The Special Educational Needs Initiative (SENI) in Youthreach

Background to the SEN Initiative

The Special Educational Needs Initiative (SENI) was set up by the Department of Education in January 2007 to respond to the special needs of learners participating in the Youthreach programme. It was established in twenty centres on a pilot basis and has continued in them since that time. SEN is interpreted for the purposes of this Initiative as representing any factor which hinders a young person's engagement in or ability to benefit from the Youthreach programme. These factors may comprise within-learner disabilities and difficulties, family and social circumstances or harmful early experiences.

A wide range of risk factors are considered to be characteristic of Youthreach learners (Gordon, 2007). These include low achievements in basic skills; reduced motivation and expectations; poor physical health; the presence of factors that undermine mental health such as stress, low self esteem, depression and lack of emotional regulation; and practical difficulties which impinge on learners' participation in the programme, which might derive from home or community challenges, homelessness, low income, substance misuse or engagement in criminal activities. The incidence of disability in Youthreach is estimated to be significantly higher than in mainstream schools, particularly in the areas of specific or mild general learning difficulties (Smith, 2002) and emotional and behavioural difficulties (Gordon, 2009).

Under the SEN Initiative twenty centres receive additional resources for the purposes of implementing specific forms of support to the learners and building staff capacity. The resources are provided to each centre in the form of a general allocation of additional finances. The precise amount allocated is determined by the number of learner places in the centre. In a 25-place centre this additional resourcing amounts to €38,500 per annum, of which €32,500 is assigned to staffing, €2000 to staff training and €4000 to professional case supervision and staff support. The staffing input is to allow for the introduction, on a formal and timetabled basis, of a mentoring provision known as the WebWheel model, the development of an individual action plan (IAP) with each learner, the introduction of targeted teaching and support interventions to address each learner's identified needs and, when appropriate, engagement in inter-agency work with local services.

Centres are expected to implement the SEN Initiative model faithfully. They are supported in doing this by NEPS through the provision of clear guidelines, the delivery of initial and follow-up training for mentoring staff and the requirement to produce detailed annual reports. Criteria for an internal centre evaluation (ICE) under the Quality Framework mechanism have now been developed to facilitate centres to review and evaluate their implementation of the SEN Initiative on an annual basis.

Purpose of the SEN Initiative

Using a broad definition of special needs, the Initiative encourages organisational change and the systematic building of centre capacity to respond flexibly and practically to the unique situation of each individual learner. As well as promoting good quality teaching in a secure, ordered environment, the SENI model crucially involves listening to the learner's voice and understanding their view of the world. It augments professional support services with informal and non-formal approaches and provides additional training, guidance and support to staff. Through its emphasis on

the development of learners' emotional and social competencies, the Initiative has successfully piloted ways of recording and measuring soft skill outcomes along with more formal academic and vocational learning.

The two years that a learner typically spends in a centre are an opportunity for them to grow and mature through the formation of good quality relationships with adults and peers, through engagement in structured educational and training activities, through having the chance to identify their preferred career and life options for the future and through a combination of formal and informal experiences that foster personal and social development.

A key focus of the programme is on the development of emotional and social competencies as these have a very significant impact on both future employability and mental health: "Good social, emotional and psychological health helps protect young people against emotional and behavioural problems, violence and crime, teenage pregnancy and the misuse of drugs and alcohol… It can also help them to learn and achieve academically, thus affecting their long-term social and economic wellbeing" (NIHCE, 2009).

Rationale for mentoring

Early school leavers are at greatly increased risk of poor levels of literacy and maths, problematic alcohol and drug use, youth offending, lone parenting, homelessness and unemployment. The incidence of disability in Youthreach is very high, especially in the areas of dyslexia and mild general learning difficulties and of emotional and behavioural difficulties. Adverse childhood experiences may also have a significant impact, increasing the likelihood of risk-taking behaviours, substance misuse, early sexual activity and pregnancy, involvement in criminal activity, psychopathology and mental health problems.

Mentoring provides support at the practical, action-oriented level. The goal of mentoring is the development of an individual action plan that makes sense to the learner and takes account of their interests and desires for themselves. If there are any areas of difficulty in the young person's life these can be discussed and addressed. If the centre can help with a difficulty the action plan will detail how this will be done. If the problem is outside the brief and competency of the centre the learner will be referred to an agency or service that can help and the action plan will outline how this will be done. The centre will liaise with, or work in tandem with, outside agencies whenever any kind of joint action would be helpful to the learner.

Mentoring provides support at the motivational, future-oriented level. Engaging with the learners at a personal level, knowing what they are interested in and what they want for themselves, is the key to finding what is motivating for them. It has to be their agenda. Good relationships, the warmth and safety of the centre and the experience of success in learning all open up possibilities for the future that the learner may not have seen for themselves before.

Mentoring provides support at the connectional, reflective-oriented level. Theories of psychosocial development (e.g. Erikson, 1956) emphasise the importance of the social context for the developing child and the interactions and relationships they have with their primary caregivers. These have a powerful influence on their personality development and, if inadequate or negative, can lead to social difficulties and mental health problems. Good attachment experiences provide the opportunity for acquiring important emotional, social and cognitive tools. Their absence leads to an adolescent who is characterised by mistrust, shame, doubt, guilt and a sense of inferiority. The

development of *secondary attachments* later in life, however, can be a means of changing young people's negative models of themselves and of the world and allow them to acquire these emotional, social and cognitive tools. See the table below for Erik Erikson's 8-stage model.

Erikson's Psychosocial Stages

Stage	Basic Conflict	Important Events	Outcome
Infancy (birth to 18 months)	Trust vs. mistrust	Feeding	Children develop a sense of trust when caregivers provide reliability, care, and affection. A lack of this will lead to mistrust.
Early childhood (2 to 3 years)	Autonomy vs. shame and doubt	Toilet training	Children need to develop a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence. Success leads to feelings of autonomy, failure results in feelings of shame and doubt.
Preschool (3 to 5 years)	Initiative vs. guilt	Exploration	Children need to begin asserting control and power over the environment. Success in this stage leads to a sense of purpose. Children who try to exert too much power experience disapproval, resulting in a sense of guilt.
School age (6 to 11 years)	Industry vs. inferiority	School	Children need to cope with new social and academic demands. Success leads to a sense of competence, while failure results in feelings of inferiority.
Adolescence (12 to 18 years)	Identity vs. role confusion	Social relationships	Teens needs to develop a sense of self and personal identity. Success leads to an ability to stay true to yourself, while failure leads to role confusion and a weak sense of self.
Young adulthood (19 to 40 years)	Intimacy vs. isolation	Relationships	Young adults need to form intimate, loving relationships with other people. Success leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation.
Middle adulthood (40 to 65 years)	Generativity vs. stagnation	Work and parenthood	Adults need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often by having children or creating a positive change that benefits other people. Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world.
Maturity (65 to death)	Ego integrity vs. despair	Reflection on life	Older adults need to look back on life and feel a sense of fulfilment. Success at this stage leads to feelings of wisdom, while failure results in regret, bitterness, and despair.

Some core differences between key working and mentoring

	Key working	Mentoring
1. Purpose / goals	• Manage the overall programme in the centre • Encourage engagement of learners with teaching and learning • Give feedback on how they are getting on academically • Address disciplinary issues as they arise	• Encourage learners to reflect on their lives • Give them the experience of being cared about and respected • Provide support and encouragement to address problems they identify
2. Nature of relationship between staff member and learner	• Teacher-student style relationship • Key worker is offering guidance and advice	• Caring relationship • Mentor is offering interest and support
3. Process	• The centre's agenda is the focus • The key worker leads the conversation	• What is going on for the learner is the focus • The learner decides what will be talked about
4. Learner outcomes achieved	• Compliance with the programme in the centre • Clarity about what is expected of them in relation to work and behaviour	• Better understanding of self • Greater knowledge about how to care for self and where help can be found • Greater awareness of choices • Increased responsibility and maturity
5. Staff skills required	• Ability to analyse and explain clearly • Ability to give feedback in an encouraging way	• Ability to listen nonjudgementally • Ability to convey respect, warmth and concern • Ability to tolerate silence

Reviews of the SEN Initiative

An external evaluation conducted in 2007, in the very early stages of the implementation of the Initiative found that the model accorded well with the international research literature's identification of good practice and compared favourably with other support systems in place in Ireland for SEN, both in terms of value for money and its inclusive approach (Clarke, Classon & Phillips, 2007). Clarke et al. (2007) recommended that the initiative be rolled out nationally to all centres on a phased basis.

An internal report of the initial 18 month period of the pilot project concluded that the SEN Initiative provided an appropriate, effective and inexpensive response to high incidence special needs among Youthreach learners, including those associated with most emotional and behavioural difficulties (Gordon, 2009).

Some feedback from centre coordinators about the SEN Initiative:

On the benefit to learners:

"The trainees stated that they felt that it was great that there was someone they could talk to, they felt they could talk about issues in a mentoring session that they could never discuss in a group situation…"

On the benefits to staff:

"The centre appears to me to have become a more mature place in the last year in particular and I feel the level of engagement and trust that has/is developing between parents, students and staff has contributed greatly to this…"

On the benefits to the Youthreach programme:

"The centre is more trainee-centred than ever before…" Mentors *"fully supported the 'holistic' approach to the learners and felt that it was now becoming more formalised. There was a feeling that many of these things were already happening informally in the centre, but not recorded… As a result of the SEN initiative, the programme has become more learner- centred and professional."* **On the challenges involved:**

"Dealing with difficult issues which have a serious impact on the life of the learner (e.g. rape, suicide, self-harm, substance/alcohol abuse, violence and homelessness) was hard" (for mentors)

On the care of staff:

"An issue that did arise was care of the self for staff. At times the issues that arose were difficult and it was important that we were in a position to identify when to seek help and also to mind ourselves."

On the learning from the pilot phase:

"It was interesting to note that a reduction in the emotionally distressing aspects of a student's life, and the opportunity to process anxiety, worries and feelings, could greatly increase their capacity to concentrate and engage. The connection between processing experiences and emotions and capacity to engage in education became clearer… "

Report of the Pilot Phase of the Special Educational Needs Initiative in Youthreach, January 2007 to June 2008 (May 2009) http://www.youthreach.ie/wp-content/uploads/SEN-INITIATIVE-REPORT-2009.pdf

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By 2012, the Initiative was sufficiently 'bedded down' to allow for a more systematic evaluation of the impact of the Initiative. A comparative study was conducted, comparing learner outcomes in the 20 SENI centres with those in 20 non-SENI centres that matched them closely in size, location and demographics. This evaluation showed the SENI learners having significantly greater rates of retention in the programme, achieving higher levels of formal accreditation, making better progress in the acquisition of personal and social competencies and realising more successful progression.

The interventions made possible by the Initiative – in particular, the mentoring and interagency liaison – were found to have increased SENI learners' engagement with the programme and their ability to address barriers to their participation and learning.   The greatest differences between the SENI and non-SENI learners in terms of personal and social competency outcomes were found to be in the areas of engagement with learning and accreditation, initiative and willingness to take responsibility for tasks, self-awareness and ability to manage negative feelings and conflict, openness to the world around them and willingness to acknowledge difficulties and seek help. These competencies represent core employability skills as well as being indicative of greater levels of social capability and of mental wellbeing and resilience. See http://www.youthreach.ie/wpcontent/uploads/SENI-research-study-report.pdf for the full report.