

## Foundation 4 Life: A Transformative approach to Community Education

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Learning shapes subjectivities, subjectivities shape identities, and identities shape enactments that allow for different types of agency. (Moje & Lewis, 2007, p. 10).

I am very grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Journal of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia. In writing this essay, I am reflecting on *Foundation 4 Life 'A Transformative Life Skills, Education and Job Activation Programme' for Young People* I developed with my colleague Catherine McCloskey of South West Mayo Development Company CLG in 2017. We wanted to develop a programme that would genuinely support young people to accomplish their full potential. We look forward to further developing the model for application both nationally and internationally and for the purpose of this essay will outline the key programme approaches.

*Foundation 4 Life* (F4L) is a tailored education, life skills and job activation programme for disengaged young people aged between 18 and 25 who are not in employment, education or training (NEETs) in Co Mayo, Ireland. F4L supports young people utilising a step-by-step, staged educational approach incorporating a range of innovative accredited and unaccredited learning modules designed to meet diverse learning needs. The programme content is complemented by 'wrap-around' supports including intensive individual mentoring, supportive goal-setting and follow-up sessions upon completion of the course. Access to learning is enabled through robust supports including contributions to childcare, travel and the provision of nutritious meals.

F4L was conceived by South West Mayo Development Company CLG (SWMDC) under the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP), in partnership the Western Region Drug and Alcohol

Task Force (WRDATF). Since its inception F4L has enlivened the collaborative efforts of multiple agencies and stakeholders that work with disengaged young people. F4L has a 95% programme completion rate with 73% of participants progressing to either employment, education or training since the programme began in 2017. Young people Not in Employment, Education or Training have been referred to as NEETs since the 1990s. The term NEET is widely used internationally in the absence of an alternative term that is recognised by youth workers and policy maker's alike (Ewan et al., 2012).

There are three main contextual factors associated with young people failing to succeed in education and employment. They include under-achievement, family disadvantage and family poverty (Ewan et al., 2012). The longer one remains NEET the greater the challenges. In this perspective, Gardner et al. (2017) highlights some consequences of being long term NEET: *poorer well-being; increased risk behaviour, reduced earning potential, and reduced employability*. F4L activities, underpinned by a person centred ethos, offer immediate needs-based and direct supports to this cohort of young people. This is entirely aligned with the contemporary national and international evidence for efficacious interventions with NEET young people. In developing any programme engaging NEETs, evidence suggests the importance of a multi component approach. The OECD (2016) advocates a multi-agency approach in this regard:

*Comprehensive support for young people with multiple barriers requires various different actors to work together. For a 360-degree view of a young person's individual, social and educational attributes and circumstances, all the parties involved should share their knowledge and expertise. (p 49)*

F4L is grounded in the core conditions of the person-centred approach including genuineness, empathy and unconditional positive regard. This approach which is aligned with the core programme values of compassion, respect and non-judgment creates a safe, inclusive and ultimately transformative environment. These key person-centred concepts that place the young person at the centre of all helping encounters lie at the heart of, and underpin all aspects of the F4L programme. F4L, as a structured programme, *“unlock the potential of young people who find themselves outside of education, employment or training.”* (Ewan et al., 2012, p. 13) by

utilizing the key elements of:

- **Recruitment:** A youth work approach to recruitment which may include street work, networking within communities and developing partnerships with other agencies;
- **Learning Environment:** A need based, flexible approach to learning is crucial including group work, discussion based activities and ensuring the young person is an active participant in the learning process;
- **Support:** A peer and individual mentoring system with individual goal-setting, pastoral care and practical support systems;
- **Structure:** A small step-by-step, staged approach with modules that have credit value to suit the varied learning needs of the young person;

**Follow-up:** A sign posting and post programme support system which ensures young people continue to engage with education, training or employment.

F4L is designed to enhance the young people's confidence, to enable them to make better choices about their future and to increase their opportunities to find work, education or training. In a recent good practice report on working with NEETS, (Gardner et al., 2017) highlights that wellbeing is critical for engaging in employment and education and that poorer wellbeing can have significant impacts on families, deepen exclusion and deprivation and limit capacity to progress.

Most professionals agree that having a good working relationship with young people is desirable. Within a person centred approach workers utilise the interpersonal relationship as a key tool to help people feel more comfortable, ease communication, break down barriers and reduce reluctance to engage with programmes (O'Shea et al., 2017). Koloroutis (2004) describe it as

the essence of care in the moment when one human being connects to another. When compassion and care are conveyed through...a kind act, through competent ... interventions, or through listening and seeking to understand the other's experience, a healing relationship is created.

(pp. 4-5)

There is significant confirmation (Simmons et. al., 2011) that actively including young people in decision making around their mental health and social needs fosters better involvement and enhanced engagement. Within this context, it is noteworthy that less directive approaches appear to demonstrate better outcomes than more authoritarian styles when working with vulnerable populations (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

However, for many workers, particularly those in busy settings, they may feel that they don't have time for this 'softly-softly' approach. We may well hear comments that they are far too busy for this 'kid-glove' approach, instead favouring a more prescriptive, directive intervention which is activity rather than process focused and highly outcome driven. So, 'why bother with this softer approach'? Well, the answer is in the evidence; not alone are these aspirations noble, but they are essential for successful outcomes (O'Shea et al., 2017).

So what does the Person Centred approach look like in practice with young people? Within a person-centred approach young people can expect to be involved in planning their care, so that interventions match their needs. The Person Centred Approach does exactly what the name says – it puts the young person at the centre of their own care (Children Outcome Research Consortium, 2020).

F4L envisions that young people will be respected and supported to achieve their life goals. F4L's overarching objectives traverse psychological, psycho-educational, social and occupational domains but the core mission of the programme is to create a space where young people feel safe, valued and respected. Through a focus on personal growth and development, we support young people to improve their life skills and become more ready for employment and further education.

The programme coordinators and facilitator's relationships with young people are based upon the core values of the programme. All team members embrace an authentic, positive 'can-do' attitude. This assists in breaking down barriers to participation and supports young people to overcome the day-to-day challenges that they face. The approach includes listening, emotional 'hand holding', coaching and advocating which enables the young

people to grow and blossom, and supports them in reaching their full potential. F4L helps to make the 'invisible more visible' by enabling them to become more confident, ready, willing and able to participate in further education and employment.

A common challenge facing many of these stakeholders is reaching out to, and maintaining engagement with young people. F4L delivers a comprehensive and holistic suite of programmes and supports to vulnerable young people in three phases over 10 months:

- Phase 1, January-March: Identification and engagement with potential participants
- Phase 2, March-June: On-site, module and activity-based programme delivery
- Phase 3, June-October: Follow-on progression support on an individual needs basis

The on-site component of the programme is delivered 2 days per week, over 14 weeks, in informal settings. Each year the programme assists 20 young people, with 55 young people participating over the 3-year pilot phase. F4L supports these people by using a small step, staged approach, blending certified, accredited and unaccredited modules to suit diverse learning needs. Programme content is complemented with individual and group support and mentoring. A broad range of modules are delivered across three domains of development: confidence-building, life skills and job readiness. Here is a summary of F4L modules.

- Team Building
- Learning to Drive Safely
- Communication Skills development
- Sleep Hygiene and Self-care
- Sexual Health Education
- Driving Theory Test Preparation

- Youth Active Leadership Training
- Culinary Education
- First Aid Training
- Customer Service Training
- Manual Handling Training
- Prime 4 Life - Drug Education
- Progression Pathways
- CV development and Mock Interviews
- 1 week work Placement

A comprehensive 3 year pilot phase evaluation highlights F4L consistently recruited and retained difficult-to-reach young people who had not previously been engaged in employment, education or training. With overall retention rates of 95%, F4L has demonstrated its capacity to engage meaningfully with hard-to-reach young people. Progression pathways are also strong with 73% of participants advancing to either employment, education or training (Doody, 2020).

Doody (2020) demonstrates a range of positive wellbeing outcomes for participants with analysis of data from wellbeing measures showing that there was an average of 21% increase in subjective experience of wellbeing. The data shows significant increases in wellbeing in the following areas: feeling relaxed (34%), interested in new things (32%), 'feeling good about myself' (31%), optimistic about the future (30%), feeling close to other people (29%), feeling cheerful (28%) and feeling confident (25%). The study also demonstrates improvements in motivation to progress onto education and employment, and broadening of horizons, with a better awareness of opportunities, indicating that F4L's broad range of modules and content develop and expand their skills across a range of connecting domains: job skills; life skills; interpersonal skills.

Reengaging with any educational process is difficult, even more so for

those most vulnerable. What we have found is that young people respond to genuiness and realness and the creation of authentic spaces. I will sign off with a F4L programme quote

*Life is like cycling a bicycle, we all fall off at some point, however most of us get up unscathed and cycle on. The Foundation 4 Life programme supports those who struggle for lots of different reasons to get back up on the bicycle again. (South West Mayo np)*

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