

**Tranquillity, Guided Visualisation and Personal Discovery
for disengaged 'dispirited' pupils.**

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Abstract

Swindon Youth Empowerment Project (SYEP) is currently working in six schools in urban disadvantaged areas in Swindon. The project encourages young people with disaffected and challenging behaviour to reflect on their own behaviour, relationships and potential. The particular innovation of SYEP includes *guided personal reflection* using visualisation, words and music in an ambient environment without distractions (called "the Tranquillity Zone"), followed by focused activities to stimulate personal discovery (called "the Discovery Zone"). The current phase is to train Learning Mentors in schools in the Excellence in Cities initiative in Swindon to run sessions for pupils at risk in their schools, and assess the impact of these programmes.

The project team calls these "dispirited pupils" as they have never learnt to reflect on their self-worth and potential. The main education staff involved are two trainers from the Swindon Youth Empowerment Project (SYEP), who are working in partnership with the Excellence in Cities initiative (EiC) to train 9 Learning Mentors. These Learning Mentors organizationally are part of the EiC, and are employed to guide and support challenging pupils (mainly from secondary schools), so that these pupils become more engaged and motivated with their learning and improve their behaviour. The Swindon Youth Empowerment Project team has trained the Learning Mentors in the Tranquillity Zone and Discovery Zone programmes, which are designed to stimulate pupils in a non-authoritarian way to reflect on their attitudes, reactions, relationships and actions, to consider the consequences of these, and devise alternative life strategies. This is described as reflection on and development of their "higher nature" in ways designed to have a positive effect on relationships and self-esteem. The Tranquillity Zone is guided with text and music in an ambient environment and is linked with the Discovery Zone, which inspires young people to move to their higher nature through personal discovery and activities to develop and articulate their understanding and thinking. The project seeks to influence behaviour by addressing the root causes of personal insecurities and open up new possibilities. Within the 18 project elements of personal, moral, social and emotional learning, the organization is non-authoritarian and aims to illuminate staff, pupils and parents with a positive outlook, which helps them to rise above their problems.

The project is developing and expanding, and has involved me as researcher as a dynamic part of that developmental process. Feedback from the Excellence in Cities government initiative has been enthusiastic, recognizing it as an innovative new strategy to refocus and re-energize disaffected young people both in primary and secondary schools. The Learning Mentors who operate the project in schools regard it as most effective and have enthusiastic views on their training. Pupils who have been through the project express strong views that it is been personally effective to them and even "turned them round" from failure to success.

All concerned have the highest opinion of the effectiveness of this project in terms of increasing the personal confidence of disaffected young people and giving them a sense of direction, agency and aspiration. The relationship between the project team and these young people is crucial to its success, and the process of building capacity through training is beginning. As the project is not funded by mainstream educational funding, it is totally reliant for its survival on marginal funding bids which are currently restricting expansion. For this it needs to follow up the pupils who have benefited from the programme, and their parents – and to create long term evaluation procedures.

A mobile classroom transformed into a Tranquillity Zone, before and after.



1. Aims and Purposes.

This interim report explores the use being made of 'tranquillity and personal discovery' as a means of raising self-esteem. We are investigating:

To what extent is tranquillity and personal discovery an effective strategy for improving the behaviour, learning and achievement of disengaged pupils?

In general the research will examine project aspirations that pupils will begin to show signs of becoming 'switched on' to learning as a result of the programme.

2. The innovation and its context.

This professional enquiry focuses on the work of the "Swindon Youth Empowerment Project" (SYEP), part of the work of Learning Mentors in the Excellence Cluster which is part of phase 3 of the [Excellence in Cities](#) programme¹. Total access to the group has been negotiated and agreed. Permissions from headteachers, teachers, learning mentors and parents have the support of this umbrella organization. The topic for the dissertation is how work with pupils normally termed 'disaffected' in the broadest sense can be tackled by primary and secondary schools. Viv Bartlett, from the project team, said:

"The SYEP aims really at creating an environment for young people to start becoming aware of their potential and developing their potential. The way I look at it is that its as if every human being has a light that has to be switched on. ... As the project expands, we need to have more and more people who can run the course with the young people with the right attitude, with the right motives, with a certain amount of power that influences these young people, but it's the power of example" .

Heather Burns was a co-ordinator for the Youth Empowerment Project in the early days. She said,

"The project is really a catalyst for self awareness. Once the young people have begun to understand their own value there are some really practical outcomes. For example, a lot of the young people feel more motivated to do well at school. As the young people become more empowered, their desire to help other people really increases. Level 2 of the project is about nurturing this really powerful aspiration.

The unique environment created by the Youth Empowerment Project has really benefited a range of young people. Now we really want to develop the project further by developing our sequence of courses, but also creating stronger partnerships with more schools and more youth organizations as well."

Fidelma Meehan, the current project officer, explained it:

"A dispirited young person, whether at school or home, lacks motivation to engage in learning or positive behaviour. Our purpose is to help restore the spirit in the young person so that he or she gains the motivation to engage in learning or positive behaviour" (Evening Advertiser, 21.3.06: 14)

The project runs in six schools in disadvantaged areas of the town. The Learning Mentors work with and encourage underachieving pupils not as a teacher or counsellor but as a guide on social and emotional aspects of experience. The particular innovation of SYEP includes *guided personal reflection* using visualisation, to words and music in an ambient environment without distractions (called "the tranquillity zone"), followed by focused activities to stimulate personal discovery (called "the discovery zone"). The current phase is to train the Learning Mentors to run sessions at in tranquillity zones in their schools.

The schools are involved because of long-term pupil disengagement and underachievement. The pupils involved are selected by the school staff as being in need of support. The team hope that the project will have the following impacts on:

- the social and emotional development of pupils.
- enhancing motivation and achievements of pupils both inside and outside school;
- enhancing the reflective practice of the professionals involved with the pupils;
- positive interfaces with parents.

¹ <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/sie/eic/>

The research could demonstrate the effectiveness of a new means of working with challenging pupils effective in that it acts on the root causes of the disaffection rather than the symptoms. That is not to say that treating symptoms (e.g. by giving a young person boundaries) may not still be needed: but a higher ambition is getting pupils to impose their own boundaries through an understanding of what kind of people they wish to become, and consequently a strong sense of agency (feeling of being in control rather than powerless) and feeling of self worth.

The team view the Project as an example of personal, spiritual, moral, social and emotional education. On this view, relationships are vital for learning (and can give positive or negative stimulus). Pupils learn by engaging, exploring and discussing through which their confidence and sense of self-worth is increased. My role as researcher is as external evaluator: I therefore have to hold the statements above as being potentially problematic until demonstrated otherwise.

The following sub-questions in the research will contribute to clarifying issues:

- What exactly is self-esteem and how does it relate to social and emotional aspects of learning? How does this relate to self awareness, self understanding, and self discovery of potential?
- How can self-esteem be raised in the short-term and the longer term?
- What is the contribution of self-discovery to achievement?
- What is the value of personal reflection through tranquillity and personal discovery in a valuing context?
- Can we draw any conclusions about wider implications of social and emotional learning on the education service?

3. Educational Issues.

This project focuses more on encouraging meaningful reflection through a calm setting, guided visualisation, and activities to stimulate personal discovery and understanding – on social, emotional and broadly spiritual matters. ‘Spiritual, moral, social and cultural education’ were highlighted in the 1988 Education Reform Act, as curriculum themes for all subjects (Bigger and Brown 1999; Bigger, 2000).² Personal, social, emotional and spiritual education are different facets of the same educational aim of promoting personal maturity as a preparation for adult life. The term ‘spiritual’ used to have religious undertones but has now broadened to refer to personal renewal in general. Personal education, relationships education, self understanding and esteem, anger management, conflict resolution, emotional education, personal autonomy, creativity, aspiration, motivation, and ‘enjoyment’³ are all examples of this, encouraging well balanced attitudes.⁴

Self-esteem and self concept are frequently cited in educational literature (e.g. Bracken, 1996) but is imprecise and there are questionable assumptions. For example, self esteem and self confidence are confused, that it is linked with depression and even socio-economic status; and assumptions are made that self esteem is static over time. Blascovich & Tomaka, (1991) argue that self esteem “refers to an individual's sense of his or her value or worth, or the extent to which a person values, approves of, appreciates, prizes, or likes him or herself”. MacArthur, JD. and CT. (2004) note that self esteem refers to an individual's sense of competence or ability in general or in particular domains” (no pagination). Measures of self-esteem are the quick but crude Rosenberg's Scale (1965) [10

² This is the basis of the compilation of chapters by subject specialists edited by Bigger and Brown (1999) in which ‘spiritual’ is not confined to religious contexts but includes for example appreciation of art, music, and literature, self expression through drama, and personal meaning and enthusiasm across all curriculum and vocational subjects (also Bigger, 2000).

³ Within for example the ‘Excellence and Enjoyment in Primary Education government programme.

⁴ Strangely, this broad approach to self understanding and awareness of the depths of the human spirit (referred to as ‘spiritual’) is not fostered by religion where there is pressure to accept blindly a package of beliefs. It does not follow that a religious believer is by definition spiritual: if ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ become synonyms, then the word ‘spiritual’ becomes unhelpful in educational contexts.

questions on a 4 point scale] and Coopersmith's Inventory (1967, based partly on work by Carl Rogers) which is a 'like me/not like me' instrument with 50 questions (there is a shortened version with 25 questions). Any self esteem scores have to be interrogated in the light of the ideals assumed by the questions. Self-esteem seems to be not static but dependent on events and experiences – so beliefs about our own ability and worth can be enhanced or diminished. We look with interest but open minds about the project's claim to be able to enhance self belief. We hope to provide a contribution to the self esteem debate.

Mruk (1999) emphasises that both self worthiness (feeling worthwhile) and self competence (able to achieve and solve problems) should be developed side by side. He uses phenomenological method – that is studying the phenomenon (self esteem) objectively through many cases and then seeking to generalise from it by linking it to other appropriate research. 'Authentic' self esteem is distinguished from 'defensive' self esteem, a veneer put up to hide inner insecurities, sometimes to the extent of becoming a clinical problem. In defensive self esteem, there can be a lack either of worthiness or competence, and unconscious self-deception to cover this up which may reveal itself in arrogance or anger. His model uses two continua:

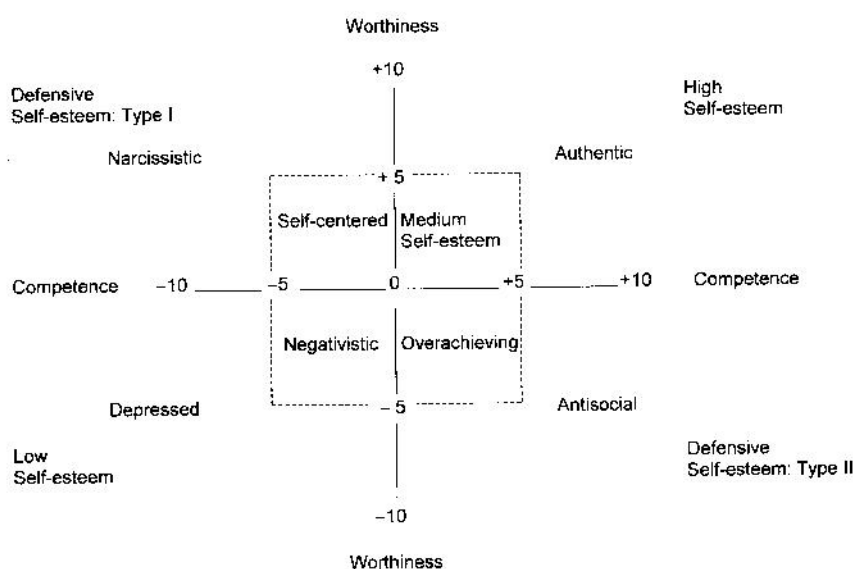


FIGURE 5.5 Clinically significant self-esteem problems.

SYEP is particularly concerned with the 'worthiness' aspect. Of this Mruk says:

"We know that the worthiness dimension of self-esteem is much harder to envision, mainly because it is more experiential and deals with more subjective matters, such as self and social values. But values are judgments of merit or worth in a given domain, which means that one either rises above some standard or falls below it.." (1999: p.157)

Mruk also views self esteem as developmental: however developmental mechanisms are not well articulated and this should be viewed as an area for future research. Mruk's own enhancement scheme (pp.210-216) works on positive feedback, cognitive restructuring and pattern breaking. After this, competence is developed through problem solving leading to a self esteem action plan. SYEP similarly seeks to 'scaffold' self esteem development through experience, activities and discussion – that is to encourage cognitive restructuring through awareness raising experiences.

The term **Empowerment** is the political dimension of collective self worthiness, used for people being involved in their own affairs and in decisions affecting their futures in ways which are open, democratic and which encourage feelings of **agency** – that is that they can proactively change their lives. After the work of Paulo Freire on adult literacy in Brazil (Freire, 1970) empowerment has emerged as a significant concept in wide-ranging research, in which learning has political motivations and goals. That is, the knowledge that we can make our lives better gives us precise goals which we pursue with urgency. This personal politicisation may also drive us to convince others to wake up and help themselves. This links closely with critical and post-modern analyses of **power** and **influence** – for whose benefit does the status quo exist (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000)? Whose discourse will be heard and whose will be silenced? Empowerment in this educational context implies that individuals realise that their perspective has significance.

4. General Methodology.

The qualitative research paradigm is flexible (Robson, 2002: 163-200), illuminates process, aims and purposes, and outcomes (intended and otherwise). Its evidence or *data* – “that which is given” can take many forms, being observed, heard, elicited, captured and so on. We assume data to be first hand truthful information, but should not misunderstand what sort of information it is. An interview may produce data which is an *interpretation* of a situation, possibly with hidden agendas. If recorded accurately it may produce reliable data about an opinion, but not necessarily of the facts underlying the opinion.

This research is essentially ethnographic, with the researcher an outsider to the project. The project team is encouraged to be evaluative and use varied feedback to inform planning for the future¹. They are not co-researchers, but their efforts produce more and richer evidence which is shared and discussed with the researcher. The researcher shares transcripts which inform development. The researcher observes this whole dynamic process, records, analyses, theorises and draws conclusions. As this is a *dynamic* rather than *static* process, the researcher is recording *change*.

5. Data Collection Strategies.

Data on the project is being obtained from a range of participants/stakeholders, and from observing a range of situations and aspects of the project. The evaluative ‘eye’ is that of an outsider who seeks to be detached and unbiased. However I seek to give due weight to the voices of participants and interrogate any tensions with my own conclusions.

Interviews are all conducted by the researcher so there will be no variation in approach. They will be semi-structured to allow comparison whilst providing a degree of freedom. All interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed for content (that is, not for linguistics) with digital copies kept for continued analysis. Where possible interviews are conducted face to face but a number of telephone interviews have been piloted and the process refined. The telephone interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim as with face-to-face interviews. Permission was sought and granted so that the phone call was not a surprise. Respondents were informed about the recording and permission to record was sought. If necessary I book a return call at a more appropriate time. The transcripts are sent to the interviewees and team for respondent validation, discussion and for courtesy. One particular interview schedule demands interviewees to think before response – a clear finding of the pilot phase. These informants receive the schedule in advance. This has the added advantage that the informants may discuss the questions in their family or study group so that the interview itself gives various perspectives – for example of what the children contributed.

Group interviews are planned including several meetings with the project management team. This has explored the aims, vision and operation of the program and discussed research methods and data. Future sessions were planned with group tasks which would generate naturalistic data rather than continuing to be didactic. Group interviews are also planned with participants to explore their experiences and opinions about the project. If several similar group interviews are to be planned with participants, they will be structured as focus groups for comparison – that is all will use the same schedule. Transcripts will be sent where possible to interviewees for respondent validation.

Observation evidence is being gathered through participation in events such as training, management groups and school sessions.

Triangulation is provided as follows:

- a) Methodological: data collection will be multi-method, using interviews with a variety of stake-holders, observation, documentary analysis.
- b) Time: although not in any sense a longitudinal study, the data collection will cover people who have been involved over a four year process.

6. Analysis and theorising:

The data will be analysed using the open coding of Grounded Theory (GT) following the constructivist line of Kathie Charmaz (2000) and Adele Clarke (2005).⁵ The process of GT is constant comparison, with patterns explained through emergent theoretical codes which build up from substantive to formal – that is, from the specific to the general. Codes must come from the data, but in thinking through potential codes *sensitising concepts* help the researcher to focus. Although GT analysts should not import grand theory but work from the data itself, they are expected to be informed and prepared. Therefore a detailed knowledge of sensitising concepts through the literature is recommended and necessary. Examples are: the **management of educational change** (Michael Fullan); **power/influence** (Bourdieu)⁶; **equity** (Freire, 1970; Wrigley, 2003)⁷. For the SYEP project under discussion, all participants – project team, teachers, learning mentors, pupils, parents – are viewed by the team as needing to be given **agency** to improve their own lives and relationships, professional and otherwise. We explore in other words how **emancipatory** the process is at all levels, and how this impacts on **self-esteem** and **self understanding**. Although the data needs to speak for itself, it can be interrogated in so doing by concepts such as these.

7. Initial Findings: Design and Management.

This research covers the first four years of this project through data collected in 2005-6 from people who have been involved during these four years. Qualitative ethnographic data, collected by an external researcher, forms a staged feedback source which the project uses to inform its progressive developments, which are then in turn researched ethnographically to form a diachronic picture of development. The continuum of outsider/insider researcher changes subtly through this process: the single researcher is wholly outsider in the early stages, but by stage 2 contributes to discussions on project development in ways which encourage the project team to build up their evaluation strategies so that evaluation continues within the team after the end of the research.

Interviews were conducted with a Learning Mentor from each of the schools. These were currently beginning training in the Project and were not 'insiders' in a philosophical sense but learning the project philosophy as trainees. All were enthusiastic for the Project and convinced that real benefit had been observed in their pupils and that the methods held great promise in their task of dealing with disaffected children. In describing the personal benefits of tranquillity and personal discovery and visualisation, all found it of personal benefit, although had described it as a not easy task to quieten the mind in a busy job. One said that she experienced more benefit in 45 minutes that she had in an entire Christian weekend retreat. The coordinator of the Learning Mentors said:

"I am lucky. I saw it in action as an observer. I've gone through three of them as an observer. I am not for a minute saying that it solved their problems long term,

⁵ The difference lies in the level of 'truth' that is produced – for Glaser the data is a puzzle with a definite answer, which if done rigorously can be considered proved; for the constructivists, GT is a form of argument that moves understanding on but has no definitive answer.

⁶ Relationships and status are reproduced through the *status quo*. within a climate ('habitus') of expectation and deference.

⁷ All people, however disadvantaged, should be encouraged and enabled to be political awakened and take responsibility for their own learning. Knowledge is not 'given' and 'banked' but constructed patiently through understanding of the real world. Literacy, for example, needs to be a mechanism for emancipation.

or that it wasn't a challenge at times, but it does make a difference. There were one or two, one in each course, that it made a long term difference to. One year 5 was a chair thrower, f*** this and f*** that. Tranquillity was one of the strategies that was put in place for her behaviour. She got a silver award for behaviour last year, Christmas gone. This was unheard of. It was a managed move, she was just about to be kicked out. There is no way she would have got this [without tranquillity and personal discovery]. Unthinkable. She just blossomed. She was able to talk quite openly about what she thought in her imagination, about where she went, Tranquillity Island. It seemed to be a place where she could just be, and speak. Its hard to put your finger on it. The children are very relaxed there, when they learn how to relax. But it does take a lot of patience on the facilitator's part!"

She also noted: It's about showing the pupils they all have something in them that's worth a lot. Once they have gone through the programme we see such a difference in the pupils. They are just so much calmer." (*Evening Advertiser*, 21.3.06).

The Excellence in Cities coordinator had been convinced of the potential of the programme and incorporated it into his operational responsibility for the Learning Mentor Programme. He is encouraging 'tranquillity zones' to be constructed in each school and staff development and training to take place. He takes seriously the idea of disaffected pupils being 'dis-spirited' – that is having a poorly developed sense of the human spirit and the sort of values which generate human community.

"They do amazing work in our schools and day to day they are exposed to really difficult issues. And a lot of negativity that they work through. This gives them access to something that has really the potential to cleanse and transform some of that negativity into something positive and shining is rather important I think. Not just in terms of their job satisfaction but as a way to recharge their batteries and to maintain the enthusiasm and the positive energy. Thus my hope is that as this begins to emerge in our schools that it is really, it is a subtle but potentially powerful way of sending an indirect message into school itself. Its different. People will be curious. Too often I find that in the educational world people work incredible hours, and often the positive motivation to make a positive difference to children becomes an incredible pressure, they beat themselves out for not having achieved enough, and they work harder and harder and it becomes counter-productive. What you get is a lot of really stressed out highly strung people who have lost touch with their inner energy and strength and enthusiasm [as they produce the same in their pupils]. Exactly, and sometimes I think less is more. We have a responsibility to relax."

So, in addition to calming pupils down, he sees an important function being to replace negative attitudes and self constructs with positive ones which are more likely to promote learning, relationship and self esteem.

Discussions with the designing team have focused on the following themes.

- **Social and emotional aspects of learning.** The team recognised the importance of this current government priority and are aware that SYEP is able to make a substantial contribution to this. We explored ways in which the philosophy and process might be made more generally available.
- **Spiritual education.** The team recognise that spiritual education in its broadest sense is another government, OFSTED and school priority and wish that the SYEP process is seen as a contribution to this also. This is highlighted by the use of the term 'dis-spirited' (lacking in spiritual maturity and awareness of meaning) for 'disaffected' (lacking in feeling, motivation and engagement). Disaffection is viewed as a symptom of spiritual emptiness.
- **Bahá'í teachings.** Although being based on Bahá'í teachings, the team were sure that they are not engaged on recruitment but on sharing insights on human nature at its broadest, and the inestimable potential in every one when positive forces for good are unleashed.
- **The Eighteen Elements:** The heart of the project philosophy are a working list of eighteen elements of human empowerment which concern personal understanding positive communication and relationships, guidance and role models, and personal transformation. These are:
 1. People have a Light (positive) Side, and a Dark (negative) Side.
 2. We all have Inestimable Potential

3. We all have Virtues and Good Qualities.
4. We desire and work towards well-being and happiness.
5. We are capable of Transformation.
6. We need to develop Self-awareness
7. We need to be Personally engaged in transformation
8. Power of Good Example: we can be helped by role models, and help others.
9. Power of radiance.
10. It helps to Focus on Higher Nature – within and beyond ourselves.
11. Positive and uplifting words have great power.
12. Positive responses to negatives change our perspective.
13. We can be part of Creating a Cohesive Empowering Atmosphere, an ethos for good.
14. Calling on higher powers and inspirational writings.
15. We can be Conscious of our growth and evolution.
16. We can be aware of Challenges to our growth and be proactive in meeting these.
17. Service to others is also empowering.
18. Listening carefully and with understanding is edifying, helping us to develop.

8. Initial Findings: Student Feedback.

The following students indicated that they considered SYEP very helpful to their own development and in sorting out their troubled lives. All were selected to experience the Tranquillity Zone because of personal problems.

S- (female), 11

"I used to get really angry and then take it out on whoever was closest to me... I always used to get into trouble and some people in my class didn't like me because I was so angry all the time... [After the tranquillity zone,] I am happier now at school because it's nicer being told you are doing well instead of being shouted at all the time and I've got more friends now" (*Evening Advertiser*, 21.3.06: 14)

D- (male) 14

I don't think the the Tranquillity Zone helped my whole week I think it helped my whole life really because some of the things that the Tranquillity Zone has taught me will stay with me so that I can help either myself and my problems or my Mum's problems and feelings and anyone else I know.

Thanks to the Tranquillity Zone and Discovery Zone, I have more self peace than I have ever had in my life and I think that the days I was going there I was a lot calmer, I was thinking about everything before I had done it, I think that it helped me kind of doing things but only if it was the right decision to do at that time.

After the programmes I do think I had less problems, because before I didn't care about them but now I'm thinking, if I carry on doing bad things, I'm not going to end up being able to have sports cars like my brothers, or nice houses, or girlfriends, instead of being sat behind a college desk where I want to be, I'll be sat behind bars. So I want to choose the right choices rather than the wrong choices.

R- (male) 14

When I was in the Tranquillity Zone I just felt that I had no worries or anything

I feel school is more important than it used to be

I'm not getting as many bad reports as I used to. I used to have one every day but that's gone down now. I know it's bad, it's a couple a week, but it's still gone down. I'm improving. My attendance in school's gone up as well. So that's quite good.

R-'s mother C-

I wasn't aware of what Richard was doing until one day he came home and he told me he'd been to the Tranquillity Zone. I said, What on earth is the Tranquillity Zone? And Richard's words were, It's beautiful Mum. And I said to him, what do you mean it's beautiful? There's candles, there's big floor cushions, the room's scented, and he even suggested at one point I could have my own Tranquillity Zone at home. And I was thinking, This is not the Richard that I know! But it's obviously working.

K- (male) 17, Swindon 12-18 project

K- achieved a University place (Computing and Business) in September 2005, indicating that this was not an aspiration or expectation in the 11-16 phase of schooling.

"The information it gives you is absolutely brilliant. You are told you are something. You are told you aren't a useless person, you aren't going to fail all your exams, you are brilliant, you are rich in these gems, you are wonderful. And that its up to you to show that as well. It was a lot of work, and I learnt loads, and I'll always remember it. I'll never forget what I've learnt. I'd love to make a commitment to continue level 2 and other levels and bring more TZs to my family and friends and other young people. "

"It gave me the greatest confidence to be able to go out and give what I had learnt back to someone and basically to pass on my knowledge and give people a feeling that the Tranquillity Zone first gave me. And it boosted my confidence as well. It made me feel really good about myself. And the feedback I got from my Mum and Nan who came to the zone was brilliant, they basically couldn't stop praising me.

If a lot of people did decide that this was something I am going to do, and we had a lot of people coming, I think it would be brilliant, I think the town would be so much more relaxed, especially with the youths and yobbery that is associated with most young people. If you got to calm those people down, and make young people more respected, I think that would be a great thing, I think not only a great thing for Swindon but a great thing for the whole country.

If the queen could come to Swindon tomorrow, and she could look at all these young people, so relaxed, she'd say What's happened, Why are these young people so brilliant? And you'd turn round to her and say, its because of this great service that I've been through and I think other people should go through. She'l say Brilliant, get everyone doing it. That's a dream."

M-, K-'s mother.

K- wasn't very confident before, he is now! Its really done him good in doing it really. Its really helped him think and try and help other people who have been in his position as well. He helps his sister, and me! Its really helped him think more about his self awareness and other people's awareness as well.

V- (female), 15 Swindon 12-18 project

"I was in a group called STEP a youth group thing for those with family problems, they introduced it to us and it sounded quite interesting. And coming here, and Woah! It takes your breath away. Its an ordinary room, with curtains and things, but when your in there you click, your mind just goes, you are relaxed as you walk in, its like walking into a different world. When we got in there we were all hyper, ten 13 year olds all hyper, yet we come out and sat there ... we was all silent, and peaceful, it was lovely.

The stories were really good There was one I really remember about the nails in the fence, there was a boy that was angry and his dad said to him, every time you are angry put a nail into the fence. He got less angrier and one day his dad looked at him and said, Look, that's what you've done, you've scarred the fence, and it made him realize that he can take it out on other things, and I think that was one of them that I remember really well. The stories were really good. Knocks you for six!"

"I was having a lot of problems at the time, my life was basically going downhill every day, I thought that I'd just end it. But I came into the Tranquillity Zone and it was like, now there's a reason to live, I am a good person, I can turn my life round. And I did.

My friends think I'm more upbeat, my teachers think I'm more confident, people think its changed me, I'm more mature...

And my behaviour is a lot better. Before I used to wander off I used to think, What the hell am I doing here, why don't I just go home. But now I feel, I need to go to school, its education I need, and basically I'm a lot more focused in lessons. I'm able to do the work with a lot more proficiency (?) and I enjoy the work a lot more than I ever did before.

V- (on her doing the Tranquillity Zone with others)

Level 2 was one of the greatest experiences of the Tranquillity Zone cos you knew now how to help others. You knew how to communicate with your friends, how to be totally honest with your friends, these are two really important qualities of life, to communicate as a team, and then we of course do the Tranquillity Zone, and that was one of the best experiences I've ever had, I felt so good. Everyone said how good it was and how much fun they had. I was really pleased that I could help others the way the Tranquillity Zone had helped me.

I think doing it for a lot of other young people in Swindon would change the atmosphere, because a lot of you people are kind of irritable, they're aggravated easily, they basically have too much time on their hands. If they came here they would be a lot calmer, and a lot more willing to talk about what's bothering them. I think it would make a great difference to the atmosphere. They'd be a lot happier and calmer....

I think it would be a great help to people to have more YEPs. It means a lot more young people could be reached, and it would make a great difference. And I'd love to be one of those people making a great difference.

S- (male) 14

I came here in year 7. I think I was picked by my learning mentor at school because of the problems I was having. It was a chance for me to escape and calm down. We came here. It's really addictive, I really like it. I can't stop coming back. .. [We] walk in here and choose a space and sit down. All the lights are off, candles lit with some calming music. We sit there with our eyes closed while they tell a story and you try to visualize it. Then at the end we go back out there for some juice and biscuits, then come back in here and talk about how we felt, did we remember anything, think anything more special. They change the stories. I've lost count of the number of visits.

C- (female) 14

There is the butterfly [story]. There are two butterflies in their case, trying to get out. It can't, so the little boy helps it with scissors. It comes out but it can't fly. The second one opened, and it could fly. ... this is how we grow ... you have to struggle until you are strong enough to achieve... we go on a trip to see the wise man in the story. In one of the [storoes] we had to make up our own journey, and we put it all together.

J- (female) 14

[My first experience] was 3 years ago in a public Tranquillity Zone. The music, the la la song, the cushions, chairs are not comfortable to me. Yes I have brought some friends along. Teachers do it too. They know about it. We did a Tranquillity Zone with some other children, my mother helped. We went to a hospital, I did it for the grown-ups, another group did it with the kids. Charlotte went. All of us were really nervous. When we got in we were like this (mimes shaking). We did children for the first one, but there weren't enough children for the second one so we just had adults. ...They said we were brave. We just did the tranquillity, not the discovery. They said they had a perfect time, they liked the music and they were a bit distracted. The people who doesn't want to talk no one forces them to, they just pass the pencil along.

9. Initial Findings: Other Feedback.

T- (female), marketing analyst

Well I spent 3 days working with the YEP officer as part of the project, and that was really really stimulating. And as a result of that |I became more motivated to get involved, so following on from those 3 days which was classroom training really I got more involved by participating with existing groups and actually trying out what I'd learnt and was convinced that this was really something special. The positive response from my own children led me to explore it with my local school where they go to, and the HM there was very supportive and helped us to create some space and with the support and interest of a couple of teachers we were able to offer a programme to children at Lethbridge Primary School., Swindon.

R- (female), teacher.

Well after doing the training for Youth Empowerment Project I felt that there were a lot of strategies I could use in the classroom to empower young people and give them confidence in themselves to realize their full potential. I think its been very beneficial and I think its something I would like to see in schools more often.

C- (female), financial analyst.

I remember the very first Tranquillity Zone that we had, and I was actually outside, and as the children came out they'd listened to this wonderful story about the jewels inside of them and how precious they are I can remember the door opened and these bright-eyed children came out into the hallway and they were saying things like Wow! That woman reading the story, she was so right, her stories are so true, Wow, its so amazing, and it made me so so happy to think that they hadn't just sat and listened to a story and gone

away, they'd actually gone away thinking about it, and marveling about the effect of the story, it was wonderful, absolutely wonderful.

10. Report by Educational Psychologists, Summer 2006.

The Swindon Education Psychology Service (EPS) commissioned a report by two EP trainees at Bristol University (Barnham and Stanley-Duke, 2006). They used a qualitative methodology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (see Smith 1996, Smith et al 1999; Chapman and Smith 2002), based on semi-structured interviews, in order to clarify participants' understandings. This is a well-established methodology although even in Psychology - Erwin W Straus (1966) and Clark Moustakas (1994) are key texts. Despite this methodology, they still recommend scientific elements such as control groups and pre-post data. They analysed the project as a social skills intervention: the SYEP team view it instead as an emotional understanding intervention. The pupils interviewed had had only recent experience of SYEP – the pilot group during the current academic year, the research group only one year on. The report recommended (based on a single parent comment) more liaison with parents: this has in fact been a high priority throughout, by both SYEP and the Learning Mentors, but some parents are difficult to reach. There were useful points made. The project was seen not to work best with disruptive teenagers, but rather with those low in self esteem and self confidence, assisting appropriate referral of pupils. The SYEP team has reaffirmed and streamlined pre- and post- project data on each pupil.

The report draws a positive conclusion:

“This research indicates that the SYEP provided a safe, non-academic environment in which the children learnt about themselves, their feelings and shared valuable experiences with their peers. This appears to have provided psychological and behavioral responses that have diminished the potential physical, emotional or psychological stressful events in their lives and appears to have enabled them to cope better in school.”. (p.31)

They note that they had not discovered the precise mechanism. They felt that feeling special may have been a factor, and the 'Hawthorn Effect' should be investigated. Nevertheless, special attention and adult mentor relationships can make an important difference to children with low confidence and should not be discounted.

In general, this report shows that it is important to take cognizance of psychological perspectives in future developments. SYEP's declared focus is self understanding, self confidence and self worth, which should be the psychological starting point following the work of Chris Mruk (1999) on the 'self worthiness' and 'self competence' continua (see above). This also involves emotional understanding and ability, as for example recently Murphy (2006) whose contributors reject general claims for emotional intelligence and promote measurement of emotional abilities and understanding.

Initial Conclusions

All concerned have the highest opinion of the effectiveness of this project in terms of increasing the personal confidence of disaffected young people and giving them a sense of direction, agency and aspiration. The relationship between the project team and these young people is crucial to its success, and the process of building capacity through training is beginning. As the Project is not funded by mainstream educational funding, it is totally reliant for its survival on marginal funding bids which are currently restricting expansion.

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