

Hope for Children at Risk

Children who are victims of social and environmental deprivation often turn in the vicious circle to truancy, vandalism and crime. The special educational needs of children at risk were recognised in the 1970s by the establishment of the Youth Encounter Projects. St. Paul's Youth Encounter Project in Finglas is ten years old this year.

TONY GORMAN is principal of St. Paul's Youth Encounter Project Finglas, Dublin.

In the early to mid 1970s crime had hit epidemic proportions on the streets of major Irish cities. Car-stealing, mugging and handbag snatching were the first evidence of drug related crime in our society. Major political pressure resulted in the opening of Loughan House - a detention centre for young offenders.

The Department of education consulted with the Catholic Youth Council in Dublin, Ógra Corcháil in Cork and the Limerick Youth Service to initiate a special programme for children at risk. These consultations resulted in the formation of the Youth Encounter Projects. For the first time in the history of the state, youth organisations were asked to be patrons of special schools. Four schools opened between 1977 and 1979: two in Dublin (Finglas and Sean McDermott Street), one in Cork and one in Limerick. The broad brief was to move into the local community, identify the children at risk and to set up a programme to cater for their needs.

St. Paul's in Finglas opened in October 1978 with the first six pupils referred by the school attendance officer. Some of these 13 year olds had not been to any school for two years and one hadn't been to school since he was six!

The challenges presented by these young people were many and varied. The staff had already decided on the structure of the school day believing that flexibility and discipline can only operate within a structured environment and in the full knowledge that this was not going to be "a drop-in centre."

We had looked at the reasons for a child getting into trouble in school: coming in late, very often hungry and lack of sleep. The reasons for such behavior, we found out later, ranged from the house being surrounded by the police at dawn searching for a brother or a parent, to alcoholism causing mayhem and fighting all night long. Taking all these things into consideration, our strategy was as follows:

We opened every morning at 9 a.m. and the pupils could come in anytime between 9 and 10 o'clock. During this period they could have their breakfast and have a game of pool. Classes began at 10 a.m. The pupils, twenty four of them at this stage, were divided into three groups. It was explained to them that they could earn merit in three areas - behaviour, attendance and work. This merit then entitled them to a weekly trip, a monthly treat such as the cinema, ice-skating or horseriding and at the end of each term their teacher would take them away for a short break in the country. It was an important part of this discipline that anyone who didn't earn their merit didn't go on these trips. It would have been disastrous

for us to say "but that poor kid never gets anything, lets take him anyway." When that "poor kid" heard about what he had missed he made sure to be in on it the next time round.

In 1980 the Van Leer Foundation was asked to evaluate the four Projects. As part of this evaluation the Van Leer Foundation would pay one full-time salary to each Project, that salary being towards a non-teaching position. The result of this was that a full-time community worker was employed by each Project. This person's job was to take over when the school day finished. We had identified the need for this position at an early stage. Our children were barred from local clubs, local shops, and most other local activities. They would now have their own club where they and their friends could spend two evenings a week enjoying the activities and competitions which had been denied them. A play school group was also set up for the younger brothers and sisters of our children who were usually just as much at risk as those attending our school.

The Department of Justice seconded a full-time Probation and Welfare Officer to the staffs of the Projects. This person on each staff was responsible for home/school liaison, court appearances, family counselling, family budgets, mediating on rent arrears and evictions and being a support to the family in the trauma associated with these. With the appointment of a Bean an Tí to cook dinners each day and be responsible for the general well-being of our children, we now had a team of people whose collective expertise gave the best possible service to the children and their families in our care. This is definitely an answer to treating troublesome children in their own community and giving them a last chance to improve themselves before, sadly, they are taken and locked away.

The Van Leer three year period of evaluation ended and a substantial document was produced. It was very positive about the work being done in the Youth Encounter Projects. In Finglas we introduced the Group Cert exam for those capable of doing it. Cookery, Art, English and Maths were the subjects taken and with great results. The Department of Education inspectors at the time argued with us about the length of time a child should stay in our school. They wanted the child referred, "washed clean" and sent back to their normal school in six months! Justice Declan Costello visited St. Paul's while compiling his Report. He stated quite clearly to the inspectors that it was not possible to repair twelve or thirteen years of damage to a child in a short period of time. On average, a child stays with us for four years.

Our aim is that our children will become productive members of their community and responsible members of society. To this end we have had our successes and our failures. Sixteen of our past pupils are in full-time employment for four years or more. Three are serving prison sentences of four years or more. One is attempting his Inter Cert this year. The cost to the state to lock a child away, without treatment, in say, St. Patrick's Institution, is about £30,000 per year.

The evaluation document stated that the cost of having a child attend a Youth Encounter Project was £3,000 per annum. We didn't escape the cut-backs. Our Community Worker and Welfare Officer are both gone. We continue to work however, in the belief that every child has a right to education and that it is only through education that they will eventually break out of their poverty trap.



Two of the students from St. Paul's Youth Encounter Project on a canoeing course.