

Schooling outside the mainstream

Rhys David reports on an alternative to the classroom for excluded children that is proving a success in Caerphilly

It is nine o'clock and the workshops are springing into life on a small industrial estate on the edge of Caerphilly as staff turn up to the small engineering companies, trade depots, and offices that make up the site. But in one of the units it is also the start of the school day. For the small number of mainly 15-16 year olds who arrive by car and taxi it will be English and Maths but also web design, video making or possibly event management in a real commercial setting. There may also be visits outside to film a conference or set up a stage show.

This is Young Wales, a new and successful approach to working with children who have been excluded from mainstream education. Every year in Britain some 7,000 children (overwhelmingly boys) are excluded and for the vast majority that means the end of effective education. Though Wales has a good record in this respect, with exclusions at five per ten thousand school pupils – just under half the UK average – it still represents hundreds of lives potentially being wasted. And in some parts of Wales, including the south Wales valleys, the figures are higher.

The cost to these individuals of making their way through life probably without any qualifications is enormous, almost certainly a life without work or at best in very low paid jobs. The cost to society is also huge. Until they reach

school-leaving age the local education authority must try to arrange 25 hours a week educational provision in one form or another, either through one-to-one home tuition or in some form of placement. After that responsibility has been discharged, other agencies will pick up the cost of probably a lifetime of benefits for those that fail to cope with life in a society where skills are at a premium.



Bill Fitzgerald, inspiration behind Young Wales.

Young Wales has been operating for just under six years and has evolved from an earlier organisation, Music Wales, started by Bill Fitzgerald, after a long career in leisure, music and entertainment in south Wales and

beyond. His jobs have included a long spell with the Rank Organisation, commercial manager with Oakwood, the leisure park in Pembrokeshire and owner of his own pubs and restaurants. He also enjoyed a period of success in the UK pop charts in the late 1990s when he managed his daughter's band *Dragonheart*.

Music Wales worked with young people to put on shows and make music videos. Six years ago it was transformed into Young Wales, a social enterprise offering a wider range of services to young people. With this approach struggling after a year or so to make enough money to survive after earlier funding from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, the Welsh Council for Voluntary Action and the Wales Co-operative Centre had come to an end, a decision was taken to focus more on training. Bill himself retrained to be able to offer work-based qualifications, provided by the awards firm ASDAN. "Their courses offered unconventional ways of accrediting activities better suited to the type of youngster Young Wales was seeking to help, allowing a range of personal qualities, abilities and achievements to be recorded," Bill explains.

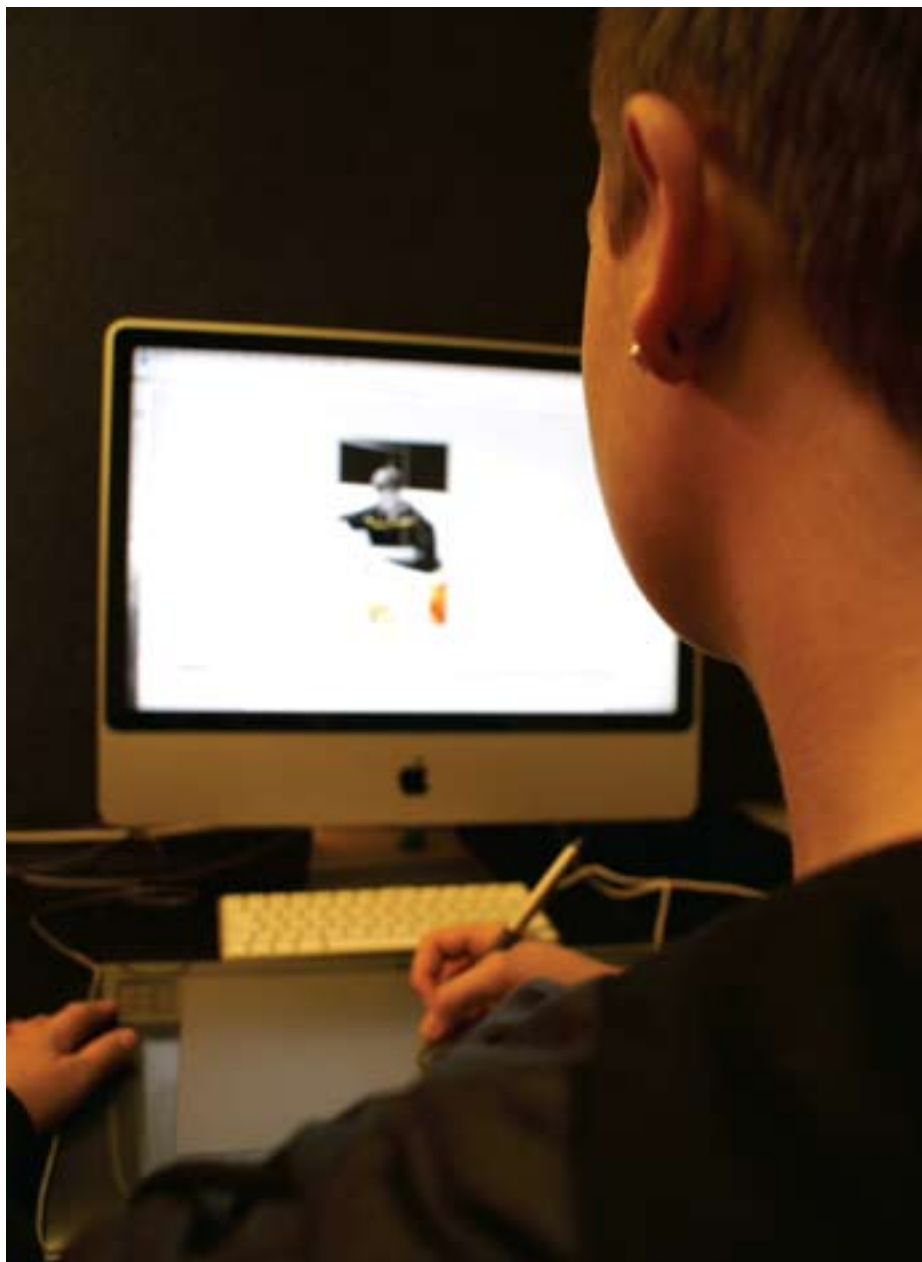
Among the first recruits were two youths referred by the Youth Offending Service in Caerphilly who were introduced to pop video making. The local education authority subsequently

negotiated contracts for Bill and his small team, which includes two trained teachers, to take up to 12 young people excluded from school. In most cases they were the victims of bullying who had just stopped turning up, rather than the seriously disruptive whose own behaviour had made them unwelcome.

Some of the children have been picked on because of physical characteristics, or had moved from place to place and were cast as outsiders. Others have been carers at home who had stopped attending school or attended only when they could. Many of the children had become virtual captives not just at home but in their bedrooms where they would hide from society and their families, communicating with their only friend – the computer – all hours of the day and night. Some who have been persuaded to attend Young Wales have been virtually mute on arrival, shying away from all contact with the outside.

As Sian Sheppard, one of the teachers on site, explained, “We were finding that there was support for children exhibiting difficult behaviours but much less for young people outside the mainstream through no fault of their own. We needed to get them out of the home environment into a small, family style set-up such as this that looks nothing like a school where we could be more free with our curriculum. It helps too that it is quite a male environment, which some of the boys in particular need.”

The children are referred to Young Wales through Caerphilly education department’s exclusion service panel. They are interviewed at home with their parents and then encouraged to come and see the site and be shown around by other students. They first join for a day’s trial and then a week’s trial after which a decision will be made by Bill and his team as to whether they are suited to one of the courses offered. Most start



Instruction in the creative industries is the real attraction at Young Wales.

by thinking they will go through the motions and leave straightaway but end up asking to stay for half a day, a day and then a few more days.

The curriculum is built around each individual who are given a mix of statutory lessons - English and Maths – and the real attraction, instruction in

the creative industries. However, the emphasis is on flexibility, avoiding the necessarily prescriptive approach schools have to apply to timetables, attendance, lessons and qualifications. Other courses are now offered, including ASDAN’s more advanced Certificate of Personal Effectiveness award, and the Examination

Board OCR's qualification which offers a route into a variety of job roles within the media industry.

Bill Fitzgerald says that while other complementary education providers offer building, environmental and other skills, Young Wales is unique in offering creative industries as an option. "This suits many of the young people we see who are technically clever but find school is just not right for them," he says.

The really unique element in Young Wales is its commercial underpinning.

Though it does not work for everyone, and some still fail to turn up when they should, the transformation achieved in many of the young people is remarkable. Two of Bill's current intake are now embracing web design and video editing and acting as event support assistants, helping out with lighting, sound and other technical jobs. They were both quiet and withdrawn 15-year-olds when they joined. But last summer they volunteered to spend seven weeks working on another regular Young Wales scheme, its Action Camp. This takes hundreds of Valleys young people, some of whom have never previously seen the sea, for short fun stays at a caravan site in Tenby. Both now have ambitions to attend college and find work in the creative sector, and have hopes of good GCSEs in English and Maths.

The really unique element in Young Wales is its commercial underpinning. The jobs done by the students are real world projects won in competition with other suppliers and from a range of customers mainly in the third sector across south Wales. "We provide end-to-end solutions for our clients in fields such as video production, web design, print design, photography, event management and equipment hire," explains Bill. These clients include some of the main south Wales housing associations - RCT Homes, United Welsh, and Wales & West. Young Wales has become their first point of call if they need a corporate video or if there is a requirement to deal with a problem such as drugs where it is thought a film involving the local community might help.

When they move on the young people will have been able to acquire an all-important qualification and as a result have something to show potential employers. These qualifications will have been matched to their abilities and will range from

records of assignments they have worked on to GCSEs in Maths or English. Just as importantly, however, they will be able to demonstrate an awareness of and ability to work in the outside world, a life experience skill many of their school contemporaries may not have acquired.

All last year's intake have now gone on to college or a job, though not in every case in IT or the creative industries. Some have gone into construction, others into hair and beauty, or health and social care. The skills they have learnt in Young Wales and in particular the emotional as well as intellectual steps they have been able to take will serve them just as well in other careers, and they also have a competence in key IT skills.

Until now Young Wales has only taken on children in their early teens, from years 9 and 10. This year for the first time a 16-year-old is staying on – effectively past the statutory school age and therefore no longer eligible for local education authority support. The move is intended to reduce Young Wales's dependence on one local authority, tapping into Welsh Government finance for those attending colleges. Another development could be the recruitment of young graduates, making it possible for Young Wales to take on more difficult creative industry assignments and to stay fully abreast of the more significant technical developments in the field, something the pressures of running the organisation has made it difficult for the existing small team to manage.

A more significant move could be the franchising of the approach to other parts of Wales. Work is now being done to draw up a package whereby different providers could be offered different levels of support depending on the services they could offer. Thus, those with a full capability could be given a large degree of autonomy, contributing a fee that would cover central services such as marketing. Those only developing their capability would draw more heavily on the centre for curriculum and other support.

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