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Program Evaluation Re-Imagined: Discerning the Spirit of the Whole Child Project in Whitehorse, Yukon

by

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In one of the foundation articles for spirituality and social work, Canda (1988) defined spirituality as “the human quest for personal meaning and mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the non human environment, and, for some, God” (p. 243). A decade later, Ortiz and Smith (1999) conducted a content analysis of “spirituality” in the social work literature and found “common themes of interconnectedness between self, others, and a sense of ultimacy as well as the individual’s need for generativity and inner meaning” (p. 309). Carroll (2001) later presented two dimensions of spirituality: a vertical dimension or “relationship with the transcendent,” and a horizontal dimension involving “the kind and quality of one’s relationships with self and others, to well-being in relation to self and others, and to a sense of life purpose and satisfaction” (p. 7).

While a precise definition of spirituality is not the focus here, it is apparent from the literature that connections and relationships among people are a major component. For social workers, spirituality is more than an inner search for meaning or a personal experience with transcendence.

Program evaluation may appear at first glance to be at the opposite end of the social work continuum from spirituality. This is not to suggest that program evaluation is somehow immoral or evil. Rather, it could be argued that the exercise of program evaluation has tended more towards measurement than meaning. Evaluations are generally intended to assess the overall outcome or impact of an established program, and are usually undertaken for purposes of accountability (are the founders and community getting intended benefits?) and policy-making (where do we go from here and how should we proceed?). Quantitative approaches have been favoured as measured program outputs are assessed against specific program objectives.

This is not always the case, however. A recent evaluation of the Whole Child Project (WCP) in Whitehorse, Yukon (Zapf, 2004) employed a qualitative methodology to explore the relationships and meaning of the program for the community. Although the language of spirituality was not used in the final document itself, in hindsight I believe the evaluation process sought to understand and express the spirit of the WCP rather than simply its measured operations.

Whole Child Project

The Whole Child Project (WCP) in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, has its roots in the efforts and philosophy of the staff and administration at Whitehorse Elementary School (WES). Under the direction of a community-based Steering Committee, the WCP has been offering programs since September 2001 to coordinate services for students and families in the inner city area of Whitehorse through an active open school concept. In the winter of 2004, an evaluation of the Whole Child Project

was undertaken at the request of the RCMP and funded through their National Youth Strategy at Headquarters in Ottawa. The evaluation was completed by the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family (CRILF).

Context

As the capital city of the Yukon Territory, Whitehorse features a population of approximately 20,000 residents. The primary economic force is government, with an estimated 5000 public servants working for all levels (territorial, federal, municipal, First Nations). While the population may not be large in southern terms, Whitehorse is a large urban centre in the context of the north, and experiences many of the problems associated with urban living. Whitehorse offers its residents a wide range of recreational and cultural activities, but most of these activities involve considerable cost (as well as transportation and supervision for young persons). There is no public recreation centre in downtown Whitehorse.

As a downtown school in the inner city, Whitehorse Elementary School is “dual track” meaning that it serves the needs of French Immersion for the entire city as well as an inner city English-stream. In general, the 300-320 French Immersion students come from relatively privileged circumstances around the entire Whitehorse area. Most of the 80 English-stream students reside in the downtown core, a highly transient group in low-income households with the associated disadvantages in terms of resources, opportunity, and educational preparation. A significant number of the English-stream students are First Nations. In addition to the effects of poverty, many of the English-stream students have witnessed violence and substance abuse at home. Whitehorse Elementary is also the local school for Kaushee’s Place, a transition house located in downtown Whitehorse. In every sense of the

word, the English-stream population at Whitehorse Elementary School can be considered “at risk.”

Early Initiatives

Whitehorse Elementary School in the early 1990s had a reputation for being a tough school where fighting and vandalism were common. Staff had to deal with up to twenty fights per day, and the school at that time had a special room in the basement for violent kids to “cool off.” The strap was in common usage as an instrument of social control.

Many changes were reported in the mid-1990s. The strap was abolished and a clear policy was implemented against humiliation of students as a discipline/control technique. A second Vice-Principal position was added with specific mention of responsibility for promoting community development with the English-stream students. Administration and teachers began to acknowledge the need to go beyond the constraints of formal education if they wanted to help this community. If they wanted to make a difference, this group realized they needed to create a community atmosphere in the school. By the time of a 1996 workshop entitled “Success before Six” (led by an outside facilitator), a number of teachers and administrators were discussing what has been described as “the germ of the Whole Child Project.”

Many of this group were devoting considerable volunteer time to promote the vision. For example, when it was obvious that some children were coming to school hungry, a breakfast program was initiated with WES Principal and Vice-Principals preparing food donated by local stores. Eventually, this program was taken over by parents from the community, and it still operates today (as does a lunch program). An overall “open school” approach was initiated at WES whereby students could come in to the school when they arrived in the morning rather than wait outside for the bell. Facilities such as the gym, computer lab, and library were available to them (along with breakfast).

Those committed volunteers were doing all that could be done at the time within the boundaries of the conventional school day. They met regularly to consider next steps, and invited other community leaders from outside the school to these meetings. Two key realizations set the stage for their future work: (1) in order to reach the children it would be important to reach out to families in the community, and (2) a central figure would be needed to coordinate all the proposed activities for school and community. The expanded group (now including likeminded persons from the RCMP, Learning Disabilities Association of the Yukon, Whitehorse Planning Group on Homelessness, Yukon Family Services, First Nations, and the City of Whitehorse) began to seek funding for the community coordination role. Using resources provided to them as a federal partner in the National Crime Prevention Strategy, the RCMP's National Youth Strategy funded the May 2001 hiring of a Community Coordinator for the Dealing with the Whole Child Project.

Vision

Early WCP documentation makes frequent reference to the proverb that *it takes an entire village to raise a child*. The project is grounded in a belief that barriers to learning are created and maintained by problems that begin outside the classroom walls. As approved by the Dealing with the Whole Child Society in July of 2002, the initial Mission Statement read:

To improve the well being and encourage the healthy development of at risk students and their families through holistic services that are provided collaboratively in a community school environment.

The vision here is one of a stronger inner city area of Whitehorse as a better place to live. One active step towards that goal is the creation of an open and accessible community school to serve as a safe and trusted alternative for families in trouble. The school would function as a centre or hub for delivery of

services that complement and support education.

Structure and Activities

The WCP is governed by a Steering Committee that represents interested and participating partners such as Yukon Territorial Government (YTG) Department of Education, YTG Department of Health and Social Services, RCMP, City of Whitehorse, First Nations, non-governmental agencies, WES staff, and the WCP Community Coordinator. Normally, the Steering Committee meets once per month. With very little turnover, the Steering Committee has averaged 12-14 members since it began.

When the WCP began in 2001, a door-to-door survey was conducted with families in the downtown Whitehorse area to determine their interests and needs. Now an annual event, the needs survey allows the WCP to keep current with interests and needs in the community served. Results are presented to the Steering Committee, posted on the WCP website, and are used by WCP staff for planning. The WCP has initiated and/or coordinated a wide range of activities since its inception. Some of these could be described as signature or defining activities for the WCP, regular events initiated by the WCP and run by volunteers with help from the WCP staff. Four such defining activities are: the Open Gym and Computer Lab; Stone Soup Club; Swim Night; and Transportation.

Full elaboration of the structure and activities of the WCP is beyond the scope of this paper. These features are addressed in detail in the full evaluation report which is easily accessed online (Zapf, 2004).

Evaluation

Data collection for the evaluation involved two trips to Whitehorse in January and February 2004. During these site visits, the researcher conducted 16 individual and seven group interviews with key informants (WCP staff, Steering Committee members, program participants, volunteers, parents, youth, agency representatives), attended two Steering Committee meetings, administered two surveys, participated in WCP activities at Whitehorse Elementary School, and rode the pick-up bus. Documents reviewed included initial funding proposals, subsequent funding applications, minutes and Coordinator's reports from monthly Steering Committee meetings, assorted media articles and interviews, WCP newsletters, websites, WCP Annual Reports and annual Family Surveys.

The methodology developed for the WCP evaluation was not revolutionary or unique. There is a foundation in the literature for the approach taken. Data collection interviews were not structured with standardized interview schedules. Rather, this evaluation made use of the "informal conversational interview" (Patton, 2002, p. 342) which offers maximum personalization, responsiveness, and flexibility. Questions can flow from the immediate context and are able to build on information already gathered. Most of the personal interviews for this study were scheduled in advance with particular key informants. Some, however, occurred by taking advantage of unplanned opportunities and chance encounters at WCP activities and events.

Exploring issues of evaluation of community-based projects, Gardner (2003) observed that such work often involves looking at programs that are "developing rather than established" (p. 73), with the result that the evaluation is likely to focus on process (i.e., what is happening within the program). Kibel (1999) argues that "for programs engaged in healing, transformation, and prevention, the best source and form of information are client stories" (p. 13). Patton (2002) confirms qualitative enquiry as an appropriate approach for evaluation of programs at the implementation stage, explaining that "qualitative methods are often used in evaluations because they tell the *program's story* by capturing and communicating the *participant's stories*" (p. 10). Such qualitative data is most often collected

through “interviews, field observations, and documents” (p. 13), the three primary data collection methods employed for this evaluation.

Voices

Now listen to the voices of the WCP stakeholders and participants. Do you come away with a sense of the relationships and the meaning of the WCP for this community?

Is WCP making a difference? I know it is. I see the positive energy, the self esteem, the role modeling. (Steering Committee member)

I have no doubt we are having a positive influence here, an impact on their lives. We are making connections, helping the community grow. (RCMP)

Stay home parents, single parents, any parent. We all need to shine sometimes. I can shine here. (Parent)

The availability to access the school as a community service means that families that might not otherwise be in a school setting are given the opportunity to experience this setting in family oriented activities. This may help some parents ease fears about being involved in their children’s school experience later on in the child’s life. It creates a vital link between parents, children, and schools. (Agency representative)

That guy? He’s our Principal. He’s on the bus all the time. He knows me. (Youth)

Many years ago a lot of these parents had bad school experiences themselves, but now they are coming into the school and having positive experiences. Word spreads. Not just the parents but the kids too are feeling more positive about the school since WCP started. (WES teacher)

The proof is that after 3 years we are still getting more than 50 kids from core downtown Whitehorse. We are saving kids here. I can’t prove this, but I see the kids living a different relationship with the RCMP. (Steering Committee member)

Right now, Whitehorse Elementary has less vandalism than any other school in Whitehorse. (RCMP)

We, the First Nations, approve of the good things they are doing, and have included their information in our newsletters. WCP provides healthy and safe alternative activities for the downtown youth and is in fact open to all children. (Agency representative)

The kids know us. They can discuss consequences with us. This is not the same as giving talks about drugs and such. This is the fundamental principle of “officer presence” in operation. (RCMP)

Children think of the school as a place to have fun outside of school hours. This improves their overall attitude towards school. (WES teacher)

The biggest thing I saw, the biggest change, is that I went from being just another cop to being an actual person with these kids and families. (RCMP)

I like to play basketball with the cops. They’re like not bossy at all. (Youth)

The original plans for a WCP started out with no intent of RCMP involvement or crime prevention. But that all changed with the funding. Now WCP challenges preconceived notions of what the RCMP is all about, a real change in attitudes. The RCMP couldn’t buy this PR for a million dollars. (Steering Committee member)

WCP means that we are not alone in this work and that the school is at the centre of the community and in no way an adversary. (Agency representative)

Sometimes I wear my uniform, and my badge. The girls look at me and say Wow, I could be RCMP too! (RCMP)

I like to see my kids calling RCMP officers by their first names. (Parent)

WCP is leading the way in showing other schools and agencies what community really means. (Agency representative)

I am still not sure what the magic is – why it works. I guess the entire WCP is about relationships – with families, with the RCMP, with agencies, with volunteers. Relationships based on openness and trust. (Steering Committee member)

You know how this program spreads? It’s like a summer fire. One branch is burning over there, one over here, the roots are all touching underground and the fire could pop up anywhere. (Parent)

I’d like to reiterate the importance of families entering the school itself prior to their children entering school as it may dissolve or expose any barriers that parents have to becoming involved parents in the school system. (Agency representative)

Another thing you can’t measure but it’s huge. Kids will get involved to help you and you learn how to say things and do things with them. They teach us every day how to be better police officers. Just being there Wednesday nights, what I learn from these kids I can apply to my relationships with other kids. (RCMP)

Without the WCP, my agency's services in downtown Whitehorse would be scrambling to find available child friendly space to offer some of our programs. (Agency representative)

For me, it's a fun night out with the kids for free, and it's safe. Where else could we go where there is something for everyone and they don't compete? This is the high point of our week. (Parent)

My kids get to be with kids from outside their class. There is a great mix of ages, grades, and cultures. You can walk in and see grade sevens playing basketball with kindergartens. Everyone is equal in the gym and the computer lab. (Parent)

Rules? Yeah, I guess there are rules. Like no swearing or being mean. The Principal is right here, and the cops. You have to be good. (Youth)

This is not an RCMP project. We see it as an RCMP funded community project run by the community. We supplied the money at first and partnered, but we don't have to look after it. (RCMP)

I like to have the computer all quiet, just to myself. (Youth)

These kids can't count on much in their lives, but they can count on the Wednesday night bus coming to bring them to the gym. (RCMP)

We view the WCP as a sister agency, with similar beliefs that families are at the core for determining children's success. We share the goal of reducing the number of children that go into care by engaging the whole community in the care of children and families. (Agency representative)

Conclusion

The WCP evaluation attempted to build a “foundation of general ideas” about the program rather than produce “statistically definitive data or conclusive results” (Unrau, Gabor, & Grinnell, 2001, p. 210) at the implementation stage of the project. This notion of a “foundation of general ideas” about a program appears to include relationships, connections, visions – all components of the definitions of spirituality presented at the outset of this discussion. It is for this reason that I have attempted to present this qualitative evaluation of the Whole Child Project in Whitehorse, Yukon, within the context of our consideration of spirituality at this conference.

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