

Foreword

Initiatives which are practical and innovative and designed to support young people in their education, formal and informal, are always welcome. So too are initiatives designed to gather information about what works best in the provision of services to young people. All the more reason, therefore, to be grateful for an initiative which set out to do both, namely an educational action research initiative such as the EAR project. Action research is a particularly valuable strategy in educational and developmental work, because it allows the people most directly affected to have a say in identifying problems and priorities and to be actively involved in developing responses, and in evaluating them, as evidenced in this report.

It is made clear in the report that 'the EAR programme delivery uses youth work methods' and is 'informal in its approach' to supporting young people in the transition from primary to second level education. This seems to me to be one of the key reasons for its success. The Youth Work Act 2001 defines youth work as 'a planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary involvement ... which is (a) complementary to their formal, academic and vocational education and training; and (b) provided primarily by voluntary organisations'. It is clear that a range of programmes and activities, whether or not they are carried out within a context or an organisation which is explicitly labelled as being youth work, can adopt strategies, approaches and methods which are based on youth work principles. The most important principles are that the informal and non-formal¹ education of young people is the primary concern and that they are taking part of their own volition. Both of these clearly apply in the case of the EAR project.

Using such an approach creates particularly rich opportunities for positive learning in a context which is young person centred (rather than simply young person *focused*, an important distinction made by the project) and in which an emphasis is placed on the importance of relationships in shaping and sustaining the learning process. The

¹ 'Non-formal education refers to learning and development that takes place outside of the formal educational field, but which is structured and based on learning objectives. This is differentiated from informal learning, which is not structured and takes place in daily life activities within peer/family groups etc. Youth work interventions typically result in both non-formal and informal learning' (Youth Service Liaison Forum, *Strategy for the Delivery of Youth Work in Northern Ireland*, 2005, p. 13).

testimony of all of those involved in the EAR project, both adults and young people and whatever their organisational perspective, seems in one way or another to bear out this central importance of relationships; and not just relationships between the adults and the young people, but those among the young people themselves. When good informal and non-formal learning environments are created, young people learn very effectively from each other. This is abundantly clear from the feedback to the transition programme, where both the young people ‘receiving’ the guidance and those ‘imparting’ it appear to have gained so much in terms of knowledge, skills and personal qualities. The consistency with which the young people expressed the view that the programme wasn’t long enough was striking – many educators and trainers would envy such a response! Adopting a youth work approach also means that the possibility exists (indeed should be encouraged) for the adults to learn from the young people, although this is a challenge which may involve a shift of culture and mindset, as at least one respondent explicitly acknowledges.

Good relationships and positive attitudes, while crucial, are not in themselves sufficient to ensure that the work is successful or that things go smoothly. An important point emerging from this evaluation is the need for careful planning and for clarity about roles and responsibilities, all the more so when collaboration between multiple agencies and organisations is involved. It is a credit to all of those who have managed, directed and contributed to the EAR project that so much has been achieved so efficiently in the delivery of what is quite a complex and multi-faceted programme. The challenge now – and this evaluation report does not underestimate it – is to ensure that these valuable and valued initiatives, to which the young people have responded so positively, are enabled to continue by being appropriately mainstreamed and ‘embedded’ within the relevant partner organisations. There have been too many examples in Irish education and social services of worthwhile and imaginative programmes ceasing to exist on the expiry of a specific source of funding or a particular institutional framework, and of the ‘wheel’ having to be ‘reinvented’ subsequently because the original need remains.

The authors of this report demonstrate both a knowledge of the strengths of a qualitative approach which focuses on the subjective (and usually retrospective) perceptions of participants, and an awareness of the growing demands for objective

indicators of success in a policy environment increasingly concerned with outcomes and accountability. The project's own tracking and monitoring systems provide a basis for development in this regard and already provide significant evidence of success. In terms of the participants' own perspectives, the report contains many persuasive accounts (from both the young people themselves and from the adults working with them) of personal and social growth and development, of opportunities provided in the present which enrich young people's lives and enhance their sense of possibilities for the future. The choice of the name 'EAR' suggests an emphasis on the importance of listening, and the lessons of the project to date merit a careful listen.

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