

STUDY for an MA in Catholic School Leadership at St Mary's Twickenham. Courses start in October, February and June each year.

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Lessons in service

The Young Vincentian Schools Programme offers a framework for young people to get involved with needy and disadvantaged groups, providing invaluable formative experiences on the road to adulthood

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THE WORLD is in need; but we can make it a better place. We can make a difference. These are the words of a song by Jaci Velasquez; it is also the message of the St Vincent de Paul Society's (SVP) Young Vincentian schools programme. Engaging and developing the altruism and enthusiasm of young people is a challenge for many primary and secondary school teachers and chaplains.

By using an age-appropriate, well-structured, fully resourced plan of spiritual and practical charitable activities, children and teenagers learn about and put into practice Catholic Social Teaching. The programme consists of Mini Vinnies for children aged 7 to 11, Youth SVP for 11 to 14 year olds, and the B-Attitude for 14 to 18 year olds.

The young people are invited to reflect on how they can help with some aspects of need in their local environment, something practical they can do to put their faith in action. For example, at St Joseph's Primary School, Penarth in Wales, Mini Vinnies were recently commissioned to be part of the chaplaincy team. They use liturgical resources with weekly readings provided in the programme and help to plan and lead the school assemblies. Older young Vincentians can have roles of greater responsibility in their school chaplaincy teams.

When the Young Vincentians work alongside their local parish adult SVP group, it gives them a firm connection with their local church and community, and a greater sense of belonging. The SVP Vision, which is inspired by Christ's message to love our neighbour as ourselves, is for individuals and families who are in any form of need to have hope, together with a sense of dignity, worth, well-being and peace of mind.

The SVP is an international Christian voluntary membership organisation that tackles poverty and disadvantage by helping and supporting vulnerable people. It is present in 150 countries around the world. Hearing about what is going on in the SVP family world, the young people often spontaneously respond by reaching out to those in need. In Southwark, one development officer told us that when their young Vincentians heard about the Nepal earthquake, they immediately committed to raising money to help survivors. As part of their work, this group also raises funds for feeding babies in Sudan.

To do

CONSIDER setting up a Young Vincentian group in your school for one of the three age groups, or all of them.

GIVE children a deeper insight into what it is like to be marginalised and poor, and teach them how to help fight that poverty.

FIND ways for everyone to play their small part in making the world a better place – the key to Catholic Social Teaching.

The Mini Vinnies maxim, "See, Think, Do", nurtures attentiveness to other people's needs and then encourages reflecting and responding in a practical way. A group of 20 Mini Vinnies in Gateshead came up with the idea of collecting food and toiletry items for a local homelessness project; because of their enthusiasm, the whole school became involved. Youth SVP and B-Attitude groups are encouraged to find active ways to help their local community, such as working with the adult SVP's parish food bank.

A former head teacher, who is currently a development officer in Hexham and Newcastle Diocese, says the practical nature of the Young Vincentian programmes means they appeal to children of all learning styles and different personalities. A young person who does not shine at sport or music or academic work can find the chance to get involved in school life in a different way. These children are often the quieter, more reflective types with a caring nature. They can frequently be the inspiration for the group.

Children who lack self-esteem, confidence or academic prowess are sometimes drawn to the Young Vincentian programmes because of its hands-on aspect. Children are naturally keen to get involved with the world around them; and the programme helps to raise their awareness of the true nature of poverty in the world. Often children see a two-minute sound bite on the news about a disaster and the next week there is nothing more mentioned about it. A former head of three schools, and now a development officer for Westminster Diocese, says that the Young Vincentian programmes teach children that poverty is an ongoing struggle; they give children a deeper insight into what it is like to be marginalised and poor, while they help to combat that

poverty. One B-Attitude group helped with a Christmas party for young unaccompanied migrants in Kent. They met the young people, talked to them, danced with them and interacted despite language difficulties. Spending time with the migrants and seeing that, apart from their vulnerability, they are not so different from themselves helps to develop empathy and gives them insight into the lives of the less fortunate.

Another B-Attitude SVP group made up of 14–16 year old students provides a regular silver service afternoon tea at a local residential old people's home. The students do a singalong to encourage senior citizens to dance; they sit and chat with them and form relationships. We know loneliness is one of the greatest poverties the elderly suffer from.

From a practical point of view, there are advantages for teachers wanting to introduce the Young Vincentian programmes to their schools. As well as contributing positively to Section 48 inspections, which assess the RE component in Ofsted, the programmes are very easy to adapt. One head teacher uses the programme to dovetail into other initiatives to form an umbrella under which they can all work.

Flexibility is one of the key words in the programmes. Schools face a myriad of problems – shortage of staff, lack of availability, lack of time. These programmes can be led by teaching assistants, parents and school governors. They do not have to meet during lesson time; the meetings can take place as a lunchtime club or an after-school club.

Pope Francis wrote in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*: "Good education plants seeds when we are young, and these continue to bear fruit throughout life." The Young Vincentian programmes help cultivate these seeds. The principles of the SVP as espoused within the Young Vincentian programmes are what we would want all of our children to aspire to in their adult lives. They are a way in which we can prove to our children and their families that the key to Catholic Social Teaching is everybody playing their small part in the global family of Christ.

Anita Boniface is communications officer for the St Vincent de Paul Society (England and Wales). For further information about the SVP's Young Vincentian programmes in your school, see www.svp.org.uk.