

AN INVESTIGATION INTO YOUTH'S PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCE OF "WRAPAROUND"

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Introduction

This paper describes the findings of a small, qualitative evaluation of a program for youth whose futures are in jeopardy because of suspension or expulsion from school. The research objective was to understand participants' experience of the program from their own perspectives. The program under consideration is a Wraparound program which is offered to vulnerable youth in a high-needs community in Toronto, Canada.

The Wraparound process is an individualized service planning process which is based on a collaborative, team-based approach. The program is offered by PEACH (Promoting Economic Action and Community Health), a grass roots agency in the community, in partnership with Oolagen Community Services, a children's mental health centre which has pioneered the Wraparound approach in Canada, and which supports numerous Wraparound partnerships in Toronto. This paper traces the community needs which led to the development of the program, discusses the findings of the evaluation of the program from the participants' perspectives and includes a discussion of the role of the coordinator.

Youth in the Jane Finch community of Toronto are at particular risk from the effects of a host of social disadvantages which are grounded in poverty and racism. In the United Way's 2002 report on poverty in Toronto (*A decade in decline: Poverty and income inequality in the City of Toronto in the 1990s*), the Jane Finch community, as a

new immigrant community, was described as one of the four Toronto communities most vulnerable to poverty, with Jane Finch containing the largest number of low-income people. The report pays particular attention to the growing alienation of youth due to particularly to increasing poverty, and lack of services to meet youths' needs.

Imbricated with such social disadvantages are the effects of past Ontario government budgets which instituted cut-backs to funding for education. Such cuts scaled back English as a Second Language classes, recreation, arts, and specialized student services – in other words, the very programs needed to reach out to alienated youth. At the same time, Ontario instituted the Safe Schools Act (*Making our schools safer*, 2005), which legislated a zero tolerance policy for violence and weapons. The Act gave increased power to principals and teachers to suspend and expel students and made expulsion or suspension and police involvement mandatory for some behaviour. Suspension and expulsion rates have increased substantially in Ontario (Kalinowski, 2005).

Since its institution, the Safe Schools Act has been criticized for its disproportionate impact on racialized students. The Ontario Human Rights Commission concluded that “human rights protections have not been adequately incorporated into the current disciplinary regime. Further, the Commission noted that “It is possible to have a disciplinary regime that both maintains safe and violence-free schools and protects the human rights of all students in the school system” (Bhattacharjee, 2005). Further marginalization and alienation of already vulnerable youth in the Jane Finch community have resulted from such budgetary and policy decisions. Suspended or expelled youth have little recourse to alternatives to school. Once suspended, youths “hang out” in the

streets or at home. Social programs which in the past might have met these youths' needs have been devastated by budget cuts. When youths return to school after frequently multiple absences, they are often unable to keep up with their schoolwork and are in danger of dropping out permanently from school at a young age. This is a fertile ground for the kind of despair that leads to gangs, drugs, violence and guns. These are youths with urgent needs who require the intensive support and planning afforded by a Wraparound process.

The Wraparound Process

In recognition of the complex issues faced by youth under the threat of zero tolerance policies, PEACH and Oolagen Community Services initiated a Wraparound program for youth in danger of expulsion or suspension. The program is based on a partnership with one of the Jane Finch high schools, and referrals to the PEACH Wraparound Coordinator come primarily from this school.

The Wraparound process was pioneered in the United States as a planning and implementation process which draws together community supports for youth with complex needs (VanDenBerg, J., Bruns, E., & Burchard, J., 2003). It is oriented towards respect for youth and their families' own identification of their needs and the mobilization of community members who form a team to help plan and carry out the goals that emerge from the identification of needs. VanDenBerg and Grealish (J. VanDenBerg & Grealish, 1996) describe the elements of Wraparound's philosophical base as:

- Based in the community
- Individualized to meet the needs of children and families

- Culturally competent
- Parents included in all aspects of the process
- Flexible funding
- Implemented on an inter-agency basis and owned by the larger community
- Unconditional services
- Measurable outcomes

The Wraparound process consists of meeting with youth to determine strengths and needs across multiple domains, for example, housing, education employment, social, legal, emotional, and behavioural. Following this assessment, the Coordinator and the youth nominate team members drawn from family and community who are able to help with needs that have been identified. An initial planning meeting is held to prioritize goals and formulate a plan. Thereafter, the team meets regularly to review progress, update plans, or reformulate goals. The process of planning and implementation is guided by principles of voice and choice in the identification of needs and in planning, access to needed services and funding, and ownership of the process. In an overview of the Wraparound approach, Burchard, Bruns et al. describe the practice principles that comprise family-centered decision making and the identification and implementation of services that meet the families' needs. These principles provide an overview of the Wraparound process:

1. The community collaborative structure with broad representation manages the overall Wraparound process and establishes the vision and mission.
2. A lead organization is designated to function under the community collaboration structure and manages the implementation of the wraparound process.
3. A referral mechanism is established to determine the children and families to be included in the wraparound process.
4. Resource coordinators are hired as specialists to facilitate the wraparound process, conducting strengths/needs assessments; facilitating the team planning process; and managing the implementation of the services/support plan.

5. With the referred child and family, the resource coordinator conducts strengths and needs assessments.
6. The resource coordinator works with the child and family to form a child and family team.
7. The child and family team functions as a team with the child and family engaged in an interactive process to develop a collective vision, related goals, and an individualized plan that is family centered and team based.
8. The child and family develops a crisis plan.
9. Within the service/support plan, each goal must have outcomes stated in measurable terms, and the progress on each monitored on a regular basis.
10. The community collaborative structure reviews the plans (Burchard, Bruns, & Burchard, 2002).

With the general framework for Wraparound processes in mind, we turn now to youths' perception of the Wraparound process as it was implemented at PEACH.

Youths' Perceptions of the Peach/Oolagen Wraparound Program

In order to obtain feedback about youths' experience with PEACH's Wraparound program we undertook a small, qualitative study aimed at understanding participants' experience of the program from their own perspectives. The study was based on in-depth interview data from five young people who attended the program. These young people were asked to describe the nature of their participation, give their assessment of the results of the program, provide opinions regarding strengths and weaknesses of the program, and give advice to PEACH on changes that would be beneficial.

The Participants.

Our conclusions are based on data from four males and one female. Three of the young men were seventeen years old and one young man and young woman were

eighteen. All participants are young people of colour. All five participants were at risk of, or had incurred, suspensions from school. Three of the five were in conflict with the law. All have been given fictitious names for the purpose of this paper.

The data showed remarkable similarities in the categories of analysis particularly among the four young men: John, Tom, Dave and Pete. However, this consistency did not obtain for the young woman in the study. Mary was under court order to attend the PEACH program. She was highly motivated to finish school, and was helped considerably by PEACH's Suspended and Studying program, a program which provides educational instruction to suspended students. Because of space limitations in this paper, we include less data on her perceptions because she felt less need for Wraparound, but was mandated to attend. As well, there were some variations between John, Tom and Dave and Pete. Although undiagnosed, Pete appears to suffer from learning disabilities and/ or developmental delay. While much of what he said is consistent with the other young men, his interview pointed to differences we will discuss where relevant.

Summary of Themes from the Data

The dominant impression from this set of interview data is that participants felt that the PEACH Wraparound program worked to ameliorate the harmful effects of school suspensions due to behaviour or attendance problems, and/or conflict with the law. This general result is based on youths' descriptions of how the program functioned from their perspectives and what they felt were the strengths and limitations of the program from their experience. We identified four major themes from the interview data: 1) the importance of a strength-based service that is driven by students' own goals; 2) access to

services and programs in order to meet goals; 3) the importance of success and the relation between success and further education; 4) anger reduction in the context of school through the experience of “having people on my side.”

1. The importance of a strengths-based service driven by youth goals

For Tom, Dave and John, the experience of setting their own goals and identifying their strengths during the Wraparound process had dramatic effects. There are clear indications in the data that these youth remembered the strengths identified in the Wraparound process, and they drew on this memory when facing new challenges. The combination of identifying their goals and their strengths clearly influenced their motivation. *A feedback loop, beginning with the consideration of their strengths and goals, resulted in increased motivation, led to follow-through with programs and services, and thus to new understandings about their capacities based on experiences of success in the programs.*

In all five cases, youth who described very troubled relations with schools, indicated by suspensions, skipping, fighting, drugs, or criminal behaviour, described successes in specialized training classes, job training, and job performance. For Dave, Tom and John particularly, these successes formed the motivation to go back to school with a new sense of self and with specific purposes. Dave describes the process from his point of view:

“PEACH made me mature into that kind of person – [made me so that] I can’t see myself sitting there becoming a bum? The fact that all the goals – they told me all the good stuff about me. Like that I’m friendly, right? You know? And I’m artistic. Before? When I see myself? I’m kind of like a loser, right? Ever since PEACH got into my life, they kind of put me in a spot where all my badness and all my weaknesses were there and all my good stuff. And they kind of showed me that. And I kind of thought I *do* have a lot of potential. So in other words, they kind of brought all the stuff that’s in me out. I could *see* it and that really helped me a lot because – I guess people, they don’t like seeing the goodness of themselves, I guess – that’s a hard thing.”

Dave got an opportunity for a job he wanted. He was unsure about whether he could do it, but he remembered that one of the strengths identified in the Wraparound process was his friendliness. He decided to take the job:

“What happened was the fact that I got to deal with parents and the kids. Sometimes the kids want to go on the go-cart but they can’t because they’re not tall enough. So the fact that I have a skill talking to kids, I love working with kids – they [Wraparound team] pointed that out to me. I remember that. So I started talking the kids.... ‘you can’t do that because you can get hurt’ - I talked to the kids like an adult instead of being rude to them and saying “No – you can’t get on the ride - get out of my face.” Instead of being rude to them I tried to cope with them and understand them and make them understand me. Which is good, right?”

“My boss ... he liked me so much because I have so many skills. ‘Dave, out of all the workers I’ve had so far you are the best.’”

“If I can do that at work, I can do it at school.”

Another participant, Tom, brought his rather dog-eared Wraparound assessment contract outlining his goals and strengths with him. He had read it several times since completing it with the coordinator. He had identified educational and financial goals as most important to him. He understood his major strength as resourcefulness, and he carefully read the parts of the contract that were important to him out loud to the researcher, including his strengths. When asked about his input into the goals he said, “I picked the ones I liked.”

Pete’s major goals were to “stay in school, avoid problems [fighting] and get a job.” He was helped to meet these goals by learning about alternatives to getting into fights. Although Pete shared goals of staying out of trouble with the other young men, his talk about goals seemed somewhat more a *necessity* he had incorporated than a process of *ownership* of the goal, as demonstrated by the other participants. It is likely that

cognitive ability played a role here, or possibly the interview process had something to do with his responses. However, he felt his goals were important and he took them seriously. He was very enthusiastic about learning about options to fighting, and described being able to stay out of a fight by choosing to talk to the other person rather than fight.

Mary was completely clear about her goal: She needed to get her school credits. As a young mother who had been suspended, she was unambiguous and self-directed about the need to finish school. Her primary means to achieve this was through the Suspended and Studying program, while PEACH supported her in dealing with obligations imposed in her court sentence, the education system, day care, and other barriers she encountered to finishing school. Mary's own very high motivation perhaps made the Wraparound process somewhat less important to her than to the others in the study.

2) Access to services and programs in order to meet goals

Following the goal setting process, the Wraparound coordinator connected youth to services that met their goal. Where they identified financial concerns, she enrolled them in job-training leading to part-time jobs. Where they identified educational goals, she mapped out strategies for specialized training and ways to re-enter the educational system. Because participants had identified goals themselves, they were eager to take advantage of these services. With the team input that is part of the Wraparound process, various supports were put in place: team members functioned to help with such things as addictions counseling or support in school.

One of the crucial determinants of participants' connection to services was the concrete support provided by the Wraparound coordinator during the referral process.

John, for example, describes his fear that PEACH was “going to be another program where it is boring and stuff.” However, he relayed:

“See how PEACH is – they help you and stuff. See when I went through the YMCA and all these other stuff, they didn’t really help me. They told me to send e-mail but they never sent me back nothing. They didn’t bother. They tell me to send my resume. They never send nothing back. I just said forget it.”

John makes a clear distinction between programs that “let you down” and programs that help:

“A program that lets you down... A program that lets you down is a program that takes long to reply, they never talk to you, they never call you, they set a date, they tell you to get something in by a certain date then you never hear from them. They say they’re going to help you but they take months and years or whatever.”

John’s experience with PEACH was that the Wraparound Coordinator returned his call right away, and set a date to meet him. Following discussion about his goals, she helped him access services to meet his goal:

“Oh great, man, this program actually got me a job!”

It is crucial to note that the Coordinator helped by supporting the participants’ *access* to the services. She accompanied them to appointments and went by subway with them so that they learned the public transportation route.

“Andrea showed me the location – she actually took me there. I didn’t know where it was. She’s not a person who just gives you like the sheet and says here – you know where it is and you go on your own. She actually went with me – we took the subway down to St Clair. We went there and I talked to the supervisor.”

The coordinator functioned to facilitate access to services in a variety of ways: helping participants to fill out forms, reminding them of deadlines, and generally keeping track of the process. For Tom and Mary, she was able to obtain a computer so that they

could work at home. This kind of concrete support for connecting with services was crucial to the participants, and they experienced it as caring.

Continued contact and outreach to PEACH youth who occasionally withdrew from service was crucial as well. Dave, for example, went through a difficult time at one point during the Wraparound process. He returned to being influenced by friends and using drugs. Ashamed, and feeling that he had let his team down, he stopped his contact with Wraparound. However, the coordinator called him periodically to “check on him.” This contact was very important to Dave who felt:

“...I let myself down and I couldn’t just face them, and I kind of went into my own world. Andrea ...called me and checked up on me, which I liked so much because she checks on me. It’s not like I was gone and she says forget it. She actually checks on me. Yeah – that was very important to me.”

Researcher: “How come?”

“Because it showed she really cares. Whatever she said to me it’s as if she’s giving me a mothercare, you know, like unconditional love, right? It seemed that’s what she was giving me. Even if I didn’t call or I didn’t go, after, she checked on me. Unconditional love, yes, and I liked that. Umm.”

Dave described the best thing about PEACH as “they don’t give up on their students – that’s what I like about PEACH.”

3) The importance of success and the relationship of success to further education

Once firmly connected with team support and community resources, Tom, John and Dave encountered personal successes that increased their confidence and their motivation. They followed through with their job training programs, secured jobs, and attended specialized training programs enthusiastically.

For Tom, who excelled in a computer course, the best thing about the Wraparound program was:

“when Andrea and me went to go to set me up in a computer course. An internship, like. I went four hours a day on graphics and web design. I finished it.”

Tom was also encouraged to volunteer at a bakery. This gave him an opportunity to demonstrate his capacity to work. He was hired at the bakery for a part-time job, which helped him to meet his goals in the financial domain.

John, for whom we might infer that skipping school led to conflict with the law, said the following:

“It makes me happy because I’m actually achieving something. Trying to look for a job on my own is kinda hard because no one would accept me. The only place to get a job is in a factory... Thanks to PEACH that I’m able to achieve what I wanted to.”

Dave described success with getting off drugs and taking a firm stand with friends who encouraged him to use. Dave’s success with his job brought him very positive feedback from his boss, and in his words, helped him to recognize that “I kind of thought, I *do* have a lot of potential.”

Pete described his success in trying to use alternatives to fighting: “One time someone was bothering me I told the person “I don’t like how you’re talking to me.” He stopped bothering me. Before – I got into an argument and started fighting.” Pete describes his new capacity to use words rather than fists. When asked how he managed to implement the strategy, he said “I tried it that way because if I fought he would get hurt cuz he was small, so I wanted to try something different.”

With the exception of Mary, whose motivation regarding school was never in jeopardy, one of the most compelling findings in the data is the degree to which these successes led to a renewed relationship with the education system. Once confidence and

motivation increased, participants saw school in a different light and gained a higher estimation of their ability to succeed.

Dave clearly sees continuation in school in the future as possible and desirable. His experience at work led directly to his sense that “If I can do that at work, I can do it at school.” The result was that he is in the process of investigating cooking schools at the college level as his next step.

Tom did extremely well in computer training. He says:

“It gave me more knowledge of computer skills and it gave me something to do because I left school – I was going to get kicked out and thought I should go to that program instead of getting kicked out, then go to any school I wanted after that.”

John describes his pleasure in learning in his computer training program, saying:

“It’s a really good place – there’s like a supervisor – he sees what you do - and they also encourage you to do things you never thought you could do.

Researcher: “Like what?”

“I never thought I was able to do HTML and stuff – so much codes and stuff. That I couldn’t understand, but then they explain it to you so you start to understand so you get happy because you’re learning things.”

John intends to change to a new school in the fall and make a new start. He feels hopeful about succeeding there. Pete’s foremost goal is to stay in school, and he is clear about avoiding trouble as the means to meet the goal.

Clearly, one of the most important benefits of the Wraparound program at PEACH is not just the actual experience of the program, but the impact of the program on participants’ future educational attainment. These participants had deeply troubled relations with their respective schools. The Wraparound process had a substantial

reparative effect on their sense of hopelessness and despair in relation to further education.

4) Anger reduction in the context of school through the experience of having “people on my side.”

One troubling finding in the research concerns the levels of anger and helplessness participants recounted in relation to their school experiences. Part of the reparation of relations with education described above came from participants’ capacity to reduce levels of anger as a result of Wraparound intervention.

Also troubling are the young men’s descriptions of chronic boredom in school, leading to getting in trouble and skipping classes. These youth, in varying ways, were caught in a vicious circle of boredom and alienation in school, which led to behaviour problems. They then developed conflicted relations with the principal or vice principal, and felt increasingly angry and unheard. Ironically, the schools’ dominant solution appeared to be asking students to leave school or drop out temporarily, which, when combined with participants’ own propensity to skip, put them too far behind in their studies to catch up. Anger, discouragement and helplessness produced more skipping and getting into trouble. Here, the Wraparound program had direct effects in interrupting this cycle of failure.

Tom’s experience is particularly illustrative. He describes getting into trouble as a chronic feature of his attendance at school. His perception, which he described with intense frustration was that “...everything I do gets me into trouble. The simplest thing I do gets me in trouble. Everyone gets in trouble no matter what they do.” When asked for an example, he says:

“Last year I got into trouble with me and the Librarian in the first semester...I wasn’t supposed to be in the library in the first semester - I was banned from the library. And now in second semester, I go to the library and because she knows I was bad the first semester, every time I go to the library I get in trouble and always get sent up to the office. Like, she’ll say I’m not supposed to be on the computer, that I’m skipping class. But my class is down there. And I say no, I’m not skipping class, but I get sent to the office. Then I just go to the office and sit there.”

Researcher: “What would happen if you said to the principal “No, I’m supposed to be there?””

“It’s how you talk when you’re mad. It’s a different person when you’re mad. You just talk different. You talk in a louder voice and they’ll think you’re being angry and they’ll say you need to cool off because you’re mad right now and they’ll send you home.”

For Tom, one of the primary benefits of the Wraparound program was the Coordinator’s willingness to advocate for him with the principal. When Tom got in trouble, he felt the principal or vice principal did not listen to him, and that their only solution was to ask him to leave school. He was unable to represent his own interests in these encounters because either he stayed silent and withdrawn, or he got angry.

“If I went in by myself, something else might happen. Sometimes when I go in there I don’t talk or I’ll say something that *they* think is rude, then I’ll get in more trouble. Like, sometimes when I get mad I don’t talk, like I just listen to see what they have to say.”

When the coordinator met with Tom and the principal or vice principal, she suggested options to leaving school or suspension. For example, she suggested that he get his work from the teacher and finish it in a different classroom. These solutions worked.

“It’s better having someone in the room talk to the principal. If it’s one on one, with a student and the principal, they’ll hardly listen.”

“Andrea helps to tell my side... I think it’s both – she helps to tell my side, and she helps them, for me to do something else besides go home. Sometimes I’ll go to a different classroom to do my work and hand it to the teacher at the end of the day and that was it.”

Researcher: “It works for you?”

Tom: “Yeah.”

Researcher: “And you don’t get as mad?”

Tom: “Nope.”

The Wraparound team was an important support for Tom, who clearly felt that having people on his side was important:

“... I think it was all right having like people on my side to talk about what will I do and stuff.”

Two teachers with whom Tom had good relationships when he was in school were on his team. “They treated me different than the [other] teachers and stuff. Anytime I had a problem I could go to them and they tried to help me solve it.” And: “Anytime the teachers saw me in the hallway and stuff and I wasn’t supposed to be there, they’d tell me to go to class and do my work.”

When asked about skipping, Tom indicated that he skipped because he couldn’t sit all day long in school. He found it boring. His idea of an ideal school involved a school with activities such as regular gym. He relayed that regular physical activity is no longer part of the school curriculum. He was quite definite that a mixture of classes and activities would help him stay out of trouble.

John described his experience of skipping. He did not like school and was also bored. He began skipping in grade eight. He was put in a special program for students with attendance problems:

“When you’re in grade 8 and you skip a lot they put you in a program. It’s called CAP [?] or something. That program was the worst program. I just went there and all I did was nothing. Oh man, like, I basically slept through the whole day. They didn’t help me or nothing. I didn’t have to do nothing but I still made it to

grade nine. They just put me to grade nine. I didn't go there to do nothing. I just went there for attendance. It was such an easy program. They just let me sleep. They don't even care I think. That program is the worstest program ever. They should at least tell you you should be working, you know, but they don't. They just let you sleep."

John was very angry about this program, particularly because he held it accountable for his skipping and dropping out in grade nine:

"Grade nine - I was behind in a lot of stuff and I didn't understand *anything*- no math no nothing. I was like, damn, - that program - it never helped me out. They didn't like - at least if you're sleeping, they should tell your parents or something. Tell you you should be awake. Then I would have learned. I would have done my assignments. When I went to grade nine, I didn't understand most of the math stuff."

John attended this program for a year. When he returned to grade nine:

"I didn't understand a thing in grade nine."

"I just felt tired to do my work because I didn't understand things. I look at everybody in the class and they know everything and I'm like, damn. It made me want to skip and drop out and stuff like that."

...Then you kind of feel you don't understand and everybody understands and you don't know what's going on and they be laughing at you... Then you just start skipping because you don't want to go to that certain class."

John came to PEACH after coming into conflict with the law. He went to a job training program, and got a job. He decided that he wanted to make more money than minimum wage, and this led to his goal to get further computer training. He intends to go back to school in the fall.

Dave also describes his anger in school which led him to get into trouble, leading to suspension. He described getting angry at other students in classes because their behaviour problems took a great deal of class time. He got into fights at school. "That's how it all started - temper." He began skipping whole days.

“After you’ve skipped a day or two of school, it’s really hard to go back. It’s hard to get back to the work. So I couldn’t adapt to that. So I kind of gave up and started chilling with my friends.”

Dave’s Wraparound team was instrumental in helping him deal with anger. His team consisted of the Coordinator, a trusted teacher, an addictions counselor, a staff member from the YMCA, and family. He describes his sense of responsibility to the team as important in managing his anger:

Dave: “If someone really gets on my nerves, I would go up to him and knock him out. [But] I think about Andrea and C. and Mr. S. and my family and such and I stop myself.”

Researcher: “How did you stop being angry?”

Dave: “All these people are trying to help me and I’m going to screw up just by hitting one guy. So I’m going to put my anger on a hold and thought about all these people. Right there, my anger is gone. I just sit down and do my own thing... Before – I’d wait after school or at lunch to beat up the person, which is wrong, yes, but I guess my temper got away, so usually I’ll just save it for after school or at lunchtime to beat up the person.”

Dave: “When I got into Peach that’s when I was able to control my temper you know, then after a while I just gave up on myself and I let my temper just fly and start bursting out and I stopped going to school, that’s when I got kicked out.”

Here Dave describes a setback which led to his suspension. It was during this time that the Wraparound Coordinator continued to contact him. He eventually reconnected, began to work successfully and plans to return to school. When reflecting on what he learned through the Wraparound program he says:

“The anger – try to think about people -- try to look at both sides of the story, you know? So in other words, just because someone says something it doesn’t mean I have to take it into consideration, I got to look at another point of view. And I have to think about if I should get involved or not. So in other words they kind of taught me to think both ways, right? Which is good.”

Pete also found school boring. “School is boring – You’re locked up...it’s too quiet...everybody working [as individuals]. You feel a weight.” He describes a cycle

where he gets into trouble when he comes to class mad or tired, then gets “bored” with the work, then the teacher “nags,” then he gets mad and leaves and skips the class. It is difficult to tell what boredom means here, as he associates it with lack of ability to focus due to being tired or mad. He was clear that if he can take a few moments to himself at the beginning of class, he can focus on the work, but teachers begin to “nag” him to do his work, then he gets angry.

When asked about his team, Pete was particularly clear about its importance:

“the team is good because there are more people on your side. People can talk to you and show you - You’re used to learning from them, so that helps you learn.”

He appeared to take and understand feedback support from people he felt close to. Indeed, it was particularly important to him to have his mother on the team, because she explained to him what was being said. She “translated.” In this case, the mother’s long history of communication with Pete possibly helped ameliorate some of the cognitive barriers to understanding.

The Role of the Coordinator.

In the interview data, the participants frequently referred to the Coordinator and it is evident that their connection to her was crucial to their involvement in the program. We believe that there are some specificities about her approach that are important to understand as we consider the youths’ opinions about the process. Consequently, following analysis of the youths’ interviews, we interviewed the coordinator about her perceptions of her role.

As a person of colour with considerable knowledge of the Jane Finch community, Andrea brought a sense connection to the community and a compassionate understanding of the difficulties faced by the most vulnerable of its youth. Andrea's implementation of her role as the Wraparound Coordinator was consistent with the Wraparound process described above. However, she augmented her role in three basic respects in order to meet the particular needs of marginalized and alienated youth: she paid particular attention to outreach, she mediated between the school and youth and their families, and she kept in frequent contact - "checking in" - with youth during and after the Wraparound process.

Andrea engaged in considerable outreach because these particular youth and their families are extremely isolated. Not one of the participants in the study was involved in community activities.

"These kids are more isolated than others. They are taught not to share their problems. You don't talk about what problems are going on. I don't know if it's a community thing or a cultural thing – you don't talk about it. And it shows up at school – there may be food issues, TTC [money for bus tickets] issues - nobody asks, they don't share."

Andrea began to connect slowly to students by going to the school and bringing them lunch. Over lunch, they chatted, and she began to develop a rapport. These students had no way to connect to the idea of a support team.

"They are criticized at school and at home. Mommy and Daddy don't talk about it because they are ashamed their kid got kicked out of school. So talking about a support team is just like a foreign language."

Andrea was careful to leave the timing up to the youth. The process of nominating team members was slow because it was hard for youth to imagine adult

support: “Their biggest fear was having all these people at a table ripping them apart.” Shame and isolation necessitated the development of a supportive, positive relationship with the Coordinator before the Wraparound team process could develop.

Andrea’s role vis a vis the school was extremely important. These youth and their families are deeply alienated from the school. Parents fear and resent school authorities. Youths’ experience of school is one of criticism and lack of supportive relationships. “You hear this all the time – ‘they never ask what the problem is.’” A large part of Andrea’s outreach efforts involved reassuring parents and youth that she is not from the school. She visited parents at home and reaffirmed that she didn’t have access to school records. She reassured parents that she was not there to criticize, but to find out about their child’s strengths and needs in order to support their success.

In light of the tense relations between the school and youth and their families, Andrea undertook informal mediation as part of her role. When a Wraparound student had difficulty at school, either they or the school called her and she immediately met the youth and school official to work out the problem. She suggested alternatives to further suspensions and helped youth to participate in working out the problem. She promoted the development of mutual understanding between the school and parents. For most of the participants in this study, a teacher joined the Wraparound team. This increased the youth’s sense of having adults on their side in the school context.

Finally, Andrea “checked in” with participants both during and after the team process was completed. These check-ins consisted of inquiring about how school was going, showing concern about attendance, behaviour and other issues – all in the context of a caring relationship. “Kids want someone to pay attention to them. To ask some

questions, see how they're doing, ask what's wrong." "These kids need an adult to check in with them, to say 'how are you' – not always be yelling at them, not always griping at them."

Because of this kind of relationship, youth used PEACH in a variety of ways. One youth, if kicked out of class, came to PEACH to work on the computers or do his homework. Another did his community service hours at PEACH. Andrea took him with her to community meetings to combat this particular youth's isolation in the community. Her experience is that "kids like having adults in their corner -- someone who takes the time to get to know them." Because of her follow-up check in calls, youth have a constant support to turn to as needs or crises arise. Pete's recommendation for improving PEACH was to have "more people like Andrea." As Dave said, "Having a person like Andrea in my life – it's the best." And struggling for words, he said, "it's, it's.... *breathtaking*."

Conclusion and Discussion

Clearly it is impossible to generalize from a qualitative study and a particular limitation of this study is the small number of participants. However, the strength of qualitative methods is their capacity to describe and conceptualize processes. In this regard, the data on which this study is based suggests links between boredom, lack of activity in school, getting into trouble, and punishment leading to increased levels of anger, resulting in skipping and suspension, with the consequence of being too behind to continue in school. The *PEACH/Oolagen Wraparound program played a substantial role in interrupting this process by 1) advocating within the school for alternatives to punishment; 2) developing alternatives outside the school, such as job training or*

specialized training, and supporting access to those alternatives; 3) developing a team of people who were “on my side” and which provided considerable emotional and practical support, all of which led to; 4) decreasing anger, frustration and hopelessness, allowing for reconnection to school.

Several elements of this process are worth noting. First, all the young men experienced considerable relief at having people “on my side.” There was a sense in which a perception of injustice was at work. Although they all talked about individual teachers who helped them and supported them, they felt part of a system that didn’t listen to their “side,” where punishment through suspension supplanted constructive alternatives. It was heartening to witness their change in affect as they described their experience with alternatives. In that sense, the Wraparound program functions as an alternative to punishment and blame, thereby reducing the anger, shame and humiliation they experienced in not being heard and in being punished by multiple suspensions. Indeed, this data set points to serious harm to all five youth from the process of suspension.

All four young men used the word “bored” to describe their experience in school. Although it is not in the purview of this study, it would be useful to gain a better understanding of what this actually means. Tom despairingly told the researcher, “Miss – I just can’t sit there all day.” Dave describes his boredom at the amount of class time given over to disciplining students. Pete associates boredom with losing focus because of fatigue or anger. Indeed, “tired” is a word that came up frequently in the interviews. There are multiple reasons why this may be happening: drugs and alcohol, discouragement, individual learning styles, school curriculum, or insufficient opportunity

for recreation at school are all suggested in the interviews. However, it would be important to understand this experience in more depth as it appeared so frequently in the data as a precursor of problems. We are not in any way advocating a simplistic “school-bashing” conclusion, but rather, seeking a more complex understanding of these young people’s experience. Interestingly, when presented with alternatives such as computer training, job training etc., these students were enthusiastic and engaged learners.

The same conclusions cannot be drawn for the young woman in the study. Although we clearly cannot make inferences about the role of gender from this study, further research on gender differences in marginalized youths’ experiences with both with school suspensions and with support programs would be interesting. There is no question that Mary benefited from PEACH: “The importance of PEACH is people who supported me and helped me talk about the future.” But the process described above did not occur for this self-directed young woman. The key word in her assessment of PEACH is her use of the word “future.” She saw education as crucial to future goals. She seemed deeply invested in being a good mother to her daughter. It is possible that the individual support offered by the Wraparound coordinator was more practical and meaningful than the Wraparound process. This is because, as a young single mother, she faced multiple barriers to her future goals: poverty and attendant rigid welfare regulations, long bus trips to daycare, employers who expected her to be on call for work, and, due to her suspension, attendance at multiple schools in order to get her credits. The PEACH Suspended and Studying program was important to her because school regulations forbade this bright and highly motivated high school student from entering school property to pick up her class assignments.

Perhaps the most important conclusion of this study is that the experience of personal respect, concrete support and self-identified success for these youth led to the increased potential for long-term social inclusion through employment and further education. All youths connected the PEACH/Oolagen Wraparound program with support and respect. Much of this respect stemmed from their relationship with the Coordinator, whose concern and support acted as an antidote to their alienation from other potential sources of positive regard. In the context of that relationship, their self-identified goals were taken seriously and their motivation was harnessed through the identification and support of their strengths. Certainly the data support suggest insights into the processes which may underlie the efficacy of Wraparound programs for marginalized youth such as those in this study.

Researcher: Okay. Anything else that you can think of that would be helpful to PEACH?

Dave: To PEACH? No, not really, I just want to say, Hey, Thank you PEACH! Wherever you guys are listening...

Researcher: (laughing because Dave picks up the tape recorder and yells into the microphone:)

Dave: ...to just say thank you. You guys have been a great help. Especially you Andrea! I love you a lot, alright? Seriously. You're a very special person to me. Thank you.

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