CUS

Urban Education

Research Brief

School Community Programs for Vulnerable Boys

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Toronto District School Board

"Acceptance is one of the biggest messages we try to get across – because they already have their stereotypical views of what the society male should be. So we try to break that down, take it apart and look at it from so many different angles. After we are done, they realize how ignorant their views were in the beginning.

Statement of the Problem

Analyses of TDSB administrative data show that particular groups of boys are vulnerable to dropping out or leaving school early (Ansief et al., 2010). The Gender Education Strategy (GES)

committee of the TDSB was established in November 2009 to address the gender gap in academic achievement and school engagement through research and program analysis[1]. The purpose of the Research Subcommittee of GES was to assess and conduct research on the range of school-community

programs and interventions that have been implemented to address the gender gap in academic achievement, such as mentoring programs and single-sex classrooms. Little is known about how and why these programs and classrooms address the gender gap,

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as well as their effectiveness.

Approach and Design

This study considers vulnerability to be a product of social inequality and sociocultural processes, which determine a particular group's marginalization or inclusion in academic and extracurricular programs and services (Noguera, 2008; Cutter, Boruff & Shirley, 2003). Although vulnerable children and youth exist across every socio-economic strata (SES) of our society, those in the lowest SES range from low-income neighbourhoods are more likely to be defined as vulnerable (HELP, 2011).

Methodology

A multiple-case-study approach was used to assess the effectiveness of school-based interventions for vulnerable

populations of boys in five TDSB school communities. Case studies emphasize detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships (Merriam, 1988). The following key questions guided the research:

1) What interventions exist in TDSB school communities to facilitate school engagement of vulnerable boys? What organizational and instructional practices are utilized in these interventions?
2) What are participating administrators', teachers' and students' assessment of these interventions? Do they think they are effective? Why or why not?

Middle school communities serve as sites for the present study. The Research Subcommittee worked with the TDSB Research and Information Services department to identify middle schools that had a high number of male students who were vulnerable to disengaging. Five middle schools in the TDSB were chosen for the study and the boys' programs that they offer. Data for this report was collected over a six-

month period.

Findings

The research team identified five themes about program successes from interviews and focus groups:
1) Experiential learning and exposure to new environments,
2) Critical thinking and citizenship development
3) Mentorship
4) Building friendships
5) Creating safe and democratic space.

In terms of *experiential learning*, the administrators and facilitators of the boys' programs in the school-community spoke about how exposing the boys to new experiences was helpful in getting them to realize their different capacities (which are often presented as very limited by members of their own communities). *Critical thinking and citizenship development* (within and outside the context of school) was another successful aspect of the programs. According to Alexandra, an administrator for

This collaborative team of teachers and researchers are part of the ongoing School Community Programs for Vulnerable Boys.

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one of the programs, using citizenship development model fosters self-awareness, self-understanding, self-control and social skills. The boys we spoke with also expressed a desire to develop more *positive friendships with their peers.* These relationships, they felt, would help strengthen their communication and interpersonal skills. Students truly appreciated the *safe and democratic space* of the programs. One student, Tev, explained: "When I come down here, they can actually work it out and they make it safe between us. So when I come down here and they talk to us, we don't have to get into a fight again. They make it so that we are friends and nothing else happens, and it is safer to talk to other people."

Implications for research, policy and/or practice

Despite the many successes of the programs, the boys we interviewed communicated a desire to do more activities and have more opportunities to travel beyond their schooling communities. We interpret this as a call for the programs to place more of an emphasis on building *social capital* (Bourdieu 1986), i.e. relationships with individuals, groups and institutions beyond the immediate school community that provide access to resources needed for success. In addition to greater focus on social capital, there is room for school

community programs to improve their promotion of *academic engagement*. Both teacher and school collaboration might be effective approaches to bridging this gap. If teachers were to collaborate with program staff more, their participation might provide more of a bridge to academic engagement goals of schools. Moreover, if the existing programs were revised to engage and work collaboratively with other schools in the community (particularly secondary schools), a more extensive academic support system could be realized.

Recommendations for Further Reading/Resources

- Canada Education article on Failing Boys! Beyond Crisis, Moral Panic and Limiting Stereotypes: http://www.cea-ace.ca/education-canada/article/failing-boys-beyond-crisis-moral-panic-and-limiting-stereotypes
- My Brother's Keeper: A New White House Initiative to Empower Boys and Young Men of Color: http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/02/27/my-brother-s-keeper-new-white-house-initiative-empower-boys-and-young-men-color
- Boys to Men Empowerment Program: https://www.facebook.com/boystomenempowerment

Citations

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Message from the Head of CUS:

On July 1, 2014, CUS and I begin a new chapter as I leave friends and colleagues in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning and join the department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, specifically the Adult Education and Community Development program. In my new department and program I will focus my research and service activities on education and training needs of racialized and marginalized youth transitioning to adulthood. The department change and refocused scholarly agenda is the culmination of over six years of work with school districts, programs and services for Black male youth, queer youth of colour, and young adult offenders. In these precarious times it is difficult to advocate for such highly stigmatized populations whom the general public often views as individually responsible for their social problems of dropping out of school, low academic achievement, violence and HIV/AIDS. The need for systemic critiques and alternative visions and solutions cannot be overestimated. Through writing grants for collaborative, community-based research and presenting at academic and professional conferences, schools, programs and services for youth, I've attempted to raise the public profile of the Centre for Urban Schooling as a research unit in OISE concerned with the everyday experiences of students, parents, teachers, administrators and youth workers in some of our most economically disadvantaged communities. I will continue this work in the department of Adult Education and Community Development, and look forward to working the faculty, staff and community members in the CUS network who strive to create a more equitable, socially just education system. As my late mother used to say "Keep your head up, chin forward and do that thing!

Sincerely,

Lance T. McCready

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