



Author Judy Chapman with two of her students

C R E A T I N G S U C C E S S

An Integrated Studies Program for At-Risk Secondary Students

Judy Chapman

When asked to write one line to explain the program he is a part of, Jared (18) wrote, “Revolutionary: a heart and a home in a world that fails so many.” He is one of nearly 100 students who have become secondary school graduates instead of high school dropouts through the Integrated Studies Program (ISP) in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

Creating this program over the past five years has been a roller coaster of emotion, a learning cliff of new ideas, and both the most rewarding and the most challenging experience in my years of teaching. In 1997, the principal of the largest senior secondary school in my district approached me, an elementary teacher, to develop a program for “at risk” students.

The staff at his school was dismayed by the number of academically capable students who were being unsuccessful and dropping out of school. They had discovered a common thread when looking at the permanent record files of these students. It was noted that their academic achievement in the elementary system was above average in most cases. It seemed that the attachment to one classroom and primarily one teacher in the elementary model worked for these students. When sent off to the more impersonal, fragmented system of the secondary school, they lost grip and began to fail. While the

secondary method worked for stable, well adjusted young people, these more fragmented learners fell away from the system. They began to skip classes, to get caught up in the network of “at risk” peers out of class and to fall into a downward spiral of despair. Each term would start anew and new resolve would be made, only to be broken at the first sign of stress or failure.

After much soul searching, I decided to take on the challenge of working with these fragmented young people. I envisioned creating an elementary classroom in a high school building. I took all of the learning outcomes for the grade 11 core subjects and required electives and planned a thematic integrated way of learning (The Integrated Studies Program - ISP). In the fall of 1997 I left the safety and security of a grade 6 classroom where I loved my work, to move on to a whole new world.

The first impression of any elementary teacher to the high school system is that the students are very big! They don't take off their outdoor shoes to come inside, and they don't walk down the same side of hallway in an orderly manner. The students' height prevents the stern look down at the naughty grade 4 child who is being inappropriate in the hallway. Discipline is a far different issue. It is absolutely imperative to gain the students' respect – and to respect them in return.

I have no Special Education training. I am not a counselor. I had never taught in a high school. I think, perhaps, nearing my 50th birthday and facing my own empty nest left me in a somewhat altered state of mind in which I thought this job was do-able. In any case, on Sept. 2nd, 1997, I greeted a class of twelve grade 11 “at risk” students.

These were students who had been thrown out of most other educational institutions in our district and who thought they had hit yet another “alternate” place. I will never forget “Jay” who came through the door last, slammed his binder on the table and yelled out, “Great, another “f-ing” class for losers.”

enhanced by the advocacy of a significant adult in their lives, that learning that is relevant and current is more easily accepted and learned, and that working hand in hand with the community puts students in line with their futures. In addition, my years of teaching and parenting had shown me that setting the bar ever higher when expecting results causes the student or child to strive for more and to enjoy success. I also came to the job with a wonderfully supportive family, a natural love of people and sense of humour. Some days, if I could not have made a joke in the middle of a tense situation, I don't honestly think I could have carried on.

It is important to note that although the class began with only 12 students, within a few weeks I realized that the class did not have the synergy needed for a successful learning community. I asked the students to identify others who would benefit from the program. In the fall of the next year I took 20 students to grade 12, and a colleague started with a new class of grade 11's. In September, 2001, three teachers,

three part time teachers' assistants and I, as coordinator / teacher, have taken on more than 75 students in grades 10, 11 and 12. These students deal with a mix of

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There was silence as the others waited for my response. Perhaps it was my years of elementary expectations, or maybe it came from my 20+ years of parenting, but I reacted quickly and firmly. I said, “Jay, I can only assume two things by the behaviour I have just observed. Either you do not know what is appropriate and correct classroom behaviour, or you do not respect me and this place. If it is the first, you are welcome to stay because I am here to teach you appropriateness. If it is the latter, please leave. There is the door. Do not return.” Jay stayed and there was no more coarse language in our classroom.

Our classroom is one of decorum and respect. Students feel treasured and cared for. As well as tables for learning groups of four or five, our classroom contains a couch, a fridge and microwave, and most often a bouquet of flowers. Early on I established, with the administration of the school, that I would work with any students who had the academic potential to pass high school subjects as long as they wanted to be in the program. In addition, I have been given the leeway to dismiss any student who is not able to meet the criteria developed by the ISP staff and students: **Be here at least 90% of the time. Show a good attitude. Get all of your work done on time and to the best of your ability.**

Having just completed a Masters degree the summer before taking on this challenge, I came armed with research-based theory that stated, among other things, that student success is



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EN BREF

Les écoles secondaires font du bon travail pour ce qui des jeunes qui sont bien adaptés et qui viennent d'un foyer stable, mais elles échouent lamentablement pour les élèves issus de milieux plus fragmentés. Le Integrated Studies Program offert à Abbotsford, en Colombie-Britannique, marie la sécurité et la chaleur d'une salle de classe élémentaire au programme d'études secondaires pour aider ces étudiants à réussir. Ses élèves doivent tous surmonter une variété de difficultés familiales, affectives et scolaires, mais ils partagent un but commun : apprendre, terminer leurs études secondaires et quitter l'école avec un plan pour leur avenir.

behavioural, emotional and academic challenges because of the issues in their lives. However, all come to us with a common goal – to learn, to graduate from high school, and to leave with a plan for their future.

It is an understatement to say that it was a huge academic challenge to teach the entire curriculum at a secondary level. Because I was so intent that the teachers in the regular stream respect this program, I elicited the help of department heads and used testing material from their classes. Using all sorts of elementary strategies I made the material as interesting and relevant as I could. For example, to address the theme of “conflict” I used the conflict in their own lives (Family Studies), the conflicts in the world at present and in the past (Social Studies and History), conflicting characters in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (English), and conflicting opinions in “Government” as fuel for what we learned. Learning is powerful. When students fall in love with learning and become hooked on success, their own problems become less debilitating.

I have been saddened and humbled by the stories my students have told me. Whenever I think I have heard the most awful story of human unkindness and neglect, there is a fresh story to take its place. While I do not dwell on their problems, it is important that they tell me when they are unfit to work to their potential. The building of social capital is intricately woven into all that we do. Manners, respect, compassion, trustworthiness, tolerance are ideals that we aspire to daily. As students learn to trust each other – and me – they become more able to blossom in the classroom and to share bits of themselves. The students share their lives in an incidental way with one another.

Perhaps the story that moved me most profoundly happened during a grade 12 literature lesson. I suggested that the character in the play was “vulnerable”. Seeing a rather blank look on several faces I asked if the students knew what vulnerable meant. One girl answered this way...

“Well, I can’t give you a definition, but I think I can give you an example, if that’s OK. Once when I was 6 years old, I was fast asleep. My mother was drunk and swung a baseball bat at me and hit my head. I woke up to pain and blood. I was very afraid, and after that, whenever I went to sleep, I would feel vulnerable.”

Powerful stuff. Not only will the students never forget the concept, they learned why “Nadia” had days when she did not want to interact with anyone.

In many cases, my students have been beaten physically and mentally and emotionally by the adults in their lives. It is not an easy thing to help them to trust again and to want to strive for a better life in a world that has turned its back on them so many times. But, with patience, and kindness, and a genuine love for them as worthy human beings, the possibilities for success are endless.

This June we will have had just under 100 graduates from the Integrated Studies Program. Our graduates are in colleges and universities and out in the work force as productive members of society. They believed what I repeated to them

Judy Chapman is a teacher at Abbotsford Senior Secondary School. She has received several awards in recognition for her work with at-risk secondary students, including the Prime Minister’s Award for Teaching Excellence (1999), the Rotary Paul Harris Fellow Humanitarian Award (1999), and a Fellowship from McGill University to teach students about the program (2000). She has also travelled throughout B.C. and Canada speaking to educators about the program.

almost daily, “You cannot change what has happened to you until this moment – but together we can create a wonderful tomorrow.”...and they have. 🌈

Untitled

Sitting here on the grey couch
By the window
The curtains gently billow
In the soft evening breeze
The smoke from
My untouched cigarette forms
Small wisps before they escape
Into the city sky
And join the stars
Night time in the city
Looks like a bright heaven
A big giant playground
Where games are won
And sometimes more than lost
I continue to look out
The window and wonder
What happens when
The lights go out
When the city no longer
Looks like a playground in heaven.

By Robina Sharma
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