



Independent Evaluation of the Re-form Project

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Executive summary

The Re-form project was funded by the Young Roots programme of the Heritage Lottery Fund for the duration of 2007. Youth workers from Southend Vineyard, a Christian Church affiliated to the evangelical movement Vineyard Churches UK, set up the Re-form project to tackle the stereotype of Essex boys and Essex girls and perceptions of culture and heritage within Southend. The Research Centre at City College Norwich provided independent evaluation services to complement internal and Heritage Lottery Fund monitoring.

The project appeared to achieve three of its four stated aims. The youth workers recruited young people from the Kursaal Ward of Southend to take part in an exploration of the area's cultural and historical heritage. This exploration of heritage included discussion, talks, trips and tours of heritage sites in and around Southend and other cities in Essex. The project enabled the young people to gain the communication and technical skills necessary for interviewing the local community on their perceptions of heritage. Although the young people did not explore the heritage of surrounding counties (the fourth stated aim) it is clear that the skills gained by the young people during the course of this project would be easily transferable to a wider exploration of heritage.

Beyond the stated aims of the project the evaluation recognised further benefits to the young people involved in Re-form. This extra value came in the form of increased confidence and a sense of group identity, as well as the perception amongst teachers that some of the young people were more engaged with formal education as a result of the project.

1. Background

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) was established in 1994 to support heritage projects in the UK. In 2003, the Young Roots programme was launched to support youth organisations aiming to engage young people in their local heritage. As 95% of Young Roots projects were run by organisations which had not previously received an HLF grant, the HLF saw the Young Roots programme as creating “rewarding new partnerships between the youth work and heritage sectors” (HLF, 2005, p.3).

A 2004-2005 evaluation report of the Young Roots programme that reviewed 69 previous projects commissioned by HLF pointed to three main learning outcomes from projects which engaged young people with their historical and cultural heritage:

“Project leaders felt that the main benefits to participants were that they learned new skills, increased their self-confidence and gained a greater understanding of heritage.” (HLF, 2005, p.5)

By giving the young people a greater sense of community, work experience and opportunities to meet people outside their age and peer group, project leaders considered that the Young Roots projects were having a positive impact on the community (HLF, 2005, p.5).

In Autumn 2006, Southend Vineyard, a Christian church affiliated to Vineyard Churches UK, applied for funding from the Young Roots programme of the Heritage Lottery Fund to conduct the ‘Re-form’ project. This project aimed to involve young people in thinking about their local heritage. By reconnecting young people with their heritage the project aimed to enable individuals to challenge the stereotype of ‘Essex boys/Essex girls’. Project funding was awarded at the end of 2006.

2. Aims

The Re-form project worked towards the following aims:

- To recruit young people from the Kursaal Ward of Southend to take part in the project
- Encourage young people to explore their perceptions of their cultural heritage
- Enable young people to interview the local community concerning their perceptions
- Enable young people to explore cultural heritage development in the surrounding counties and the historical cultural heritage

3. Methodology

Active project partners included United Reform Churches (URC) and the Enterprise Centre in Southend. The Research Centre at City College Norwich provided SOUL Record (Soft Outcomes Universal Learning) training and independent evaluation services.

From March 2007 to January 2008, the weekly Re-form project sessions were attended by young people from the Kursaal Ward of Southend-on-sea. During this time the young people learned about Southend's heritage and prepared questions for interviews with local people. Martin Astell from the Essex Records office and Graham Sweeney, a professional photographer, worked with the project to provide specialist support.

During August 2007, the Re-form group conducted over fifty interviews with local people of all ages on Southend High Street, sea front, Woodgrange estate, Priory Park, the Kursaal and Adventure Island. The young people used filming and audio-recording equipment to carry out the interviews. Film and audio commentary was edited together with photography of the local area using a computer.

On 3rd October 2007, the Re-form group presented their work on Southend's heritage to the Southend-on-Sea Youth Council and on 21st October to the Southend Vineyard. Further trips to the Essex Records Office and a tour of Basildon with Vin Harrop, Chair of the trustees of the Foundation for Essex Arts, provided further material for inclusion in the final presentation at the Southend Odeon on 10th January 2008.

This report summarises the data made available to The Research Centre, based at City College Norwich. These data included the project manager's records for each of the weekly sessions conducted with the young people, and data from anonymised SOUL Record questionnaires and worksheets completed by participants. In addition to these internal sources, The Research Centre also developed three different brief evaluation questionnaires to be completed by either parents/carers of the young people, teachers or other attendees present at the final presentation.

Further, more detailed background information on the young people was made available to The Research Centre by the project manager. This case study report

presented the diverse needs and social context of the young people involved in Re-form and showed how each individual benefited from the project. While awareness of this context was of use to the researchers in determining distance travelled by the group as a whole, ethical standards protecting the privacy and anonymity of the participants meant that the information was not suitable for general publication. Given the small number of young people and the diverse backgrounds involved, any attempt to present meaningful anonymous case studies would have made the young people immediately identifiable through their context and connections. Attempts to generalise away from presenting personal situations lessened the value of presenting the case studies at all.

3.1 Session Reports

The Re-form project manager recorded a written report after each session, including attendance data and descriptions of the activities and issues covered during the session. Attendance data was extracted from these reports. The text was analysed for recurring emergent themes concerning the impact of the project on the well-being and behaviour of the young people involved.

3.2 SOUL Record methodology

The SOUL Record is “a practical framework for measuring the progress of informal learning” (Research Centre, 2005). In the context of the SOUL Record ‘informal learning’ encompasses a wide range of personal development achievements (e.g. improved confidence, social skills and organisation) as well as non-accredited skill acquisition (e.g. from time and money management to filling in forms or health awareness). When performed more than once over a period of time, the SOUL Record can provide a numerical indicator of progress in soft outcome areas during the course of a project (Butcher *et al.*, 2006).

Interviews for project staff took place in March 2007 and SOUL training took place soon after. Two Re-form project staff were trained in the use of the SOUL Record before sessions took place, although one later withdrew from the project.

3.3 Final presentation (feedback)

Over the course of the Re-form project, the young people gathered video and audio recordings of their interviews and observations. These were edited together to form a documentary intended to ‘Challenge the Essex Image’. At the final presentation of

the documentary, the Research Centre distributed a 10 statement questionnaire tailored to the parents/carers and teachers of the young people involved with the project. Other attendees were asked to fill out a 6 statement questionnaire. The respondents were asked to agree or disagree with positive statements. The statements covered areas such as confidence, knowledge of the community, enjoyment of the project and levels of interest and interaction with others. The analysis is presented below.

3.4 Research ethics

The Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS) provided child protection training to a large number of attendees, including applicants for staff roles in the Re-form project, from URC, Millennium Volunteers, Centre Place Youth Club and the Enterprise Centre during the early part of 2007.

The Research Centre conformed to the latest ethical guidelines of City College Norwich. All data was held in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998) and any data included in the project report was anonymised and/or aggregated before presentation. Interviewees were asked for their informed consent before interviews took place, and only interviewed if consent had been given. Responding to a questionnaire was considered consent in itself. The participants had the right to withdraw at any time without prejudice.

4. Results

4.1 Re-form sessions

Twenty-eight young people were involved in Re-form sessions. However, half of these visited the sessions only once or twice, while a core group of 10 - 14 young people aged between 8 and 19 attended repeatedly throughout the year. Many of the young people attended the project with a sibling or in an established friendship group and new members over the course of the project often came to the group through family or friendship links.

The largest number to attend a single session was 14, while the average was 8. A gender bias was often recorded, with more girls than boys attending: on average, 2 boys to 6 girls attending a session. However, more boys attended regularly towards the end of the project than at the start, with the final session being attended by 5 boys and 9 girls.

During the weekly sessions the project workers recorded the progress of the project. The session reports were compiled by the project manager in a free text format. They summarised the activities and discussions that took place and any issues arising, from the viewpoint of the project management. The session report analysis, therefore, consisted of identification of recurrent emerging themes, in order to ensure as much value from the 'rich' data as possible.

Forty weekly sessional reports were analysed, revealing both positive (75%) and less positive (25%) recurring themes. The most common theme was that of the young people engaging in a constructive dialogue at a point in the session that could have provided conflict. Although there were a few instances of confrontational behaviour over the 40 Re-form sessions, the project workers introduced and promoted the idea of valuing others and engaging in dialogue as a more constructive alternative to disruptive behaviour.

Another of the emerging themes – a growing sense of group identity and willingness to support each other – helped motivate the young people to discuss issues. This group identity was evidenced by smaller points at the start, such as enthusiasm for wearing the Heritage Lottery t-shirts while on outings and the insistence on others being able to share the use of recording equipment equally. During the latter stages of the project, group identity became more obvious as the young people supported each other through preparing the documentary and giving presentations. Those with particular experience in using editing and media software supported and guided those who had less experience, and those who had concerns about public speaking or recording sound files were given encouragement and support by other young people.

Over the course of the project, the session reports documented many occasions on which the young people had taken an interest in new ideas and gained skills in a practical setting. This led the project team to perceive a greater level of self-esteem in the young people and the ability to explore their cultural and historical heritage more thoroughly. Through the introduction of photography, audio and visual recording techniques, as well as visits to the Essex Records office and areas of special historical value in Southend and other Essex towns, the young people were able to explore ideas beyond their everyday experience.

As the project progressed, the session reports indicated that the young people involved became more willing to disclose thoughts and feelings to the project workers and each other. The move from expressing feelings about the community and the opportunities in Southend on a more general level, to sharing more personal issues, showed a growing level of trust in the project workers and in the group. This level of trust was particularly evident when the young people invited local mental health workers (who they met on the day of the Youth Council presentation) to speak to the group. This session involved extensive discussions on difficult mental health subjects, held within the supportive environment of the group setting.

A common recurring theme to be extracted from the session reports was the growing confidence the young people in the group, displayed when interacting with people other than their peers. They carried out interviews on local heritage issues with 26 young people (18 or under) outside of their youth group and 28 people aged over 18. The session reports particularly noted the young people's attentive and respectful attitude to the older people they interviewed. These interviews were clearly valued by the young people and were given prominence in the finished documentary. The session reports noted that the use of interviewing techniques gave the group the confidence to approach a wide range of people and, therefore, be exposed to ideas on heritage outside of their usual range of experience.

While the session reports noted occasional points of confrontation or disruptive behaviour within the group, these were far outweighed by the positive themes discussed above. Rather than active confrontation, the most common negative issue was an initial lack of engagement and interest in new activities. However, this was often overcome by presenting a practical challenge or offering ownership of a particular area of the project to specific members of the group.

The need for both male and female project workers arose as a theme towards the end of the year, when the male participant left the project. This was mentioned on a number of occasions in connection with discipline and engagement issues. The young people involved felt that any continuation of the project should be supported by both male and female workers, and a number of the young men attempted to recruit volunteers for this post from within their circle of contacts. For any further project sessions this theme presents an important issue to be addressed.

4.2 SOUL Record Responses

SOUL Record questionnaires and worksheets were completed at the start of the project, after six months, and following the documentary screening three months later.

Session reports indicate that, while SOUL would ideally be used on a one-to-one basis, with the youth workers discussing and supporting the young person throughout completion of the questionnaire, this was not possible in the case of the Re-form project. Some of the young people were resistant to discussing personal thoughts and feelings and “decided as a group to fill them [the SOUL questionnaires] in privately” (Session report 4). Not all young people chose to participate and not all group members were present at each SOUL session. Analysis of the SOUL data provided in this report must be viewed with due consideration to the conditions under which data was gathered.

Questionnaires were only used to gather midpoint and final data so there was no baseline measure to compare these to. The worksheets used were also selected from both the young person and children sections of the SOUL Record. Different young people completed different sheets at different times throughout the project, thus the data collected were not consistent enough to draw quantitative results. However, it has been possible to draw out certain points of note.

The first sets of worksheets were completed just after the project began in April 2007. Responses were collected from five young people; two of whom were female. The remaining three sets were unidentified. The main worksheets completed were from the children’s and young person’s sections of the SOUL Record and were centred on the five main outcome areas of Every Child Matters (Research Centre, 2005). At this stage in the project, when the lack of written responses and the session reports suggested some of the young people were resistant to the idea of the SOUL questionnaire, the most consistent data came from the goals the young people set for themselves on the accompanying worksheets. The goals included:

“Listen to what others say without interrupting”

“Work more effectively as part of a team”

“Be more relaxed in conversation with those I don’t know or I don’t know very well”

“To be more concentrated on and focused with people when they are speaking to me or explaining things”

The next set of SOUL Record data was gathered in October 2007 with five completed sets of worksheets and six completed questionnaires from the Young Person’s section of the SOUL Record. All worksheets and questionnaires were completed by females. On this occasion, the goals identified were more project specific, such as “see a change by what we have already done” or personal goals about wanting to do even more with the project, for example “get involved a lot more”.

The final set of SOUL Record responses was completed following the final Re-form presentation evening, in January 2008. Seven completed questionnaires were received with five of the seven having completed a SOUL questionnaire or worksheet for the first time. Five responses were from females and two responses were received from males of the group.

It was clear from the manner of completion that the young people responded to the final questionnaire with greater focus and consideration than given to the worksheets from a year earlier. While there was no means of comparing scores over time, the analysis noted that the highest average score was in the area of ‘Making a Positive Contribution’. This area encompasses the statements:

*“I care about the environment
I help around the house
I treat people with respect
I usually try to help other people”* (Research Centre, 2005)

These statements relate to outward-looking aspects of the young person’s interaction with society, the main focus of this project. Average scores for the remaining sections were highest for ‘Staying Safe’, followed by ‘Economic Wellbeing’, ‘Enjoying and Achieving’ and ‘Being Healthy’.

4.3 Feedback from the final presentation

Approximately 70 people attended the final presentation of the Re-form documentary held on 10th January 2008 at Southend Odeon Cinema. These included the young people themselves, their parents/carers, siblings, teachers, specialists who had provided support during the project, representatives of the project partners and local organisations and members of the public.

After the viewing, all were invited back to the offices of Southend Vineyard for an awards presentation and buffet. At this time, they were asked to give feedback on the documentary and the Re-form project itself. The three questionnaires available were slightly different for teachers, parents/carers and other attendees.

Staff from the Research Centre were present at the event and noted the exceptional enthusiasm shown for giving feedback on both the documentary presentation and the project itself. While response rates to questionnaires were often low, the Re-form feedback managed a high response rate: with 22 questionnaire responses from approximately 56 attendees (this number does not include the young people themselves, who completed SOUL questionnaire feedback, or Research Centre staff). The achieved response rate was almost 40%, with many of these including extensive positive comments on the questionnaires. It should also be stated that a number of the attendees were present in family groups and in some cases the feedback questionnaires were completed by one member of the group with input from the other members.

Four of the teachers who attended completed a feedback form. All were entirely positive about the project, agreeing with all of the positive statements from the questionnaire listed below:

*“The young person I teach...
...has gained confidence from participating in the Re-form project
...knows more about their community because of the project
...can communicate their ideas better after taking part in the project
...is more engaged at school / college after taking part in the project
...is more interested in continuing education after taking part in the project
...is achieving better results after taking part in the project
...attends more often after taking part in the project
The project has had a positive impact on the young person I teach.”*

The teachers also provided a number of independent comments, mostly referring to the impact the project has had:

“The project has really made a difference to the young peoples life. WELL DONE.”

“The project has been fantastic for the kids.”

“I really think the project has had a positive impact on the young person I teach.”

"I think it is an excellent way to engage young people and help them develop and learn outside the classroom."

Four parents/carers questionnaires were returned, although it was observed by Research Centre staff that more parents/carers sat down in the feedback area to complete a questionnaire. Therefore, it was likely that a number of the parents/carers completed 'Attendees' questionnaires, without realising a fuller parents/carer questionnaire was available.

The parents/carers who responded all agreed with 7 of the 8 positive statements on the questionnaire:

*"The young person I care for...
...has gained confidence from participating in the Re-form project
...knows more about their community because of the project
...can communicate their ideas better after taking part in the project
...has met a wide range of people through the Re-form project
...enjoys attending the Re-form project
...has new interests because of the Re-form project
The project has had a positive impact on the young person I care for."*

The only statement that did not receive 100% agreement was "The young person I care for tells me about the things they have done with the Re-form project", which one respondent (out of four) disagreed with.

The parents and carers provided positive comments about the enjoyment the young people had felt at being part of the project:

"[Young person's name] loves coming and I think it's a wonderful opportunity for kids to express themselves."

"[Young person's name] really enjoyed taking part with this project."

"After watching the film I now know what my daughter finds enjoyable with Re-form."

Fourteen further attendees completed the briefer questionnaire, which included the statements:

*"I think the young people involved...
...have gained confidence from participating in the Re-form project
...knows more about their community because of the project
...can communicate their ideas well
The project has had a positive impact on the young people involved."*

All (100%) of the respondents agreed with the positive statements above. They were also asked to comment first on the film presentation and then on the project itself.

Comments relating to the documentary focussed on two points. A number of attendees found the film:

“Very professional and well put together.....”

Many of the respondents commented on the strong and original message of the film presentation:

“There was a distinctive message for both young and old.”

“Excellent, original, unique!”

“Definitely a powerful presentation!”

“There are so many important messages in the film for the Council and people of Southend.”

This last comment also highlights another aspect of the feedback. The film contends that the young people really do want to do something positive with their lives and challenge the Essex image, but for this they would need further support, youth projects and resources, which they currently do not receive. Many respondents felt the message of this film should receive a wider audience in the community. Attendees commented on the message:

“To learn about ‘their’ town/county in this way enables them to communicate what they feel – and what they say makes some of us uncomfortable. The film should be essential viewing to all those with authority over the way that Southend develops in the future.”

“An excellent idea and carries a strong message to the local council to supply more funding for youth projects. Could form a template for any major town.”

Furthermore, some of the attendees were struck by the emotional impact of the film:

“I think you should have more to encourage people to help their community. It was quite touching.”

“It promoted the feeling that I should help in some way.”

Final comments praised the quality and the value of the project for the community:

“Very worthwhile, fantastic project.”

“Well worthwhile project. Great for the youngsters. You can see the pride in their faces at the presentation.”

“An excellent, well-thought out idea to get young people involved, working as a team and gaining confidence in their abilities.”

“I think the Re-form project was a really good idea. I think you should keep doing this and then it will help Essex.”

As the previous statements show, the audience for the Re-form ‘Challenge the nation’ documentary clearly valued the work of the Re-form project and was enthusiastic for the young people’s views and findings to be more widely disseminated to those with authority over the future of Southend. Many also hoped that the project would continue in some form.

5. Conclusions

The Re-form project appeared to achieve the first three of its stated aims. The young people of the project were recruited from the Kursaal Ward of Southend, and by the end of the sessions a core group of 10 – 14 young people had become deeply involved in the exploration of heritage promoted by the project. This exploration of heritage included discussion, talks, trips and tours of heritage sites in and around Southend.

The young people were facilitated in the aim of interviewing the local community concerning general perceptions of Southend’s heritage. They gained valuable communication skills as well as practical experience of using audiovisual recording equipment. Project staff and volunteers were particularly impressed by the range of age groups the young people chose to interview.

The young people were able to present their findings in a documentary that was shown at Southend Odeon. The documentary was copied to DVD and was made available to a wider audience.

Concerning the fourth stated aim, there was little evidence in the session reports to indicate that the young people actively explored the cultural heritage of surrounding counties during the year-long Re-form project. While the sessions included trips to towns outside Southend, no trips outside Essex were undertaken. However, it was clear that the skills gained by the young people during the Re-form project would

enable them in any exploration of cultural and historical heritage outside of Essex in the future, if they so desired. In this way the Re-form project provided the springboard for fulfilment of the fourth stated aim, rather than the direct achievement of it.

Questionnaire feedback after the documentary showed how families, teachers and other involved parties appreciated both the effort and commitment of the young people to challenging the Essex stereotype, but also how they valued the impact of the project on the young people themselves. This feedback, alongside analysis of the SOUL Record data and session reports, indicated that the Re-form project had also provided enrichment to the well-being and outlook of the young people beyond the remit of the stated aims. This extra value came in the form of increased confidence and a sense of group identity, as well as the perception amongst teachers that some of the young people were more engaged with formal education as a result of the project.

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