

# Building on the positives

Open College Network Northern Ireland CEO Brendan Clarke and Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre Programmes Manager Louise Ormsby explain how the centre is building resilience, skills capacity and social capital in young learners in custody through new qualifications being used by the social care team.



Brendan Clarke



Louise Ormsby

The Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCN NI) has had a long association with the prison education system here through its accreditation of local customised programmes tailored to the learning needs of inmates at Magheraberry and Magilligan. New relationships with Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre have supported curriculum led innovations aimed at supporting individual outcomes of young people in periods of custody at the centre.

“OCN NI’s progression and personal development qualifications are credit based and flexible and are made up from a corpus of several hundred units, the Programmes Department have found them useful in contributing to new developments in the school’s ‘pro-social’ curriculum,” explains Brendan Clarke CEO at OCN NI. “Research within and across educational environments over

recent years has yielded significant proof that educational attainment can be promoted through cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Boesel, Alsalam, and Smith 1998). We have been able to provide Woodlands’ social care staff with an opportunity to recognise and measure the value of their engagement with the young people and to dovetail their learning and development with the main school curriculum and to complement their suite of cognitive skills qualifications.”

Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre , which forms part of the Youth Justice Agency’s custodial Services Directorate, has a focused approach to addressing the needs of young people who find themselves at variance with society and in custodial care for periods of time leaving them outside the state education system. These periods of absence can compound the young offenders’ problems by

interrupting formal education leading to a loss of learning and achievement. In many cases other non-cognitive losses also take place undermining motivation, determination, other skills which strengthen social interaction and a sense of responsibility and belonging. Woodlands staff make a significant contribution to restoring these potential losses and the damage to the social fabric that they cause. The Directorate’s agenda is to promote the young people’s engagement in pro-social activities in order to develop a better life balance and assist in providing direction to enable them to desist from crime.

Such an approach supports the social capital (Putnam 2000) principle which proposes that the value of social interaction is based on trust, without which, the social fabric holding communities together breaks down and individuals lose their sense of belonging and social problems manifest themselves in terms of crime and disharmony. Indeed this theme is consistent with some aspects of the new school curriculum topics on citizenship and diversity being offered in pre and post primary schools across Northern Ireland.

As a way of adding value and benefit to the behavioural activities conducted by the social care team, Woodlands Programmes Manager, Louise Ormsby has introduced courses to the group work sessions which complement the centre’s formal school curriculum. The courses in different aspects of personal development are accredited by Open College Network Northern Ireland and sit on the National Qualification Framework. “During the ‘school day’ the social care team schedule group work and

behavioural sessions to build skills and capabilities to personal development. The group work programme sits within the educational timetable. This is where the value of the OCN lies. We are now able to accredit learning and skills development at this level where previously we were not. The flexibility in the OCN NI units makes assessment more straightforward and has made the staff – young person engagement a more positive and beneficial experience. Constructing learning opportunities has been transparent, inclusive and non-stigmatising. In fact, our young people see the academic value of these learning sessions; when they can achieve an OCN NI qualification it motivates them to do further OCN NI or other qualifications.”

Louise adds, “The sessions build on the ‘Good Lives Model’ which focuses on skills and capabilities and on having a good life. The units help to provide the vehicle for positive aspirations and the units appeal to the learner’s real life experience, hopes and aspirations.”

“The main achievement of the Programmes Department, thanks to the



optimism, future-orientedness. The benefits of this cannot be undervalued.”

OCN NI’s Quality and Programmes Manager, Simon Hamilton explains that the courses have a national measurable value and enable learners to gain formal recognition while taking part in non-cognitive skills activity. “There is a great

assess learner skills development and validate the group session activity in a measurable way. This can have its own motivating value for lost or disaffected learners. There are a number of positives here, not only for the learners, but for the social care team as well in that we have helped them to maintain and support learning with units that focus on approach goals not avoidance goals and these fit well with the Woodlands’ application of the ‘Good Lives Model’.”



Louise Ormsby concludes, “This is about more than second chance learning, it is about restoring lost learners and maintaining learning and in some cases allowing young people ‘to walk before they can run’ in terms of developing their engagement with education and learning outside the school setting. Ultimately these young people will leave custodial care and return to their communities and everyday life. The aim is to help them to reconnect to systems within their communities. This can only happen if young people have the best opportunity to gain respect and self-respect. The social care staff at Woodlands have positioned the young people to get the added value of a broader curriculum and to enjoy achieving as a part of that.”

commitment of the social care workers, has been to embed into Woodlands, a culture of group-work and facilitation activity which sits alongside and complements the ‘school day’. We have been able to use these accredited sessions to focus the young people and to develop their non-cognitive skills in motivation, persistence, self-esteem,

flexibility and valency in our progression and personal development qualifications which adds to their appeal across different sectors and for different providers and learners. The bite-sized learning approach being used by Louise’s team means that the qualifications could be introduced to the group session activities allowing group facilitators to

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