

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Swindon Young People's Empowerment Programme (SYEP)

"The training of good human beings, purposeful and wise, themselves with a vision of what it is to be human and the kind of society that makes that possible."

(Ofsted document, Promoting Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development)

Aim

SYEP's aim is to train dispirited children to be good human beings and engaged in positive behaviour and learning. Our training gives children an empowering vision of their potential as "a mine rich in gems of inestimable value". The gems are human qualities such as resilience, respect and the desire to make a positive contribution to society. By developing these gems in themselves they can change their outlook on the world. We refer to this approach as "developing a healthy human spirit".

Why it works

The evaluator has stated that this approach "shocks" children into instant change when they get a new picture in their heads about who they are as human beings. Their self worth increases, which impacts on their engagement in learning and positive behaviour – including an increased desire to be of service. In brief, as the evaluator has stated: "It turns their lives around."

How it works: Tranquillity Zone and Discovery Zone

This approach is currently delivered through two experiences called the Tranquillity Zone and the Discovery Zone, which are one-hour sessions run over 10 weeks. While the Tranquillity Zone is a relaxing experience, its aim is to encourage children to reflect on the challenges they face, and analyse what gems or qualities they need to develop in themselves in order to overcome these challenges. The Discovery Zone inspires children to use these gems in everyday situations to enable them to make choices that are beneficial to them and the wider society.

Currently in eight schools

(Drove, Lainesmead, Lawn, Penhill, Churchfields, Greendown, Dorcan Nova Hreod.)

These programmes have been set up in eight local schools, where pairs of facilitators have been trained to facilitate programmes, choosing children at risk. Facilitator training sessions are simple one-day training programmes and feedback from these courses is that staff often feel dispirited and need this intervention just as much as the children they work with.

PLANS FOR 2008 – 2010

Our plans for the next two years are to get these programmes in at least 50% of local schools by training two facilitators in each school. We are already working in eight local schools, so we will work in partnership with

approximately 15 schools each year over a two-year period, and continue to refine our evaluation procedures. We have raised 50% of our funds until April 2010 through The Tudor Trust. We now need the support of the Schools Forum to raise £50,000 to ensure sustainable expansion, so that these programmes reach the neediest children and are ultimately accessible to all children, teachers and parents. We hope that in establishing SYEP in 50% of schools, that Swindon will be in a lead position in 2010 to spearhead this approach around the UK.

Report on the work and effectiveness of the Swindon Young People's Empowerment Programme, 2001-2008

**Dr Stephen Bigger,
University of Worcester
March 2008**

Executive Summary

Schools have a dual role: to develop knowledge through the curriculum; and developing pupils' self understanding so that they can become positive members of the community. The first is measured by tests and examination results; and unfortunately the failure of the second is measured through exclusions. This project has been about turning disaffection into motivation, and thereby strengthen pupils' knowledge by first addressing their self understanding.

Awareness that raw knowledge is not enough has prompted a range of government demands, the most recent being to emphasise social and emotional aspects of learning. The programme on which this paper is based has been demonstrated as effective through four years of external evaluation. Its financial cost to schools is minimal, and its effectiveness rapid. It has turned around vulnerable children and young people, some of whom have now reached university as self understanding led to motivation, which earned them qualifications – all beyond their initial aspirations and expectations.

There is no magic cure for disaffection and negativity. Disaffected pupils find themselves in a vicious cycle in which bad behaviour causes conflict with adults (parents and teachers) whose dealings with them are then characterised by anger and frustration. There is no progress from this stalemate without breaking this cycle. The consequences of not breaking out of it is total life failure, without qualifications and a worthwhile job. Crime may seem the only visible route to take.

Breaking out of this negative spiral is what the project has attempted to achieve. The philosophy is summed up through six principles:

- We all have inner qualities, or 'gems'
- We all have the potential to do good, or to do harm (dual nature)
- Positive speech has power to transform
- We have the potential to transform our lives, whatever our histories
- Positive action brings about change: the community is more united if people work together
- We need, and can be, positive role models.

This report on the work of the Swindon Youth Empowerment Project (SYEP) between 2000 and 2007 explores how personal and social transformations can take place when young people with social, emotional and behaviour

difficulties are encouraged to talk through their life choices using visualisation, symbol and metaphor. They are referred to as 'dispirited' as they lacked motivation and ambition. All were failing academically.

The evaluation took place over three years, 2004-2007 with the external researcher working alongside the project team and interviewing a range of people involved. In doing so the team were trained in evaluation techniques in order to encourage a long

Dr. Stephen Bigger, University of Worcester

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Term culture of evaluation, in schools as well as in the project.

The research demonstrates a clear long-lasting effect on many of the young people involved.

This report discusses a range of factors contributing to this success, primarily relating to trusting and empowering the young people so that they value themselves and their abilities, build positive and caring relationships with others, and work towards creating a better world. It shows that young people can transcend their limited world view, learning to see themselves differently as people with energy, potential, compassion and the ability to affect positive change. In this they can reach out to others and with others, building moral understanding and cascading positive attitudes and energies to those around them.

It has had rapid and lasting results with needy and disengaged children aged nine to thirteen. The processes involved should therefore be taken very seriously by government, schools, and youth services as a powerful intervention that has shown it is able to turn youngsters from actual and potential delinquency to becoming committed to contributing to society as good citizens. The report looks forward to ways of enabling whole classes of children to benefit. It shows how SYEP approaches can become a central strand in citizenship, personal, social and moral education, spiritual education, creative thinking skills, and social and emotional aspects of learning.

Inspired by the teachings of the Bahai Faith, it is non-partisan and works openly and transparently with all faiths and none. It looks forward to expanding its work to other schools.

SOME RESPONSES FROM CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

"I don't just think it's changed my week, it's changed my whole life."

"I used to want to commit suicide. Now I know there are reasons to live."

"You can concentrate more in lessons."

"Coming here has helped me come off report."

"I've not got such a bad attitude towards my parents."

"It helps you leave your troubles behind."

"I can express my inner thoughts. It has helped my whole life."

"I always used to get really angry and got into trouble, but now I'm doing really well."

"My behaviour is a lot better after the Tranquillity Zone. My mum said I'm a different child."

"I have learnt to do my maths well and I've got a good nature. I feel like bursting with happiness. I have made new friends. Deep down every week I have become more peaceful inside."

"My behaviour got better."

"I learnt more about myself."

"Don't let your past results limit your future!"

"I won't get far without co-operation. Doing bad things can ruin the rest of your life."

"I've learnt to use the gems in me. To be helpful. To encourage people. I learnt to be calm. Learnt to be helpful. To look more to the Healthy Human Spirit. I have become nicer and less angry! To rise each time I fall."

"Show people respect and they will respect you."

“Controlling anger, how to calm down, how to relax, don't lie, never give up.”

“I have learnt more about myself and other people too. I feel more calmer that I used to be. I have learnt to control my anger.”

“Before the TZ I was the opposite of calm but as soon as I started the TZ and DZ I have now become calm I learnt how to control anger, never to tell lies and everyone is a mine rich in gems of inestimable value.”

“Since I started TZ I have felt calm, warm and important. Deep down every week I have become more peaceful inside.”

“I feel I know how to respect other people around me. I feel peaceful and calm in the TZ. I have learnt how to control my anger more in the TZ. I learnt to express my feelings. I feel more confident in myself. I have learnt more about myself and others in the DZ.”

“Found new ways to show I care. Found out different ways to show respect.”

**Statement from Roderick Bluh,
Leader of Swindon Borough Council**

March 2007

Councillor Roderick Bluh, Leader of Swindon Borough Council, said:

“We cannot ignore the human spirit in dealing with the challenges and problems faced in our communities today.”

“No-one is taking care of this side of life and what is happening in the Tranquillity Zones and Discovery Zones needs to happen in the rest of society. It’s important that here in Swindon we have a programme for developing the human spirit, that isn’t connected to any religious rituals or traditions, and is already benefiting hundreds of young people. I hope that this will become more widely available for all the children and young people in our schools.”

**Statement from Tom Wilkes
Community Deputy Head Teacher
Hreod Parkway School, Swindon**

11th February, 2005

Hreod Parkway School has worked with the Swindon Youth Empowerment Project for nearly two years now. After the initial contact we were convinced of the potential benefit of their work to our pupils.

To this end we were delighted, 14 months ago, to release a teaching space on our northern campus and allow the creation of a satellite ‘Tranquillity Room’.

The work of the Swindon Youth Empowerment Project through the Tranquillity and Discovery Zones has made a tremendous difference to the lives of approximately 15% of the pupils at the school.

Hreod Parkway has many pupils who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or ‘at risk’ in different ways. The Tranquillity and Discovery Zones have provided an important additional dimension to our support for such pupils. Through our enrichment programme, during tutorial time or as part of a wider literacy or emotional intelligence programme during the holidays, the Tranquillity room has proved to be an important, if not essential, service for many of our young people.

More recently, pilot work has begun to show potential benefits for parents with the first joint parent and pupil sessions in the Tranquillity room proved to be a fascinating experience.

We look forward to a third fruitful year of working with the Swindon Youth Empowerment Project and we are already making plans to develop such activities on our new school campus from 2006.

**Statement from Dr Ben Schmidt
Chair of Governors, Penhill Primary School, Swindon**

February 2007

Over the last few years the SYEP team has developed a truly innovative and marvellous programme to help young people overcome low self-esteem by raising their aspirations and giving them a lasting sense of self-worth and empowerment.

At the heart of the programme are the so-called Tranquility and Discovery Zones, which have one great lesson to teach: that moral choices and inner happiness go hand in hand. Children are given a glimpse – and, what is more: an actual experience - of this fundamental truth: that doing the right thing will over time give one a lasting feeling of goodness, and that, conversely, feeling good inside one will be more likely to do the right thing.

A growing number of schools and youth groups in Swindon and elsewhere are working with the SYEP because they find that low self-esteem is a root cause for many other negativities that can manifest in life at school, such as low aspirations, low achievement, truancy, bullying, aggressive behaviour, or disengagement. What it comes down to is this: that it is very difficult to learn well and behave well when you are feeling down and out.

The enthusiastic, passionate belief in the power of goodness in each and every child that permeates every aspect of the SYEP is contagious: it convinces children (and staff) that they are truly 'mines rich in gems of inestimable value' – and that everyone else is, too. I find it hard to see how anything but good could come from that.

**Words of support from Bridget Long
Deputy Head Teacher, Lainesmead Primary School in
Swindon.**

January 2007

As deputy Head Teacher of a large primary school in Swindon, I have really realised the benefits of the TZ experience for children. The tranquillity zone creates a place to feel safe and calm. The children appear to transform as they enter it, both in mind and through their body language.

The tranquillity zone gives children an opportunity to relax and listen as well as to visualise. The stories told are open to their own interpretation and the children can relate them to their own way. They are positive, powerful and uplifting.

The programme allows the children to develop more self confidence in a caring and nurturing environment. The discussions help to develop their ability to overcome challenges and to realise that we have choices in life. Through interesting and exciting scenarios, the children become aware of how their choices affect themselves and others.

Some year 5 children who were involved in the programme last summer, have gone on to create a calm corner in their own class. The structure of this is very similar to that of the tranquillity zone. The decision to do this was brought up in class council and it shows how the children are using their positive experiences and are keen to share such a positive environment with other members of their class.

I believe that the tranquillity and discovery zone has had a positive impact on children's behaviour and attitudes at my school. It is an experience that they will remember for the rest of their lives. They really are made to feel that there are gems within them.

I believe that the Tranquillity and Discovery Zone is very powerful and can make a difference to children's lives. It would be my aim for the Tranquillity Zone and Discovery Zone experience to be available to all children.

Best Wishes

Bridget

January 2007

**Statement from Helen Smith, Student Adviser,
St Joseph's Catholic Comprehensive School, Swindon
2005**

I am writing to express my thanks for the tremendous effort you and the team put into the latest group from St Joseph's School. Although some of the students left the programme at various stages, I am certain that they all benefited in some way, no matter how small.

Young people transform like a chrysalis, so that not only were they confident enough to speak in front of their peers but also in front of adult strangers. This shows an amazing amount of progress for three of the students in particular, for whom English is their second language.

For another girl, whose literacy skills are poor, it was great to hear her read a poem, clearly and using words she had never seen before. She became a part of a team where she has often been an outsider.

Two boys have had problems with their social skills but I have seen them become more considerate group members, able to participate in activities with people they may not have otherwise worked with. They were easily able to take on the role of 'hosts' for our final presentation.

Another teenager has blossomed and although she has always appeared to be the more confident one of the group, she has had her own self-esteem issues. The programme has given her inspiration to believe in herself and to write songs and poems about her experiences.

Once again, on behalf of the school, many thanks and I look forward to working with you all again in the future.