

Clare Local Development Company
SICAP – Demonstration of Work

Preparing 4 Life – Youthreach Ennis - Summer 2018

Background:

In 2016 Clare Local Development Company had several discussions with Clare Limerick Education and Training Board Youthreach about the gap in service provision for 14-16 year olds. These young people were out of formal education, were not engaged in any education supports or were ineligible because of their age to participate in the Youthreach programme or the Community Training Centre were limiting their future prospects and were moving further and further away from the opportunities that education and training could afford them. This gap in service provision for young people who are technically too young to be out of formal education but have resisted all interventions to support their retention or for those who are not ready for informal education and training is an ongoing issue.

Together with the LCETB we developed a model best described as a pre Youthreach programme which would reengage the participants in a course focusing on their personal development, communication skills and other general learning modules such as computers and sports. The objective was to foster routine, assess their needs, work on group dynamic and ultimately prepare them for meaningful participation in continuing education and training namely Youthreach or Community Training Centres.

We piloted the programme in November and December 2016 with young people who were on the waiting list for Youthreach Ennis. This initial course had youth work focus and concentrated on group work and personal development skills. The facilitator devised the sessions based on a needs assessment of the young people and we felt that the priority for this group was articulating their opinions and finding their direction.

The subsequent two programmes in Summer 2017 and Autumn Winter 2017 had more of an outward focus. We looked at First Impressions, Active Citizenship, Rights and Responsibilities, Life Cycle and Future Planning as well as a Sport, Recreation, Health and Nutrition. Our engagement strategy for enlisting participants on this course was to collaborate with Education Welfare, School Completion and most notably the LCETB Youthreach co-ordinator. We contacted all the young people that they referred, outlined the course to them and supported their active involvement.

We gave weekly updates to the referrers and at the end of every 6-8 week programme a full report on each participant was forwarded on. These reports would be used as the basis for their applications to further training or education courses.

These programmes, though successful in engaging with young people and retaining them for the duration were not easy. The participants could be difficult, their behaviour was challenging and their attention span was often times short. They struggled to articulate their thoughts, speak in front of their peers, give their opinions and to remain cool. Some of them had unstable personal lives and this frustration regularly found its way in to the classroom.

Finding the right tutors proved on occasion to be difficult also. The ideal candidate needed to have a strong balance of experience and patience. We varied the personnel in the first three programmes and we realised that the Preparing for Life tutor needed to have a teaching/training background, preferable with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and ideally with some experience of youth or community work. After each programme we tweaked and modified the content and the person spec.

In Summer 2018 we sat down again with the co-ordinator of Ennis Youthreach and agreed dates, location, course content and started to contact potential participants. Judith Devine, a teacher with vast experience of working in schools with young people with high levels of need and of facilitating afterschool programmes was contracted to deliver the course. It is this course that our case study will describe in detail.

Preparing 4 Life (P4L) June/July Aug 2018

Judith Devine – CLDC/SICAP Homework Project tutor

Week one - Welcoming and Observing:

The P4L course consisted of two, two hour slots on Tuesdays and Wednesdays for six weeks. During the first two weeks, my colleague from SICAP took each student to one side to fill in the Registration and Personal Action Plan forms. This activity enabled her to gather a good understanding of each young person's circumstances, and enabled one-to-one communication. As the sessions progressed, I realised that the value of having that individual contact with each young person would have been valuable to me in tailoring the delivery of the course, helping with the building of relationships and understanding some of the behaviours I encountered. In planning for a future re-run of the course, I think it would be preferable for the person delivering the course to complete these forms with each individual prior to the course starting. This would also be less disruptive to the running of the sessions.

I made certain to learn the students' names as soon as possible, to address them all personally by name and enquire about their week, their day and their journey. I made the effort to always welcome them to the session individually, with the warmest possible greeting, and find something to compliment them on. This could be anything from their punctuality, to their new hairstyle, or their smile. During the first session, we discussed the importance of a smile. Only one or two of the students presented with a smile on the first day. One of them looked actively hostile!

I had prepared an "interview sheet" (attached- titled "Getting to Know You") in advance of the session. This consisted of basic questions about the students, from "What is your favourite TV programme?" to "Who do you live with?" I asked the students to sit in a "speed dating" style arrangement in the room, interviewing each other using the sheets. This approach had worked well in the past as an icebreaker activity for 16-18 year old students in further education. I was surprised that this activity did not go down well. Many participants simply refused to talk to others, apart from those they already knew. Others worked through the questions in pairs but left many answers blank, spoiled the sheet or gave inappropriate responses to some questions. As they worked through the questions I mingled with the pairs and made conversation about their responses. Any were very guarded about giving any personal information and viewed the activity with suspicion.

On reflection, I would modify this activity to make it less personal and word it to encourage fuller answers.

Who am I?

As a further icebreaker, I asked the group to form pairs once more, this time with someone they didn't already know. This took some intervention from me to form the pairs as about half the group were reluctant to move or interact with anyone new. I had the group play a few rounds of "Who am I?" using Post it notes. Some of the girls in particular, were unwilling to stick post it notes on themselves. The level of self-consciousness was very high and compromises needed to be made until the entire group felt comfortable enough to participate. However, the students very quickly became more relaxed and I observed how the lack of focus on themselves as individuals, but rather talking about a famous person was much easier for them to deal with.

First impressions

A tutor led discussion about first impressions –what it means, what things register, how quickly people make judgements. A couple of amusing videos from YouTube helped to grab attention about what makes a good and bad first impression. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5c-7kkF-GXA>

Presenting yourself

I referred specifically to myself and asked the group to comment of my dress, my expressions, my words and my attitude that formed their first impression of me. I also gave feedback about my first impressions of the group as they arrived, without mentioning names I pointed out that some smiled and some didn't, that some made eye contact or looked at the floor, some replied to my greeting and some grunted or were silent. I asked what impressions these different responses were likely to create. I praised and congratulated students on things they had done well -turned up on time, dressed appropriately, responded to my greeting etc.

Handshakes

Five minutes or so was spent discussing handshakes –again, a short YouTube clip helped to lighten the mood. We discussed the right kind of handshake and I shook hands with everyone in the group. The students were confident enough at this stage to practise this with one other person but not people they had not already spoken to. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41BdlgNyKFI>

Self Knowledge

On welcoming the students to the second session, we discussed again first impressions. I had asked the students to come dressed a little differently to show a different side of their personality. A couple of them had made the effort and turned up in sports type dress. I arrived in a suit. We discussed how the different styles would be appropriate for different situations and occasions. Again I complimented individuals on their grooming, hairstyles, dress etc.

Computers-logging in, creating email accounts, test emails, sending links

Throughout the course, sessions were held in a room well equipped with desktop computers. I decide to utilise these and began with a session on how to log on. This took quite some time due to

the time it took for the machines to boot up, install updates and so on. I found that many of the participants were reluctant to use computers and were very discouraged by having to wait, or any perceived problems presented by the hardware and software (error messages, Windows installing updates and so on). It was interesting to observe that more than half of the students preferred to use their mobile phones to access email and browse the internet. This appeared to be because they were comfortable with their personal phone interfaces and the privacy that the small screen gave them.

Only 4 of the 12 participants already had email accounts that they used, so I paired the 4 with students who were less confident with emailing and demonstrated how to set up an email account with a sensible, easy to remember name. I then asked all the participants to email me, and I responded by sending them some useful links to youth service websites and Youthreach pages.

I explained the usefulness of using email in applying for jobs, training etc. and encouraged all to use a password they would remember, or save it on their phones somewhere. We made a habit of checking emails each week, as many would forget their passwords or how to use it. I believe that by week 6, all were managing to use email adequately.

Week 2

What motivates me?

This discussion was about passions, things that the students enjoy, hobbies, aspirations. I gave my own examples –my motivation is to feel useful, that I am contributing to society, also to feel peaceful, content, and calm, to be able to pay the bills without worrying etc. My passions are my dogs, my garden, walks on the beach, travelling to new places. The students found this a very difficult topic. Only one member of the group was involved in a sports team. Students found it very difficult to name anything they were interested in, and the focus of what might motivate them yielding one consistent answer-money. This led to me pointing out the things that money facilitates, and how some of these things can be achieved without a great deal of money.

Balloon activity and Personal Traits

The next suggested activity involved the students writing personal traits, beliefs etc. on post-it notes and sticking them to a balloon. The students struggled to find the vocabulary and tended to just copy examples I gave, so we paused the activity and I found a website with lists of positive, negative and neutral traits. <http://ideonomy.mit.edu/essays/traits.html> We picked out words as a group and discussed their meaning. Students then logged onto computers and picked up the link to this site via the email link I sent to them. They found the list useful to help complete the activity. A little levity was brought to the session by the students blowing the balloons up, helping each other with the task, and using the markers to draw their faces on the balloons. Some later commented that doing “different” tasks like this, with something to interact with physically helped them to relax and enjoy it more.

Week 3 -Communication

This session began with a short YouTube clip about body language.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOkrS1v7Ywk>

We then had a tutor led discussion about posture and body language, drawing on first impressions from Week 1. We looked at examples from the animal world –the mouse and the silverback gorilla, and examples from the world of celebrities given by the students.

Again, access to the computer and YouTube was useful here. I reflected that it would have been a good task for the students to find a video clip from a film of real life of someone famous that they admire, and have a look at each one as a group, observing how those people communicate, present themselves, behave etc, and pick out their personal traits in advance of the exercise where the students identify their own traits.

Leading up to a break, I asked all the students to meet outside (this course was delivered during the heatwave!) I set them the task to assemble in a line from the eldest to the youngest person in the group, without speaking. Some found it impossible not to speak. It was an interesting task to observe, as the natural leaders and thinkers were obvious to spot. Some did try to use hand signals and use their phones. The task would have worked better if I had allocated 5 minutes talking and preparation time after explaining it and before the task started.

Week 4 - Stress

This session began with a discussion on stress, with tutor led examples including a description of a stressful day of my own.

What is stress? In pairs/threes the group used flipchart paper and markers to create a spider diagram of things that cause stress. After further discussion, they added possible symptoms of stress in a different coloured marker, and then we discussed how to deal with stress, and focussing on how this can be done in both healthy ways and ways that actually make the situation worse. The ways of dealing with stress were then added to the diagram in a new colour. As this was during week 4, many students were feeling more confident in sharing experiences and thoughts, and the discussions were becoming more balanced, with less tutor prompting required. The session ended with links to a variety of organisations and websites that can help individual experiencing the symptoms of excess stress.

Social Citizen –Individual Rights vs Social System rights

The group exercise suggested in the lesson plan was something that the room layout wouldn't allow easily, and I felt that the personalities within the group would not have responded well to the activity, so we used a series of questions to stimulate discussion in the group instead. I gave the questions out to the group on sheets individually, and asked them to spend some time researching the answers to questions such as "When do we have to start paying tax?" and "Do you have a duty to vote in elections?". The students were interested in the answers to most questions. I assigned different questions to research to different students and they brought their answers back to the table to discuss. At this point, the discussion led to significant misconceptions coming to light from the students. Many issues needed clarification that was beyond my own knowledge and expertise, so it would have been useful if I had researched the answers to the questions myself!

Week 5 - Prejudice

The sessions this week covered types of prejudice and discrimination. There were a range of pre-prepared activities and scenarios to discuss as part of this, and I also found it useful to utilise YouTube to show them a film of the classic “Blue Eye Experiment”. This generated some lively discussion and strong opinions voiced which required some degree of management, but certainly helped students in gaining the confidence to voice their opinions. I do not think this would have worked nearly so well in the earlier days of the course, before the group had become more familiar with each other.

Week 6 - Party Planning Activity

At week 6, still having no access to outdoor recreational space and still in the midst of the heatwave, I anticipated a lot of resistance to sitting in a room full of computers taking part in discussions or listening to me as the tutor. I set the group a task, working a pairs or small groups that they were comfortable with. They had an imaginary thousand Euros to spend on organising a party for 100 people of their own age. We discussed the need for a venue, games, entertainment, refreshments and so on. I asked them to research costs and come up with a shopping list, outlining how the funds would be spent. They also had to research party games suitable for around 12 participants. Each team would need to demonstrate their party game involving the entire group. I gave the group flipchart paper and markers so that they could present their ideas to the rest of the group. This task was quite successful in generating interest from the group and all but two girls participated with some enthusiasm. My colleague was there on the day to help the teams with their ideas and prompt their imaginations. Again, most students were unwilling to utilise the computers or the internet, but engaged well with each other, sharing information and ideas, and presenting them in some form on the paper. Some teams still lacked the confidence to host a party game for the others, and opted out of this, but it was pleasing to see that others put a lot of effort into it, and the change in their attitudes and confidence since the first week was evident.

Bowling Activity

For the final session, the group met at the local 10 pin bowling venue. Most of the original group attended this, though for some, this type of activity was out of their comfort zone. With a little persuasion, everyone participated and the feedback indicated that they had really enjoyed this activity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Students certainly enjoyed aspects of the course, and found others “boring”. They had an expectation that it would be like school, and responded well to the fact that it wasn’t. They could request breaks whenever they wanted speak freely within reason, make drinks in the pleasant cafe, for free, go outside for a smoke and so on. Students respected the freedoms and behaved largely in a very mature manner.

My colleague, Kirsty, from SICAP was on hand on a weekly basis to support the delivery of the course. She was an experienced youth worker and had also worked in informal education settings. It was beneficial to have her as a “pawn” or as a sounding board within the group as they found it difficult to voice their opinions. It was also useful to have a second pair of hands or another adult in

the room. Kirsty was also extremely helpful to the young people if they identified other needs they may have and in guiding them to access supports from other organisations such as sports and recreational facilities, disability services as well as guidance and life coaching from within the SICAP team in CLDC.

Eddie, the manager of Youthreach Ennis, was also a welcome visitor to the group and he outlined the interview process, the course content and the possible progression routes.

The room allocated for the course was more than adequate. All the computers worked and the large central table was a useful feature as it accommodated the whole group without being too big and allowing anyone to isolate themselves. The cafe area adjacent was great for supplying a change of scenery now and then, and created a more informal setting for chatting and getting to know the students. An outdoor recreational space would have been a huge bonus on this course. During the hot weather, the students were keen to be outside, and it would have been a real advantage to do some more physical activities to add some dynamics to the interaction, as well as break up the session with more movement. Similarly, for tutors with the appropriate skills and experience, practical workshop type rooms or kitchen spaces would be ideal for varying the environment diversity of the activities, as well as helping the tutor to assess the abilities and needs of the students. Having the programme within the ETB buildings was also a bonus as it encouraged the young people to feel part of something bigger and to get a feel for an education campus.

One of the biggest motivators for the students was the fact that I explained that I was in effect assessing them for suitability for the Youthreach course, and there were a limited number of places available. I clearly indicated that I was looking for people who were willing to participate in the activities as fully as possible, present themselves as well as possible, and show that they would be a wise “investment”. We talked about this on a weekly basis, and on many occasions it helped to refocus some participants on their reasons for being there.

Two months on...Where are they now?

Of the 13 participants in the P4L course – one is in full time employment, one has disengaged but 11 have progressed to a full time programme in Ennis Youthreach and are doing really well.