

Affluent, Angry & Alone: An Anecdote About Aiden

Leanne Nazer-Bloom, Canada

Leanne Nazer-Bloom, B.A., B.Ed., M.Sc., Ph. D., holds an interdisciplinary doctoral degree from the University of Manitoba. During her career, she has worked with elite athletes, chess players, expectant moms, teachers, administrators, daycare workers, toddlers, and over one thousand children and youth in the area of mental skills development. Following a twelve year career as a professor in the Faculty of Education and the Department of Kinesiology and Applied Health at the University of Winnipeg, Leanne has recently begun the rewarding challenge of investing in her own children in a new way, as she lives out her teaching philosophies daily, working in a multi-aged classroom setting, teaching her four children at home. University of Ottawa.

Email: nazerbloom@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this participatory action research study was to develop a better understanding of stress in the lives of adolescents, to understand how they cope, and to assess their response to a program developed to help them cope positively with the stress they are facing. The following piece focuses solely on the relationship the researcher established with a bullied student named Aiden. His story is told in a variety of voices including his own, as well as through the use of ethnographic fiction.

He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.

Author Unknown

Let me introduce you to Aiden. He and I met when I worked in his class one spring. As a researcher, my goal was to learn about those things that caused stress for him and his peers, and to offer positive strategies for mitigating that stress. As I taught in their classroom, interviewed students, and observed behaviours and relationships, I quickly recognized that the stress facing this adolescent was a great burden to bear.

The students pushed and shoved their way into classroom on Wednesday morning. The girls settled in the same way as they do any

other morning. Tess and company whispered among themselves, and Sarah sat alone at one table. Today, the boys acted a bit differently though. They were making comments to one another under their breath. Rather than their noisy chatter, they shrugged their shoulders at one another, or shook their heads. Something seems amiss today.

Mrs. Smith walked in with energy and focused intensity. She began to speak. “I heard what happened at lunch yesterday with Aiden,” she started.

“It wasn’t us. We didn’t do it,” protested Robby.

“That’s not the point,” she went on. “You guys either drop him as your friend or include him. You make a decision. Drop him, or include him. You can’t treat people like that.”

“But we weren’t the ones who did it,” Charlie insisted.

“Silence is consent. Do you understand that? Silence is consent, and so if you are standing around and watching something like that happen to someone, and you say nothing, your silence shows that it’s okay. Do you get that? Your silence is consent,” Mrs. Smith re-emphasized. She was furious, and anger could be heard in the tone of her voice. She wanted to be sure that these students understood that being a bystander when somebody is being bullied, and choosing to do nothing demonstrates approval. “You are going to have to make decisions that aren’t going to be popular. Eventually, you will have to make the decision, ‘Am I a leader or a follower?’ You decide.” She made her point. I think they got it. The boys slumped into their chairs, deciding not to defend their lack of action any further.

The incident that Mrs. Smith was referring to was something that occurred the previous day. While on the school grounds during the noon hour, three boys jumped on top of Aiden. Two boys pinned him to the ground while a third boy stood over top of him. The boy who stood over top of Aiden pulled down his own pants, squatted low into Aiden’s face and passed gas right in Aiden’s face.

“We didn’t think he was going to do it,” Robby said in their defence. “He said he was

going to, but we didn’t think he would actually do it. I thought he was joking.”

But he did do it, and the humiliation and embarrassment that Aiden endured as a result of that incident has caused him to feel incredible fury. When Aiden finally broke loose of the two boys, he ran into the school sobbing, cussing, and screaming. A teacher who was in her classroom during the lunch hour heard yelling and the sound of lockers being kicked in, and emerged to find Aiden pacing back and forth between the boys’ bathroom and the hallway, punching in lockers and screaming. She managed to corner Aiden into her classroom, and immediately called for help. The two senior administrators rushed in to first restrain Aiden, and then to calm him down in order to find out what happened. That was during the last week of the intervention. I never saw Aiden again.

Ethnographic Fiction

As you read further about Aiden, you will notice that several approaches have been taken to tell his story, including:

- a) sharing actual accounts of things that occurred during classtime, as cited above,
- b) highlighting conversations between me and Aiden during interviews,
- c) paraphrasing quotes from Aiden, and
- d) presenting data in the form of ethnographic fiction.

“Ethnographic fiction has been defined as an evocative product of the imagination that incorporates such literary techniques as flashbacks, flashforward, unfolding action, dialogue, interior monologue, alternative points of view, and the omniscient narrator” (Halas, 2001, p. 79). To follow are a series of vignettes aimed at introducing you to Aiden. Some of them are presented as fictional reconstructions based on:

- a) field notes,
- b) my reflective journal writings,
- c) interviews with Aiden,
- d) interviews with Aiden’s peers, and
- e) informal and formal dialogue with Mrs. Smith.

The vignettes read much like fiction, and have been created out of the information given by those involved in the study. In places where a vignette is presented as a fictional reconstruction, the reader will be alerted.

The reason that this writing style was adopted for telling Aiden’s story is because so much of what I learned from Aiden was through observation, noting the things he didn’t say, in addition to what he did say. He offered such rich insight into his life, and what it must feel like to be him, but at times these pieces, taken from his interviews, observations, and interviews with others, had to be pieced together. Often during interviews, he nodded, shook his head, or responded with only his eyes or a grin. His body language told so much of his story that seemed to be told more effectively using a combination of writing styles. Themes of loneliness, anger, rejection, and hopelessness were shared in Aiden’s actions and posture. Narratives and fictional narratives helped me to present Aiden to you, to give you a sense of what life is like for him, helping to point out how he copes with stress and how his coping strategies could potentially put him at risk.

Aiden’s Life

I don’t think I can describe in words how my heart broke for Aiden. He is a big boy who is lonely and angry. Aiden is white, and an only child who lives with both of his parents in Yorkdale Heights. Aiden recently moved to Yorkdale Heights from a small city at the beginning of the school year. His

parents are both professionals, and have started their own business in this mid-sized Canadian city, while maintaining a business they left behind in their former city. Work keeps these parents out of the house from seven o’clock in the morning until eight o’clock at night. Sometimes they are home earlier, and sometimes later. When they do arrive home early, the family goes out to dinner together. “Does anyone make supper at your house?” I asked Aiden.

“Not really anymore,” he said. Most nights Aiden is home alone, and if he doesn’t make himself a plate of pasta, he spends the money his parents leave him on take out pizza or pitas.

Endomorphic

After meeting Aiden, it was apparent that he had a poor body image and low self-esteem. In a conversation with Mrs. Smith, she noted, “He’s a larger set boy and, people are quick to point it out.” Mrs. Smith teaches this same group a Foods and Nutrition course. In that class, they discuss Canada’s Food Guide and energy input and output. “When we do that...you can see, like, he puts his head down and, you know, he singles himself out...I think he already knows it, he doesn’t need it reinforced by his peers when they make fun of him and stuff.” Aiden does have an endomorphic shape. He is rather soft looking, but not obese. He carries a large frame and he would likely be a good enforcer in hockey or football. Since the males in this class jump immediately to insult each other based on physical appearance, he is often called “fat.”

Home Alone

Home alone...again. What should I do? Watch TV? Play X-Box? Hack into someone’s computer? Look at raunchy websites? Whatever...who cares. Being an only child has its perks. I get all my own stuff. I like

my stuff. I have lots of it, and I don't have to share one bit of it. A television, a computer and an X-Box all in my own bedroom. It's sweet. I never have to leave my room. But man, I spend a lot of time alone. When my friends let me down, it's really lonely. Living in this big house and being by myself can really suck. I think I'm hungry. I guess I'll order a pizza for supper again tonight.

The above fictional account was based on an interview with Aiden when he proudly shared the positive aspects of being an only child who has the opportunity to spend a great deal of time unsupervised. He enjoys hosting his friends, and allowing his friends to do things in his home that they would not be permitted to do elsewhere. However, the freedom that accompanies this unsupervised time can also lead to isolation and extreme loneliness, which Aiden experiences when his friends exclude him.

After School Retreat

"Where are you rushing off to Aiden?" I asked one day as the 3:30 school bell rang.

"Can't talk now, Mrs. Nazer-Bloom. Robby and Charlie are coming over after school so I gotta get going" he said, fumbling to close his locker as he rushed to leave the school.

"Sounds fun. Have a great time," I called out to him, as he ran past me and out the door.

At Aiden's house, he and his friends decide what to do. "So, what do you guys want to do?" Aiden asks.

"I wanna go back onto that website that we were on last time. You know the one," Robby says, mischievously.

"What do you got to eat?" Charlie asks, as he rummages through the fridge. He pulls out some leftover pizza and walks to the

computer where Aiden and Robby are sitting.

"Yeah, I know what website you wanna see. Move over. I'll type in the address," says Aiden.

"Yeah. That's the one," Robby says, as the images begin to appear. "Man, Aiden, you're so lucky that you're here alone and can do this stuff. I can't even invite friends over to my house after school. You can have anyone over you want, and do this stuff. This rules."

"Like, if my parents ever caught me looking at this stuff on the internet, they'd like kill me," Charlie says, as he fixates his eyes on the images. "You're so lucky man."

"Yeah, I know," Aiden boasts, leaning back in his chair. "This is the life."

This fictional narrative is based on encounters Mrs. Smith has had with Aiden after dismissing him from class, and information Aiden shared with me during our final interview. The activities that Aiden and his friends engage in, in his home after school again points to what Aiden sees as the positive aspects of his life, and the freedom that accompanies his lack of supervision.

Aiden on Stress

During our interviews together, Aiden shared his thoughts on stress. To follow is a paraphrase of Aiden's words on what stress is to him.

Stress sometimes takes over your life and messes you up. Making friends and getting along at school is stress to me. Stress makes me feel heavier, and I start feeling smothered. Sometimes it gives me a headache and other stuff. I can't explain it. I feel it mostly in my body. Fitting in at a new school is

hard. It's weird because you have to make all new friends. Relationships can be hard too. Sometimes communicating is hard. It depends on the two people.

Fitting In

Aiden tries so hard to fit in at Yorkdale School. He wants it so badly. But it isn't easy. How hard would it be to move to a new city at the age of thirteen, trying to break in to a new crowd? Mrs. Smith sympathized, "What I've noticed is if you don't start here in kindergarten and go to grade eight with the same group of kids, it is so hard to get in." Aiden arrived at this kindergarten to grade eight school as a grade eight student. Many of the others have been together since kindergarten. If he was more skilled socially, maybe Aiden would have a chance at fitting in, but his interpersonal skills are not well developed.

"If you've got the social skills you can fit in. But Aiden is a prime example. If you don't have the social skills, forget it. And if his family does get up and move, you know, he's just going to struggle over and over and over again," Mrs. Smith pointed out. Although I would suggest that the present does not necessarily dictate the future for Aiden, I agree that he does need to be taught effective communication skills in order to cope better interpersonally. With his parent's business, it is likely that another move is forthcoming in a year to two for Aiden and his family. Without some sort of social skills intervention, attempting to fit in at age fifteen or sixteen might not be any easier than fitting in now for Aiden.

Buying Friends

Aiden does not know how to interact with others well. When he speaks to adults, he mumbles and keeps his head down. He is successful at winning friends, however, by 'buying' them. "I'll buy you a chocolate bar

at the deli today," he'd tell Bob. "I got you covered for lunch today," as he pulled out his wallet to treat Charlie to lunch at the school deli. "Wanna' come over after school, Bob? I'll buy you a bag of chips," he bribed. His confidence seemed low and his wallet appeared full. Although Aiden did not share with me that he purchased food for his friends, both Mrs. Smith and other students during interviews mentioned this pattern. And for Aiden, buying friends seemed to work. Inviting others over after school to raid his fridge and look at "unmentionables" on the computer screen also attracted others to hang around with him. Were they really his friends? That's difficult to say. Did they defend him when he was in trouble? No, not even close. Of all the students in the class, Aiden was the only one who said that he did not have a significant adult in his life whom he could trust, if he had a problem – there was not a parent, relative or teacher that he trusted enough to confide in, when the chips were down. Did he at least have one person that he could count on as a friend then? I'm not certain that he did.

Mrs. Smith shared that she has tried several times to establish a connection with Aiden, by chatting with him after class or while walking down the hall. "He shuts me out," she shared. The amount of time and number of students that Mrs. Smith teaches also constrains her ability to establish a relationship with Aiden. In this school of five hundred students, Mrs. Smith sees Aiden for three classes and one food lab over a six-day school cycle.

Dejected

Aiden is a very sad person. His body communicates sadness by a slumping posture, and hanging his head low with his hair in his eyes. At times, there is no intonation in his voice at all. It was often difficult to elicit a response from Aiden during class discus-

sions. There was a lot going on in this young man's mind, but nothing that he would make himself vulnerable to discuss during class-time. Interviews helped me to understand him much more. "Aiden, sometimes you seem really sad. Are you sad?" I asked.

"Sometimes," Aiden replied.

"What makes you feel sad?" I asked.

"I can't really say," he answered.

"Is it home or school?" I probed further.

"Both," he replied.

Insult to Injury

Being called names, and being bullied by one student in particular were a constant source of stress for Aiden. "This kid kicks me every once in awhile, but it doesn't really hurt." Aiden went on to share about a time when a bully got physical with him. "I was standing where that window is, right. Then he drop-kicked me across the room and my shoulder went back and snapped."

"What happened next?" I asked.

"That kid got suspended for two days!" he said.

"What did your parents think about this kid hurting you like that? Were they upset?"

"Oh, no, not really," he said.

"How did that make you feel?" I asked.

"It pissed me off!" he exclaimed. "They thought I was faking."

Aiden saw his parents as unsympathetic, which added insult to injury for him. He had been broken by another human being, and as

he saw it, his primary source of support did not jump up in his defence. Aiden felt as though he had nowhere to turn when he needed help. He could not count on his parents. They were never around, and when they were, they failed to show him the type of support that he craved. He couldn't count on his friends. They just used him for food and cheap thrills on his computer. When he was bullied, Aiden felt that he had no one there to back him up. Feelings of hopelessness shone though during our final interview.

Everyone's Out to Get Me

"I always get into trouble – I don't care anymore! Like seriously, school has tried everything to suspend me." Aiden clearly feels that everyone is out to get him. When he gets into trouble for what can be looked on as self-defence and has to deal with the consequences of his actions, he feels like nobody hears him, nobody is listening, and nobody cares.

These experiences are not new for Aiden, who encountered similar situations at his former school. He explains, "Like, my old school, they tried everything to suspend me. They tried planting evidence in my locker."

"What do you mean evidence?" I asked.

"Weed!!" he exclaimed.

Aiden went on to share that the school principal had a personal vendetta against him since, during a hockey game, Aiden checked the principal's son into the boards, knocking him out and giving him a concussion. Following that incident, Aiden says that the principal put another student up to planting marijuana in Aiden's locker, in an attempt to get Aiden thrown out of school. Whether this story is accurate or not, it is still Aiden's perception that this authority

figure was out to get him, which is very significant. These perceptions likely contribute to his feelings of frustration, alienation, and hopelessness.

When Aiden shared about giving the principal's son a concussion, he chuckled and wore a wide grin. I think Aiden enjoys being an enforcer in games with physical contact. I think it makes him feel empowered, strong and in control – feelings he doesn't often experience.

Aiden on Coping

Aiden and I talked about coping during our three interviews together. To follow is a paraphrase of Aiden's thoughts on coping.

Kids my age get into fights to cope with stress. Punching a punching bag isn't as good as hitting a person. Fighting is a good stress buster. At least you're doing something about it, not like when you hit a punching bag. You might get suspended but that will give you a few days to, like, cool down. I got suspended for two days, but it helped me to cool down. Playing X-Box also helps me to cope. Sometimes I just settle my breathing and calm down. It helps. But I'd really rather fight.

Anger Brewing: A Conversation

"You know, Aiden, I feel worried about you with all of the stress you experience and not feeling any support. What do you do with all that anger inside of you?" I asked.

"Bottle it up," he said.

"Have you ever done anything...with the energy produced by your anger that's bottled up inside?"

"Yeah. I got in a few fights at my old school and got suspended for a month for two fights

in one day. I won them both!" he announced proudly.

"What did your parents think about that?" I queried.

"They were pretty pissed off," he said.

I am troubled by the anger festering inside of young people, like Aiden. Isolation, loneliness and anger are real issues facing many young people. It may only take one small incident, on top of years of other incidents, to put a young person "over the edge." Going 'over the edge' could result in an angry young person unleashing all his fury by launching an attack on those he feels have wronged him, as exemplified in the tragedies of Columbine, USA, and Taber, Alberta. These issues are in desperate need of attention.

Tensions Mounting

During classtime Aiden demonstrated that he is a very angry young man. A verbal poke from Tim here. Another jab from Robby there. Aiden would mutter something back to them under his breath. Needling, jabs and digs fly back and forth, back and forth, class after class. Some of the boys are able to murmur their insults to one another, and still manage to fly under the radar, not being heard by the teacher. But when Aiden has had enough, he is unable to hold back. "Shut up you fucking faggot!" he'd scream back at the one insulting him.

"I am getting so fed up with the language in my class. There is no need to speak like that - ever!" Mrs. Smith exclaimed. In her sensitive yet no nonsense approach in these situations, Mrs. Smith removes Aiden and any other offenders from the classroom,

taking them into the hall to get to the bottom of the situation privately.

After one class in early April I asked Mrs. Smith, “Where’s Aiden these days?” after noting his repeated absence.

Mrs. Smith had reached her limit. After countless episodes of poor impulse control and shouting matches between Aiden and others, Mrs. Smith escorted Aiden to the principal’s office, and told her administrator, “He’s not saying ‘fucking faggot’ in my class again! It’s not acceptable!” and left Aiden there to deal with the principal. Aiden did not return to class for nearly two weeks. I do not know what he was doing instead of coming to class, but when he did return in mid-April, his attitude had softened, and he seemed less agitated. Perhaps he had softened because he hadn’t been bullied?

I Don’t Care Anymore

“I don’t care about school and I don’t care about homework. I don’t do homework and I don’t worry when the teacher comes around to collect it. I just don’t do it and I don’t care.” In the twelve weeks that I was in his class, Aiden did not submit one piece of homework. He did not make excuses for it. He just didn’t do it, and shrugged it off when asked about it. His parents are well educated, and expressed a desire for Aiden to do well in school. Aiden wrote entrance exams for admission into a prestigious private school. His results did not measure up, and he was not accepted. “My dad was pissed with me, but I don’t care anymore. I don’t care that I don’t fit in here. None of it really matters anymore.” I could hear the hopelessness in his voice. He meant it. I could tell that nothing really mattered to him anymore.

Where are Your Parents?

“So what are you and your buddies up to, after school?” I asked Aiden.

“My friends come over and they just go on my computer and log onto their accounts,” he said.

“What are they doing on your computer?” I asked.

“Trashy things,” he confessed.

“In your house?” I clarified.

“Under my supervision,” Aiden said proudly.

“It sounds like you feel pretty proud of yourself, Aiden,” I observed.

“Yes, I am,” he said confidently.

My parents are always away. And when my parents are away, I look after myself. I like to play X-Box, video games, and killing video games. I have friends over a lot, and I like to do that. I guess my dog is really the only one who keeps me company. He and I wrestle. My friends come over to use the computer and to do things that they can’t do on their own computers.

The preceding fictional narrative was based on information Aiden shared. It would seem that with superficial friendships like the ones Aiden experiences, life can be lonely.

Aiden One on One

The first interview I conducted with Aiden was a group interview. During this interview he shared very little, only mumbling under his breath, in an attempt to make his peers laugh. Thus I chose to conduct the next two

interviews with Aiden in a one on one setting. The decision to interview Aiden alone was a good one. One on one, Aiden made eye contact and sheepishly grinned as he shared the mischievous things that he and his friends do after school.

“You know, it’s really different meeting you here one on one. You are different from the way you are in the classroom,” I said to Aiden.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You’re soft-spoken and funny and it is nice to visit with you here. When I speak to you in class, it sounds like you are annoyed and just not happy to be there,” I said. Aiden went on to share that when his friends are being obnoxious in class, he does it too, in order to fit in.

“I have to do it too because, you have to,” he explained.

I bluntly asked, “What would happen if you didn’t act like that?”

“They’d call me a woosy,” he said.

It appears that there is tremendous pressure to follow the crowd in order to fit in, as with most adolescent situations. Two other boys who I would consider athletic, bright and hard working agreed that they felt pressure to act inappropriately in class in order to avoid being teased by male peers.

Sharing His Music

About mid-April, the typical reserved, non-commenting Aiden came to life for the first time during class, when I announced their final project. “For our final classes together, we are going to do presentations. I’d like everyone to present something related to attitude. You can share a poem, or a skit.

You can write a story, a rap or share lyrics of a favorite song. Whatever you like, that has something to do with attitude.” Aiden’s hand shot up. “Mrs. Smith, can I go to the library? Can you write me a note so that I can go?”

“Sure Aiden,” she said, jotting a note to the librarian, seeking permission for Aiden to use the library computers. Before the end of class was up, Aiden was back with lyrics of a favorite song printed out. They were lyrics written by a rap group, and Aiden couldn’t wait to share them. The following class, Aiden was among the first to get up in front of the group, and without hesitating, recited and then interpreted the lyrics of the song. This was remarkable for a student who had contributed virtually nothing all term. Asking students to choose something personal to share appeared to make an impact. For those who chose music to share, it seemed to make the greatest impact. Aiden’s voice seemed to be heard for the first time since the beginning of February. Maybe he was not comfortable sharing his own voice, but felt much more at ease sharing his thoughts and feelings through the lyrics of a song.

Music was an effective component of the intervention that helped me to connect at a deeper level with many of the students. Many song lyrics revealed the “heart” of the students, pointing out what students valued and where their passions lie. Their music gave me a platform to ask more questions in follow up interviews, and allowed me to enter their world.

Asking students to share song lyrics was particularly effective with Aiden. After class, Aiden stayed back to share more with me about the meaning of the song he presented called “Changes.” He wanted me to know that the song artist was Black, and died in a racially motivated killing a couple

of years ago. Aiden knew so much about music, and seemed to feel very proud to share something with me that I knew nothing about. It was interesting that the song Aiden shared with the class discussed how people have to start pulling together to make changes, and that we can go nowhere unless we help one another. The essence of the song can be summed up in these lyrics: “We gotta’ make a change. It’s time for us as a people to start makin’ some changes. Let’s change the way we eat, let’s change the way we live and let’s change the way we treat each other. You see the old way wasn’t working so it’s on us to do what we gotta do, to survive” (Shakur, 1998).

“Finally, something that resonates with Aiden,” I thought. I was ecstatic at this breakthrough. Then a thought occurred to me, “I wonder if the message in this song is his heart’s cry?” If only I could have worked with these students longer, I think that I could have made an even richer connection with each of them. Processing the content of their music was definitely an enlightening moment for me.

Wrapping Up

I am not sure how effective some of the techniques taught through the intervention were for Aiden because he missed so many classes. Visits to his former city and trips to the principal’s office took him away from nearly half of our classes together. The intervention would likely have been more meaningful for Aiden if he had not been absent so often. When Aiden was in class, he did not participate much and seemed really annoyed at having to participate in group work. Group work was not a good teaching strategy to use with Aiden, since his friends were fickle, at times rather mean, and were not always open to including him in their groups. Other times the verbal needling between Aiden and others contributed

to a tense classroom environment. Looking back, it might have been effective to work one on one with Aiden, where possible, to catch him up on the work that he had missed, and to alleviate the stress he may have felt working with others when exploring personal issues.

Music was a rich avenue to explore with these students, and when given the opportunity to voice his thoughts through the words of a favorite song, Aiden shone. I am grateful to all of the students for opening up to me, and sharing their lives. I am grateful to Aiden for opening my eyes to the countless variables that put him and others living in this upper middle class neighborhood at risk. Before working with this group, I had not considered that these students would be at risk. It was startling to discover that some students were experiencing neglect, feelings of hopelessness, feelings of isolation, and bullying. I was also surprised that many students were feeling so angry. The grass is always greener on the other side, isn’t it? But things aren’t always as they appear.

A “Fictional Flash Forward”

I got nothin’ better to do.

I may as well get blasted.

During our interview together, Aiden shared how on one occasion, he became drunk on the alcohol in his parent’s liquor cabinet. He also mentioned that he had been to a party and drank beer. Although this preliminary evidence of experimenting with alcohol does not point to addiction, in my experience with working with youth at risk, a significant factor which is often a precursor to drug and alcohol addiction is a lack of leisure skills. This lack of leisure skills often leads youth into looking for things to do to fill their time. Because Aiden does not appear to be involved in any activities outside of school,

or any activities offered within the school, he does not appear to be honing leisure skills aside from exploring on the computer and playing video games. I might suggest that substances could become attractive for Aiden, as a means to fill his leisure time.

Youth From Yorkdale Heights at Risk?

“Affluenza,” Neglect & Disconnect

I believe that the affluence of some of the youth living in this community could actually put some of these students at risk. Easy access to money for many of these young people could lead them into trying substances, which could translate into future issues related to substance use and abuse.

My experience working with youth before teaching at Yorkdale School had been limited to working with incarcerated youth who, by our judicial system were labeled ‘at risk.’ When I came to Yorkdale School I did not expect to find so many similarities between those at risk youth and the youth living in Yorkdale Heights. I followed up with Mrs. Smith about the similarities that I had observed between these two populations, and she agreed that although there are many differences between the two populations, there are many similarities. Since Mrs. Smith herself grew up as a child of poor immigrant parents, and considers herself to have been ‘at risk,’ she easily relates to students who grow up with less. “Like, some kids [in poor communities] were going to school hungry because there was no food and there was neglect....When I come here to teach, you know, a lot of these kids have food and choose not to take the food and come to school hungry.”

This must be frustrating for a teacher who, having grown up with no food in the cupboard, deals with inattentive students who cannot focus due to their empty bellies,

when there are positive alternatives and healthy choices available.

From what they shared of their lives, I feel concerned at the apparent neglect of some of the students with whom I worked. In today’s society, many parents are working really hard to provide for their families, and children are suffering as a result. Mrs. Smith raised this as a concern as well. “A lot of these kids are neglected in the same way here [as in poorer communities]. Here Mom and Dad are working, like, to eleven o’clock at night or traveling by plane and emailing [asking], ‘Are you doing your homework?’” Although the neglect that these young people experience is not physical, as they appear to have an abundance of what they need, their neglect is experienced in the form of emotional care and contact time with significant adults in their lives. Aiden, for example, has no siblings, and mentioned that he does not have any significant adults in his life to whom he could go if he needed help.

One final similarity between the at risk youth I worked with in the past and the youth from Yorkdale Heights was a lack of connectedness to the community. In poorer communities where children and youth may be at risk, often times there are people who move in and out the community on a regular basis, making it difficult for these young people to lay down roots. Because the adults who live in Yorkdale Heights are often professionals, it is not unusual for families to move when the breadwinner’s job takes the family out of province or out of the country. Mrs. Smith shared, “There were transient people in my area growing up but there’s a lot of transient families in this area too, who stay for two or three years and then leave because of transfers, right. So being rooted in the community isn’t really there either.” Feeling a sense of belonging in a

community, and knowing where you are from can lead to feelings of security. As an adolescent, feeling secure can go a long way in helping to move through this tumultuous period of life. Moving and starting over is difficult at any stage of life, but during adolescence, it can be extremely difficult. Attempting to find an existing social group to fit into, especially when you are still figuring out who you are, can be very stressful.

The most obvious difference between the youth with whom I worked in the past, and these youth, is accessibility to money. This access to money may put the youth from Yorkdale Heights at great risk. Access to money means access to a lot of things, all of which may not be positive or healthy. Drugs and alcohol cost money, and many of these youth have easy access to money, which could lead to experimenting with substances that could potentially lead to addiction. When leisure skills are lacking, boredom results. Getting high could be an effective means of alleviating boredom, or even dulling the pain of isolation and rejection.

My Final Visit to Yorkdale School

I did not meet with the students again after we finished the presentations. Our three months were over, and ending off with the music was a strong way to finish our time together. I did go back one last time in June, hoping to see them again, but they were busy writing exams. I brought in a handwritten note for each student which Mrs. Smith was going to pass on to them. In the note I thanked students for their hard work, wished them well, and included a copy of my favourite poem, written below. Although not written by a rap artist, it resonates the same message of needing to work together, as the song shared by Aiden.

The Goose Story

Next fall, when you see geese heading south for the winter...flying along in V formation...you might consider what science has discovered as to why they fly that way:

As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in V formation the whole flock adds a 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own.

People who share a common direction and sense of community can get to where they are going more quickly and easily because they are traveling on the thrust of one another.

When a goose falls out of formation it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone...and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front.

If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formation with those who are headed the same way we are.

When the Head Goose gets tired, it rotates back in the Wing and another goose flies point.

It is sensible to take turns doing demanding jobs with people or with geese flying south.

Geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

What do we say when we honk from behind?

Finally...and this is important...when a goose gets sick, or is wounded by gunshots, and falls out of formation, two other geese fall out with the goose and follow it down to

lend help and protection. They stay with the fallen goose until it is able to fly or until it dies, and only then do they launch out, on their own, or with another formation to catch up with their group.

If we have the sense of a goose, we will stand by each other like that.

Milton Olson

References

Halas, J. (2001). Shooting hoops at the treatment centre: Sport stories. *Quest*, 53, 77-96.

Nazer-Bloom, L. (2007). Assessing adolescent's responses to a coping skills program: An action research approach to understanding adolescent stress and coping. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Manitoba: Winnipeg, Canada.

Shakur, Tupac. (1998). Changes. On *2Pac Greatest Hits* [Audio CD]. USA: Interscope Records.