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# The *I-C.A.R.E.* Experience: Promoting School Safety and Prosocial Behaviour

Under an initiative of the Ontario Ministry of Education, the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) targeted selected schools for additional support in developing intervention programs to enhance students' socio-emotional functioning. Canadian census data was used to select schools with a high proportion of low income families.

In 2004, we began work with an inner-city Scarborough elementary school that was experiencing transitional stresses due to the arrival of many new immigrant families who were using the community as a first stop-over before moving out to neighbouring municipalities. The principal was particularly concerned that students did not have the necessary social skills, sense of belonging, and community commitment to maintain a harmonious environment conducive to learning. Staff also felt that parent expectations, as expressed through parent meetings, were too narrowly focused on academic achievements, to the detriment of children's socio-emotional development. The school therefore felt that a program should be designed to foster prosocial behaviour and inclusivity. Specifically, despite the school's proactive stance against violence, bullying and victimization remained a significant concern, and disciplinary problems often interfered with effective classroom teaching.

*I-C.A.R.E.* was designed by John Chan, in conjunction with school staff, to foster valued qualities like Consideration, Acceptance, Reaching-out to others, and Empathy. Its focus was to promote partnership among school staff, students, parents, and professional staff to achieve a positive shift in the ethos of the school towards prosocial behaviour, caring and kindness, and building a peace-loving community.

## ROLLING OUT *I-C.A.R.E.*

*I-C.A.R.E.* integrated monthly themes and accompanying activities into regular classroom subjects, particularly Social Studies and Religion [n.b., the school in question is a Roman Catholic Separate School]. We introduced each theme in monthly divisional assemblies to the whole school to ensure that the targeted requisite skills were disseminated uniformly and consistently to all classes, making use of various formats including slide shows, videos, music, and skits, songs, and demonstrations by students and staff.

In Year One, we placed strong emphasis on anti-bullying, focusing on responsibilities of the bystander. Students were encouraged to be their "brother/sister's keeper" to promote a safe and caring place for learning. In the second year, *I-C.A.R.E.* focused on social skills, empathy, and character formation to create necessary support for social cohesiveness, harmony, and inclusion. In Year Three, we addressed the enhancement of mental health through themes of positive psychology (e.g., happiness, and positive thinking based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy principles), to encourage students to identify their own inner strengths and use them to increase and sustain high levels of well-being.

Each month, teachers reinforced the concepts and skills students learned in the assembly with additional classroom activities:

- Worksheets and in-class activities (e.g. "Friendly Ways of Saying Things", "How to Set Realistic Goals") that synchronize with the monthly theme.
- Engaging students in "quality circles"<sup>1</sup> – groups that meet regularly to solve problems and to identify ways to improve the school or class. Students participated in these groups to discuss various topics and to plan action. Examples included: bullying issues affecting the class, supporting victims, organizing charitable activities like adopting a child in the third world, and brainstorming ways of reducing noise while going upstairs after recess.
- All classes participated in the "Cube of Love"<sup>2</sup> of Chiara Lubich's Focolare Movement as a model of prosocial and peace-making behaviour, to train students (and adults) to live with strong ethical values applied in resolving conflict and violence. Each face of the cube has a brief message that focuses on caring for others (e.g., "I'm the first to love"; "I love Jesus in the other"; "I share the other's joy or hurt"). When used in the *I-C.A.R.E.* Project, students rolled the cube daily to choose the message and pledged to try their best to "live" the message by their acts and share their experience with their class at the end of the day. For example, one student shared: "I was going to hit back at Matthew when he accidentally pushed me. Then I remembered this morning I rolled 'I love my enemy' on the Cube, and I stopped."



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A teacher whose children studied in the school also shared this anecdotal experience: "My husband and I were fighting over something as we had always done in front of the kids, and then my youngest son came to us and said: 'This morning I rolled the Cube and it said We love Jesus in the other.' We felt so small in front of our kids, and all our arguments immediately ceased – and for quite a long time after."

- Classes volunteered, in turn, to host the theme of the month by preparing short speeches, prayers, songs, or motivational skits and presenting them over the P.A. system in the morning, at recess, and at lunch hour. Intermediate students assisted in conducting surveys and organizing school-wide *I-C.A.R.E.* activities focusing on monthly themes (e.g. poster competitions, concerts, awards, and prizes).

#### A CULTURE OF CARE

Corroboration for the rationale and organizing principles underlying *I-C.A.R.E.* can be found in the "ethic of care" literature, which emphasizes engaging everyone in the school to promote prosocial behaviour rather than reacting to perceived negative factors in the environment.<sup>3</sup> By building a school culture that embraces rather than excludes children, bullying and other disruptive behaviours are effectively counteracted. A culture of care, built on social inclusion, provides for the fulfillment of a basic, paramount human need – to belong. In so doing, it averts a host of undesirable outcomes that affect people who are socially rejected. In experimental studies, Baumeister demonstrated that social rejection not only leads to emotional upset, but also contributes to a broad range of maladaptive and pathological patterns of behaviour: increased aggression and antisocial behaviour, decreased cooperation, poorer intellectual performance, and self-destructive acts. These findings have important practical social implications for Baumeister: "Possibly if we can promote a more inclusive society, in which more people feel themselves to be accepted as valued members, some of these tragic patterns could be reduced – for the benefit of all."<sup>4</sup>

On the pedagogical side, there is increasing evidence that school-based programs targeting students' emotional, social, and decision-making skills likely boost academic achievement. For example, Fleming, et al found that higher levels of school bonding and better social, emotional, and decision-making skills occurred concurrently with higher test scores and grades.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, lower test scores and grades were associated with elevated levels of attention problems, negative behaviour of peers, disruptive and aggressive behaviour, and early use of alcohol and tobacco. These findings support the premise that student academic performance may benefit from school-based intervention programs that address specific risk factors, curb early manifestations of antisocial behaviour, and promote school bonding as well as socio-emotional skills. This perspective was shared at meetings with parents to garner their continued support for the *I-C.A.R.E.* Project.

From its inception, *I-C.A.R.E.* was predicated on the firm conviction that the project would only be effective when all relevant parties envision and commit themselves to creating a school environment that is safe and free of violence. This was achieved in three ways:

- A Steering Committee involving staff, student leaders, and the principal worked to oversee daily project management. The principal played a vital role in the success of the program. As Harris and Petrie emphasize, administrative leadership is critical: "Schools characterized as safe invariably are led by principals who foster an atmosphere based on principles of belonging and caring among students, faculty, and parents."<sup>6</sup>
- Considerable effort was expended in community-building and fostering of commitment and consensus among various stakeholders through letters and news bulletins to parents and parish, parent nights and "drop-ins", and communication of *I-C.A.R.E.* themes to families by the social worker.
- Ongoing in-house opportunities were provided for staff to build skills and empower them to sustain and develop the *I-C.A.R.E.* initiative further on their own.

#### EVALUATION OF EFFECTIVENESS

All students in Grades 1-8 periodically completed confidential surveys during the first two years of the *I-C.A.R.E.* Project, beginning before the intervention started. Various aspects of school life were measured using Chan's *School Life Survey*,<sup>7</sup> especially modified for this project. Results were obtained on four scales: physical victimization, verbal victimization, relational victimization, and prosocial behaviour. In addition, staff were independently surveyed on their opinion of *I-C.A.R.E.*

Major results of the evaluation are presented below:

- Before the program, students generally perceived moderate levels of victimization. After the initiative began, students perception of physical and relational victimization decreased and remained at a low level. Perceived verbal victimization initially decreased, but then increased again, suggesting it may be more resistant to intervention than other forms of victimization. Subsequent interventions therefore targeted the reduction of verbal victimization.
- Approximately 20 students had high victimization scores on the pre-program survey. Subsequently, they reported substantially less victimization. In addition, few other students reported high victimization in later surveys.
- Students reported increased prosocial behaviour as the intervention progressed.

Staff surveys/interviews provided further support for the efficacy of the *I-C.A.R.E.* program, especially in the Junior and Intermediate Divisions:

- Staff generally agreed that students had improved empathy and compassion, honesty and responsibility, and friendship skills; students seemed more respectful and better able to resist peer pressure.
- Staff generally indicated that students were more optimistic, resilient, and better able to foster aspirations and set goals.
- They reported less bullying and improved intervention by students on witnessing bullying.
- Students reportedly showed improved management of negative emotions such as anger and impulsiveness, and were more likely to include others socially.

**EN BREF** Le Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) a ciblé des écoles afin de leur fournir du soutien additionnel pour mettre au point des programmes d'intervention visant à améliorer le fonctionnement socio-affectif des élèves. Amorcé dans une école du quartier défavorisé de Scarborough, le programme *I-C.A.R.E.* vise à combattre la violence, l'intimidation et la victimisation et à favoriser un comportement pro-social, l'intégration et une culture de bienveillance. La première année se concentrait sur la lutte contre l'intimidation, mettant l'accent sur les responsabilités des témoins; la deuxième année se focalisait sur les aptitudes sociales, l'empathie et la formation du caractère; la troisième année ciblait l'amélioration de la santé mentale, avec des thèmes de psychologie positive incitant les élèves à puiser dans leurs forces intérieures pour rehausser et maintenir leur bien-être. Des sondages auprès des élèves et du personnel ont mesuré le succès quant à quatre aspects : la victimisation physique, la victimisation verbale, la victimisation relationnelle et le comportement pro-social.

- Staff generally believed that *I-C.A.R.E.* formed an important component of instructional activity at the school; both staff and students were involved in *I-C.A.R.E.* activities and took responsibility for planning the program.
- They appreciated that *I-C.A.R.E.* was integrated into the Cube of Love, which they regarded as very effective.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

*I-C.A.R.E.* was notable for achieving a global, proactive intervention that demonstrated flexibility in addressing the changing needs of the school. It not only addressed bullying, but incorporated a global initiative to address the socio-emotional development of students and promote school safety and character formation. The extant literature indicates that anti-bullying policies work more effectively in the context of a whole-school approach, with multiple components that operate simultaneously at different levels in the school community.<sup>8</sup>

Many school-based behavioural intervention programs are of short duration and are delivered by support personnel in response to specific crisis situations. These programs are frequently stop-gap measures, often ineffective in sustaining their desired effects over the longer term. In contrast, *I-C.A.R.E.* is aimed at fostering a long-term commitment to sustain the program after its initial launching phase.

*I-C.A.R.E.* aimed to build a peace-loving community and enable students to apply their training to the resolution of conflicts and violence, using a model of prosocial and peacemaking behaviour based on Catholic values in the school and general ethical principles in the broader community. We feel that its success stemmed from the investment of time and effort in building the momentum from the ground up and from the involvement of students, staff, and parents from the very beginning. Over the span of its operation, the project progressively encouraged both staff and students to take ownership by playing an active role in planning, designing, and executing the project. The process of engagement itself, as much the content of the program, played a major role in the project's success. Staff also encouraged student leaders, selected and trained in *I-C.A.R.E.*, to learn about violence prevention, socio-emotional growth, and character-building at a formative stage of their development. These experiences will prepare them for greater leadership responsibilities in high school and beyond.

It was a very rewarding experience to work with students and staff at the whole-school level, where the application of psychology could have the most impact. |

JOHN CHAN, Psy.D. is a registered School Psychologist with the Toronto Catholic District School Board. NICHOLAS WHITE, Ph.D. is an educational researcher employed by the same school board.

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### Notes

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