

DYRC – Living in Safety & Stability

Dungannon Youth Resource Centre is a full time funded EA Youth Centre based in the centre of Dungannon. It delivers programmes around mental health, safety and awareness, risk taking behaviour, physical health and sports, good relations which is relevant for its setting because of the amount of newcomer children and young people in Dungannon. The majority of the membership is newcomer children and young people, mainly from East Timor and other nationalities including Portugal, Lithuania, Latvia, China and Africa.

The Royal School in Dungannon has a boarding unit and the relationship between the school and Dungannon YRC has been very positive and has been a good avenue to support young people who are away from their home in order to study by offering volunteering opportunities and additional support.

Core funding is through the Education Authority. It is a full-time centre, open 6 evenings a week. The core project entails a lot of work with newcomer children and young people through the needs analysis undertaken with the Education Authority. However, in addition to this there is a specific project which is to develop good relations amongst newcomer young people, health and wellbeing and managing how they live in safety and stability. There are volunteer, drop-in and outreach programmes throughout the week, which interact with a range of young people. Before COVID-19, numbers during a Friday evening drop-in could have exceeded 100 participants as a safe place to play sports, meet with their friends and relax after a week of school.

Originally, the young people from East Timor appeared to be extremely polite and well mannered, always thanking you for holding the door open etc. However, over a period of time a slight change in some of their mannerisms has been noticed. The Centre has positive relationships with an older group of people from East Timor, who recognise that their young people are becoming more 'Irish'. Reflecting on the experiences of newcomer children and young people in Ireland, Skokauskas and Clarke (2009) argue that there is a strong likelihood for adolescent newcomers to experience family conflict due to a clash of western values which sit in opposition to those of their family. This can also be experienced on an intergenerational scale. Moreover a lack of acceptance by peers and teachers may cause newcomers to feel different, which can be exacerbated by discrimination or prejudice.

They seem to be adopting local Catholic stereotypes and negative attitudes towards Protestant young people. One example of this was during a cultural session learning about different backgrounds, an East Timorese young person claimed they wanted to fight with the Protestants as this was a mindset of their friends and those around them.

Gang culture is relatively popular within this community, with particular rivalry towards the Portuguese community. A few incidents have occurred recently between young people from East Timor and Portugal, with fights organized in the Portadown and Belfast areas.

The Centre has discovered that conversations surrounding racism have become increasingly popular since the Black Lives Matter campaign. This may not be necessarily due to an increase of racist incidents but more so that awareness is increasing through social media presence. Staff would say that 'low level' racism occurs, through segregation in the town with services providing for a certain community e.g. coffee shops and barbers. Newcomer young people that would attend Dungannon YRC would share stories of how they have been refused entry

into certain bars and nightclubs in the area despite being the legal age to enter. They would give examples of how groups of newcomer young people from East Timor were accused of being loud and disruptive and told to leave a local fast food chain despite being a well-mannered group. Staff would question if this would be the case for local indigenous young people. Another example of experiencing 'low level' racism occurred when a group of East Timor young people clapped at the end of a movie in the cinema and were told not to come back. Staff are often informed by newcomer young people of their experiences of racism and exclusion which for good reason negatively affect their ability to feel safe and secure in the area that they live in.

The living in safety and stability challenges increased with COVID-19 as the youth centre was closed and staff claimed it was especially hard to connect online with the newcomer membership. Like a lot of youth organisations, Dungannon YRC were very active online during the pandemic, hosting online sessions most evenings and continuing to be as present as possible to support young people. For having such a large membership of newcomer children and young people, they noticed they were massively underrepresented during the online delivery. A key reason for this was poverty. Many of their membership would live in poverty and not be able to access the online provision due to not having access or limited access to a laptop, tablet or mobile phone with wifi or data. For some, it meant having no laptop or device to access the online youth work sessions or school classes, for others it meant using their entire data allowance to attend any school classes which meant they were unable to attend the online youth provision. Thankfully, once the youth centre re-opened, the vast majority of newcomer children and young people returned.

Another knock on affect following the pandemic highlighted by Dungannon YRC staff was the increase in young people aged 13-14 who were still going out despite restrictions and beginning underage drinking. Outreach was not allowed, therefore the opportunity to discourage and challenge this behaviour was not there. Beforehand, during outreach, staff would encourage young people to attend the youth centre for programmes or drop-in to get them off the streets and away from underage drinking. This behaviour could put these young people and others at risk which affects their ability to live in safety and stability. This highlights the important work of local youth services and outreach teams to be present and offering young people safer alternatives and programmes to raise awareness of the dangers of risk taking behaviour such as underage drinking.

Parents have threatened their teenagers that they will send them back to East Timor if they didn't change their attitude and become like their East Timor culture and have respect. East Timor has had a similar history to us in Northern Ireland with conflict between West Timor and many of the young people have experience and memories of this which affects how they are and their understanding of safety and stability.

It is difficult to have relationships with parents due to the language barrier. Parents are polite and friendly but limited to small conversations and gestures. Unfortunately, if there were any incidents where staff would need say to young people, 'I'll have to tell this to your parents' in order to challenge any behaviour, the young people will know that more often than not, they will be the ones translating the conversation so may hide the majority of the truth.

They shared about scenarios in which home life may be difficult with a lot of people living under the same roof and living conditions could be difficult.

Utilising facilities such as the sports hall to encourage participation of all kinds including football for both males and females. This is a great tool to encourage young people from all backgrounds to mix and befriend each other through fun activities and sports.

Advice for other organisations and youth workers includes being aware of not being racist and refraining from language that could be racist and exclusive. Staff have often heard wrong terminologies used towards newcomer children and young people such as 'the blacks', 'them ones' and 'foreigners', which all contribute to their mental and social wellbeing and ability to feel safe and stable where they live. They encourage staff of other organisations to be aware of this and continue to practice inclusivity in their youth work. It is important to accept everyone regardless of their name, accent or skin colour etc and one staff member shared of how powerful a welcoming smile, wave and hi-five can be to ensuring newcomer children and young people feel welcome as they enter the centre or programmes. Another encouragement when working with newcomer children and young people is doing your best to learn, remember and pronounce their name correctly as it's showing respect. Often, some young people say that calling them by their first letter of their name is ok e.g. 'P' however, endeavouring to learn their name is a meaningful tool to show respect and be welcoming.

Bibliography:

Skokauskas, N. & Clarke, D. (2009). 'Mental Health of Immigrant Children: A New Challenge for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Services in Ireland', *Child Care in Practice*, 15:3, pp.227-233