

CHAPTER

11

**CREATING SAFE AND CARING LEARNING
COMMUNITIES IN CANADA:
TOGETHER WE LIGHT THE WAY**

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Abstract: Together We Light the Way is a comprehensive school-based model that aims to prevent anti-social behaviours. Its overall objective is to create safe and caring learning communities by encouraging municipal officials, business leaders and members of community groups to work in partnership with school staff, students and parents. This paper describes the sociological underpinnings of the model, and its objectives and framework. It also presents an evaluation of the model, which was implemented in four pilot schools.

Background

Defining the problem

Studies by James Coleman (1966) and others have revealed that the socio-economic status (SES) of families explains more than half of the variation in student achievement across schools (Rutter *et al.*, 1979). Socio-economic status is highly related to other student-related effects such as violence, school drop-out, entry to post-secondary education, and adult employment and income levels (Dill and Haberman, 1995; Englert, 1993). Schools serving low SES families often find themselves in an “iron circle” that begins with the family’s economic conditions, which may be a consequence of unemployment, cultural, racial or linguistic diversity, recent immigration, high mobility or family break-ups (e.g. Dillard, 1995; Gezi, 1990). These conditions often give rise to what Shaw (2001) identifies as family “risk factors”: harsh or erratic parenting skills; poor parental supervision; low family income, poverty and isolation; family violence, abuse and neglect; and parental conflict. Low SES families are more likely to have low expectations of their children’s school performance.

A family’s SES, however, is a symptom, rather than a direct cause, of violence and other difficulties that a student may experience at school. In fact, SES is a relatively crude proxy for a set of family and community conditions and interactions, which are considerably more direct in their impact on student success (Lee, Bryk and Smith, 1993). Together, these conditions and interactions, which can vary widely across families, constitute the family’s “educational culture”, at the core of which are the assumptions, norms and beliefs held by the family about intellectual work in general and school in particular. The behaviours and conditions resulting from these assumptions have been shown to relate to school success (Bloom, 1985; Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 1987; Scott-Jones, 1984). On the basis of such evidence, Walberg (1984) concluded that the basic dimensions of family educational cultures are family work habits, academic guidance and support provided to children, and stimulation to think about issues in the larger environment. Other dimensions include academic and occupational aspirations and expectations of parents or guardians for their children, and the provision of adequate health and nutritional conditions and physical settings in the home that are conducive to academic work. Communities are able to supplement and sometimes substitute for some dimensions of family educational cultures.

Finding a solution: Social capital in children and youth

Family cultures only account for one part of the explanation for variation in student success. The primary mechanism that links particular types of family educational cultures

with student success is "social capital". Variation in the strength of family educational cultures matters for students' success, both inside and outside school, because it exerts a powerful influence on their access to and acquisition of social capital.

Our understanding of "social capital" is informed by treatments of the concept found, for example, in Coleman (1987, 1989) and most recently in Driscoll and Kerchner (1999); it is the "assets" people accrue by virtue of their relationship with other individuals and networks of people. Depending fundamentally on the existence of high levels of trust, Driscoll and Kerchner suggest that these assets may take a number of forms: reciprocal obligations and expectations of one another held by members of a social group (e.g. the obligation a child feels to work hard at school in return for the obligation a parent feels to provide a happy, secure and stimulating home environment); the potential for information that exists in social relations (e.g. a relative's knowledge of whom to contact to be considered for a job); and the existence of effective norms and sanctions that encourage some forms of behaviour and discourage others (e.g. norms held by the family about what constitutes respectful behaviour towards teachers, and appropriate disincentives for disrespectful behaviour).

There is another type of social capital that is especially important in accounting for a child's success, which consists of the habits and dispositions evident in family members' individual and collective responses to intellectual and other everyday problems. When such habits and dispositions are productive, and when the form they take falls into what Vygotsky (Cole *et al.*, 1978) calls the child's "zone of proximal development", they constitute a valuable resource for children. Once acquired, such habits and dispositions serve not only instrumental problem-solving purposes, but also contribute to the child's sense of self-efficacy. Considerable evidence suggests that a robust sense of self-efficacy generates persistence in the face of the challenges presented by the school curriculum, which represents a key explanation for differences in the child's success (Bandura, 1986).

Objectives of the model

The National Crime Prevention Centre sponsored a three-year study of the Together We Light the Way model as part of a larger initiative to support, assess and disseminate information about effective interventions to reduce youth anti-social behaviours and to build resiliency in at-risk children and youth. Together We Light the Way aims to build resiliency and responsibility in children and youth aged four to 14 by increasing protective factors and minimising the risk factors associated with crime.

- *Protective factors* are school success, increased academic achievement, a sense of self, a safe and secure environment, a healthy lifestyle, positive family and school relationships, respectful and caring relationships, and a connection to caring adults.
- *Risk factors* are a lack of success in school and thus low academic achievement, unsafe and insecure environments, victimisation, bullying and fighting, poor nutrition, family stress and a lack of attachment to caring adults.

The model involves the entire community: schools, businesses and communities work together to create safe, caring, stable and effective learning environments. It therefore relies on the commitment and involvement of school leaders, teachers, parents and the community for its success. The model aims to enhance the success of children by helping them to develop a sense of self, respect and responsibility; it also aims to connect children and youth to their communities in meaningful ways, thus helping children to develop the resilience and capacity to overcome challenges and assisting them to lead productive, meaningful and happy lives. Together We Light the Way encourages a caring and interdependent relationship between the school and its community, envisioning the school as the heartbeat of its community.

The Together We Light the Way model has five explicit objectives for students:

- To develop respect for themselves and others.
- To become motivated to obtain high levels of academic achievement.
- To interact and play co-operatively with peers.
- To understand the importance of a healthy lifestyle.
- To interact respectfully with members of the community.

Framework of the model

The Together We Light the Way model consists of a series of guiding principles, pillars, cultural components, specific programmes and overlaying strategies. District leaders, principals, teachers, parents and community partners are trained using an extensive set of curriculum and audio-visual materials.

Guiding principles

- Everyone is unique and has a contribution to make.
- Everyone has strengths to be nurtured and supported.
- Everyone has the right to be respected and the responsibility to respect others.
- Service to others performed with caring and love makes a difference.

Pillars

- *Academic.* To ensure students reach the highest level of academic achievement.
- *Respect.* To cultivate in students a strong sense of self-respect, personal responsibility and respect for others.
- *Teamwork.* To enable students to work as effective team members in the school and community.

- *Leadership.* To provide opportunities for students to be innovative and to take responsibility for themselves, their school and their community.

Cultural components

- *Partnerships.* Individuals from businesses and communities should work with students, school staff and parents.
- *Starting from strengths.* Individuals must be recognised as unique with strengths that are valued, recognised and nurtured.
- *Sharing leadership.* Individuals should be encouraged to demonstrate initiative and to take responsibility for their own education and well-being.
- *Growing personally and professionally.* Personal strengths and accomplishments make individuals unique. Honouring a person personally and professionally brings a tremendous strength and energy to the team.
- *Respect.* All actions and interactions in the school should be based on the guiding principle that "every person has the right to be respected and the responsibility to respect others".
- *Assessment and evaluation.* Information about programme implementation and student growth and achievement must be used to make informed, objective decisions.
- *Service.* Service to others must be recognised as contributing to building stronger and safer classrooms, schools and communities.
- *Celebrating success.* Individual and school success should be recognised, honoured and celebrated.

Specific programmes

- *Circles of Love* involves reading together to encourage a love of books and reading.
- *The Choice Is Yours* demonstrates how making positive choices can have a positive impact on a person's life.
- *Celebrating Our Stars* recognises and honours students for their accomplishments in academic life, respect, teamwork, leadership and service.
- *Healthful Happenings* teaches students about the importance of nutritious foods and healthy living, and their relationship to learning and well-being.
- *Parent Rap* facilitates meaningful parental involvement.
- *Respect* teaches students how to respect themselves and others in the classroom, school, family, and local and global communities.

- *Connections: Classroom and Community* shows students how learning at school is relevant to life outside the school.

Overlaying strategies

- *Partnerships* involving parents, businesses and community partners.
- *Goal setting* or establishing priorities and measuring success.

Evaluation of the model

Data collection

This model was implemented in four pilot schools. To evaluate progress towards achieving the project objectives and implementation by teachers of the Together We Light the Way programmes in classrooms, data were collected by an external evaluation team once or twice a year over a three-year evaluation period – either from the same class of students in September and June or in successive cohorts of students each September. Data were also collected on incidents of bullying and academic performance, and interviews were conducted with a number of stakeholders.

Achieving project objectives and implementing programmes

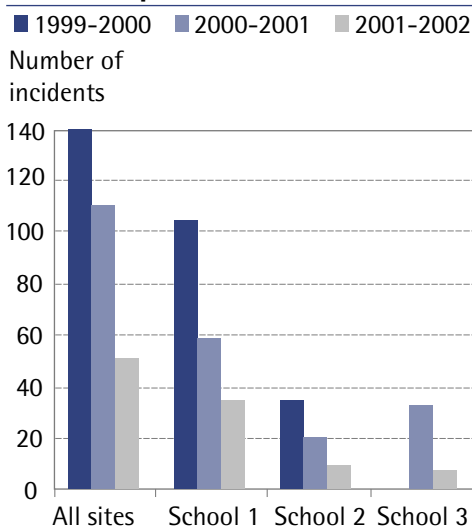
Results of the external evaluation indicated that the programme is making considerable progress, particularly regarding four of the eight project objectives: enhanced learning and employability skills and habits, the development of non-violent responses to anger, improved attitudes, values and behaviours towards school, and the creation of productive partnerships.

In addition, 40% of the project's programmes were carried out within the first year, 1999-2000, and the implementation of these programmes is steadily increasing under the direction of the project's advisory group. Classroom, social skills development and community integration activities were defined as priority areas.

Incidents of bullying and academic performance

An analysis of the data revealed that incidents of bullying decreased in all pilot schools between 1999 and 2002 (Figure 11.1). A longitudinal study of academic results, which was conducted using the Canadian Test of Basic Skills, showed that the academic performance

Figure 11.1. Incidents of bullying between September 1999 and June 2002



of all students enrolled in the programme over the study period met or exceeded expected grade equivalent growth (Figure 11.2). It can be concluded that focusing on increasing protective factors and decreasing risk factors created a behavioural foundation of safety and caring that fostered academic achievement and the development of a culture of respect within the school community, resulting in fewer bullying incidents.

Interviews with key stakeholders

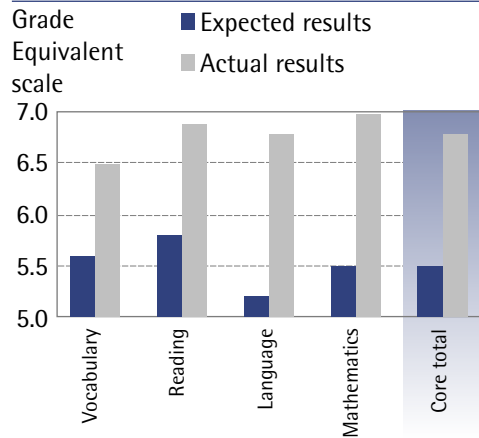
A number of themes emerged from interviews conducted with principals, staff and parents in the four pilot schools:

- A culture of respect was built in the school and community through the use of a common language of respect and shared beliefs in the Together We Light the Way guiding principles.
- A school-wide focus on the use of the goal-setting process helped students to achieve their goals and articulate their learning, growth and development.
- The increased involvement of parents, businesses and community partners had a positive impact on the behaviours of students and others involved in the programmes.
- Shared leadership resulted in students, teachers, non-teaching staff, parents, businesses and community partners all taking responsibility for the education and well-being of the students.
- Teachers and administrators viewed the data collection and assessment components as "user-friendly" tools for making informed decisions.

Conclusion

The evaluation of the Together We Light the Way project highlighted a number of important points. First, Together We Light the Way has made important contributions to schools and communities, particularly to children and their families. All those involved in the project expressed a positive view of the models and its effects. Second, the programme provides a comprehensive approach to addressing the problems and issues in schools today. It is a creative and helpful tool for creating respectful relationships among and between students and adults, thus making a crucial contribution to a civil society. Together We Light the Way also shows considerable potential for addressing many of the

Figure 11.2. Actual vs. expected academic results of students involved in the programme (1999-2002)



factors associated with youth anti-social behaviours. It can attract the community into the school and engage parents more fully in the education of their children.

This programme will continue to yield positive outcomes in the future, aiming to facilitate long-term improvement in a school's capacity to optimise the achievement of students, especially those with special needs and most at risk of failure.

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