

## **THE SCHOOL AS A HUB: BEST PRACTICE MODEL FOR CHILD AND YOUTH WORK**

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*ABSTRACT: This article examines a model of prevention in high-risk children in a school using a Child and Youth Worker orientation. The work took place as part of a 25-year longitudinal research project which was a policy demonstration project examining the effects of a community-based approach to prevention for young children. Specific guiding concepts such as the child at the centre, the school as a hub, and an approach based on ecological principles and community development framed the development of programs and initiatives. Statistically significant results point the way to validating the approaches taken as best practices and also suggest a need to blend a child-centred, ecological orientation with the formal school system*

*Key words: school-based child and youth work, school-as-a-hub model, prevention, community development, research*

This article is a description of one community's response, under the direction of a child and youth worker, to the plight of its children who were at risk of experiencing serious mental health and developmental problems. The article lays out the challenge that relates to children at risk, the government response, the community response, and the results achieved. In doing so, it highlights best practice approaches to children and communities at risk that arise from a child and youth work approach.

### ***The Problem***

In 1989, it was documented that 18% of children in Ontario were exhibiting serious mental health disorders, and only one in six had had any contact with a social service or mental health agency (Offord, Boyle, & Racine, 1989). It was also highlighted that all children had had contact with a physician or a school (Offord et al., 1989). This pointed the way to important points of contact for the delivery of services to children at risk as well as all other children. This picture of the vulnerability of children has again been reiterated in the work presented in the "Early Years Study" (McCain & Mustard, 2002).

### ***The Government Response***

In 1990, the Ontario government announced the launch of a multi-site initiative which was a "25-year longitudinal prevention-policy research demonstration project to provide information on the effectiveness of prevention as a policy for children" (Government of Ontario, 1990). It became very much a matter of participatory research at many of the sites.

This initiative focussed on preventing emotional and behavioural problems, promoting positive general development in young children, improving family and neighbourhood characteristics, ensuring the connection and coordination of existing services for children and families, and involving local residents in project development and implementation. The intent was also to assess the cost benefits of using prevention approaches that reduce the involvement of children and families in remedial education programs, child welfare services, mental health services, youth justice services, and health services.

### *The Community*

A number of characteristics define the Highfield community, one of the eight sites in Ontario selected for this research, which would focus on school children between the ages of four and eight. Its school, one of the fastest-growing inner-city schools in the northwest part of Toronto (it had 18 portables on site), reached upwards of 1,000 children in five years, serving children only up to grade five. Upwards of 36% of all families were headed by a single parent. Sixty-four percent of the families reported living below the Canada Low Income Cut Off level, which is widely regarded as the poverty line. Unemployment was high. The average family income dropped in the mid 90's as the provincial Conservatives began to oversee an era of prosperity that spread throughout most, but obviously not all, of Ontario. This community was also a magnet for new immigrants. Over 40 different language groups were identified in this community. What one saw was the ongoing ghettoization of poverty, with children, single mothers, and new immigrant families becoming the locus of this form of economic inequity.

### *The Community's Response: The Guiding Concepts*

Over the 18 months following the date of site selection, members of the community came together to continue to fashion their vision and to create programs for children, families, the school, and the larger community. There were four major guiding concepts that served as a foundation for the programs that were developed. In addition, associated principles for each concept were defined.

The first guiding concept was that all programs and efforts would either directly or indirectly benefit young children about to enter, or entering, their early school years. Supporting this central focus was a view of the child as a whole child who was developing physically, socially, emotionally, cognitively, and psychologically. There were significant points of transition in this developmental journey leading up to school entry. To support children on this path, it was important that they be provided with caring adults and trusting relationships outside of the home over a number of years. Finally, what complemented this focus on children was attention to the development of their own cultural identity in a mainstream context.

The second guiding concept was that the school was central to the children and their development since it was the place where they spent most of their day. It was the ideal vehicle for the provision of programs, enhancements, and opportunities as well as being a hub and centre for the community. However, with respect to these roles, a significant culture and value shift was required on the part of the school and its personnel in order for the vision to become reality. The school needed to partner, and accept as equals, sectors and individuals that had their own culture, their own language, and their own viewpoints.

The third guiding concept was the adoption of an ecological orientation in the development of the programs that were provided for children. This concept needed to be infused with the power necessary to support an interactive dynamic between the various elements in this system. This was achieved by providing workers (called family enrichment workers) who worked with the children throughout the year in their homes and in the classroom. These workers provided a bridge between the different contexts as well as vital relationships for the children, families, and teachers.

The fourth guiding concept was the adoption of a community development approach to the Highfield project activities. When "building communities from the inside out", the orientation is on assets, strengths and capacities (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). Specifically, this meant positioning the school as the hub and the centre of the community in order to develop and support the capacities and strengths found in the community. The school became the location of choice for events and activities for the larger community. For parents and grandparents, it became a place for meaningful involvement and skill development through employment and volunteering opportunities. It became the location for the provision of services for different groups and for different needs such as ESL programs, parenting programs, and leadership development.

### *The Programs*

The following description provides a sampling of programs and activities offered that were a reflection of the guiding concepts.

For children to be successful at school, school readiness was an underlying focus of a host of pre-school programs. A Family Resource Centre was set up which focussed on the various abilities and experiences young children needed to make a successful transition to school. Some of the programs provided included:

- a regular pre-school drop-in program;
- a toy and book library with dual language books (translation from English into Hindi);
- a variety of language enrichment programs/supports;
- a computer experience program;
- parent workshops;
- a summer program for children and families entering school.

To support the children's success once in school and in the classroom, family enrichment workers began working with the children in a school readiness program during the summer prior to the start of school. These workers supported the children over the next four years of schooling. This began a process of providing a caring relationship that lasted for at least four years for some children. Time and again, teachers cited the evident differences in children who attended these programs, pointing out their readiness to participate in a more formal learning environment.

The family enrichment workers were the means by which the ecological perspective was infused with a dynamic element. These workers gave support not only to children in the classroom and in the home but also to their families. This reduced the child-to-adult ratio within the classroom. They were able to provide academic and emotional support to the children both in the school and at home. In addition, these workers, who were hired from the local community and came from the larger cultural ethnic groups, provided not only a bridge from home to school but also a bridge from the family's culture to the school's culture.

To actualize the vision of the school as a hub of the community, many events, activities and programs were staged at the school to ensure that all members of the community could access the school. There were four major cultural events implemented each year: two for the South Asian community; one for the Black community; and one, a multicultural event, for the whole community. A variety of services and programs were offered including: a pre-natal nutrition support program by the Department of Health; parent education workshops by the Children's Aid Society; "Nobody's Perfect" in native languages (Somali and Punjabi); heritage language classes for children; ESL classes for adults; and support for a developing Black Students' Association. Lastly, many of the regular and fee-for-service staff who worked on the Project were local residents. Over 100 volunteers actively supported the project and were recognized each year for their contribution.

The partnership between the school and the Project led to a number of shared efforts that also supported shared values. The focus on active living and physical education resulted in the development of a skating program for all children in the school. This required securing over 300 pairs of skates. The school, through the support of the Project, adopted the Lion's Quest model of social skill development. An intergenerational program was set up between a local senior care facility and the grade threes. All 1000 children in the school received one of breakfast, lunch or a nutritious snack. A wetlands was developed on the school site. Reading enrichment programs were developed. What seemed to be one of the ongoing results of the partnership was that the school conveyed a sense of openness and welcome towards members of the community, especially parents and other family members.

### *The Results*

Effects on children, in such a complex effort as this, can be a challenge to measure at the best of times. This challenge is increased when the nature of the work is such that outcomes manifest themselves much later. However, the Highfield Project, after the four years of the pilot demonstration stage, has demonstrated statistically significant results in a number of areas. These results need to be seen against the backdrop of the risk markers and challenges that exist for children in a community such as Highfield where there are high levels of poverty, large numbers of single parent families, many families living in subsidized housing (Offord et al., 1989), and many new-Canadian families.

The results point toward hoped for and intended cost savings achieved through the reduction in the provision of specialized intervention services in these children's futures in the areas of mental health, health, remedial education, child welfare, and youth justice. Ultimately, it is hoped that the investments made in these children and their continued schooling and social success will lead them to complete school, gain employment, maintain positive relationships, and be contributing members of their community.

The statistically significant results for the following areas include:

- *Children's mental health*
  - significantly lower rates of anxiety and depression
  - improved social skills
- *Children's health*
  - improved parent ratings of their child's health
- *Quality of Schools*
  - decreased Special Education placements (which increased in control sites)
  - increased satisfaction ratings by families concerning both their children's teacher and school.
- *Quality of Local Neighbourhoods*
  - increased satisfaction with conditions in their dwellings
- *Parent Health and well-being*
  - reduction of smoking by mothers and others in the home from 46% to 26%
- *Parent and Family Functioning*
  - highly significant patterns of improvement on measures of stress, social support, depression, marital satisfaction, and general family functioning (Peters, Petrunka, & Arnold, 2003, p. 224)

### *Best Practices for School-Based Child and Youth Work*

What is being suggested as best practices in this demonstration project are skills and approaches often applied by child and youth workers in individual and small-group situations but, in this context, they have been

generalized to a much larger scale, a whole school. The best practices that guided the work of this project are described below.

The central focus of all work was the child. The child was seen as a whole being developing over time and having critical points of development, both in the early years and at points of transition. Relationships were central to the support provided to children and families over time. Work and support was provided within the contexts in which children grow and develop. In addition, the children's physical environments were addressed to ensure that they were child-friendly. The overall orientation was towards prevention, with an emphasis on capacity, strengths, skill development, and resiliency. There was a constant effort to bridge contexts and cultures, both formal and informal.

While the practices employed at the Highfield Project may not be the sole domain of child and youth workers, the results strongly suggest that these practices can make a difference in the lives of children at risk. The results also suggest that these are practices and approaches that need to be blended with a formal setting such as a school in order to be a place that truly supports child development (McCain & Mustard, 2002).

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