

In any discussion about young people and crime these days, if anyone present actually knows anything about the system, the name Dalston Youth Project (DYP or Dalston) is invoked. It has in fact reached the point where old youth justice hacks beg "Please, not Dalston again...". But Dalston is going to go on being discussed, because it is at the forefront of a new approach to preventing young

"At the end of the year's intake arrest figures had gone down 61% and well over half were in full time education, employment or training."

youth justice teams or other members of the community) have been excluded from school, been involved in crime, or are in other ways having problems or are at risk.

The programme consists of matching the individual young person with a mentor, a volunteer recruited from the local community. The two groups meet at an intensive week-long residential course spent outside London, where the young people are helped to examine their lives, and learn to co-operate, communicate and trust other people. After this, the matched pair of mentor and young person meet on a weekly basis, where help, support and encouragement are important components of the relationship. Because the mentors are from the same community, they understand and can empathise with the difficulties these kids are facing; some of the mentors have been through similar problems themselves.

One of the most innovative parts of the programme is the two month 'college taster' course, sponsored by the Education Directorate and held at Hackney Community College. Most of the young people on the project have a history of failing in education, with bullying and humiliation a common feature of their experience. Although eight weeks is not long enough to overturn years of 'aversion therapy', the project gives additional help by providing literacy and numeracy tuition in advance to those who need it. Many of the young people go on to find that things are very different from their previous experience at school:

"I was treated like a human being at the DYP Education Programme, not like a child like they did at school"

"The teachers at the DYP lessons didn't shout at us all the time so I was more relaxed and was open about what I found difficult"

"When I was at school I was picked on and blamed for eve-

rything. The teachers would say 'don't fiddle about, girl!' and 'you must be stupid if you didn't understand the first time!'. On the DYP programme we were treated like adults and everything was explained to us calmly, and if we didn't understand it they would explain it again as many times as it took for us to understand. They were really nice ... and they didn't look at us and write us off because we are black."

Dalston also arranges for a series of work placements and visits for the young people, or to shadow those working in areas they are interested in. In the summer of '96 one young woman was placed in the Fire Station Nursery, six went to Kiss FM, four to the Daily Mirror Newspaper Offices, and five to Choice FM. The mentors and project workers also give support in applying for jobs, for college or other training programmes.

Like any other project, some drop out, continue to offend or get aggressive, but there are very high levels of success. Although it is early days (the convention is for a two year follow up period) at the end of the year's intake there had been both qualitative and quantifiable changes. Parents and others close to the young people talked about their having acquired a new maturity, and being generally easier to live with; but perhaps more dramatically, arrest figures had gone down 61% and well over half were in full time education, employment or training. That is pretty remarkable, and that is why the name Dalston will go on being invoked.

The next phase, however, could be the most crucial. Having established itself, proved itself, won awards and been visited by the Home Secretary and other representatives of the great and the good, can it maintain the energy and enthusiasm which are, arguably, a major factor in the results so far achieved?

Yolande Burgin is a criminologist with a background in youth justice.

The panacea?

Yolande Burgin assesses the evidence in favour of Dalston Youth Project.

people from getting involved with crime, and so far seems to be getting some pretty extraordinary results.

The project was established in 1994, to work with some of the most alienated young people aged 15-19 in Hackney, a borough with very high risk factors associated with offending, such as unemployment, lack of educational qualifications, truancy and families under stress. Hackney was also found to have the highest levels of crime of any borough in London in 1993. Most of those referred to the project (by social workers, probation officers, teachers, the police,



Dalston Youth Project