SCHOOL COMMUNITY PROGRAMS FOR VULNERABLE BOYS

Lance T. McCready, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Urban Education in the department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education (LHAE) at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (*OISE/UT*). • **Lance T. McCready**, Ph. D. est professeur agrégé en éducation urbaine au département de Leadership, Higher and Adult Education (LHAE) à l'Institut d'études pédagogiques de l'Ontario (OISE) de l'Université de Toronto.

Ramon San Vicente is an Equity Instructional Leader with the Toronto District School Board. • **Ramon San Vicente** est un leader pédagogique en équité au Conseil scolaire de Toronto (Toronto District School Board).

Rachael Nicholls is a researcher and doctoral candidate at OISE/University of Toronto. • **Rachael Nicholls** est chercheuse et candidate au doctorat à l'Institut d'études pédagogiques de l'Ontario (OISE) de l'Université de Toronto.

Carl James teaches in the Faculty of Education and the Graduate Program in Sociology, and is the Director of the York Centre for Education & Community. • **Carl James** enseigne à la faculté d'éducation et au programme d'études supérieures en sociologie et il est le directeur du York Centre for Education & Community.

Olivia Strohschein is an MA student in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. • **Olivia Strohschein** est étudiante à la maîtrise au département du curriculum, de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage à l'Institut d'études pédagogiques de l'Ontario (OISE).

ABSTRACT **In this article the authors describe the findings of a school-university collaborative multiple-case study of school community programs for vulnerable boys in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The purpose of the study was to identify what kinds of programs exist to address gender gaps in academic achievement, which school communities those programs are housed in, and learn more about their effectiveness for the purpose of developing an evidence base. The following key questions guided the research:**

- **What programs exist in TDSB school communities to facilitate school engagement of vulnerable boys? What organizational and instructional practices are utilized in these interventions?**

- **What are participating administrators', teachers' and students' assessment of these programs? Do they think they are effective? Why or why not?**

The authors worked with the TDSB Research and Information Services department to identify five middle schools that had a high number of male students who were vulnerable to disengaging from school. Over a six-month period the authors gathered information on programs designed to address the gender gap in academic achievement in

those school communities. They identified a total of 13 programs, the majority of which were *Boys to Men* programs focused on mentoring. Five themes on program successes emerged from the individual interviews with the student participants, administrative staff, program facilitators and teachers: *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. One of the limitations student participants identified was the need for more activities, especially those that provide the opportunity to travel beyond the schooling community. We interpret this as a call for the programs to place more of an emphasis on building social capital and suggest they do this by strengthening partnerships with families/caregivers, other schools, community members, organizations & businesses. In conclusion we discuss how the results of our study provide some evidence of the effectiveness of school community programs to foster school engagement of vulnerable boys, but there is room for these programs to promote more academic engagement through greater teacher-program collaboration.

RESUME Dans cet article, les auteurs décrivent les résultats d'une étude collaborative école-université portant sur des cas multiples de programmes scolaires communautaires pour les garçons vulnérables au sein du Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Les objectifs étaient d'identifier les types de programmes existants ayant pour objectif de combler les écarts entre les sexes en matière de succès scolaire, les communautés pédagogiques dans lesquelles ces programmes se retrouvent et les facteurs d'efficacité de ces programmes, dans le but de créer une base de connaissances sur le sujet. Notre recherche était basée sur les questions suivantes :

- Quels sont les programmes des communautés scolaires du TDSB qui encouragent l'engagement scolaire chez les garçons vulnérables ? Quelles sont les pratiques organisationnelles et pédagogiques utilisées lors de ces interventions ?

- Comment les administrateurs, les professeurs et les élèves évaluent-ils ces programmes ? Est-ce qu'ils estiment qu'ils sont efficaces ? Pourquoi ou pourquoi pas ?

Les auteurs ont travaillé avec le département de recherche et d'information du TDSB pour identifier cinq écoles intermédiaires qui comprenaient un grand nombre d'élèves vulnérables au décrochage scolaire (les élèves à risque de décrocher). Pendant une période de six mois, les auteurs ont recueilli de l'information sur les programmes qui visent à combler l'écart entre les sexes en matière de réussite scolaire au sein de ces communautés scolaires. Ils ont identifié un total de 13 programmes, dont une majorité de programmes intitulés *Boys to Men*, axés sur le mentorat. Cinq thèmes reliés à la réussite de ces programmes ont émergé des entretiens individuels avec les élèves, le personnel administratif, les coordonnateurs de programme et les professeurs : *1)* l'apprentissage par l'expérience et l'exposition à de nouveaux milieux, *2)* la pensée critique et le développement de la citoyenneté, *3)* le mentorat, *4)* la création d'amitiés, *5)* la création d'espaces démocratiques et sécuritaires. Une des lacunes mentionnées par les participants était le manque d'activités, surtout celles qui offrent la chance d'aller au-delà du milieu scolaire. Nous interprétons cette lacune comme un appel pour améliorer les programmes afin qu'ils soient davantage axés sur le développement d'un capital social, notamment en renforçant les partenariats entre les familles, les autres écoles, et les différents acteurs—clés au sein de la communauté. En conclusion, l'article revient sur les résultats de notre étude qui démontrent que les programmes scolaires communautaires favorisent efficacement l'engagement des écoles envers les garçons vulnérables mais que ces programmes pourraient accroitre l'engagement académique des élèves par une meilleure collaboration professeur-programme.

BACKGROUND AND 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]. A Research Subcommittee of the GES was formed, which included authors McCready, James and San Vicente, to provide an evidence base for programmatic reforms recommended by the GES. The specific 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. According to the Glossary of Education Reform (http://edglossary.org/) the term *school community*, when used by educators, typically refers to the various individuals, groups, businesses, and institutions that are invested in the welfare and vitality of a public school

and its community — i.e., the neighborhoods and municipalities served by the school.

The term may encompass the school administrators, teachers, and staff members who work in a school; the students who attend the school and their parents and families; and local residents and organizations that have a stake in the school's success, such as school-board members, businesses, organizations, and cultural institutions; and related organizations and groups such as parent-teacher associations, charitable foundations, and volunteer school-improvement committees (to name just a few). Through this research the authors hope to contribute to an evidence-base of effective programs and interventions designed to address the gender gap in academic achievement in urban school communities, in particular, as relatively little research currently exists on this topic.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We defined vulnerable boys as boys who are at-risk of dropping out of school due to academic underachievement. 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 and from low-income neighbourhoods are more likely to be defined as vulnerable (HELP, 2011). Theories of *structural and cultural* risk also conceptualize vulnerability as a product of the environment rather than individual characteristics. Theories of structural risk posit that certain structural conditions – namely de-industrialization in urban areas, racial discrimination in the labour market, tracking and other forms of inequality in schools – make students vulnerable to dropping out or being "pushed out" of school (Dei, 1997). Theories of cultural risk argue that boys adopt attitudes and beliefs linked to being socialized in or coping with challenging conditions in low income, disadvantaged communities that increase their proclivity to delinquency and academic failure (Noguera, 2008).

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:

- What interventions exist in TDSB school communities to facilitate school engagement of vulnerable boys? What organizational and instructional practices are utilized in these interventions?

- What are participating administrators', teachers' and students' assessment of these interventions? Do they think they are effective? Why or why not?

SITES

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 from school. 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. A table of school communities included in the study appears below:

PROGRAM SUCCESSES

Five themes on program successes emerged from the individual interviews with the administrative staff, program facilitators and teachers as well as from the group interviews with the boys in terms of the ways school community programs respond to the needs of vulnerable boys: *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.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND NEW ENVIRONMENTS

The administrators and facilitators of the boys' programs in the schooling-community spoke about how getting boys to try new things and learn in different ways was helpful in getting them to realize their different capacities (which are often presented as very limited by members of their own communities). These new experiences help the boys develop a critical framework in which to assess their present situations, evaluate their needs and make the necessary decisions to push them into directions that they feel will secure them the success that they desire. The act of navigating communities outside of their own has been a positive experience in which the boys have been able to negotiate different identities. Such negotiation alters both self and others' perceptions of them in very positive ways.

School	Community	Programs for Vulnerable Boys
Elm Tree	North York (Jane & Eglington)	Hands Up, Smash the Glass Ceiling and Always Stop and Think Before You Proceed
Spruce Glen	North York (Jane & Finch)	Boys to Men
Algonquin	North York (Dufferin & Lawrence)	Boys to Men, Real Talk
Osprey	North York (Black Creek & Lawrence)	Boys to Men, Boys Reading Club, Strong Man
Helmer	Scarborough (Danforth & Eglington	Boys Reading Club, The Boys Group, Overnight Camping Experience

CRITICAL THINKING

Some administrators identified citizenship development (within and outside the context of school) as a successful aspect of their program. According to one administrator, citizenship development involves the cultivation of self-awareness, self-understanding, self-control and social skills. She explained how her schools' program encourages the boys to see that when they make good choices, the outcomes reflect those decisions. Noting how the school is situated within a "priority neighbourhood", this administrator emphasized the importance of teaching the boys critical thinking and positive decision-making; at her school, the importance of positive decision-making is reflected in the production of critical memoirs, in which the boys employ role play as a means to engage with their thoughts and feelings. Adult volunteers share their own pieces of writing, and then together the group discusses what decisions can be made in that context and how the boys can navigate toward the positive ones.

MENTORSHIP

Many of the program facilitators we spoke with viewed themselves as mentors whose primary purpose was to engage boys in meaningful exchanges and dialogue that built on their own experiences growing up in challenging circumstances. Several facilitators felt this type of ongoing mentorship encouraged change and growth among the boys because it modelled how the boys could overcome certain obstacles associated with the environments they are growing up in. Kevin, the facilitator of *Real Talk*, articulated the complexity of the mentorships, suggesting that youth, particularly boys, are confronted by both positive and negative contexts in which to be mentored. Like Kevin, Ryan, the founder of *Strong Man*, also observes the difficult situations the boys grow up in and envisions mentorship through the camaraderie of the boys. Ryan notes how many of the boys who participate in this program have not had positive mentors in their lives; the decisions these boys make are guided largely by prevailing stigmas and pressures both within their communities and embedded structurally in institutions such as schools, the police, the justice system and the media. He argues that *Strong Man* provides a counter-narrative to the deleterious constructions that are imposed and enacted on these boys daily.

BUILDING FRIENDSHIPS

When we interviewed the boys, they expressed a desire to develop more positive friendships with their peers. These relationships, they felt, would also help strengthen their communication and interpersonal skills. Peer support, communication and positive relationships within the school were recognized by the boys as successful methods of engagement. One student, Tev, explained how the program has helped him *"be more open with people"* and has taught him *"how to talk to anyone, no matter who they are"*. In building positive peer relationships, the boys begin to assume a greater level of accountability and ownership over their own futures. Additionally, by learning to communicate more, they learn to integrate themselves into a wider network of perspectives and opportunities.

SAFE AND DEMOCRATIC SPACE

The boys' desire to build positive relationships with their peers is consistent with their desire and recognition that the

school is a safe space. Tev explained this in relation to the school staff and their role in regulating these peer relationships:

> *"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".*

Tev's insights underscore the importance of building positive peer relationships as a vehicle to positive decision-making and sustained engagement.

PROGRAM LIMITATIONS

Despite the many successes of the programs, the boys we spoke with communicated a desire to do more activities, as well as a desire to have more opportunities for travelling outside the schooling community. We interpret this as a call for the programs to place more of an emphasis on building *social capital*. Social capital is defined by Bourdieu as:

"The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu 1986, p. 248).

Moreover, drawing on the work of Coleman (1990), van Kemenade explains how *"social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would be unattainable in its absence"* (van Kemenade, 2002, p.5). Often described as the glue that hold societies together, social capital has been *"vaunted as the next big idea in social policy"* (McKenzie, 2002, p.280). Lochner (1990) suggests that collective efficacy, participation in voluntary organizations, social trust/reciprocity and social integration for mutual benefit are the main theoretical strands within theories of social capital.

IMPLICATIONS

Putting more emphasis on building social capital involves strengthening partnerships with families/caregivers, other schools, community members, organizations & businesses.

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILIES/CAREGIVERS

The family, because it provides economic and social welfare for its members, has been identified as "the first building block in the generation of social capital for the larger society" (The World Bank, referenced in van Kemenade, 2002, p.12). Administrators, program facilitators and teachers we spoke with all stressed the need for greater parental involvement – particularly the involvement of male figures. Revising school-community programs in ways that encourage such connections would help the boys build social capital through strengthened relationships — such as those relationships between the boys and their caregivers, as well as the caregivers and the schooling community. Engaging parents in the school community could also bring opportunities for parents to network, providing each other with resources and support. It is important to consider, however, that the caregivers of vulnerable students are often vulnerable themselves, partly due to a lack of cultural capital (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). Therefore, engaging the caregivers of all students (rather than solely focusing on the families of vulnerable boys) might be a stronger approach. More economically privileged parents and caregivers often possess higher levels of social capital and are therefore in positions where they can help parents of vulnerable boys leverage opportunities to travel outside their current schooling community or learn new skills (which were aspects the boys really valued, but wanted to see more of in the current programs).

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS WITH OTHER SCHOOLS, ORGANIZATIONS & BUSINESSES

Colletta and Cullen (2000) write about the structural dimensions of social capital (such as the institutions, networks, precedents, behaviours, rules and roles), explaining how these components function to bond individuals in groups to one another as well as integrate groups with different levels of power and influence – a process, they argue, which leads to social inclusion. If school community programs for vulnerable boys were to partner with other high schools, colleges and universities, organizations and businesses students would have more opportunities to establish larger social networks. These kinds of networks can be quite powerful, possibly influencing the boys' future decisions and outcomes in relation to post-secondary education and the labour market. Furthermore, Putnam (1995) argues that "in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism are reduced. (p.67)". Possessing higher levels of social capital, therefore, might help boys overcome structural barriers they are face.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The majority of school community programs in our study focused on changing the boys' attitudes and behaviours, with an emphasis on character development and social skills. According to Collette and Cullen (2000), cognitive social

capital "describes the values, attitudes and beliefs that produce cooperative behaviour". Critical thinking, reflection, positive-decision making, character development and the creation of democratic space were key components in many of the boys' programs, and found to be quite successful in facilitating school engagement among the boys. However, very few of the existing programs linked these outcomes to *academic engagement* – with the exceptions being the *Boys Reading Club* as well as some of the sports teams, where participation is contingent upon good academic standing. As stated earlier, teacher and school collaboration might be effective approaches to bridging this gap. The programs could improve academic engagement if more teachers participated and shared the responsibilities of the programs. 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.

NOTE

[1] Originally called the "Boys Education Strategy".

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER READING/RESOURCES

Failing Boys! Beyond Crisis, Moral Panic and Limiting Stereotypes:
www.cea-ace.ca/education-canada/article/failing-boys-beyond-crisis-moral-panic-and-limiting-stereotypes

Boosting the Life Chances of Young Men of Color:
www.mdrc.org/publication/boosting-life-chances-young-men-color

Boys to Men Empowerment Program:
www.facebook.com/boystomenempowerment