

You have to believe it to see it

Safer Learning in Dangerous Times

By Nicole Ysabet

You Have to Believe It to See It

After years of research about how violence affects learning, we got a grant to look at what that was like for youth between 16 and 24. Parkdale Project Read, a literacy program in the west end of Toronto, helped us because they hoped our research would help them support youth in their program. We wanted to know how literacy programs, schools, and other kinds of learning programs could help youth learn. In all these kinds of programs there are students who aren't learning right now, but we think they **can** learn if we give them what they need. When we say "You have to believe it to see it," we mean that what you expect shapes what you can recognize. Here are some of the things youth helped us see.

So Obvious, It's Invisible

The problem, based on what we heard from students, teachers, and some other school staff (like guidance counsellors, social workers, and vice principals) is this: We've made a lot of rules based on the idea that violence is something that only a few people do, and that it only happens to a few people. But it's not, so the rules don't work.

Violence is everywhere, all the time... It's like a part of life. No matter what walk of life you're from, if you're from an affluent family, or from a family that doesn't have a lot, or – it doesn't matter. Wherever you are on the spectrum, violence will somehow work its way into your life. And in a school, it's just like – violence is almost a cool thing. When you're a grade nine, you get initiated. They never caught me, though, I ran all the way to grade ten... But at that age you're vulnerable because you don't know who you are. You don't have an identity. You're still searching for what kind of group you belong to – what kind of circle you fit in – and your self-esteem level is unstable.
(Kwame)

Right now, one of the big ideas about how to make schools safe is to suspend or expel kids who are violent. On a certain level, it makes sense – if someone's beating up other students, it obviously has to stop. But the students who are using violence to control other people are often the same students who are

experiencing a lot of violence. If kicking them out is all we do, we're just moving the problem along to somewhere else. Schools use the rules to control people but this doesn't support them to do better. As soon as you try to control somebody, you can't be on the same team anymore. It makes it feel like them against you. Other things make it feel that way too: when teachers or other staff are violent or disrespectful with students, it seems like nothing happens. And when the whole system seems unfair, it's hard to figure out why you should play by the rules.

In the same way that we act like there are only a few violent kids in school, we act like there are only a few violent families. Kids are afraid that if they tell people there's violence at home, they'll get taken out of their families. And it seems like a reasonable thing to do; nobody wants to leave children with adults who hurt them. But the "children" we're talking about are sometimes 14 or 15 years old, and they want to stay in control of their lives. The foster system looks scary and unpredictable. Maybe it will be better than with your parents, and maybe not. At least at home you know what you're getting. So what happens is that these kids don't talk to anybody. They don't get a chance to hear someone say "It's not okay that your mom hurts you, or your dad calls you stupid. You're not stupid. Let's figure out together what we can do to help you." Teachers told us that they don't ask because they're scared of making it worse. They have to report to Children's Aid, and they don't know if that will be good for students, or if it will just make more problems.

"There's something wrong about the attendance thing."

Some of the other rules create problems, too. One that almost everybody talked about was attendance. Strict attendance policies don't acknowledge that youth have a lot going on in their lives. People told us about not coming to school because they didn't have the bus fare to get there from shelters, because they were trying to avoid bullies, because they were injured from fights or because they had no clean clothes after a night on the street.

A lot of teachers do that [take students' skipping class personally rather than thinking about what might be going on for the student]. When you skip their class the day before, and you come in the following day and they're berating you for being absent, it makes you that much less motivated to come the next day. So then it becomes a pattern of skipping. If I didn't have a note, or a reason for why I wasn't there, I was afraid to go. (Clara Locey)

When schools make policies about attendance, asking why students aren't coming has to be a key piece. When teachers talk to students about attendance, what they should be saying is "It's great that you're here. What can you and I do together so you can get here as much as possible?"

Help Me Think It Through

A lot of youth said they wanted people who would treat them with respect, help figure out what their options were, and give them the information they needed to make good decisions.

*You're going through all this violence at home, let's say, or violence in your community, or violence at school, and the only thing you can think about right now that takes your mind off of it is trying to get somewhere where you don't have to be around that violence any more, and then you go to a teacher or your guidance counsellor to say "What can you suggest I do?" And because that guidance counsellor is at a loss, they tell you "Well, you know, I don't think there's that much you could do. You should pick another career." or "Maybe this school isn't the type of school for you," or "Maybe you should be taking these type of courses." No, you don't tell me what I should be doing, **I'm** telling **you** what I would like to do, and your job as a guidance counsellor is to suggest – you're supposed to guide me, help me figure out what choices are appropriate for what I need. (alternative school social studies class)*

We believe that in the long run, schools need to change the rules. But in the meantime, what could help is more information. We could put up posters and make announcements to let people know what help is out there. We need to talk about needing help like it's normal, common, and nothing to be ashamed of, and we need to really mean it. Youth need to know exactly what will happen if they tell people about violence that's happening now, or violence that happened before. Teachers, principals, and other staff need to ask what's up as soon as they see that something's wrong – when somebody's acting up in class or not coming to class, for example. We need more full-time counsellors, maybe from outside the school system. Youth and teachers all need more places they can go to think and talk safely about what would really help them. The school system needs to ask youth more questions, because the students are the experts about their own lives, and they have a lot of ideas about how to make things better. Lastly, we need more support – that means money and good press – for programs and people who help youth to believe in themselves, to use and develop their strength and brilliance.

Everyone learns something at school. Some people learn that they're stupid, or bad, or that they shouldn't be there. We think that isn't true, and we hope that people can work together so that schools become places of refuge. Even if there's too much going on for you right now to learn the curriculum (after all, not that many people can focus on the math test when they're trying to cope with violence at home) you could be learning about what kind of learner you are, or where you can get the help you need so that you don't get stuck. You could be

learning how to believe in, and see more of, the strength, knowledge, and wisdom you already have to offer.

To read more about how programs and schools can support youth learning, or about violence and learning more broadly, please go to our website:

<http://www.jennyhorsman.com>

Our heartfelt thanks to all the youth who took time to talk to us, and share your stories and your wisdom. We hope that we will be able to use your knowledge to make supportive places where everyone can be seen, and believed.