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UCC
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Grease, Petrol, Biscuits and Bikes

A Report on the

Springboard Youth Motorcycle Project:

Profile, Evaluation, and Future Development

Pat Leahy

School of Applied Social Studies

University College Cork

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Foreword

This research study evidences the benefits that the adaptation of a non-formal methodology (geared towards keeping particular students in school) has had in the educational biographies of the young people concerned.

The study illustrates how the role of working with young people who are in danger of withdrawing from school and other forms of training and education within contemporary society can be transformed to effectively respond to the needs of a disaffected section of the youth population.

The philosophy and everyday operation of the micro-project investigated demonstrates the positive impact that a small group of people with a creative, reflexive and committed mind-set can achieve.

Alongside charting the front line work with disengaged young people we (practitioners and academics) are also challenged to contribute to the reconstitution of marginalised young people's lived experience of the modern world into an inclusive space, and need to persuade policy maker, legislators and practitioners to reconstitute aspects of the formal education system to the informal, to champion work with the hands as the natural equal of work with the head, and to commit the resources necessary to bring these young people in from the borderlands of inclusion/exclusion to become real citizens of postmodern society.

Work such as that reviewed in this research project is one bridge to social inclusion for young people who are in danger of leaving school early that is very real and very tangible and serves as a model for others in this field.

Professor Fred W. Powell,
Dean of Social Sciences (2008 – 2014), University College Cork

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It's really quite simple; the kids come in, they work on the bikes, enjoy themselves and then they go away…

Actually, it's a bit more complicated than that. Carl von Clausewitz [1] once remarked that "*everything in war is very simple. But the simplest thing is difficult"*. The same dictum often applies to working with disengaged young people in marginalised communities, therefore the capacity to do the simple thing well can camouflage the high levels of skill and knowledge (both technical and experiential) that competent social, youth and community workers require to engage and work with such young people.

Motorcycle renovation as a means to retaining at risk of leaving young males in education? 'The Real Mechanics' is the name of the motorcycle renovation project located in Terence MacSwiney Community College (the young people picked the name) in Knocknaheeny, Cork city. It is operated as a joint venture between the school and the local 'Springboard' project with the aim of retaining certain young people in the educational system.

This research study is concerned with recording, analysing and evaluating this project in order to identify good practice in this area, further our understanding of how this approach operates, extract lessons for practice from the project, and offer recommendations to the participants concerned on how to proceed from here.

[1] The noted Prussian military theorist; his work is often used today in business studies.

Introduction

The School of Applied Social Studies was approached by the Knocknaheeny and Farranree Springboard Project in December 2015 to sound out the possibility of an evaluative research study into one particular aspect of the project's work with marginalised young people; the motorcycle project.

One of the academic staff who has a background in Youth Work and a keen personal interest in motorcycles agreed to conduct the study on a pro bono basis. This research study is qualitative and is concerned with extracting meaning and knowledge from this unique group.

The fieldwork took place over the course of spring 2016 and involved an 'immersion' research approach whereby the researcher participated in the motorcycle group's sessions, helping the project staff in teaching the young people basic (and highly transferable) mechanical and workshop skills.

The fieldwork also involved interviews with one of the young people, with the three key staff personnel in the motorcycle group (two springboard workers and the mechanic/tutor) and with the core school staff involved in the project. The researcher is a qualified professional (JNC) youth worker and has considerable experience of direct work with disengaged and marginalised young people; he was therefore capable of 'slotting in' to the motorcycle group in an unobtrusive manner. The researcher's own cultural background (working class origins and from the Northside of Cork city), and has extended family members attending the school), familiarity with motorcycles and professional

location (involved in youth work for over 25 years). This permitted him to function as an "insider researcher" (Costley, C., Geoffrey, C.E., Gibbs, P., 2010) to a certain degree across three domains; youth work, motorcycles and 'local culture'. Costley (2010) notes that in social research

> *The role of an insider is better because interviewees assume that the researcher is sympathetic and understands their language, concepts and experiences. Being an insider can make you seem less threatening, in part because you know the rules and as bound by them as the interviewees are. (p.9)*

This methodological approach was constructed upon the well-documented reticence of vulnerable groups in general and disengaged young people in particular (Smith, 2008) to divulge their thoughts and opinions to people whom they don't know; the timeframe for trust building did not exist. On the other hand, the immersion technique allowed for some level of a relationship to develop and crucially, for the researcher to participate and observe the group in its natural environment. Immersion allows us to observe and chart the everyday and ordinary dynamics and activities of a group and from this uncover the extra-ordinary and unusual; to find "t*he remarkable in the mundane*" (Silverman, 2007, p.16).

All of the young people were made aware of the researcher's role and all were aware that they did not have to engage with or cooperate with the research project.

Profiles

The Area

Built in the early 1970's, Knocknaheeny is a predominantly local authority housing estate on the Northside of Cork city that is "*consistently shown as one of the most deprived electoral divisions*" (Regeneration, 2016) in Ireland. Knocknaheeny is also a 'RAPID' area.[2]

The area is characterised by high levels of welfare dependency, a high proportion of lone parent families (56.3%, overwhelmingly female lone parents), a high proportion of Travellers and low levels of educational achievement; only 4.7% of the population have a third level degree. The area also "*has the highest percentage of young people aged 0-14 in Cork City"* and the highest (23%) unemployment rate (Cork City Council, 2015).

Knocknaheeny also has a reputation for anti-social and criminal behaviour; although both the state and Cork city council have invested major resources in regenerating the area and the existence of a vibrant selection of community development initiatives it retains a rundown appearance (partially due to the

[2] "*The RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development) Programme is a Government initiative, which targets 51 of the most disadvantaged areas in the country. The Programme aims to ensure that priority attention is given to the 51 designated areas by focusing available resources. The Programme also requires Government Departments and State Agencies to bring about better co-ordination and closer integration in the delivery of services*" (http://www.environ.ie/community/community-and-voluntary-supports/rapid/rapid).

extensive construction work being undertaken at present) and a lingering bad reputation as a troubled neighbourhood.

Nevertheless, these "*communities also have a rich history in culture, art, sport, writing, and folklore*" (Philips, in O' Doherty, 2012). The very real problems that exist should not detract us from acknowledging the many strengths and positive factors that also impact in these areas and from utilising these strengths in a pro-active manner to address the problematic issues that affect the population.

The School

Opened in 1980 and operated by the Cork Education and Training Board (ETB) the Terence MacSwiney Community College is the locality's sole second level school. It is also a DEIS school. [3]

Given the marginalised and deprived circumstances of the community in which it is located the school is faced with many challenges that would be unfamiliar to the majority of Irish second level education providers. Although the majority of the students represent the more or less typical Irish teenager, many suffer from material deprivations and live in families that feature inadequate parenting.

[3] DEIS is an Irish government programme that directs additional supports to schools in disadvantaged areas; its core aim is "*to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities are prioritised and effectively addressed*" (Dept. of Education and Science, 2005, p.9).

This results in an educational environment that regularly has to cope with the multiplicity of issues that surround poverty such as students coming to school hungry. All too frequently the school staff have had to work with children who have been devastated by peer and family suicide and to teach youngsters who live in home environments that feature substance misuse, violence and criminal behaviour (O'Flynn, 28/4/2016).

The lack of positive male role models is cited as a key deficit in the lives of many of the more disengaged male students; "*they see women doing all the decision and work*" (O'Flynn, 28/4/2016).

Faced with a very different educational setting than the typical Irish second level school and operating from the premises that high achievement in the formal curriculum is not the overall priority Terence MacSwiney Community College has over the years instigated various small scale programs to meet the educational and pastoral needs of the selected students who require additional supports. The motorcycle project is one example of this strategy.

It is an undisputed fact that for the vast majority of the population the longer a person stays in education the better the outcomes for that person, their family, their community and society as a whole; therefore, any and all measures that help retain students are a valid and vital part of the school's work.

The Young People

All of the young people involved in the bike project are male, and all of them are considered to be at high risk of early school leaving, with the attendant (and often lifelong) problems of unemployment or precarious employment that is the usual consequence of leaving school early. Typically, this 'employment status zero[4]' label cascades into welfare dependence, early and lone parenting, involvement with the criminal justice system and so forth.

During the fieldwork were six young people observed participating in the project; two in the older group (aged 16 – 18), and four in the younger group (14-15).

The young people's families have a strong history of intergenerational unemployment and welfare dependency and poor educational achievement. The Knocknaheeny and Farranree Springboard project has worked with the wider family systems of a majority of the young people in the motorcycle group over the years, and some of the families (due to the multiple issues that they struggle with) have been involved with a wide range of social and state actors (TUSLA, City Council, An Garda Síochána and so forth).

Early school leaving and the subsequent 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET) status is not uncommon in the Knocknaheeny area and

[4] 'Status Zero' refers to the not in employment (status 1), education (status 2) or training (status 3), categorisations for young people used in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. This led to the somewhat infamous term 'NEET'; not in employment, education or training. See Howard Williamson, 1997.

amongst the families of the young people in the motorcycle group. Early school leaving is usually the precursor to lifelong poverty:

> *There is a real risk of long-term socio-economic disadvantage for an early school leaver. For many, leaving school early will lead to narrower employment opportunities and an increased likelihood of poverty and unemployment. (Lally, 2012)*

Burgess and Leahy (2003) found that early school leaving in Ireland tends to be the end result of a cumulative process of disadvantage and marginalisation (see also HEA National Access Plan 2015). It is a specific and highly significant life event that thereafter severely limits the person's life opportunities across the course of their employment biography. Early school leaving is the result of disadvantage, the principal obstacle to social mobility, and a key phenomenon in the inter-generational trapping of particular groups in poverty as the children of early school leavers are the ones who also tend to leave early and perpetrate the problem.

An undisputable fact is that the overwhelming majority of Irish early school leavers (exiting prior to obtainment of the Leaving Certificate) become NEETS with the attendant consequences. Alongside the cost to the individual concerned society has both financial and social outlay; the NEET cost in Ireland was reckoned to be 2.77% of Irish GDP in 2011 (Eurofound, 2014), just over 17,500 per person per year. The hidden potentials, abilities and undiscovered talents of these young people is wasted. Measures which retain young people

in school are therefore not just an altruistic effort to do good but a hard-nosed financial attempt to reduce expenses.

Measures to assist these young people are also time critical; the hope is that they will continue in education and training. The statistical reality is that many of them will exit education and enter the labour market as unskilled manual labourers/operatives and/or settle for a life on welfare payments (Central Statistics Office, 2017). In the 'Celtic Tiger' era the unqualified young man was able to secure a job on building sites; in post-crash Ireland this avenue of employment no longer exists and any significant time period spent unemployed increases the likelihood of long term (indeed virtually permanent) unemployment, and "*Any delay in the normal age of inclusion into the labour market is considered to increase the risk of unemployment"* (Henning, Hespanha, Machado and van Berkel, in van Berkel and Moller, 2002, p.112).

Coles (1995) locates four key dimensions of difference that impact upon youth transition from school to work; social class, gender, locality and ethnicity. Additional dimensions include sexual orientation, abilities and disabilities and family circumstances. These areas can be usefully described as 'impact fields' as they impact upon young people's trajectory through youth and in many cases predetermine where a young person will end up in later years; employed, unemployed, in university and so forth (Bradford, 2012, p.46). The life circumstances of the motorcycle group members strongly indicate that their transitional trajectories were directed towards disengagement from school and ultimately NEET status prior to involvement with the group.

Although the young people's employment and life chances are heavily dependent on the wider economic climate in that a return to a boom time would most likely see many of them gain employment they will still be at the bottom of the jobs queue in a society that has virtually de-industrialised. Furlong and Cartmel (2007) show that less-well off and less qualified young people suffer disproportionally in labour market and if they can access employment it is precarious; unless these young people can gain certification they will remain in the lower reaches of the social hierarchy.

The Irish and indeed western education systems and economies in general are currently influenced heavily by notions of knowledge economies and virtual (computer derived) world. The motorcycle group is (arguably) open to the critique that it is fifty years too late as future employment will be shaped by digitalisation and consist of sitting in front of computer screens. But this is not the full story, Crawford (2009) makes a strong (and spirited) argument against the devaluing of manual work;

> *While manufacturing jobs have certainly left our shores to a disturbing degree, the manual trades have not. If you need a deck built, or your car fixed, the Chinese are of no help. Because they are in China. And in fact there are chronic labour shortages in both construction and auto repair. Yet the trades and manufacturing have long been lumped together in the mind of the pundit class as "blue collar," and their requiem is intoned. More recently, this consensus has begun to show signs of cracking; in 2006 the Wall Street Journal wondered*

whether "skilled [manual] labour is becoming one of the few sure paths to a good living." [5]

The motorcycle group offers these young people the opportunity to acquire these 'blue collar' skills and the pleasure of working with their hands and brain in an enjoyable setting.

The Knocknaheeny and Farranree Springboard Project

At national level 'Springboard' is a Health Service Executive (HSE) operated programme that places family support projects in specific communities that are deemed to suffer disproportionate levels of disadvantage and marginalisation.[6]

In meeting the multiplicity of needs in disadvantaged areas Springboard has a broad remit that allows individual projects the scope to run their service(s) in a manner that best caters for local conditions; the praxis of a project in Dublin might vary dramatically from one in Galway or Cork. Although pressures are evident in Irish social services to move towards a 'one size fits all' model (Garda Youth Diversion Projects are an example of this phenomena. See Swarik, 2015; Colman 2016), to date the required flexibility for effective and reflexive practice in communities is still evident in this specific project.

[5] Matthew Crawford began his working life as an electrician's mate, moved into academia and is a senior fellow at the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. Moreover, he runs his own motorcycle repair shop and fabricates parts for custom motorcycles in Richmond, Virginia.

[6] For a more detailed explanation of Family Support Work please see Philips, G., in O'Doherty (2012).

The programme employed is rooted in community orientated social work praxis. Social work has a (sometimes bewildering) array of different approaches located in different traditions and theoretical models. The Knocknaheeny and Farranree Springboard Project is grounded in an interdisciplinary community development model that draws on ideas and practices from a range of ideas including social justice orientated social work, community development perspectives and community based youth work models. The S project's director, Ger Phillips states explicitly that due to the project's community development orientation;

> *People are not blamed for being poor, or for being single parents or because they are recipients of social welfare. Rather structural and political factors are taken into consideration when considering the reasons for poverty, and how poverty, dependency and isolation are maintained.* (cited in O'Doherty, 2012)

The location of the 'problem(s)' in wider structural issues (such as poverty and inequality) rejects any neo-liberal 'blame the victim' explanation. It also discards charity focused pitying as a response to these problems. Instead practice is infused with a genuine empathy for the local population and a pragmatic methodology is employed to work in partnership with the areas inhabitants in addressing (in so far as it is possible to) these issues.

The project is located in two adjoining neighbourhoods, Knocknaheeny and Farranree and has the following brief;

> *The Springboard Mission is to promote child health and development through a comprehensive Family and Community initiative in the Farranree and Knocknaheeny areas. Springboard also aims to develop safe and healthy communities through supporting parents and children, collaborative planning, community action, policy advocacy, and interagency cooperation.* (Knocknaheeny and Farranree Springboard Project, Undated)

One particular strategy employed by Springboard is to use select 'micro-projects' to engage with, stabilise and assist identified groups in the local population.[7] Such micro-projects are tailored in as far as it is practical to the specific needs and desires of the identified population. These micro-projects represent a co-designed creative and reflexive approach to social work that due to their small scale can respond in a flexible manner and grow organically.[8] This micro-project approach dovetails perfectly with the school's small program approach for the young people deemed most at risk of leaving school early.

The motorcycle renovation project is one such micro-project and represents a very successful multi-disciplinary approach that has developed in an organic and reflexive manner to assist the young people in question whilst fulfilling the

[7] For example, there is a horse project for Autistic children and a garden project (Philips, 2012).

[8] 'Co-designed' social approaches feature inputs from all actors involved in the relevant phenomena; as such they differ radically from traditionalist 'expert' approaches in addressing social issues; see Kilcullen, 2013.

mission of Springboard at national level, where amongst other goals, the national aims include;

- Working in partnership with other agencies, key groups and individuals in the community, and
- Targeting the most disadvantaged and vulnerable families in the areas (Department of Health and Children, 2001)

  The motorcycle group is a solid example of this work in practice; it provides an invaluable service to the young people concerned and represents a partnership of services and key individuals.

This approach is validated internationally, for example, at European level, Hawley, Hall and Weber argue that in relation to measures that increase the employability of young people;

> *successful policy measures specify their target group and find innovative ways to reach them, for example by establishing a good reputation or creating a positive 'brand' for the measure or working with relevant community groups for hard-to-reach groups.* (2012)

The Motorcycle Group

The idea of the group originated from a discussion in 2012 between teachers and the Springboard workers regarding the situation of a small number of young people who were deemed to be at high risk of leaving school.

A recurrent problem and worry for the school and springboard was the failure of (some) of the male pupils to achieve the junior certificate. The then vice-principal (now principal) Phil O'Flynn had strong links with the Springboard workers and a high level of contact with eight of these young people, all of whom were "*going to be expelled or leave*" (April 28, 2016). The school places a high value on having a positive relationship with all of its students, and particularly with those who face challenging circumstances, and believed it necessary to offer these young people additional and specific measures to assist them.

Alongside the school leaving issue all of these young people were faced with challenging life situations and/or deprivation, poverty and marginalisation. The consensus was that unless specific supports were put in place these young people would exit school without even the basic level of Junior Certificate. To desist from the technical language for a bit, in some instances these kids had horrible lives and things were only getting worse. Within their own community they were identified and labelled as trouble.

The idea of a car maintenance group was floated (a very successful car project was operated by the probation services in Cork city for a few years); this was ultimately deemed a non-runner, however, the then principal of Terence MacSwiney Community College (Willie McAuliffe) suggested a local motorcycle mechanic/tutor Noel Quinn as an option.

The idea of a mechanically orientated group was decided upon and the financial/resourcing matters were resolved between Springboard and the

school. Prior to start up the Mallow Car Project was visited to pick up ideas and tips. There was some initial reluctance from some of the school staff to the idea, principally centred on the notion that the motorcycle group would reward 'bad' behaviour and that it would take up space. Apart from this the school staff have supported the project enthusiastically, particularly the caretaker (within who's broad domain, the school boiler-room, the group is sited).

The original aim for the motorcycle group was simple and clear-cut; retain the young people to Junior Certificate level. As the group developed the aim shifted and became a bit more ambitious; to retain them until Leaving Certificate level. Retaining this young people to this level represents a significant challenge to the school and the motorcycle group; these young people's life circumstances and transitional trajectories are pushing them towards an early exit, and getting them to the junior certificate is a sizable achievement in itself. These young people do not (in the main) find school a rewarding or positive experience. However, raising the motorcycle group's core aim to achieve leaving certificate level is a very positive success indicator. This illustrates a growth of confidence in the staff's belief in the group's capacity to motivate and retain the young people on the grounds of the results achieved to date.

Of the eight young people identified earlier one opted for the local Youthreach Centre and seven started in the motorcycle group (in 2012), the project was successful in its explicit aim in that they all completed the Junior Certificate.

Alongside this explicit purpose membership of the motorcycle group is a positive and enjoyable experience for the young people with ad affirmative

aspect, as the current principal (Phil O'Flynn) put it; *"I have a positive topic for conversation with them, I can praise them"* (28 April 2016).

Usually, the interaction between these students and the staff is of a far more negative and corrective nature; they frequently engage in misbehaviours of one sort or another, leading to their receiving negative attention (which is arguably preferable to receiving no attention at all, Harris, 2008).

Subsequently, two of these young people have sat the Leaving Certificate and the families of all the participants attended the school for the presentation of motorcycle course completion certificates.

The current aim is to have all of the participants achieve the Leaving Certificate.

It is instructive at this point to garner a brief flavour of some of the young people's biographies.

- One participant is from Slovakia, his two brothers are still there, he had no friends in Ireland and his mother can't speak English.[9]
- Another came close to leaving school twice; he spent his whole life in care with the expectation that his mother would let him move in with her; this did not happen. Phil managed to talk him around to staying, however he

[9] We should never underestimate the importance of meaningful peer friendships for teenagers; to be without friends as a young person is a very lonely, frustrating and depressing experience. Amongst other functions, these friendships are *"an important framework for developing and confirming identities"* (Robb, in Kehily, 2007, p. 332).

stated definitively that he would have left school had it not been for the motorcycle project (he sat the Leaving Certificate this year, 2016).

- Another participant's father committed suicide.

A key feature of the group is that *it is a group.* Pinker (1997) notes that "*children socialise each other*" and in exploring youth work with distressed young people Harris (2011) argues that membership of a productive social group confers innumerable benefits to the individuals involved. Harris opines that for a (youth) group to succeed it has to be secure yet challenging: allow independence but also offer help:

> *Young people need challenge, fun and excitement, physical and intellectual. They also need a sense of limits and boundaries, and to feel that there are trustworthy adults around who they can turn to for help if needed.* (p.20)

Groups allow us to achieve beyond what is possible for the individual, helping them to:

- *Tackle more complex problems than they could on their own.*
- *Delegate roles and responsibilities.*
- *Share diverse perspectives.*
- *Pool knowledge and skills.*
- *Hold one another (and be held) accountable.*
- *Receive social support and encouragement to take risks.*
- *Develop new approaches to resolving differences.*
- *Establish a shared identity with other group members.*
- *Find effective peers to emulate.*

- *Develop their own voice and perspectives in relation to peers.*
(Carnegie Mellon University, 2016).

The motorcycle group has all of these attributes and is succeeding in assisting the young people involved.

Additionally, 'work', for the vast majority of people means working in a group, usually (although post-modern labour practices have eaten into this arrangement) in small primary groups that engender camaraderie and a shared value base. As long ago as the 1927 Thrasher found that in dealing with delinquent youth individual work produced little result; it was only when the group norms were changed that the individuals involved modified their own behaviours (Thrasher, 1927/2000). This phenomenon is social learning, and "*in the social learning system, new patterns of behaviour can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behaviour of others*" (Bandura, 1971).

The experience of being in a 'new' yet enjoyable group social setting with its own rules and regulations (dictated by friendly yet firm adults) presents the individual young people with a different set of norms; in order to remain in this enjoyable setting one has to conform to these norms. A key message for practitioners here is duality of enjoyable setting and the adherence to rules required to remain in this setting.

Brown (1954) eloquently recounts that primary groups in work life are not about being sites of love and affection:

> *It is not to be supposed that the unity of the primary group is one of mere harmony and love. It is always differentiated and usually a competitive entity, admitting of self-assertion and various appropriate passions; but these passions are socialised by sympathy, and come, or tend to come, under the discipline of a common spirit.* (p. 129)

Brown goes on to assert that in such a primary work group esteem is earned and maintained by working towards the common good; one is not so much concerned about the opinion of the manager and owner of a factory as the opinion of peers and immediate supervisors. The motorcycle group mimics this phenomenon; the common task is to get a motorcycle running and individuals want to contribute (although they will sometimes shelter behind statements such as "*I don't care*", or "*so what*" if things go wrong) to this aim. The praise and affirmation they get from the adults (particularly from Noel, as he is the mechanic) is received in front of the others and is earned; the adults do affirm the young people regularly but don't dish out unwarranted compliments or engage in patronising praise. On the contrary, the conversations and instructions are robust and challenging yet remain well within appropriate limits.

The workers do intervene at times (verbally and non-verbally) to get the young people to tone down foul language or to change the conversation from an inappropriate subject.

Humour is frequently deployed in these instances to challenge and confront in a non-threatening manner.

Trevithick (2005) notes that:

> *The sensitive and judicious use of humour can be helpful in a range of situations" (p. 178); it can "place the interaction on a more normal, ordinary footing and help us to reveal our humanness.*

The use of humour in such situations is however heavily predicated on the relationships between parties (for it can have counter-productive results), and solid cultural competence; knowing what is taboo and knowing what is accepted is of vital import.

Operating the Motorcycle Group

Staff

Both the community-home-school liaison teacher (Eva Philips) and the school principal (Phil O'Flynn) take a keen interest in the group and work in conjunction with the Springboard workers and mechanic in ensuring that it runs; they (the school staff) do not participate in the group's activities per se, a system that works well in that no 'teachers' are involved in the group. There are three 'front-line' staff members in the motorcycle project;

- *Michael Lynch* is a childcare leader with the Springboard Project
- *Richard Mulcahy* is a social worker with the Springboard project
- *Noel Quinn* is a motorcycle mechanic and tutor. He runs his own business (GMC Motorcycles) in Cork city, renovating, repairing, servicing and selling motorcycles. Noel has over forty years' experience in the motorcycle trade and has also acquired significant experience teaching motorcycle and mechanics in various educational centres in Cork city.

The all-male nature of the staff group might appear somewhat lop-sided; however, this feature of the group is realised in practice as a significant positive factor in providing a range of positive male role models for the participants. Prior to training as social workers both Richard and Michael worked in unskilled and semi-skilled positions and both of them have working class backgrounds. These factors assist in allowing the motorcycle group to function as a workshop

and not as a school class. The interactions between the staff offer the young people role model examples of positive adult male interaction; e. g. differences of opinion are argued but ultimately respected and not perceived as a challenge.

Cleary et al point out that;

> *The absence of a father may result in negative social and psychological outcomes for males but this is dependent on his access to alternative sources of affirmation and models of behaviour, the parenting ability of the remaining parent and economic resources. It is also dependant on the child's relationship with the out of home father. (2004, p.12)*

The positive masculinity of the workers offers this alternative to the participants who also bring with them their own life experiences.

The workers own backgrounds have equipped them with a set of cultural competencies that are of great benefit in establishing and maintaining relationships with the young participants in the motorcycle group. In his seminal text 'Learning to Labour, how working class boys get working class jobs' (1977) Paul Willis pointed out the immense significance of culture in understanding youth transitions from school to work. To this day the central role of cultural expectations is somewhat missed in explaining and responding to the transitional problem whereby some young people disengage from a standard school to work transition into NEET status, (Burgess and Leahy, 2003).

In analysing responses to overcoming youth unemployment in the EU Eurofound state explicitly that "*policy delivery relies on appropriate personnel, who need to be trained and supported*" (Eurofound, 2012). The bike project examples perfectly the absolute priority of having the right people to deliver programmes to at risk young people; the personnel are the critical factor in this form of work and the success or failure of any such intervention hinges on having the right people; persons who have an empathy for the young people, the cultural competences and the practice skillset(s) to work with them effectively.

Structure

The group is sub divided into older and younger sections; at the time of the fieldwork there were four boys in the younger group and two lads in the older group. The groups meet on Thursdays from 1.20 pm until 2.30 (boys) and from 2.30 'til 3.30 (lads).

Within the group the lead staff role is taken by Noel; his observed approach is to allow the young people freedom within a working and learning environment. The relationships between the young people and staff witnessed during the fieldwork were solid and genuine; the staff are cognisant of the local slang and local issues. They also displayed a well-honed sense of humour which was deployed as a tactic to defuse potential conflicts, encourage participation by drawing some of the group out of themselves, foster collaboration, enforce boundaries and limits and maintain the relationships of the overall (staff and young people) group.

The group operates in a relaxed and informal (first name basis) manner with (at times) lively banter.

These 'solid' practice relationships are neither accidental nor a by-product of the group's structure. They are the key working method for assisting the young people in this measure; equally important is the construction of the group setting as a work and not a school space with the attendant sense of responsibility.

This allows the young people to view themselves as going to work, not to school; this (highly subjective) '*worker not pupil*' identity can be strongly linked into the notion of transitional pathways (Walter et al, 2006) , the channels by which we move from childhood through youth and on to adulthood. The identity construction also allows for a subjective reorientation from 'boy' to 'man' (boys go to school, men go to work).

Although the *work* of the group is focussed on the renovation of old motorcycles the *conversations* that take place veer sharply from subject to subject; football, being in school, what the lads are getting up to after school, what the mechanic had for his dinner last night and so on. This is very much in keeping with a traditional working class 'shop' environment. In this instance the social workers and the mechanic are playing the role of older workers (with Noel being the foreman) and the young people are 'junior' workers/apprentices. Banter (or slagging in the local slang, and always kept within acceptable limits) is frequent and above all it is an enjoyable place to be for an hour or so. A key lesson for anyone contemplating work with young

people is very evident; it must be fun. The young people love coming into this group because they enjoy it so much. The non- formal and active learning occurs in a natural manner. No one is examined or tested in a formal sense but everyone (researcher included) is tested through questions and observations; i.e. "*are you really telling me that nut is properly tightened? Yea boy, it is… Well how come I can twist it off with my finger so? Errrr…"*

Non-verbal communication is very much in evidence; subtle but effective facial expressions and body language is used constantly and perhaps unconsciously to reinforce positive and frown upon negative actions (and expressions). It should be borne in mind that it is only because of the solidity of the interpersonal relationships between the adults and young people that this high level of non-verbal communication can work; a high degree of trust and mutual implicit understanding is a fundamental pre-requisite of this communication and the onus is on the adults to move from implicit non-verbal communication to more explicit verbal communication ("*stop whacking the wrench off the bench*") if necessary.

A further key element of the group is the maintenance of fairly rigid boundaries. The group is a closed and time limited system and not everybody can be in it[10]. A number of young people were dropped from the group as they were not complying with the (rather lenient) membership rules. The HSL teacher (Eva)

[10] The group's boundaries extend to adults; the staff are (justifiably) careful in allowing access to the group.

reckoned that in some cases these boys were seeking a 'soft option', a class to go to for messing and 'skiving off' from the more rigid normal classes. These boundaries are a vital component of the group; alongside other functions they foster group solidarity and cohesion and construct the motorcycle group as a working (not messing) space. All staff concurred with the maintained of boundaries; Noel stating that if a young person was 'acting up' they get a chance to stop or else they have to leave the group ("*stop it or you're out*", 10/6/16). The young people agreed with this stance; "*you can't have the messing like, feck that*" (18 year old, 8/7/16) and the social workers believe that you "*need to enforce rules*" (Richard, 21/3/16).

A limitation on the motorcycle group is numbers; the current set up cannot accommodate more than six or seven young people at a time, and not because of physical space restraints. The 'target group' of young people require a high adult to young person ratio, and indeed all of the staff interviewed were quite strong on this point; "*they thrive on attention*" (Michael Lynch).

Setting

The motorcycle group have the use of the school boiler room; it is of a rough and ready nature, before any work on the motorcycles can begin the young people have to haul out a number of large rubbish skips. This in itself is a good thing; it is a working space (not a 'school' space) and the participants have internalised this aspect of the project. Given the nature of the group hard manual labour is unavoidable; there is no escape from the heavy lifting aspect of the task. Prior to gaining the use of the boiler room the Springboard workers

had to manually haul the tools and bikes from storage to the metalwork room in the school; securing the boiler room space has significantly greatly reduced this part of the work, nevertheless, all involved will build up a sweat and get their hands dirty in this group.

The equipment used is a combination of tools donated by the mechanic and by the Cork Institute of Technology (CIT), and improvisation; i.e. old trolleys and junk cast iron tables have acquired a new lease of life as stands for the motorcycles. Again, this shows the participants that a little bit of creativity and improvisation can overcome a lack of equipment in many instances. However "m*otorcycles are no longer built with owner maintenance in mind*" (Fidell and Shoemark, 2000, p.2.1) and specialist equipment is required for some jobs. In this instance Noel takes the part to his own shop to work on.

The focus is very much on overcoming difficulties and problems in the renovation; these motorcycles are old and non-running. The challenge and work is to get these machines back into working mechanical order (incidentally, the aim is not to restore these motorcycles to the condition in which they left the factory, it is to renovate them into safe and mechanically sound bikes).

Hard skills transfer

A considerable amount of hard knowledge transfer relating to working in this setting generally (e.g. put your tools back where you got them) and motorcycles in particular (e.g. how to adjust steering head bearings) was observed.

It was evident to the researcher (who has, or thought he had, a solid working knowledge of motorcycles) that the young people had acquired a significant level of knowledge on motorcycles; they were using the technical language of motorcycle mechanics (able to name/locate specific parts and work on same unaided) in a fluid manner. They have learned about different engine cycles (two-stroke and four-stroke), the internal workings of engines, the lubrication, cooling and fuelling requirements of engines and a host of other information in the group. Workshop safety is the first priority; "*a moment's lack of attention can result in an accident*" (Coombs, 2002, p.0.4). Workshops are inherently dangerous places; ergo safe working practices and the heightening of awareness of potential hazards was a constant theme in the sessions observed.

The participants have to utilise mathematics and literacy; one has to measure stuff and read labels to work on motorcycles, getting the tyre pressures wrong or putting the fuel in the wrong orifice is not an option.

A key message imparted to the young people was the responsibility aspect; "*when someone gives you their bike to repair they are putting their life in your hands*". There is no disguising the fact that motorcycles are dangerous devices, particularly if they are not respected. There is virtually no room whatsoever for error in certain areas of motorcycle maintenance and renovation; the steering, brakes and tyres have to be right all of the time. This places a deep responsibility on the mechanic (regardless of the mechanic's age or status); attention to detail, double and triple checking the work and exhibiting thoroughness are fundamental to the activity.

The young people are allowed to make and correct mistakes in a forgiving environment; this is important as many youngsters have a very real fear of being seen to get it 'wrong' by their peers; the social workers (perhaps unknowingly) have no such fear (of getting it wrong) and provide a model in for the boys in this respect.

For example, in assisting the boys to fit a front wheel they (boys and men, including the researcher) inadvertently tried to fit it the wrong way around. The mechanic allowed them to do so for a while. When it would not fit the mechanic used an enquiry method to get them to figure out what was wrong; "*can ye see why it isn't fitting*"… before intervening and showing all concerned the error committed. The key lesson was to think before acting.

The manner in which the learning was delivered from Noel combined knowledge, technical ability, involved teamwork (some were lifting the bike, some were fitting the wheel, and others were offering the wrong advice) and critically a humorous but highly effective communication strategy between Noel on the one hand and Michael and Richard on the other that did not punish the mistake ("*I couldn't trust ye with a wheelbarrow"….."well you're the mechanic, you should have told us how to do it"*) but corrected it and provided a model of the right way to get it wrong and what to do when it goes wrong.

This communicative approach was highly effective during the sessions observed and generated problem solving competencies from concrete learning along with models of behaviour. Each session featured dozens of such interactions, each in itself a simple enough transaction but cumulatively a series of mutually

reinforcing lessons on how to do the actual physical work, a transfer of the knowledge required to do it, and the provision of models on how to behave as an adult worker in a workshop environment.

This included the occasional eating of cream cakes whilst telling tall tales and short stories, thereby encouraging the young people to talk about their own lives (although as expected they never gave much away in the presence of the researcher). This aspect of the project touches on another effect of industrial re-structuring; the intergenerational. The changes in the industrial landscape have closed down traditional entry points for young people into the workforce, the 'junior' worker, protected but also challenged by their older colleagues on the shop floor. With this, "*young people no longer have the opportunity to mingle with and learn from older workers in an informal manner"* (Leahy, 2008).

Although the participants are not tested in the skills and knowledge acquired it is evident to anyone who has a modicum of mechanical and/or workshop experience that the young people have learned; the ability to complete tasks such as drilling a hole, hammering a nail and wiring a plug are not innate, they need to be learned. These young people have at the very least acquired basic workshops skills which are transferable to other areas of life (not just employment).

The redoubtable Crawford (2009) has commented on the devaluing of manual work, and he has also argued that;

> *The satisfactions of manifesting oneself concretely in the world through manual competence have been known to make a man quiet and easy. They seem to relieve him of the felt need to offer chattering interpretations of himself to vindicate his worth. He can simply point: the building stands, the car now runs, the lights are on. Boasting is what a boy does, because he has no real effect in the world. But the tradesman must reckon with the infallible judgment of reality, where one's failures or shortcomings cannot be interpreted away. His well-founded pride is far from the gratuitous "self-esteem" that educators would impart to students, as though by magic. (p.14)*

The psychological effect of a partaking in an activity such as getting a non-running motorcycle and bringing it back to life in a group setting is priceless and can never be replicated through motivational workshops. The achievement of getting the bulbs to light or the piston to rise is a concrete source of pride for the young people; we took a rolling wreck and look at it now. Truly, nothing succeeds like success.[11]

Soft skills transfer

What might come as a surprise to some is the level of intellectual ability required for skilled manual work; to put it bluntly, there needs to be a brain behind the hands. The renovation of old motorcycles (as with many other skilled manual activities) is an exercise in analysis, fault diagnosis and problem solving before one even picks up a tool. With these old bikes patience is also

[11] This idiom is attributed to Sir Arthur Helps, in 'Realmah', 1868.

required and this is another inadvertent asset to the motorcycle group. A lot of time is needed which maps in with Michael's observation that working with these boys "*is a slow process*" (21/3/16).

Soft skills can be difficult to quantify, in the course of the research work in progress such as teamwork, negotiation, conflict-resolution and decision-making was witnessed. Westergard (In Curran et al, 2013) suggests that issues such as "*a lack of confidence, low self-esteem, barriers to opportunity and difficulty in managing behaviour can be addressed to great effect in a group context*" (p.174) and that the focus is not really on the subject matter (in this instance motorcycles) but on the social and personal development of the young people. This is very much the case in the motorcycle group; the real work was being done by the young people on themselves:

> *The real cycle you're working on is a cycle called yourself.* (Robert M. Pirsig, 1974)

Although rarely acknowledged, youth work is ultimately a process of values transmission, a complex process that reinforces desired values and norms and simultaneously seeks to eliminate unwelcome values. This is very evident in the motorcycle group's everyday operations and it is through countless small incidents and events that this process unfolds. The inculcation of such positive values through a positive experience of education is the key aspect of the soft skills learning in this project.

Observations

Within the motorcycle group setting these young people come across as more or less typical Irish teenagers, albeit with a heavy Northside Cork city accent and speech laden with local slang. They are clever and witty; their interactions with each other are as one would expect from any other group of young teens in the western world. Noel observed that from his perspective the kids were "*grand, just misunderstood, not bad*, *no badness*" (10/6/16). There is nothing 'wrong' with these young fellows;

The staff group work extremely well together and have gelled as true team. The core mechanical skills and knowledge role is fulfilled by Noel. Equally vital to the group's success are the ancillary roles played by Michael and Richard. They are vigilante in picking up on subtle hints from the boys that they need a bit of help or support, and they never crowd the boys. They also defuse tensions using a variety of somewhat sophisticated communication strategies that can be learned but can't be taught. When to speak softly, when to be humorous, when to self-deprecate, when to yell. A tremendous amount of practice wisdom was evident; to go back to Silverman's point on the mundane, there was a lot of mundane and simple things happening all the time, but the mundane and simple exterior hides the exceptional and complex mechanisms and structures at play in the motorcycle group.

It should be noted that all three frontline staff support each other and fill each other's roles at times, and that although all three are usually present this is not always the case (Noel is always there, either Michael or Richard might be

missing for a portion of a session). Equally important is the equalitarian nature of the staff team; there is no boss or manager and all of them have an equal input into the project, although as would be expected they all respect each other's core areas of competence and defer to the appropriate person's judgement at times. If the appropriate person makes a wrong call, they suffer from the humour and banter (within limits) of the group, again providing models of behaviour for the young people, models that may well be at odds with the young people's own lived experiences in a 'culture of honour' wherein differences of opinion are all too commonly sorted out through threats and violence.[12]

The staff group also operate as an independent unit; although the motorcycle group operates under the auspices of both the Springboard project and the school they have complete autonomy. This autonomy is justified and allows the frontline staff the space required to be creative and spontaneous in their praxis. Allowing workers, the freedom to do what they think is the right thing confers a responsibility to create, adapt, and develop their work to a much higher level than is possible in a managerial culture.

The group is also a 'safe space; Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith (2010) advance five immediate benefits from young people's participation in youth groups; sanctuary, enjoyment, development, relationships and appreciation. Of these benefits, the priority for any worker is to establish safety (sanctuary); young

[12] A 'culture of honour' is a cultural milieu in which violence (or the threat thereof) is used to resolve disputes (See Pinker, 2011).

people need to know that bullying, harassment, put downs and threats are not tolerated in the group. This relates with Maslow's needs hierarchy; it would be difficult to focus on fitting a brake pedal if one is being insulted, laughed at or felt threatened in any way.

The manner in which the motorcycles were dismantled led to valuable learning; the kids fell upon them and stripped them with no regard for where the bits and pieces of motorcycle went. This, naturally enough, resulted in many headaches when it came time to re-assemble the bikes. Noel did repeatedly inform the young people that "*it is very easy to take bikes apart, any fool can do that. Putting them back together again is a different matter, which takes brains*". However, the hard experience of having to root through boxes of bolts from four different machines to find the one specific bolt for your motorcycle is a lesson that will last a lifetime; be careful when you take it apart and it will be easy to put it back together again; the concrete experience certainly works in this instance[13].

In renovating the motorcycles, the young people tended to drop any disruptive behaviour and take on a 'worker' persona. At times the group was virtually silent bar the clink of tools on metal as the lads beavered away at their tasks. They displayed motivation, enthusiasm, perseverance and tenacity, particularly when toiling with the more boring or repetitive aspects of the work (having to

[13] Incidentally, the researcher is involved in the UCC Motorcycle Club and has witnessed a number of university students make the exact same mistake in dismantling bikes. In this case, it is not a matter of social class, we all have to learn this, usually through experience.

sand down parts, cleaning stuff, searching for the right piece). At times they had to employ muscle power and brute force; lifting the frames (bear in mind that some of these youngsters are as of yet small and slight of build), hammering and shoving reluctant parts into obedience.

Other aspects of the job demand care and precision; wiring up the electrical harness (a process that involves tracing and joining dozens of different cables) or rebuilding tiny yet vital components of the whole (such as the carburettor). The lads worked with tools, learning to care for these implements, and acquired the habits of preventative maintenance; i.e. greasing the bolts before assembly to inhibit corrosion. They also exhibited self-discipline in conducting themselves in an appropriate fashion with minimal mis-behaviour, although there was one or two incidents of 'acting the maggot'.[14]

Meeting the DEIS objectives

Terence MacSwiney Community College has DEIS status; DEIS schools receive additional resources to help meet the exceptional needs of their students; amongst others areas DEIS aims for;

> *the streamlining of existing measures for addressing educational disadvantage, targeted measures to tackle problems of literacy and numeracy, and measures to*

[14] Local slang for general mischief-making of one sort or another. As with any group of young teenage males they had an occasional bout of mischief; the first day the researcher was present three of them were in the yard adjacent to the workshop with no other adults in sight. The opportunity was grasped to display prowess at stone throwing for a minute or two until Noel appeared, ticked them off, rounded them up and put them back to work painting frames.

> *enhance pupil attendance, progression, retention and attainment. (The Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, 2015, p.4)*

In retaining the potential early school leaver DEIS schools are expected to

- *identify the most at risk pupils for the targeting of additional resources*
- *identify the needs of the targeted pupils*
- *identify the priority areas of activity to meet the needs of the targeted pupil*
- *identify the desired outcomes to meet the needs of the targeted pupils*
- *identify and put in place the interventions which will achieve the desired outcomes.* (Department of Education, 2012)

Each school has to have a plan for DEIS which addresses the following themes, and the motorcycle group has impacted across all of these areas;

1. Attendance; the members attend school in part at least to access the motorcycle group.
2. Retention; all parties' concerned (including the young people) credit the group with playing the decisive role in retaining the members in school.
3. Educational Progression; those who have exited have remained in the wider education and training system. The group members have expressed interest and commitment to progressing in education (Cork Institute of Technology and St. John's College being two of the options mentioned by the young people).

4. Literacy; rebuilding or servicing motorcycles is impossible unless one can read.
5. Numeracy; ditto.
6. Examination Attainment; two of the group have completed the Leaving Certificate, the others have sat the Junior Certificate.
7. Partnership with Others; the group stands as an excellent example of inter-agency and inter disciplinary practice. It could not function without all the constituents; school, social work, and mechanic.
8. Partnership with Parents; the group has changed the nature of the relationship with the parents. Phil and Eva reported that in the past these parents only ever came into the school to be appraised of the misbehaviours of their offspring. However, this has changed as the motorcycle group now allows for a far more positive engagement, they see their children proudly displaying the motorcycle that they've rebuilt. They hear the HSCL teacher praise their child's work and commitment (rain, hail, snow or sleet the young people get to the bike group). At the end of the year a finishing ceremony takes place; the young people get their certificate in the presence of their parents. For some, this is their first tangible experience of a positive success and the significance of this should never be underestimated as a catalyst for further education.

The motorcycle group has been successful in addressing the DEIS themes yet caution should be exercised in allocating all of the credit to the motorcycle group;

> *The nature of the programme means that it is not possible to disentangle which particular elements of the programme work best; rather any changes in student outcomes in DEIS schools reflect the comprehensive package of supports put in place*. (Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015)

Winston Churchill once remarked that "*all things move forward simultaneously"*; in deciphering human behaviour we can never be 100% certain as people's motivations and other events and incidents may well have contributed to the group member's development and multiple factors (internal and external) are at play in a complex manner during adolescence. Nevertheless, there is a 'knock-on' effect at play here which can be traced to the motorcycle group and it is the eminently plausible to attribute the positive changes in the young people to membership of the motorcycle group.

Discussion

The motorcycle group can be considered a successful and worthwhile measure for a number of reasons:

- It benefits from having a very clear and simple aim; keep the kids in school. By adhering to this aim the group maintains focus.
- It has succeeded in keeping at least some of young people in school to leaving certificate standard, thereby immeasurably strengthening their life chances, and all of the rest to junior certificate level. Those involved in the group who have exited school have remained in the wider training and education system.
- It is a micro-scale project. This approach is acknowledged at international level as a vital means of assisting severely disengaged young people in their overall transition from education into the labour market (Walther, du Bois-Reymond, Biggart, 2006) as it allows for intensive contact and has the inherent flexibility required for instant reorientation as conditions change. Such micro-projects do not have to adhere to strict curricula nor have they specific time spans. The curricula and timescale is easily summed up; "*have at least one bike running by the end of each group*" (Noel, 10/6/16).
- The motorcycle group slots into the ethos of the revamped Junior certificate
- The methods of work are a sound example of good practice in youth work and is an example of true reflexive practice

- The motorcycle group has gained immense credibility within the school's internal peer systems through word of mouth from one young person to another. The attractiveness of the group to otherwise disinterested young people is a significant indicator of the group's capacity to re-engage the targeted youngsters.
- The group has successfully negotiated partnerships and linkages with other agencies and actors; over the last year they have received a donation of tools and made a visit to the Cork Institute of Technology. The visit was a great success insofar as that the young people were totally engaged by the range of equipment and available training options on offer in the CIT. Moreover, this event has raised the horizons of the young people and alerted them to realisable career pathways if they can achieve at second level.

The key reason why the group is successful is the staff involved; they exhibit a high degree of care and congruence towards the young people and operate in a highly professional manner. The management of the Springboard project deserve credit in this regard for allowing their workforce to turn an idea into a reality and supporting the workers in progressing the group. Although the motorcycle group is not a formal youth work intervention it exhibits all the essential characteristics of good youth work. The European Commission (2014) has characterised quality youth work as underpinned by five core features;

1. *Close relationships between young people and youth workers*
2. *Active outreach; Autonomy; Partnerships with other actors*
3. *Flexibility, adaptability and access*
4. *Learning opportunities, goal setting and recognition*
5. *Safe and supportive environments to enjoy experience and make mistakes in*.

(Dunne, Ulicna, Murphy, and Golubeva, 2014).

The motorcycle group has these features in abundance and would therefore have no difficulty in being viewed as an example of excellent practice in youth work. Powell and Scanlon (2016) point out that membership in a youth group

> *can be an empowering experience, as young people have the opportunity to make decisions, take on new responsibilities and have their views represented, experiences which are often denied them in other areas of their lives, particularly within formal education.*

Limitations

A group like this will only function if the people responsible have the value set, skill set and knowledge set required. The values come first, for without these in a setting such as this the rest is meaningless. The school principal reported that at one point a horse project was attempted in the school; it failed as the provider showed no empathy for the young people and turned up with a few poor half-starved nags and communicated badly with the young people (i.e. talking down to them).

The motorcycle group is reliant on Noel providing the motorcycles (and the tools) free; although these bikes are old and non-running they would still cost a considerable sum; for example, the old Honda H100 that the young people worked on had a value of approximately 200 euro prior to the project (Noel Quinn reckons that after the project it would be worth the order of 900 euro). The group needs at least three machines, an outlay of approximately 600 euro, and has would have no means of disposing of the bikes when they are up back in working order if Noel were to leave the project for any reason.

The above being noted, it is still a relatively cheap project in material terms; computer equipment or musical equipment could cost considerably more money.

The group is male orientated and it is difficult to see it attracting any girls. In areas such as Knocknaheeny, traditional gender roles retain a high value and it is difficult (but not impossible) to envisage this changing in the near future. The

school does however offer a range of extra-curricular activities that do engage both male and female students and it is the males who are deemed most at risk of early exit.

There are young people who will not tolerate the rules that are the price of group membership, and some will not have the required level of interest in the subject material. All interventions have thresholds, rules and final limits and the motorcycle group is no exception.

The reasons why some disengaging young person who do not possess the required motivation to follow the rules and be part of this group cannot be fully known; indeed, this phenomena is deserving of its own study. Yet it is reasonable to extrapolate from what is known about the young people who do conform that control and lack of control is at least a partial explanation. Harris notes that in working with challenging teenagers many of them

> *live in home environments that are impossible for them to manage; children cannot deal with depressed or addicted parents, or those that are at war with each other. As a consequence, they may well create 'impossible situations' for those who work with them. This is then chaos that the young person is in control of – rather than the alternatives of false compliance or depressive withdrawal.* (2008, p.113)

Eva and Phil advanced "*control issues, not being in control*" as a key feature of the young people's lives; this was reinforced by the two social workers. It is possible that some of at risk of leaving school early young people who can't or

won't fit into the motorcycle group cannot (yet, at any rate) overcome these issues and adhere to the rules of the group.

Although the motorcycle group can and does meet the educational needs of some young people *it is not a panacea* for the multiple social issues and deprivation that underlies the disengagement of marginalised young people from the educational system.

Future direction

The motorcycle group's immediate future is not in doubt as both the school and Springboard remain committed to retaining this measure. The group visited the Cork Institute of Technology's workshops in May 2016, further heightening the young people's interest for machinery and opening up in their minds hitherto unknown potentials for themselves; a visit such as this allows the participants to visualise themselves as CIT students. The school are investigating the potential of apprenticeships and further training (through SOLAS, formerly FAS) for the young people.

Of course it should be borne in mind that although a group such as this can and does have an immensely positive impact on a young person's transition from youth to adulthood it cannot compensate for or overcome many of the problems and obstacles that these young people face in their everyday lives. The issues associated with intergenerational welfare dependency, poor housing, familial problems and negative experiences of education are multi-faceted and complex and lie outside the remit (and resources) of the actors involved.

In the longer term a possible threat to the current format group is the reallocation of the people involved; replacing the frontline staff in micro-projects is a very difficult task as the personality and personal qualities of the individuals involved play a major part in these measures. Any change in the people will change the project; this is a reality of creative practice and should not be viewed as a limitation, rather as a natural development in an organic

process. The aim is not to build permanent structures, it is to assist particular groups of young people in maximising the potential benefits of remaining in school.

Recommendations

1. *"If it isn't broken, don't fix it".* The personnel responsible for the group should resist any temptation to make radical changes to the measure. Thus far, the motorcycle group has evolved in an organic fashion; further development should follow this trend through the making of such minor and subtle changes as are required.
2. In this instance, s*mall is beautiful;* the group did have a brief flirtation with increased numbers which did not succeed. Groups such as this flourish because they are small and allow for intensive and intimate contact between adults and young people.
3. Over the longer term both the school and Springboard might (resources permitting) adapt the same model to work with girls at high risk of early school leaving if such a need exists. Of critical importance in this matter is finding an activity that engages the girls to the same degree that the motorbikes captivate the boys.
4. Again resources permitting, instigate a follow-up study of young people who have attended the group as they leave school to track their transitional biographies.
5. Investigate any mechanisms that would allow for the accreditation of the young people's learning in a more formal manner. The European Council has declared that

> *the validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning can play an important role in*

> *enhancing employability and mobility, as well as increasing motivation for lifelong learning, particularly in the case of the socio-economically disadvantaged or the low-qualified. (European Council, 2013)*

A formal recognition of the members' achievements would strengthen the credentials of these young people in a very competitive labour market.

Conclusion

This project is not so simple after all; indeed, an investigation into the measure reveals a set of sophisticated, complex and inter-related dynamic systems that collectively impact on the young people's transitional trajectories. The *ultimate* outcomes of membership of this group are unknowable; at the moment the young people's performance in school has improved dramatically and they are much more engaged. Although we cannot peer into the future and discover how their lives will unfold we do know that right now things have improved due to membership of the motorcycle group.

The motorcycle group is an example of a creative micro-project that works intensively with a small group of high need young people with a solid focus. There are measures such as this scattered across Ireland; music, animals, crafts and so on, usually (but not always) operated by youth work organisations. The group serves as both an exemplar of what is possible and a reminder that in working with severely disengaged young people one size does not fit all; the key lesson for practitioners (and more pertinently resource holders and policy makers) is that front-line workers need the freedom and flexibility to devise their own solutions. The person on the front line can and does possess the knowledge and skill required to construct innovative and pragmatic measures that succeed. More so than anything else, the project demonstrates that by doing the simple things well, and to keep doing the simple things well, is the cornerstone of good practice in this area.

"*Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler*",

Albert Einstein

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Pobalcholáiste Thraolaigh Mhic Shuibhne
Cnoc an Chuilinn, Cnoc na hAoine, Corcaigh

Terence MacSwiney Community College
Hollyhill, Knocknaheeny, Cork

Youth Work Ireland
Cork

Farranree-Knocknaheeny

Springboard Project

ucc
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh, Éire
University College Cork, Ireland