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The troubled teenagers who've swapped gang culture for chess

Violence blights many inner-city schools, but a scheme to end the bloodshed begins soon. Steve McCormack sees the From Boyhood to Manhood Foundation at work

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Let's face it; a church hall is probably the last place you'd expect to find a group of teenagers who've been mixed up in gang culture. To find them sitting in a circle, indulging in a spot of basic yoga, is even more surprising.

But try telling that to the From Boyhood to Manhood Foundation, an educational programme based in St George's Church in Peckham, one of the worst areas for gun and knife crime in London. It has been so successful in turning round the lives of violent teenagers excluded from local schools that it was commissioned to produce the materials at the heart of a big new anti-gun campaign to be launched in London schools in a few weeks' time.

Calling the Shots is a series of teaching resources, slickly put together, commissioned by every agency that matters in the quest to change London teenagers' attitudes towards guns and violence. It is endorsed by the Mayor, Ken Livingstone, and by the Metropolitan Police's specialist anti-gun crime unit, Trident. The education minister, Lord Adonis, known to have a short cut to the Prime Minister's ear, is expected to underline the Government's support when he officially launches the initiative next month.

The lessons, including up-to-date and relevant video footage and linked to a number of national curriculum areas, have already been successfully piloted in about a dozen London schools.

The credibility of the materials shone through in one student's comment. "I didn't think you would be talking about us," he said. Another commented that "it made me think". Teachers observed that the lessons had managed to engage the attention of groups of normally obstinate teenagers.

The content of Calling the Shots was largely written by Uanu Seshmi, the foundation's director. In writing the material, he drew heavily on the experiences of the teenage boys for whom the foundation has proved a successful last resort after successive expulsions from mainstream education institutions. The foundation's work is now attracting the attention of educational professionals searching for a reliable formula to reform the growing numbers of violent, angry teenagers.

At the beginning of my day there, I found the boys sitting in a circle with Seshmi and the other adult staff, engaged in simple breathing and stretching exercises, as a prelude to a discussion on issues affecting their lives; diet, exercise, drugs and sex.

All of the five boys had been expelled from school, and some were also excluded from the pupil referral units designed to deal with the toughest cases. Their faces are well known to the police.

They encapsulate the extreme end of the two intertwined and intractable problems that continue to stalk the school political agenda - worsening behaviour and increasing truancy rates.

But, this morning, these teenagers conform to neither stereotype. First, they've turned up, as they do every day. And second, their behaviour is as unthreatening as the members of the Brownie pack who use the same hall at a different time of the week.

"We're dealing with the worst of the worst," says Seshmi, who set up the foundation a decade ago as a response to the growing number of black teenage boys excluded from education and rapidly becoming entangled in the culture of drugs, gangs and violence that scars much of the locality. A short walk from the centre is the spot where the 10-year-old Damilola Taylor died five years ago from the wounds of a knife attack by a local gang.

But the grimness of the area's history, and its continued well-earned reputation for violence, could not contrast more starkly with the success this centre has had in persuading young people to turn away from malign influences and re-shape their lives.

Corey, 16, is as good an example of this as you could wish to encounter. Excluded from a tough comprehensive in Peckham a couple of years ago for hitting a teacher twice, he was sent to the Willowbank referral unit in Southwark, which deals with some of the worst-behaved pupils in the borough. His temper got the better of him there as well, and another solution had to be sought.

That's when he came to this centre, about a year ago. Since then, he says, his life has changed. "Now I care about myself, my family and my friends. It's shown me that there is more to life than crime."

He's learnt to play chess, and he challenges me to a game over lunch. As he concentrates on pinning me back (metaphorically) in my half of the board, his face is a study of concentration and serenity. And the gentle smile that flashes across the table as he mops up the second of my bishops speaks volumes about how much this former angry young man has changed. He's hoping to start a car mechanics course at college soon.

Hundreds like Corey have passed through the centre in the past decade. Most are coaxed back into a more responsible way of life. More than half of them, after a 12- or 24-week spell, end up going back to school or on to a further education college to start training.

But no one pretends this is easy. It takes a high input of adult time and a lot of patience before attitudes and behaviour can change. Niggling minor disputes - about wearing hats and hoodies, texting during discussion sessions and wanting to sleep rather than work - are part of the daily routine. But serious flare-ups are unknown.

"The most important thing is that these young people have the opportunity to examine and reflect on their own behaviour," explains Seshmi.

The day mixes classroom-style lessons, given by qualified teachers, with group sessions probing the life experiences that have moulded the young people.

A prominent theme centres on the view they have of themselves, because it's widely accepted that, beneath the skin of most teenagers going off the rails, is an individual with low self-esteem. Build that back up and behaviour can change.

Most boys at the centre freely admit to a problem controlling their anger, and among the activities used to get aggression out of their adolescent bodies is boxing. So, every now and then, the boys and their adult leaders don gloves and head-guards and spar with each other, or beat merry hell out of a bulky punch bag, to let off steam. All of these elements combine to enable steady progress to be made and academic work to be done. In an English lesson I sat in on, earnest efforts were being made to master grammar and punctuation.

The centre is now recognised as a special school, with a glowing report from Ofsted, and it is also an official AQA examination centre, enabling the boys to sit their GCSEs.

The work of the foundation is certainly valued by teachers in local mainstream schools. Helen Webb, a senior teacher at Archbishop Michael Ramsay Technical College, a local comprehensive, speaks highly of the effect the foundation has had on two 14-year-old boys who spent three months there earlier this year.

"We had to exclude them because their behaviour was too difficult to manage," she recalls. "But when they came back they did well in their national curriculum tests, and this term we've seen a change in attitude. They're more self-assured, have more self-esteem, and have a desire to succeed."

Other "graduates" stay on to help younger boys. Edmond, now 21, was referred to the foundation after an armed robbery conviction when he was 16. "That was the best thing that happened to me," he recalls. "If I'd have gone to prison, I'd never have learnt what I have here."

Now Edmond works as a peer mentor at the centre, as well as studying A-levels at a local college. His presence, and subtly delivered words of guidance and support, appear of immeasurable worth.

The foundation's finances, though, are fragile. Schools that officially refer pupils pay £50 a day, but students who come off their own back carry no funding. Other money comes in as a result of short-term contracts; for example, with the Connexions

careers service, or for the work done in producing Calling the Shots.

With more funds, the foundation could afford to employ more teachers and provide better resources. A recent report, commissioned by the Government, lent support by arguing that the foundation provides excellent value, through cost savings to the criminal justice system, by diverting people away from crime.

Stories like that of Kane, 15, strengthen the case. Thrown out of school for threatening someone with a saw, and routinely in the habit of carrying knives, he now carries nothing more dangerous than a boxing glove, thanks to three weeks at the centre.

"I've woken up from my sleep," he says. "There are better things to do than cause trouble."

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