the children's research centre

(in conjunction with Special Education Project, St. Vincent's Trust)

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Special Education Project (SEP)

St Vincent's Trust

Evaluation Review

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the children's research centre

The Children's Research Centre was set up in Trinity College Dublin in September 1995 and is committed to researching children's needs and to undertaking evaluation of children's programmes and services. The Centre has a particular commitment to undertaking research and evaluation under the general theme *Children in Disadvantaged Communities*.

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st. vincent's trust

Since 1976 St. Vincent's Trust has provided a range of educational, training, counselling and social development programmes for local disadvantaged young people. The Trust operates a FAS-funded Community Training Workshop and supports vocational preparation training as an alternative to formal education for school-leavers who are past the legal school-leaving age of fifteen years. The Trust also operates the Special Education Project (SEP) which is funded as a school by the Department of Education and Science.

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foreword

St. Vincent's Trust, Henrietta Street, Dublin, under the direction of the Daughters of Charity, has worked for over twenty years to provide education and training for young people residing in the north inner city, whose special needs were not being adequately served by mainstream education and training programmes. The project which is the subject of this report came into existence on the initiative of the Trust with the financial support of the Department of Education and Science.

Educational disadvantage is a complex phenomenon which has got much attention on both sides of the Atlantic since the end of the Second World War. Governments and philanthropic organisations have devoted considerable time and resources to counteracting some of its more damaging effects. In Ireland, the Department of Education and Science has taken a number of initiatives designed to enhance the scholastic performance of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Schemes of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage have been introduced with a view to providing additional teaching and material resources for schools selected by reference to a number of factors believed to be associated with poor educational performance. Further development of these schemes has taken place in schools in which the risk of educational failure is thought to be particularly high, for example, the Home School Community Liaison Scheme has been introduced into a number of primary and second-level schools and class size has been reduced to 15 in the junior classes of some primary schools under a programme entitled Breaking the Cycle. A preschool programme, under the title of Early Start, has been introduced into forty primary schools. Prior to that, specific initiatives had been taken including the adaptation of the curriculum and the provision of remedial teachers in order to provide additional support for children with special learning needs.

There is a general satisfaction among the staff of schools selected for these special schemes with the immediate effect of increased resources on the children's development. For obvious reasons, the long-term effect of educational interventions, both here and abroad, is more difficult to estimate. What is clear is that a substantial minority of children from disadvantaged backgrounds still find themselves at odds with the educational system at a time when a higher or further educational qualification is almost an essential requirement for entry into the labour market.

One of the distinguished features of the present project is that it is designed for young people who no longer participate in the regular school system. In fact, only young people who are no longer attending school are eligible to be selected for the project. It was set up in September 1995, on a pilot basis for three years. This report, which presents the findings of an evaluation of the first two years of the pilot phase of the project, was commissioned by the Board of Management of the project and conducted by The Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, with financial assistance from the Combat Poverty Agency.

It is abundantly clear from the report that the project has been successful in terms of its effect on the participants - for the first time in their lives they expressed satisfaction with their educational experience. This is a remarkable tribute to the staff (3 full-time with part-time assistance) whose dedication

and skill evoked a response from previously unmotivated young people. It is regrettable that more complete descriptions of programme content and pedagogy do not exist. In fact this is one of the weaknesses which the report finds in the project. It states: "The project does not have clear statements of objectives, programme outlines..."and again"...the project lacks mechanisms for supporting staff and for managing, developing, implementing and reviewing its educational programme." It should be noted that these are issues relating not to the quality of the interaction between staff and participants but to the relative lack of support systems outside the classroom to which the staff could turn for guidance. It should also be noted that the same issues arise in other more extensive intervention projects in Irish education.

Education is commonly held to be an important element in the solution to a range of social problems. In the case of the participants in this project, the problem was one of growing disenchantment with the regular education system resulting in departure from it at above the age of thirteen. An urgent solution was required in the interests of the children immediately involved. The fact that arrangements to provide a service had to be made very quickly may explain why most of the additional resources were allocated to programme implementation, with comparatively little being made available for programme support. This may be the opportune time to redress this imbalance.

The project comes to the end of its pilot phase at the end of the current (1997/98) school year. If the project is to continue beyond that both the Department of Education and Science and St. Vincent's Trust must come to an agreement about its long-term future. The question of resources inevitably arises. As things stand, the cost of a place on the project is substantially higher than the average unit cost of a place in the general education system but substantially lower than the cost of a place in special residential units run by the Department of Education and Science. To that extent, the project is relatively resource intensive, yet the report recommends the allocation of still more resources. The future of the project depends on a reasonable balance being struck between what local management feels the project needs and what national authorities feel can be made available. The fact that the project seems to have real potential to contribute to the development of national policy on early school leaving may be a catalyst in the discussions.

Seamus Holland
Member of the Board of Management

origins

The Special Educational Project (SEP) was set up in 1995 on a three year pilot basis, by agreement between St. Vincent's Trust and the Department of Education and Science (Special Education Section). The SEP targets children aged 13 and 14 years who have become involved in minor delinquency or who are at risk of doing so and who have become alienated from the mainstream school system. The project is located alongside St. Vincent's Trust, Henrietta Street, which since 1976 has provided a range of educational, training, counselling and social development programmes for local disadvantaged young people aged 15-18 years. The programmes are now provided in a FAS-funded Community Training Workshop through a scheme for supporting vocational preparation training as an alternative to formal education for school-leavers who are past the legal school-leaving age of fifteen years. The workshop has a current capacity of sixty participants.

Arising out of the operation of the training workshop the Trust increasingly came into contact with young people who were out-of-school and who had not reached school-leaving age and who arrived at the workshop seeking to avail of its services. The Trust, becoming aware of the needs of this group and of the multiple social risks they are exposed to, explored a number of options for setting up a separate programme. The essential idea was that this new programme could both provide a safe, semi-structured educational setting for the young people and also help them to prepare to participate in the main programme when they reached the appropriate age.

In 1994 the Trust submitted a formal proposal to the Department of Education and Science to fund a special school to operate this new programme. The school was constituted in the same way as other schools, with a Patron (Catholic Archbishop of Dublin), Trustees (Daughters of Charity) and Board of Management (St. Vincent's Trust director, St. Vincent's Trust chairperson, SEP principal and a retired civil servant) and Department of Education and Science teaching staff (a principal who was recruited, on a secondment basis, from Nth. William Street primary schools - also operated by Daughters of Charity - and the project teacher who was recruited by the Board of management in an open competition). The level of teaching staff is consistent with Department of Education and Science support for other alternative schools (Youth Encounter Projects) although the SEP's small scale and size has limited its capacity to attract similar levels of non-teacher supports as other alternative schools. The Board of Management is the minimum required and does not include parent and/or community members. The SEP commenced operating at the start of the 1995-'96 school year and at the time of writing has been operating for two academic years.

Halfway through the second year 1996-'97 the project's Board of Management decided to undertake an interim review of the project's work. In addition to providing basic information on the project's progress, achievements and future development it was hoped that this review would help to identify matters of policy and practice relating to the general issues of educational disadvantage and early school-leaving. The overall aims of this review are to document and review the SEP's progress to date, to assess the appropriateness of the project as an intervention for its defined target group, to draw out

its key policy and practice lessons and to make recommendations in relation to the project's further development and its procedures for ongoing evaluation.

Data for the review was collected from focused individual interviews with each member of staff and Board of Management, individual interviews with participant children, files and records stored in the project, observations of project activities and contacts with Department of Education and Science (Special Education Section) and a school attendance officer for the area in which the project is located. Interviews were conducted by Barry Cullen, programme director at The Children's Research Centre and assisted by Mareike Kunter a psychology student at University of Wurzburg, Germany. Ms. Kunter undertook a two week participant observation of the project.

The review is organised under the following five section headings:

1   Project outline

2   Procedures for referral, intake and review

3   Project links, personal and social supports

4   Structures for decision-making, planning, monitoring and review

5   Overview and recommendations

1 project outline

Essentially, the SEP operates as a school. It has the status of a school - its funding, structures, arrangements for insurance and supervision of children while in attendance are typical of other schools, albeit on a much smaller scale. The project has no more than twelve students attending at any one time. Since it commenced the project has had 26 students on the books and at the time they enrolled their average age was 13.8 years

The school premises consisting of one medium-sized and one small classroom, a small office and a medium-sized kitchen, is located at the rear of St. Vincent's Trust, on Henrietta Street (a Georgian cobble-stoned street of historical significance located at the rear of King's Inn in the north west inner city of Dublin). Access is through the controlled entrance of St. Vincent's Trust, out the back door and a short walk of fifty paces. The project badly needs separate space for playground, sports and other activities. It also lacks a staff room and a staff toilet.

The project's programme and timetable is as in other primary schools. The project is not open during evenings or weekends. Unlike other schools the project is not restricted to a specific educational curriculum. From its outset the project has had the freedom to experiment and develop its own programme. Essentially, the project has emerged as a response to a particular group of young people whose needs are seen as special and the developing educational programme is seen as reflecting this.

From its outset the project has dealt with 26 children all of whom come from situations with a multiplicity of problems and issues. Invariably most children have experienced school-leaving of one type of another - repeated suspensions, expulsions or continuous unexplained absences. All but one of the current group of ten children were out-of-school at time of referral and all but one are from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. All demonstrated poor performances at primary school level. Those who had gone to secondary school had major difficulties making the transition. There is a wide variation in academic performance but all of the children are academically behind. Generally, they all have poor concentration, short attention spans, and lack higher level thinking and meta-cognitive skills.

All current students smoke cigarettes, some take alcohol and one has admitted to taking cannabis. Additional issues arising amongst all 26 admitted children include being in care (6 children), bereavement/separation (6), and other problems such as homelessness, petty crime, domestic violence, alcohol use, parental alcohol and drug use, parental imprisonment, family HIV infections, and various emotional traumas.
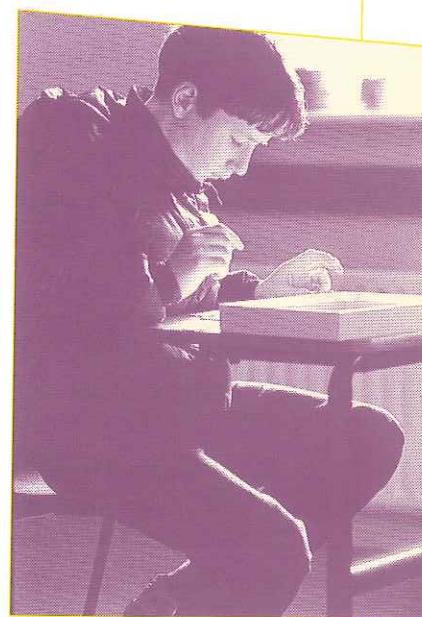
Given the nature of the project and its status as a school, attending children's need for a structured educational programme is seen by teachers as paramount. Access to some form of education and related achievement and success is seen as critical for bolstering children's confidence, self-esteem and providing them with further opportunities to learn, develop and grow.

The formal school system is considered inappropriate for providing these inputs and opportunities. It is perceived by both project teachers and students as rigid, exam-driven and as reminding the children at worst, of failure, and at best, of levels of attainment that they cannot achieve. Furthermore, formal schools are seen by teachers as having extremely high classroom numbers, with being incapable of giving individual attention to specific children when difficult situations or behaviours arise and as having insufficient remedial teaching, particularly at second level.

Children attending the SEP are seen as needing a more varied curriculum and timetable and having more opportunities to negotiate classroom routines and procedures than would be available within formal school system. They are seen as needing the attention of staff who can attend to their social and personal as well as their academic needs - as needing adults who can engage with them and formulate positive and significant non-teaching relationships and build up their self-esteem and sense of self-value. Because of their difficult home situations, staff feel the need to provide them with security, a safe and supportive environment and be able to set boundaries in quite a flexible way - ie in a way that does not force the children to leave or otherwise precipitate suspension or expulsion. The students are also seen as needing staff to deal with difficult situations as these arise and to make appropriate connections with family and other community members. It is suggested by staff that the above needs can only be responded to in small, intimate settings, where there is the opportunity for both individual work and working in small groups.

Although the project has no written programme outline for responding to these needs the teaching staff have articulated a number of key principles which they see as underlying their response. These include the following:

- **curriculum needs to be flexible, not over-academic, adaptable to individual situations and children and including the following elements - reading, social numeracy, relationships, social skills, moral and emotional development;**

- **school work is never beyond what they can cope with and it is very important that they enjoy it - they enjoy seeing their own progress.**

- **school work needs to include out-of-classroom activities including outdoor activities, sports and social outings.**

- **school needs to have a code of behaviour that has been compiled and worked out in consultation with students;**

The school day commences at 9.00am when students arrive and assemble in the kitchen area. Usually there is light conversation involving the teachers and housekeeper until 9.20 when all students have usually arrived. The students break into two separate classrooms where they work individually, and quite intensely, on maths and reading. The maths consists of adding, subtracting, multiplication and division, percentages, time and measures. There is an emphasis on the practical use of maths (bills, time tables, etc). The reading is from an assortment of "Wide Range Books" and English sheets from various English books and spelling lists. The teachers explain new material, then the students work individually on the sheets. The material is taken from various books or made up by the teachers (especially maths sheets). The assessment of students' performance on sheets and tests is not very rigid. The tendency is more to support their move from one assignment to the next after satisfactory, as distinct

from successful, completion. Students have the opportunity to review their own work as completed sheets are regularly posted in the classroom. This way, students can constantly check their progress and see where they are at. Although there is an overall common approach, each student has his/her individual pace - at the time of review one student was being assisted to prepare for a Junior Certificate examination - reflecting the need to give each student a lot of attention in small-group situations.

> *"In the area of reading you have to support the children to want to read, not to hold them back on comprehension and mispronunciation and allow them to flow. Praise and encouragement are critical for developing motivation. We also need to be prepared to work at a slow and a more varied pace. A varied programme is particularly important because concentration is so poor. We need to be prepared to give the children choices, for example, after a period of hard work they need to be able to make choices about what to do next even if this means taking a walk or a smoking break." (staff member)*

At 10.30am everyone breakfasts together (a light breakfast of tea, toast, jam and marmalade) and there is a short smoking break. Between 11.00am and 12.00 pm there is a second classroom session where individual work is continued. This is followed by a thirty minute free-time usually consisting of silent games sessions (puzzles, reading, word searches, etc.)

Everybody lunches together (hot lunch of meat or fish and vegetables prepared by Bean an Tí) between 12.30pm-1.00pm following which there is a third classroom session until 2.15pm when the students leave. Students are not given any homework assignments. Following their departure, staff clean up, discuss significant problems that have arisen and liaise with personnel from other agencies as appropriate.

There are variations to this day and, indeed, no student would have a full week of the above routine. The programme includes a number of special activities which students attend both on a large group and a small group rota basis. These include art, computers (which take place outside the class with other teachers - volunteers and other personnel from the training centre) and outdoor activities: swimming, canoeing, outings, etc.

The project has a code of conduct & discipline which is shown to each student and parents on a sheet as they start. This code which refers to matters such as use of language, weekly routines, bringing in material, sanctions etc. is also fully explained by one of the teachers. While the project emphasises flexibility in dealing with students, project staff, nonetheless, use the code as a way of making clear that they do have boundaries and that there are negative consequences to negative behaviour. In particular students who disrupt others or who interfere physically with others are issued with sanctions such as being told off, being sent to kitchen, being sent home, detention, exclusion from outdoor activities or from art, woodwork or computers, suspension or expulsion (on one occasion a student was suspended - and later expelled - following a physical attack on another student).

As a counterbalance there is a lot of positive reinforcement of good behaviour. Positive work attitudes and social behaviours, punctuality and good weekly marks are reinforced, praised and rewarded with privileges. At all times staff are encouraging the children to be present in the school, by helping them to have a good time, and by also ensuring their attendance provides opportunities for growth and development and for learning to cope with difficulties.

> *"The project has to be attractive to come to because we rely on the students wanting to be here. All of these children have either dropped out or put out of other schools for a variety of reasons. We are focused on holding on to them and we try to do this with a minimum of sanctions. The whole programme is underlined by voluntary participation. We try to make the environment attractive and we make the relationships warm and engaging. It is essential that they understand that we accept them, are prepared to listen to them and that we care for them unconditionally. This is a very real part of*

what we do and one of the reasons why it is so important is that the children have enough major hazzles outside of here. We have children here for two years at the very most. In that short period we are not going to have a huge impact in terms of their educational progress or where they are going in the long term. But it is a very important transition period for them during a time of important physical and emotional changes and we try to ensure that while they are here they get a positive experience and that the relationships that are formed they can come back and forward to in the future." (staff member)

The current group of ten children (seven of whom were interviewed) are very positive about their experience on the SEP. The students have a good attendance record. During the period of review attendance was on average nine students per day (out of a total of 10). The following comments about the SEP were made in interviews by the students:

"My mother did not like the idea at first because she thought it was a 'school for disturbed' but she came around after the social worker visited. I thought the school was great: students are allowed smoke, the teachers don't follow you around and it is not work, work, work."

"I do other things as well as English and Maths - there are many activities. I get more work done and I now have better concentration. There are fewer in the class and it is much easier to learn. The teacher sits down with me and explains."

"I can smoke and I get a lot more work done. I now like doing sums and I can now do multiplication and division. I like the outdoor things."

"The teachers don't put pressure on me. They sit down and help me work it out. You're not stuck in the class all day. We do outdoor activities and allowed to smoke."

"I like the school. I like the woodwork, computers, outdoor activities, canoeing, rock-climbing, English and Maths."

"You get breakfast and lunch and a half hour break when you do good work and you go on outdoor activities. I like the teachers. They are friendly and they help."

"I didn't learn in the other school but I learn here and I attend everyday. The other school was too strict."

Students are quite warm and supportive of the project and project staff are very positive about the progress of individual participants. In particular, there is a very strong sense of achievement from a personal and social development perspective. Staff are quite conscious of the difficulties facing students and get very excited at evaluating their progress in overcoming these and moving forward.

"We have learned that in spite of their difficulties the children have many excellent qualities - they care for, and are loyal and committed to, each other. They often ask questions about how others are getting on. The current group has jelled particularly well. While the children are quite streetwise, they are often naive in so many other ways and they have terrible fears about the futures they are facing. They are at a very difficult adolescent stage and they are exposed to a lot of risks involving drugs, drink, recreation halls, etc. We need to understand more about where and what they are coming from and we need to be very sensitive about helping them deal with their problems and their fears. We also need more support to work through these issues with them." (staff member)

2 procedures for referral, intake and review

Unlike other schools the SEP receives its referrals through a designated social worker. New admissions are made three times a year - September, Christmas and Easter - and all newly admitted students undergo a psychological assessment shortly after commencing. New referrals can come from other schools, school attendance officers, other social workers or probation officers. Normally when new referrals are received the social worker seeks a report from the relevant referrer. Essentially these reports confirm that the child is out-of-school and provide a social background and history. At this stage children can be admitted to a waiting list. The main criteria for getting on to a waiting list is that the children are out of school with little prospects of re-admission, they are aged 13-14 and preferably they are from the local neighbourhoods (although there is a bias towards children from the nearest neighbourhoods the project can and does admit children from a wider base).

The ongoing position of children on the waiting list is discussed at fortnightly review meetings involving chairperson, principal, project teacher, social worker and psychologist but the decision to provide a place is made by the principal in consultation with the chairperson. Parents are then contacted by the social worker and asked to visit the project with children and on this visit both are interviewed by social worker and principal. At this stage the child's place in the school is virtually secured and a commencement date is agreed.

The progress of each student is reviewed on a weekly basis at a meeting of the principal and the project teacher. Each student is assigned marks for their performance, behaviour, attendance and punctuality on a ten-point scale. These marks are presented to students in a group session with a brief outline of reasons for particular grades. Individual performances can be discussed at this meeting and compromises can be agreed. Students with the best points of the month get a reward (such as a special outing).

A fortnightly review of each child is also undertaken at the meeting involving the principal, the project teacher, the board chairperson, the social worker and the psychologist. This meeting discusses the progress of individual children, with teaching staff updating progress and difficulties as these arise and other staff offering advice in terms of understanding and dealing with social, family or psychological difficulties.

3 project links, personal and social supports

links

The project's main external links are the local school systems (including principals, home-school-community liaison personnel and school attendance officers) and the St. Vincent's Trust training centre. Most referrals come through the schools system and there are clear indications that the schools system has a good understanding and grasp of what the project does and is able to identify suitable students for referral. However, the project does not have formal, structured mechanisms for establishing and maintaining these links. The project is probably not so well known among social workers and social services. Furthermore, it does not seem to be linked into any network of local services and most likely would benefit from such linkage.

To date, 50% of students were admitted to the training centre after finishing in the project. The training centre is quite positive that the project has been a good preparation for these trainees. However, the project is nonetheless, physically, quite isolated from the training centre and perhaps there is a need to explore the benefits of improving and expanding such links into the future.

personal and social support

From the outset of the SEP it was envisaged that its programme would have a personal and social support dimension. This support aspect is very evident in St. Vincent's Training Centre where the social worker and the psychologist along with a family worker and placement officer, comprise an integrative personal and social development team. This team is heavily utilised in providing trainees with personal, social and family support at intake, assessment, training and pre- post-leaving stages. In planning SEP's programme it was envisaged that social supports be drawn from this team and that its social worker and psychologist would provide services to the SEP as part of their overall work detail. Although the project can and does avail of the services of both workers -their involvement in intake and early assessment is particularly valued - their input lacks real integration into SEP's programme. Essentially, there is no real mechanism whereby both workers have an ongoing, practical attachment to the project. Despite early efforts by the social worker to become more intensely involved with the project, the draw of her work in the training centre has been too strong for this to be sustained. The psychologist has been similarly drawn by her work in the training centre and, apart from assessments, has no real visibility in the SEP.

Basically, the training centre's personal and social support structure is not replicated in the SEP.

> "We are not reaching the social supports in the family. Uncertainty about the things that happen outside is one of the features of this project. We need our own social worker to help us deal with these issues." (Staff member)

This deficit was apparent from quite an early stage and as a result there have been quite a lot of discussions leading to proposals for a third worker for the SEP who would provide a personal and social support service, maintaining links with children's families and other local schools and services.

staff support

The gaps in providing supports to individual students is reflected in the absence of mechanisms for supporting staff to deal with troubling issues as these arise. Apart from the opportunity to participate in staff development days in the training centre there are no other formal supports to assist staff directly. Project staff rely on their own personal structures of support for winding down and dealing with troubling issues as these arise. Tensions and conflicts are averted because of the strength of staff's commitment to teamwork and to daily sharing information, reflections and insights on difficult or demanding issues as these arise

> "The key thing that keeps us sane is that we get on together, we are dedicated to the work and on a daily basis we discuss issues and problems that arise and we seek solutions., We have learned a lot from each other and from the children." (Staff member)

The psychologist can and does assist staff in clarifying issues arising for the children. However, it seems quite clear that the needs of teaching staff in relation to such supports go quite deeper than what can be provided in the context of fortnightly student review discussions.

A project like this needs to fully acknowledge that programme participants (students) are in most respects a very difficult group to deal with. They live in troubling homes and environments and while, usually, they enthuse in their affirmation of the project and staff, they also, frequently, make unreasonable demands of staff and are tireless in their efforts to irritate, rile and aggravate. And, this is when students feel they can express their frustrations: it is also common for students' feelings of disappointment and failure to be bottled up and, lacking an effective vent, cause even more anxiety to staff members. Such moods and behaviours can drain staff leaving them exhausted, feeling inadequate and unable to keep focused on their work. It is well recognised that work of this nature requires that staff have access to regular and structured supervision and support mechanisms in addition to what is provided for line management and participant support. Such mechanisms need not necessarily be provided from within a project's management structure: it often happens that management groups engage independent consultants to provide such supports on their behalf. It seems quite apparent that SEP's teaching staff need regular and structured access to an outside supervisor where problems with the students, general problems and also matters between staff can be raised and dealt with.

4 structures for decision-making, planning, monitoring and review
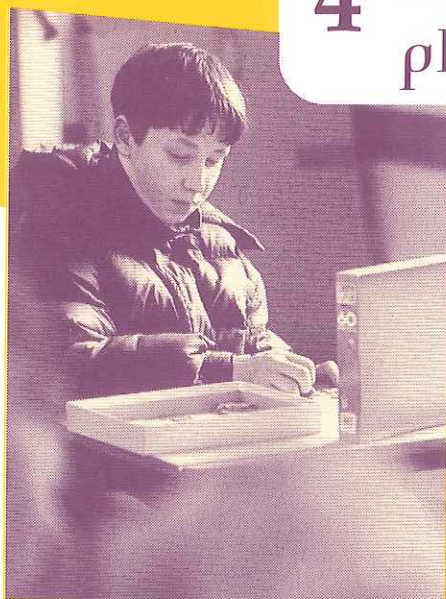
Generally, day-to-day decision-making in relation to the education programme works quite well. The two teachers and bean an tí have developed reliable means of communication and are able to deal with daily routines and issues and problems as these arise. In addition to a Friday morning meeting to review and assess each student individually the two teachers also have a fortnightly afternoon meeting to discuss progress and issues and problems which have arisen. This level of contact, communication and discussion is separate to and in addition to the ongoing contact of managing a daily routine. Both teachers and the bean an tí believe that their willingness and capacity to effectively communicate during the supervision and management of this routine is satisfactory.

There is some lack of clarity across the project as to how broader decisions are actually made and how programmes are planned and reviewed. There is, for instance, some concern from personnel in training centre's personal and social support team that their involvement in providing support services to the SEP was simply added on to their existing remit without adequate consultation or discussion of what was involved. Also, the fortnightly review meeting is commonly cited as an example of confusion in relation to programme development. It appears that the review meetings lack structure, are unfocused and their actual purpose in relation to discussing individual children is unclear. Discussions of individual children occur on a random basis and there is no apparent structure for ensuring every child is reviewed periodically. The review meeting does not discuss other issues such as classroom difficulties and management, class group processes and progress, policy, resources.

There is also a lack of clarity about decision-making relating to medium and long-term issues such as new referrals, utilisation of resources and negotiations concerning policy and external relationships. There is a sense, within the project that these decisions are the prerogative of the Board of Management. There is a sense among some Board members that the decisions are and need to be taken from within the project. It appears that the Board does not of itself generate new ideas or identify issues to be dealt with. Rather it responds to the issues and concerns as raised by the principal and sees itself as a support to the principal. It considers and generally ratifies whatever conclusions the principal and chairperson have already come to.

The Board of Management's main functions include staff recruitment, use of resources, criteria for programme intake and programme timetabling. As an administrative structure the Board has functioned quite well in relation to these functions and it has expedited its decisions effectively and efficiently when required. However, the Board lacks capacity to intervene into and effectively support the pro-

ject's education programme. Essentially, the Board of management - no different to that of any other school - does not necessarily have a direct function in managing the education programme. Responsibility for this is vested in the principal and project teacher who are employees of the Department of Education and who may or may not consult the Board in relation to the programme's implementation.

Essentially, the project relies heavily on the previous experiences of its two teachers to formulate programme aims, content and structures. Apart from this it lacks modelling on other programmes. Staff have not researched or visited other programmes either here or in other jurisdictions. It does not appear that the Board of Management has undertaken a vigorous assessment of staff training needs or appraised suitable staff training programmes or researched for itself other alternative school models. Furthermore, it appears that the Board has not taken the opportunity to set up mechanisms for supporting and monitoring the development of an education programme over a long term.

Because of the school's alternative nature and the fact that it is quite unique in how it has emerged and developed it would seem imperative that the Board of Management have a more involved role and that at least a framework exist wherein a more proactive role could be developed. Certainly teaching staff are open to the idea that a framework be put into place for the purpose of planning, monitoring and supporting programme development. While technically the school has no prescribed education programme, there is, therefore, every reason why there should be dedicated efforts to develop and intelligently model such an alternative programme here. This position reflects a very solid body of support for the project among personnel interviewed in this review. Generally, the project is perceived as doing its best in quite difficult circumstances but that its true potential has yet to become apparent.

The absence of management attention to programme development is reflected in a rather detached approach to teasing out and implementing the programme at a school level. While the project has a very warm and friendly atmosphere and the students relate positively to both the project and its staff, there is no overwhelming sense of educational mission or atmosphere of academic achievement. There is a sense that a programme structure has been adopted but no real sense of why, for what purpose or how it could be changed if necessary? For example, there seems to be a distinction between academic curriculum (reading and sums) - which is taught by teachers - and other activities - most of which involve inputs from volunteers and personnel from training centre, *but* there is no adequate exploration - or explanation - of whether such other activities should be more integrated into the curriculum. Similarly, the absence of materials from the social, natural and moral sciences is clearly evident yet classes on social problems, the structures of care and helping services, the development of computer science, animal and human biology and sex education would all seem appropriate. Finally, although the project is linked to the training centre, there is no evidence of any vocational dimensions to the educational programme. These comments are not meant to suggest criticisms of the teaching staff. Indeed, both teachers have dug deeply into their own previous experiences of special education and special projects to provide the programme with a sense of coherence, structure and variety. There is however, an overall lack of direction and purpose particularly from an educational perspective.

One Board member, commented as follows on the need for a more proactive role by management in programme development:

> "Educational issues are not as simple as giving them a spelling book. There is a basic motivational issue that is not linked to memory exercises. A more integrated, engaging approach is required. The children need to be listened to and helped to put a structure on their own thoughts and meanings. It is hard for children aged 13-14 to see the meaning in memorising - it poses no particular challenge or purpose. They need to be more engaged by their teachers at a psychological and emotional level. Their

progress needs to be reviewed intensely on an almost weekly basis. They have to see and understand the point of spelling and other exercises and teachers need ongoing support, advice and assistance to help them do this." (Board member)

Perhaps the project needs an expanded Board and for it to be given a more direct, and regular, function in programme development or alternatively this particular function could be delegated to a new planning and monitoring structure that would draw in relevant external expertise in relation to programme support, development and monitoring. There is an issue here as to who should, or is best able to take responsibility for lifting the programme, giving it direction, modelling it, rigorously reviewing and evaluating it, teasing out its policy implications and developing the educational arguments arising from it. Perhaps this is an issue for the Department of Education. It appears there is an overall lack of concern by the Department of Education for projects of this type. Certainly, the Department has not gone out of its way to provide the project with sets of guidelines, curriculum suggestions or teaching methods and techniques. However, neither is there any evidence that the Department would restrictively interfere in programme development. Given the context of a very centralised education system and curriculum maybe the best approach for achieving change and development is at a micro, project level. However, if this is to be the case, projects operating at this level need a more rigorous and involved input from management and other external experts than is the case in the SEP.

5 overview and recommendations
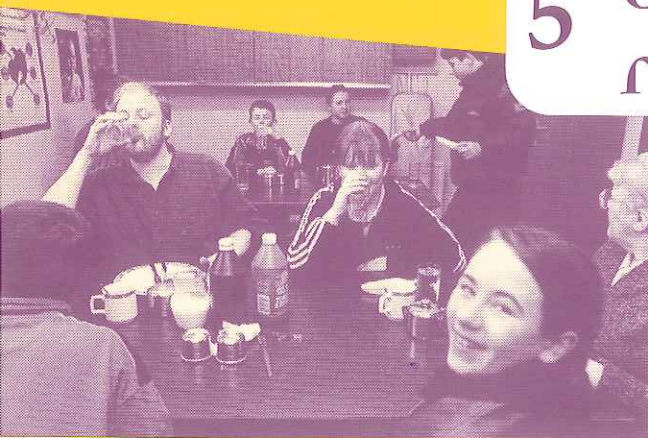
This overview of the Special Education Project involves two separate discussion topics and recommendations for the project's future development. The SEP discussion points concern first, the wider policy context of measures for tackling early school-leaving (and issues arising for SEP within this context) and, second, specific issues arising in the management and daily operation of the SEP.

The context of measures for tackling early school-leaving

The SEP does not function and operate in a policy vacuum. Although the funding agreement with the Department of Education and Science provides the project with no real policy guidance or policy direction the project is, nonetheless, being developed during a period that is unmatched in terms of expressed policy and political concerns about educational disadvantage and out-of-school children. The SEP's developing context is one in which there is growing concern about the position of children and youth at-risk who are not succeeding in the Irish education system and there are many indications of new initiatives for tackling the problems of school failure and early school-leaving at both policy and practical levels (Boldt, 1996; Combat Poverty Agency, 1996; Department of Education and Science, 1996; Ireland, 1997, 9-11; Leamy, 1997; Moriarty, 1995) Such concerns and the proliferation of new programmes are reflected more widely in Europe (Employment Initiative, 1997; EURYDICE, 1994; OECD, 1996) and in the US the subject has attracted numerous commissions, reports and government reviews and a comprehensive literature has emerged. Dryfoos (1990, 199-223) in an extensive review of evaluated US programmes for preventing school failure and early school-leaving identified a wide range of interventions including early childhood and family programmes, school-based programmes, special social services and student counselling, community-wide integration initiatives and alternative schools.

Interestingly, Dryfoos's review illustrates that at a primary school level the more successful initiatives are not alternative school projects such as the SEP but, rather, initiatives that involve whole-school restructuring and/or school-community partnerships. For example, Dryfoos reports on the work of several primary school initiatives that are based on the work of Comer (Anson, et. al., 1991) and in which schools undergo a complete restructuring involving:

(i) greater parental involvement in school management and as volunteers, teachers' aides and organisers of social and recreational activities;

(ii) the provision of counselling and personal supports to children directly within the schools; and,

(iii) the development of a more flexible curricula to include social skills and a wide range of creative activities.

Another example of whole-school primary school programmes, reported by Dryfoos, is Success for All (Slavin et. al, 1996). This approach was developed at the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools at John Hopkins University and includes:

(i)   school-based early interventions such as pre-school and crèche facilities for parents attending school programmes;

(ii)   family support team (social workers and a home liaison worker providing parenting education and counselling assistance for personal and social problems to both individual children and their families);

(iii) additional reading (utilising extra paid and volunteer tutors and encouraging children to work in pairs);

(iv)   individual academic plans for all children (coordinated by a full-time facilitator);

(v)   on-site training and support for teachers: and,

(vi)   a programme advisory committee meeting once per week.

There are indications that, in keeping with the success of programmes such as outlined in Comer's work and *Success for All* above and arising from the work of partnership companies (Area Development Management, 1997, 9 & 30-3) the Government's Anti-Poverty Strategy (Ireland, 1997, 9-11) and the work of the Combat Poverty Agency (Cullen, 1997), new official Irish programmes for tackling early school dropout - *particularly at a primary and early secondary level* - are likely to emphasise closer, more integrated school-community partnership interventions.

Less attention, to date, has been given to alternative schools. Dryfoos reports mixed views on alternative school programmes. Such separate school programmes (as distinct from whole school programmes) provide options for students who do not fit into the mainstream. Typically, the more successful alternatives operate at high-school (secondary) level, they are small and they are either separate school entities or separate units within a larger school structure. The curriculum of such alternative schools emphasise "real-world experiences, group process and group identity" and the provision of work experience opportunities in day-care, nursing homes, building renovations and small businesses and also courses on social studies and social care (Dryfoos, 210). The main arguments reported by Dryfoos (219) in support of the alternative schools approach is that they are smaller and more individualised, more likely to successfully target and they are staffed by teachers who have an interest and insights into the needs of at-risk children. However, Dryfoos also highlights that some observers consider alternative schools a "cop-out" by the mainstream system. The principal arguments against such schools are that they remove at-risk children from their peers with the risk of stigmatising them and reducing their long-term educational options. It is also suggested that such schools serve as a convenient mechanism whereby mainstream schools "encourage" disruptive students to move on or move out.

A good example of a successful alternative school project is provided by Orr (1987, 89-124). In this project, in rural Massachusetts, students (aged 11-17 y s.) who have been referred by their respective school districts because of poor academic performance, participate in a six-year alternative high-school programme which combines individual and group academic instruction (reading, math, science and social studies) with classes on preemployment training (job search techniques, completing application forms, preparing CVs, interview skills, communication and interpersonal skills), computer-assisted instruc-

tion, personal counselling and physical recreation. The programme has a high emphasis on occupational training and each student enrolls in one of five occupational training programmes' - computer maintenance and repair, word processing, horticulture and agriculture, printing, and building and grounds maintenance - each of which operates, in part, as a small business. Most students stay to attain their high-school diploma and to do so they must attain the requirements of their original school. One of the main factors that contributes to the success of this alternative school is that its main "client" is the boards and management of other schools who not only refer students and pay their participation fees but they continue to maintain an involvement with the students and in many instances successfully reintegrate them back into their mainstream programme.

There are no Irish examples of a similar six-year alternative school programme operating under the Department of Education and Science. The main elements of the above described project are common in programmes such as Youthreach, St. Vincent's Trust Training Centre and other Community Training Workshops and EU Youthstart. All of these however, are almost exclusively focused on persons aged 15 and over, they are funded primarily from the European Union and they are unable to take onto daily attendance programmes participants who officially should still be attending schools. The only Irish examples of alternative schools are the SEP itself and Youth Encounter Projects (YEPs) four of which were set up in 1977 in Dublin (2), Cork and Limerick. The YEPs straddle both primary and second level education with target groups of about twenty 10-15 year old children who experience difficulty with mainstream schools in their respective areas. The programme combines reading and maths with recreational activities, craftwork and social outings. Children are provided with meals. A community worker provides support for children's families and forms links with other local agencies. The projects do not have vocational elements. An evaluation (Egan & Hegarty, 1984) of the early work of the YEPs indicated success in tackling drop-out, in academic improvement and in reducing deviancy. However, there is no up-to-date research on the YEPs despite the closure of one of the Dublin projects in recent years. While the Department of Education and Science indicates its support for the SEP it has no immediate plans to expand the provision of alternative schools of this type.

The above discussion highlights that successful initiatives in relation to tackling early school-leaving, ideally, should,

(i) **include whole-school reorganising in the context of school-community partnerships; and**

(ii) **provide targeted "at-risk" children with a long-term learning and development programme that is more relevant to their vocational, recreational and personal needs.**

The SEP's future development needs to be cognisant of these two elements. Both require that the project become less isolated. There is a need for the project to become more integrated with the local schools' system and for arrangements to be negotiated whereby students can be reintegrated back into mainstream schools where this is positively indicated. The project also needs to be more integrated with local services generally and to have more effective communications with other youth, training, education and social development programmes.

specific issues in the management and daily operation of the sep

The second area of discussion in this overview concerns specific issues arising in the management and daily operation of the SEP. As is evident from previous sections in this report, the project has basically succeeded in setting-up, in taking in children who met the main criteria for targeting, in putting in place a programme that had most of the desired elements and in generating a supportive, educational atmosphere. The response of children has been tremendous - they are very positive about the project

and despite most having serious school-dropout problems, their attendance in the project is very good. In turn, staff perceptions of student progress is very positive and in general staff and student morale is very good. One clear indicator that the project is making an impact with its target group is that it has a significant waiting-list of persons who meet the basic criteria and who are waiting to take up places on the programme if and when these become available.

One important weakness in the programme is that it lacks documentation. For example, it does not have clear statements of objectives, programme outlines, outlines of procedures for intake and assessment, or comprehensive records on individuals' progress. Despite this lack of documentation, the project's teaching staff agree on and have articulated a number of key principles which underline their work in the project. These principles are outlined in a previous section above and they include the provision of a flexible, varied curriculum, the operation of a school programme that is enjoyable and includes out-of-class, social and recreational activities, and the inclusion of a code of behaviour, that is fully, explained, understood and adhered to. In the operation of the programme as described above it is quite clear that the programme complies with these basic principles. This particular review and report will assist in providing the project with documentation on programme aims, content and basic operations.

Other weaknesses in relation to the SEP concern its personal and social support elements, its procedures for reviewing project participants and the mechanisms for supporting staff and for managing, developing, implementing and reviewing its educational programme. To put the project's weaknesses into context, the table below is presented as one way of examining and judging the performance of the project as against other initiatives with similar intent. The table is based on Dryfoos's (1990, 199-223) review of evaluated US programmes for preventing school failure and early school-leaving. In this review Dryfoos summarises common features of successful programmes. While the review highlights that there is not full agreement on what does and does not work it reports a strong consensus on the importance of the points outlined in column 1 in the table below. In this table these points are listed along with a comment on the extent to which they feature in the operation and management of the SEP.

summary of common features of successful programmes	application to sep
flexibility and variety of strategies	SEP is a single alternative school strategy linked to a vocational training strategy
early intervention through preschool and parenting education is critically important	The SEP has no pre-school or parenting education components
early identification of high risk students particularly at transition from primary to secondary levels	The SEP has no mechanism for directly assisting schools to identify high-risk students and relies on external education and social services personnel to do this
small school and class sizes are beneficial to students	SEP is both a small school (and possibly too small) with small class sizes
individual attention and individual instruction plans are important	SEP provides both individual attention and individual instruction
each school should have autonomy to decide and effectively manage its programme with teachers involved with, and held accountable for, policy and curriculum development	SEP lacks mechanisms for asserting this autonomy and involving teachers in, and holding them accountable for, policy and curriculum development in a planned manner
flexible instructional policies are important as are emphases on cooperative learning and team teaching	SEP does not have an instructional policy per se although in practice there is an emphasis on motivating individual learning. There is little cooperative learning or team teaching except perhaps in "other" non-academic activities, eg outdoor pursuits.
it is important that teachers have high expectations of students, be sensitive to minority issues and adequately rewarded for student progress	Teachers' expectations of students is high but in practice the cut-off point of 15 years has a limiting effect on learning ambitions. Teachers are sensitive to minority issues. Teachers financial rewards are consistent with national rates but social and other rewards are limited because of size of school and the fact that it is quite isolated.

summary of common features of successful programmes	Application to sep
teachers need additional training to deal with high risk children	Teachers are not currently provided with additional, specialist training
programmes benefit from having vocational components making the link between learning and work and using experiential learning, out of class learning, community service projects and paid work experience and, where possible and appropriate, involving businesses in job placement and mentoring	Programme has only limited vocational components and these could be expanded through greater integration with training centre. There is evidence of experiential learning and out of class learning but there is no community service or job placement activities.
sustained personal attention and counselling is essential for high risk students who need assistance in dealing with personal and family problems and in some instances on site health and social services are appropriate	Although teachers provide a lot of personal attention there is not a sustained personal and social service programme. On site health and social services are probably not appropriate because of their relatively accessible availability elsewhere
a positive school climate should be encouraged through a "family" atmosphere and a safe secure and non threatening environment be developed	SEP does encourage a positive, secure, safe and non-threatening "family" environment
behavioural guidelines should be developed involving students, school and family personnel	SEP has developed such guidelines
school-community integration is essential and the development of collaborative efforts across the range of educational, health, social service and job placement personnel in the form of community led partnerships is important.	SEP is not part of a school-community collaboration providing integrated services

From the above table it can be seen that while the SEP has a number of the features that make for successful programmes, it is lacking in others, particularly, as already explained, those that concern personal and social support, teacher support and strategic matters concerning programme management, support and development. Recommendations in relation to these are summarised in the next section.

summary of recommendations

The SEP needs to clarify more precisely how it functions as an alternative project within the local schools system. It needs to make explicit what it is an alternative to and what are its objectives in relation to reintegrating children back to the schools that sent them? It also needs to be more explicit about its appropriate size and scale in terms of numbers of participants, core staff, ancillary staff, etc. and to state how it intends to more effectively integrate and network with other community educational agencies within its catchment area? The project needs to ask what are the most appropriate management structures and what arrangements, if any, need to be put into place for involving parents and/or other community interests? These are all questions that the project's management need to grapple with and come up with answers. It may be that the answers cannot be provided solely by the management and that teaching staff and staff and management from the training centre may also need to be involved, or at the very least, consulted. It may be useful for the project to engage some external assistance in addressing these questions, perhaps in a semi-structured 1-2 day workshop format. **The first recommendation of this review therefore is that the project's management put in place a mechanism for addressing and considering these questions and that a clear vision of project aims, objectives, structures, programme activities, support and ancillary activities, desired scale and numbers, internal procedures, external relationships, forms of management, and desired levels of personnel, resources, premises and equipment, be adequately and properly set out.**

It is quite clear that the project needs a mechanism for supporting, assisting and monitoring educational programme development. This programme is over-reliant on the previous work experiences of its two teachers and there has been insufficient attention to looking at what takes place in other projects and other jurisdictions and insufficient consideration given to how the project could be properly modelled and developed. It is difficult to see how this issue could be addressed in the context of a small Board of Management that meets once per term. The project requires that there be a process for supporting ongoing programme development in the form of regular (monthly at the very least) meetings involving teachers, other staff, management personnel and other external resource personnel. Such meetings would need to give in-depth consideration to how the work of the project could be more effectively planned and programmed over a long timescale and to begin monitoring and detailing the programme's effectiveness and arranging to ensure staff have access to relevant training and information and development supports. It is recommended that either

(i)   **the Board of Management takes direct responsibility to organise and attend such monthly programme development meetings or**

(ii   **it delegates this responsibility to a new programme support group to be determined in consultation with staff and external resource personnel.**

The third recommendation concerns personal and social supports to the project. It is quite clear that in agreeing a budget for these purposes, both the project's management and the Department of Education and Science accept the need for such supports in a project of this type. It is equally clear that the supports are not being delivered in a coherent and integrative manner. This failing is not attributed to the work of the training centre's personal and social support team but rather it is more to do with the inadequacy of the mechanism under which they were expected to deliver these supports. As a starting point a new mechanism for utilising this resource needs to be found for providing these supports. Perhaps the resource could be seen as a contribution to the main cost of employing a separate social worker who would work solely with SEP participants. **It is recommended that the project directly recruit a personal and social support worker to be dedicated to work solely with project participants and their families.**

The fourth recommendation concerns the mechanisms used by staff for intake and review of project participants and for dealing with ongoing resource matters as these affect participants and the day-to-day programme. The existing mechanisms lack adequate structure and purpose. Ideally, the project should have a separate staff committee that would meet on a periodic basis to consider intake / referral and also deal with ongoing resource issues. The committee should include all relevant staff. It would also benefit from an external resource person - a trainer, psychologist, social worker, etc. The committee's responsibilities in relation to decision-making would need to be fully clarified. Should this committee advise the principal or should it make decisions along with the principal? **It is recommended that the project agree the formation of a staff committee with clear terms of reference and responsibilities for dealing with participant intake and review and ongoing resource issues immediately.**

The fifth recommendation concerns the provision of ongoing supervision and supports to staff. Regular and structured forms of supervision and support are generally considered important in a project of this type. It is not unusual to engage external personnel to provide such supports on a contract basis and this is often the case in new or small projects or in instances where projects are undergoing new changes and developments. **It is recommended that the project engage a suitable external consultant to provide regular support/supervision to project teaching staff and that this arrangement be reviewed according as the project's structures develop and grow.**
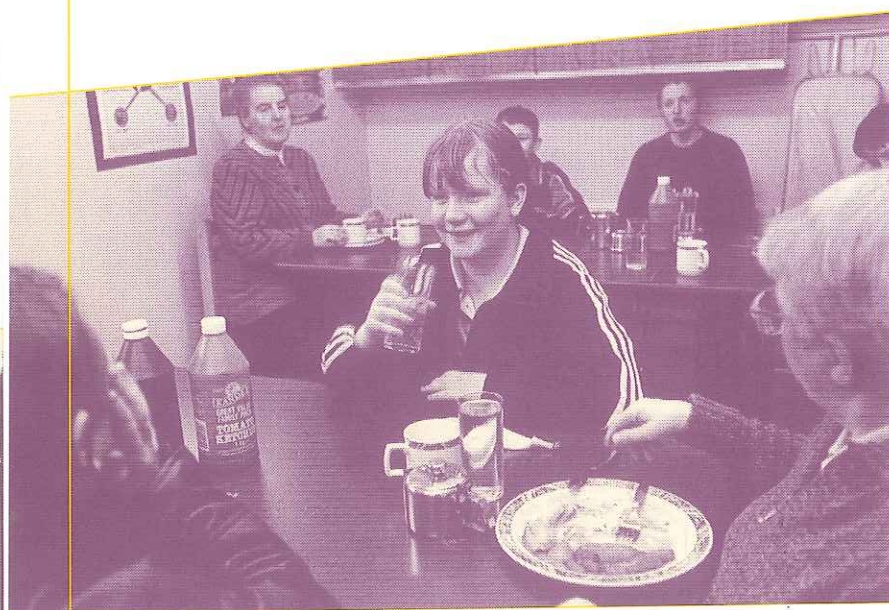
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