.96)	**0.79***	(0.63, 1.00)
School belonging	1.20	(0.98, 1.48)	1.18	(0.97, 1.43)	–	–
Social self-efficacy	0.84	(0.65, 1.08)	0.84	(0.65, 1.08)	–	–
Subjective age	0.93	(0.82, 1.05)	0.92	(0.80, 1.05)	–	–
Personal responsibility	1.12	(0.95, 1.32)	1.11	(0.94, 1.31)	–	–
Global life satisfaction	0.90	(0.76, 1.06)	0.92	(0.80, 1.06)	–	–
Self-satisfaction	1.16	(0.93, 1.45)	1.16	(0.91, 1.47)	–	–
School satisfaction	0.98	(0.73, 1.31)	1.00	(0.74, 1.36)	–	–
Attitudes to learning outcomes	1.27	(0.97, 1.65)	1.26	(0.98, 1.62)	–	–
Loglikelihood	–409.635		–413.632		–421.521	
−2LL			$p > .05$		$p > .05$	
AIC	873		871		869	
BIC	1000		974		930	
McFadden's pseudo-R^2	0.37		0.37		0.35	

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

picture, for the first time, of the relationship between students' socio-emotional characteristics and TY participation. This did not result in any changes to the predictors identified in the more comprehensive mode (Model A). Finally, Model C was constructed as the final and most parsimonious model of Grade 9 student characteristics that were associated with the choice to participate in TY. One change was noted: students' level of vocational certainty emerged more strongly as a predictor, with TY participation being positively associated with students' explicitly *not knowing* what career they wanted in future (as well as the previous association with their *uncertainty* about vocational intentions).

In general, smaller loglikelihood, AIC, and BIC values are taken as indicating better model fit with nested models such as those presented here (regardless of their absolute value; the change from one model to the next is the variable of interest). The fit statistics indicate that the three models specified here each fit the observed data to a broadly similar degree (Table 5). Specifically, there was a small but non-significant increase in loglikelihood as non-significant parameters were removed from the model (indicating no worsening of fit) while the AIC and BIC decreased from Model A to Model C (potentially indicating a slight improvement in fit). McFadden's pseudo-R^2 (or ρ^2) provides an approximation of the variance explained by these models (analogous to the R^2 statistic for linear regression models). Values ranging from 0.2–0.4 are considered 'highly satisfactory' (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2014, p. 506) and indicate that a high proportion of the observed variance is accounted for by the included predictors. High, and similar, values for McFadden's ρ^2 were found for all three models (0.35–0.37). Overall, Model C was therefore accepted as the most parsimonious version of the model (i.e. predicting TY participation to a similar degree as Models A and B but with a more concise set of variables for educators to consider).

In general, the characteristics that predicted students' choice to take part in TY were found to be stable regardless of whether all relevant variables were included (Model A) or only the most parsimonious set of selected variables (Model C). The final set of characteristics in Grade 9 that significantly predicted students' choice to enroll in TY were students' age, their home background (maternal education and home language), their level of vocational uncertainty, their educational aspirations, autonomous motivation for schoolwork, and cognitive engagement in learning.

Discussion

Transition Year represents a substantial investment, in both financial and human terms, in a relatively unusual youth development programme. However, although TY is nominally available to all students in Ireland, not all students have the opportunity to access the additional year in practice. At the school level, small schools and those with higher proportions of students from socioeconomically-disadvantaged backgrounds are known to be less likely to provide TY, often due to resource constraints or lack of student interest (Clerkin, 2013; Jeffers, 2002; Smyth et al., 2004). This study goes further by identifying, at the student level, some of the differences between students who choose to take part and their peers who choose to skip TY when the programme is available as an option.

A comparison of the characteristics that were common to this sample of students and to Smyth et al.'s (2004) analysis of the 1994 cohort shows some similarities in the profile of TY participants then and now. Being younger than average within the year group, having higher educational aspirations, and having more highly-educated parents were associated with the choice to take part in TY in both studies. Also common to both studies was that students' reported satisfaction with their school was not significantly associated with TY participation when other factors were taken into account. However, one difference, and several additional predictors, emerged in the current study.

A key point of interest is that Grade 9 students who were uncertain what type of job they wanted when they started working were more likely to choose to take part in TY for the following year than their peers who expressed more certainty about their desired career. (A more accurate phrasing, given that a majority of students now take part in TY, might be that students who *did* know what job they wanted by Grade 9 were more likely to opt *out* of the extra year.) The level of certainty students held about their desired career was one of the strongest predictors of TY participation. This marks a change from the 1994 cohort when unclear occupational aspirations were not significantly associated with TY participation (Smyth et al., 2004).

The association between students' vocational certainty and their TY participation choice suggests that one reason why students opt into TY at present may be its function as a 'gap year' within secondary education, during which they are given the time and freedom to explore their options for life after school – and, indeed, are encouraged to do so. This interpretation is supported by reports from students that many TY participants actively use the (comparatively low-stakes) year to find out about their career options and explore their vocational interests more generally (Clerkin, in press; Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004). For example, the practical experience gained on placements in real workplaces can help students to realise that the day-to-day reality of a given job might not correspond to their expectations. Conversely, participants sometimes discover an interest in unexpected fields as a result of their TY activities (Clerkin, 2015). Previous research has described how many lower secondary students express considerable career uncertainty and, in particular, weak knowledge about what the careers they are interested in would entail in practical terms and about the routes that would lead to a desired career path (Atherton, Cymbir, Roberts, Page, & Remedios, 2009). Further, at upper secondary level, career uncertainty has been identified as a significant source of stress for Irish Grade 12 students facing into their terminal examinations (Banks & Smyth, 2015). The results reported here suggest that some students use TY as an opportunity to address these concerns with focused guidance and support from teachers and guidance counsellors.

For the first time, psychosocial characteristics were also examined as potential predictors of TY participation. Two indicators were found to significantly predict students' choice to enroll. Grade 9 students who were more highly cognitively engaged in their learning were more likely to opt into the extra year. Conversely, students who reported greater levels of autonomous motivation towards schoolwork were more likely to skip TY by moving directly to Grade 11 (a more conventional year focusing on a more clearly-defined academic curriculum and preparation for terminal

examinations). The latter finding may reflect the choice of students who skip TY because they prefer to finish school in five years rather than six, and are therefore more explicitly focused on preparing for their final examinations in order to attain a qualification or progress to further education. It also points to the view expressed by some teachers that TY participants who are relatively immature – that is, in need of greater external regulation from teachers or parents – at the start of TY are often considered to be the students who benefit most from having the extra year to become more independent and develop stronger self-regulatory skills through in-school and out-of-school activities (ISSU, 2014; Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004).

Implications for policy and practice

The finding that students' psychosocial characteristics predicted their choice to take part in TY – even after accounting for background factors and vocational uncertainty – raises important questions over the extent to which any benefits arising from TY, which is explicitly framed as a dedicated developmental year, accrue to the wider student body. For example, it seems reasonable that students who are less engaged by their schoolwork might choose not to spend an extra year in school. Indeed, the comparatively unstructured nature of TY can prove difficult to manage even for 'good' students (ISSU, 2014; Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004). Many students describe their concerns over the possibility of losing academic focus during TY before returning to more high-stakes examination-oriented classes in the subsequent years, as well as a fear that the time invested in TY could turn out to be wasted. For similar reasons, students are sometimes informally encouraged away from TY by their teachers or parents if they are thought to be at risk of early school leaving (Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004). These difficulties should not be minimised. However, the findings reported here prompt the conclusion that some students who are opting to skip TY could be interested in certain aspects of the year such as vocational exploration (Clerkin, in press), or would stand to benefit from some of the developmental opportunities (e.g. collaborating with peers on long-term group projects, public speaking, designing a product and running a mini-company as an entrepreneur), but decline them because of prior negative experiences in school, a reluctance to risk further disengagement, or the desire to finish school and get out into the world as quickly as possible.

Few studies have asked students to give their impressions of TY before taking part in, or skipping, the year. It is, therefore, particularly noteworthy that only a minority – about one-quarter – of the students who chose to skip TY in this study said unequivocally that they thought it would not be a good experience. A slight majority – more than half of all non-participants – endorsed TY as being a good experience for students in general (if not, in practice or in their circumstances, for themselves). Perhaps more importantly, about one-fifth of non-participants reported their belief that TY could be a good experience in general, but did not consider the programme provided in *their own school* to be worth taking part in. Such nuanced views point to the existence of potential invisible barriers that could prevent a student from committing to taking part in a full extra developmental year, even if they held an interest in some particular aspects of the programme.

The finding that students whose home language was not English or Irish were less likely to opt into TY, suggesting possible cultural or linguistic barriers, is also worth highlighting in this light. Recent studies have shown that immigrant parents in Ireland tend to express very high academic expectations for their children (McGinnity, Darmody, & Murray, 2015), but also that immigrant-origin children participate less frequently in social, cultural and sporting activities outside school (i.e. outside the formal classroom environment) (Darmody & Smyth, 2017). The latter findings have been linked to lower proficiency in the English language and, to a certain degree, differ by families' economic resources (Darmody & Smyth, 2017). It may also be the case that a greater proportion of students from immigrant backgrounds, or their parents, remain to be convinced of the merits of taking a gap year in the middle of secondary education for personal development and vocational exploration, preferring instead to focus on attaining specific academic qualifications.

Many students from various backgrounds make a similar choice each year; however, scepticism of TY's goals and characteristics may be exacerbated among students from immigrant backgrounds given that the programme has few international equivalents against which to be compared. For these reasons, teachers and policy-makers involved in the promotion of TY to younger students should take care to ensure that those from other-language or immigrant backgrounds are provided the same opportunities to participate as their peers in practice, as well as in principle. Investigating the nature and depth of cultural or practical issues relating to TY participation – or reasons for lower interest in TY among immigrant students – could merit further research.

At the same time, these responses show that work remains to be done in making TY a viable option for all students. Broadening its appeal would require assuaging perennial concerns over losing study habits – albeit in such a way as not to dilute the unique character of the programme as one in which the focus is on broader forms of learning and maturity – while maintaining those aspects that are found to be of most benefit to students. Although this poses a challenge to programme developers, a more positive implication of the results reported here is that the students who are opting into TY appear to be those who feel most in need of dedicated time for vocational exploration and personal development (e.g. considering their future or building self-regulatory skills). In other words, these students could legitimately expect to benefit from their experience in TY if the programme is effective in its aims. Future analyses of the longitudinal data on students' psychosocial development over the three years of the study will provide more evidence in this regard.

In addition to their direct relevance to TY in Ireland, findings such as these could be of interest to policy-makers and practitioners who are involved in similar projects in other jurisdictions (e.g. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Lippman et al., 2015). To take two further examples, the results of this study may be informative to educators in Denmark and South Korea. Grade 10 in Denmark is also intended to function as a developmental year, with some similarities to TY, which is taken by many (but not all) Danish students. However, in contrast to the patterns reported here for Irish students, participants in the Danish Grade 10 tend to be described as 'vulnerable' students with lower academic achievement or students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (L. Tidmand, personal communication, August 2017;

see also Katznelson, 2013). The extent to which these differing student profiles reflect differences (intended or unintended) in the goals or characteristics of TY and the Danish Grade 10 could be used to inform the future development of both programmes. In South Korea, a developmental 'Free Learning Semester' aimed at middle school students has recently been introduced with a view to providing students with greater opportunities for career exploration and extra-curricular experiences (Lee, 2013). Given that this programme is still in the early stages of its development and has been partially based on the Irish experience of TY (Korea Herald, 13th February 2014), an understanding of the characteristics that are associated with the choice to enroll in TY among Irish students, as well as the characteristics that predict non-participation, should also be helpful in promoting the Free Learning Semester constructively to the students who could benefit from it most.

Limitations

Some limitations must be noted. Most significantly, although the schools that took part in this survey were selected so as to provide a nationally-representative sample of students, the relatively small number of schools precludes a multilevel examination of how school-level characteristics relate to TY uptake. Previous research (Clerkin, 2013; Jeffers, 2002; Smyth et al., 2004) shows that smaller schools and those with more socioeconomically-disadvantaged student intakes are less likely to offer TY to their students. Hence, it would have been instructive to investigate these patterns in greater detail alongside the data available here on students' socio-emotional characteristics and their thoughts about their future.

Next, the socio-emotional constructs discussed in this study were chosen for their theoretical relevance to the aims of the TY programme and as quantitative measures for constructs that have been identified in qualitative research on TY outcomes. The particular scales used to operationalise each of the indicators were selected on the basis of their validation and use with similarly-aged students in previous published research, including (but not limited to) the papers referenced above. However, few of these scales had been reported in use with Irish students until now, with the exception of the PISA items (which were developed for an international consortium that includes Ireland) and Muris' social self-efficacy questionnaire (which has been administered to adolescents in Northern Ireland; McKay, Sumnall, Goudie, Field & Cole, 2011). All measures were piloted in a field trial before the main data collection for this survey, but further validation of these international instruments in an Irish context would help to strengthen future applied research. Finally, it would be useful in future to seek teacher ratings of participating students' engagement, for example, in order to add a teacher's perspective to the model alongside the student-reported information shown here. Teachers' views would be particularly valuable in helping to determine the extent to which student self-selection and teachers' encouragement can play competing or complementary roles in a student's eventual choice to participate in TY.

Against these limitations, the study's conclusions are strengthened by the large sample size and high response rates to the survey; the randomly-selected and representative nature of the sample; and the multivariate modelling of demographic,

attitudinal and socio-emotional characteristics related to TY participation together for the first time.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the importance of attending to student characteristics and considering the reasons why students may choose to embrace or decline the opportunities offered through TY (and by extension, other optional developmental programmes). The data reported here confirm the role of TY as a space which many Irish students choose to exploit as a way to develop their interests and to explore possibilities for future study and employment in a low-stakes environment, particularly when they are unsure about their future plans. The increasing number of students choosing to take part in the programme suggests that many adolescents value having access to these opportunities within the guided and supervised setting of mainstream secondary education.

Simultaneously, the nuanced views of TY provided by a majority of those who chose to skip the year raise serious questions over whether they might have preferred to have taken part had the programme in their school been configured differently or had they received greater encouragement to take part. Policy-makers and teachers involved in organising TY within schools should consider whether more could be done to make the programme accessible and worthwhile for future cohorts of less-engaged students, as well as those from socioeconomically-disadvantaged or other-language backgrounds. The consistent reporting of generally (albeit not universally) positive views of the experience of TY by teachers, students and parents (Clerkin, in press; Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004) suggest that these questions are worth pursuing.

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