Creative Problem Solving in the Trenches: Interventions with At-Risk Populations

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Abstract

This monograph reviews several made-in-Manitoba projects designed to serve at-risk populations. In these initiatives, Creative Problem Solving - in combination with mentoring, career awareness, and other interventions - has been used successfully to reduce the recidivism rate of Native Canadian inmates (the Second Chance program), to reclaim talented but troubled high-school dropouts (Lost Prizes) and other under-achieving young people (Prism), to turn around the lives of marginalized Native teens (Northern Lights), and to support inner city children and youth at risk for alienation, school failure, and gang involvement (MARS – Mentoring At-Risk Students, and PLUTO – Please Let Us Take Off).
Introduction

“If education is always to be conceived along the same antiquated lines of a mere transmission of knowledge, there is little to be hoped from it in the bettering of man’s future. For what is the use of transmitting knowledge if the individual’s total development lags behind?” Maria Montessori (1949), The Absorbent Mind

Underachievement is a complicated, galling phenomenon (Gallagher, 1975; McCluskey & Walker, 1986; Rimm, 1986; Whitmore, 1980). Various researchers, including Betts and Neilhart (1988), have endeavored to identify categories of young people who are most likely to fall into the trap of substance abuse, become involved in criminal activity, and/or drop out of school. Certainly, there are many high-ability young people who see the educational curriculum as irrelevant (Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1995): they often challenge authority, create disturbances, and refuse to conform to the system. In their view, schools are unfeeling places with inflexible attendance and discipline policies that push nonconformists out the door (Radwanski, 1987). Students dismissed as ne’er-do-wells or underachievers by teachers may well develop confrontational behaviors to live up to the negative perceptions (Mukhopadyay & Chugh, 1979). It can also be difficult to meet the diverse needs of students who have different types of talents or “intelligences” (cf. Feldhusen, 1995; Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1988) that do not fit into those typically covered by the conventional school curriculum.

There is very little doubt that schools are losing many young people who are capable of making it, but don’t. A report by Statistics Canada (1991) highlighted the fact that talented students can be very much at risk – they often grow bored, discouraged, and unproductive. Indeed, more than 30% of the dropouts surveyed had averages of A or B, and only 8% identified academic problems as their reason for quitting. Most indicated that “not belonging” was the major issue. The “tough bright” – those who don’t fit comfortably into the traditional education system – face a clear dearth of services (Peterson, 1997). There are even some school administrators who, intentionally or otherwise, draw lines in the sand to force troubled and troubling students from their buildings (McCluskey, 2000a). This action creates larger difficulties and costs for society as a whole. As Shakespeare’s character Mercutio says in Romeo and Juliet, “We waste our lights in vain, like lamps by day.”

The Cost of Things Gone Wrong

“Crime and bad lives are the measure of a State’s failure, all crime in the end is the crime of the community.” H.G. Wells (1905), A Modern Utopia

Educational underachievement carries with it an emotional cost. Since high-school dropouts generally have a tough time obtaining and holding jobs, quality of life is affected: many are forced to take low-paying positions with little opportunity for job satisfaction or advancement. And because unemployed or under-employed people tend to be less happy than their better-educated counterparts, there is considerable
High unemployment has been related to decreased self-esteem, a rise in suicide and mortality rates, and increased need for psychiatric care (Gage, 1990). Many unemployed individuals are less effective decision makers, and they tend to function well below potential (Levin, 1989).

Information we examined a decade or so ago (when we were beginning to develop many of our projects) indicated that there is an economic price, both personal and societal, to be paid as well. In the U.S., a male who dropped out of high school back then earned – over the course of a lifetime – approximately a quarter of a million dollars less than one who graduated. Adjusting for inflation, families whose primary breadwinners did not complete grade 12 earned 30% less in 1987 than they did in 1973 (Mishel & Frankel, 1991). It was estimated that dropouts from the graduating class of one large, urban school district lost some $200 billion in earnings over a lifetime, resulting in more than $60 billion in lost taxes (Catterall & Cota-Robles, 1988). Levin (1989), also citing American examples, suggested that the annual cost of addressing the dropout problem was approximately $25 billion, while Forbis-Jordan and Lyons (1992) speculated that related costs ran in the vicinity of $71 billion in lost tax revenue, $3 billion in increased costs due to welfare and unemployment, and $3 billion in costs related to crime.

Considering the situation in our own country, Canadian statistics indicated that the cost of allowing 11,000 poor youth to leave school early over a 20-year span was $23 billion in lost income and productivity, $9.9 billion in lost taxes, and $1.4 billion in unemployment and social assistance payments (Canadian Council on Social Development, 1991). More recently in our province of Manitoba, it has been estimated that about $1.4 million a day – or $1,000 a minute – is spent on at-risk children and youth (Manitoba Department of Finance, 1995-96). Our services for children with profound emotional and behavioral problems can run as high as $125,000 per child per year (Children and Youth Secretariat, 1996). The bulk of the outlay represents after-the-fact costs, rather than preventative approaches. And although it may be impossible to quantify, there is also the social cost of what might have been. “What is the ‘cost’ of a symphony unwritten, a cure not discovered, a breakthrough not invented? In today’s complex world, and in preparing for tomorrow’s certainly more complex one, we can scarcely afford to waste ‘talent capital’ of any sort” (McCluskey & Treffinger, 1998, p. 216).

Lack of productivity may not be the half of it. Those blocked from positive attention and legitimate paths to success are likely to turn their talents instead toward unsavory pursuits. Troubled youth with promising interpersonal skills might, if things go awry, seek leadership positions in youth gangs (with the result that a potential talent pool becomes a cesspool). A major conclusion that arose from the First World Conference on Gifted Children in London, England in 1975 was that high-ability individuals whose needs are not met may well become severe social problems. Lacking direction and left to make it on their own, some at-risk young people move in unfortunate directions. Many unsolved crimes are very likely committed by bright individuals, who make it on their own alright, but not precisely in a socially-desirable manner. Any “success” they experience comes at the expense of others and society in general (cf. McCluskey & Walker, 1986).

Of course, large numbers of young offenders are nabbed by the law. In these cases in Canada, it costs approximately $46,000 each year to incarcerate one youth in a correctional facility (Manitoba Department of Justice, 1995-96). More than 75% of incarcerated
adults were behavior problems and offenders in their youth (National Crime Prevention Council, 1996). Poor school performance is the best predictor of future criminal involvement – only 12 of 540 adults sentenced to prison in Manitoba in 1995 finished high school (Carson, 1996).

When considering the overall state of affairs, we’re reminded of the words of an old commercial: “Pay me now, or pay me later.” Thinking it better to prevent than to lament, we decided long ago to attempt to make a difference by focusing on the at-risk domain. The literature, and our own work in a variety of settings, convinced us that there is an abundance of untapped potential out there, and far too many young people falling through the cracks, as it were. Due to lack of opportunity, it appears many “diamonds” are destined to remain “in the rough” unless we can begin to intervene in a productive way. Creative Problem Solving (CPS) has provided one mechanism for doing precisely that.

Planning with CPS

“One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child.” Carl Jung (1943), The Gifted Child

Actually, in the beginning, we saw Creative Problem Solving more as a planning tool to help introduce systemic change. And assuredly, it served that role nicely. In a volume entitled Lost Prizes (McCluskey, Baker, O’Hagan, & Treffinger, 1995), some of us, along with colleagues affiliated with a number of different programs, offered articles which dealt with employing CPS to help plan and develop (1) a support facility for at-risk children and youth, (2) a summer institute for Sikh youngsters in our community, and (3) a learning assistance center for Native Canadian students arriving in our schools from the north. As well, one district took its employees through a long-term CPS experience to improve communication, cooperation, and collaboration among trustees, senior administration, teachers, and other personnel. Without intending to go too far down this particular road, we do feel it is important to give some sense for the broad impact that planning with CPS has had in our part of the world. To that end, we’ll review one of the other projects discussed in the Lost Prizes anthology in more depth.

BEST Beginnings

BEST (an acronym for Beausejour Elementary School Team) Beginnings, a program described in a chapter by O’Hagan, Tymko, Timgren, McCluskey, and Baker (1995), was born at a “breakfast club” meeting, not unlike those held by educators the world over. Between bites of toast and sips of coffee, administrators and special educators in Agassiz School Division in Manitoba voiced opinions (argued), churned out ideas, and jotted down possibilities on serviettes. Basically, impromptu brainstorming – considering how best to reach some hitherto unreachable children and their parents – was underway. Soon the serviettes and other scraps of paper littered the table. The players got as far
as coming up with the problem statement: “How might we creatively attract parents of at-risk children into the school?” However, seemingly overwhelming issues and challenges just kept on surfacing, until the process bogged down in a morass of confusion.

If truth be told, at that point the educators involved had only been exposed to a brief glimpse of Creative Problem Solving at a regional conference. Recognizing the need to step back, consider options, and learn more, they embarked on a professional development path designed to add CPS to their repertoires. After a variety of training sessions at home and further afield, they revisited the problem. Here is not the place to reexamine the entire exercise: suffice it to say that staff – recognizing family dynamics and poverty as major risk factors – decided to address four main areas: (1) parent-child interactions, (2) literacy levels of parents and children, (3) development of parental skills, and (4) parent employability.

Armed with new CPS strategies, the team went on to create a do-able project designed to offer concrete support to at-risk children and their families. BEST Beginnings, in its final form, featured an integrated approach (where parents and children learned together), academic skill-building for parents, and meaningful short-term employment for parents in the school (Tymko & O’Hagan, 1993). More specifically, parents were (1) provided with academic upgrading via computer-assisted learning; (2) hired in the school to fill visible and significant roles (e.g., tutoring, office duties, lunch or recess supervision, library work, and making teaching materials); and (3) encouraged to read to their children at home, and to spend more time with them in community restaurants, theaters, and recreational centers. Since one of the main goals was to raise literacy levels and academic performance in general, parents also worked (on prearranged learning activities) with their own children in the classroom for several hours per day, four days per week.

The evaluative data, presented in detail elsewhere (Timgren, McCluskey, & Baker, 1994), made it clear that this CPS-generated project had a tremendous impact. Parents, once suspicious and fearful of school due to aversive experiences in their own pasts, became comfortable in the educational setting. Not surprisingly, their academic skills shot up markedly. And the children, more excited about learning once their parents had become involved, improved their grades significantly. One finding in particular was an eye-opener: for the vast majority of the 25 students (grades 1 through 7) in the first phase of the program, there was a substantial increase in home reading time. At the onset of BEST, parents read with their children only .36 times per week on average; 17 months later, the mean number of weekly parent-child reading sessions had risen to 4.12.

Academic growth resulted. After a six-month period, educators – using pre- and post-test scores from the J. Johns’ (1988) Basic Reading Inventory, noted dramatic improvement in word knowledge for almost all students. The same instrument also showed pronounced gains in reading comprehension. Even after allowing for the maturational and educational growth that would have been expected with the passage of time (by subtracting one-half year from each of the student’s grade scores), a within-subject analysis of variance performed on these data yielded a significant treatment effect (F = 49.1, df = 1, p < .01).

Incidentally, there also appeared to be concomitant improvement in student self-concept, with mean scores on the Coopersmith Inventory (Coopersmith, 1986) rising
12.26 points during the life of the program. Behavioral incidents – such as outbursts, fighting, and detentions – dropped off noticeably. Yet another spin-off was the organization of intensive professional development in the at-risk realm for teachers. Training for all school staffs in CPS was part of this process, and that soon turned out to have positive ramifications for the district as a whole. With all the successes, it was only natural that variations of the BEST Beginnings project eventually started up in a second Manitoba district, and in schools in our neighboring province of Saskatchewan.

Doing with CPS

“You must train the children to their studies in a playful manner, and without any air of constraint, with the further object of discerning more readily the natural bent of their respective characters.” Plato as quoted by Socrates, The Republic, Book 7, Section 537

About the time CPS was being used to help plan BEST Beginnings and other projects, some members of our team were asked to tackle an intervention program with Native Canadian inmates in our provincial prison system. Given the plight of our indigenous people and the state of our jails, that proposition was about as “at-risky” as it gets. In any case, it occurred to us that those who “make it” in today’s world tend to arrive at decisions by considering the social-cultural context, selecting wisely from among possibilities, and responding in ways that meet their own needs and fit within prevailing norms. Perhaps inmates, many of whom continually re-offend, might not be as adept in terms of that sort of problem solving. Since CPS had proven so effective in helping us in our planning, we wondered if it could be used to assist this population to evaluate situations, consider alternatives, and reach pragmatic solutions. In fact, might it not be employed as an instrument to help a variety of so-called at-risk individuals make more reasoned educational, career, and life decisions? Deciding to put these questions to the test, we made CPS a pivotal intervention tool in a number of our home-grown at-risk projects, several of which are reviewed in the following sections. The same facilitator, the fourth author, did the direct work with participants in all the programs.

Second Chance

At the time we were approached by Human Resources Development Canada to design and deliver what became known as the Second Chance project, it had been determined that each inmate cost Canadian taxpayers $51,047 annually (Corrections Services, 1991). The situation was exacerbated by the fact that criminal acts tend to be repeated – a disproportionately large number of prisoners have had previous convictions. Gendreau, Madden, and Leipciger (1977) found that 65.6% of inmates in our country re-offended, and Canfield and Drinnan (1991) pointed out that recidivism rates are higher for Aboriginal populations. A point of clarification here: in Canada, the term Aboriginal is used to refer to Native “First Nations” people, the Inuit, or the Métis (whose lineage is mixed – often Native and French Canadian).
In-depth descriptions of Second Chance, which ran from July 1992 through February 1993, have been offered in several earlier publications (McCluskey, Place, McCluskey, & Treffinger, 1998; Place & McCluskey, 1995; Place, McCluskey, McCluskey, & Treffinger, 2000). To review briefly, the project provided pre-release support – in the form of Creative Problem Solving training, career awareness, and work experience – to Native Canadians incarcerated in Manitoba jails for drug offenses, fraud, break and entry, assault, physical or sexual abuse, or even murder (as a juvenile). Many had previous convictions. The 31 inmates (27 male; 4 female) – in treatment groups of 16 and 15 – took part in an 11-week “life skills” classroom component, followed by a four-week supervised job placement. One early week of the in-class segment was devoted specifically to CPS, and then the tools learned were interwoven and practiced in later sessions dealing with anger management, conflict resolution, learning styles, peer pressure, relationship-building, self-fulfilling prophecy, verbal and nonverbal communication, and career exploration (via interest inventories, resumé writing, interview simulations, and job searches).

At the time, we naturally used the first edition of Creative Problem Solving: An Introduction (Treffinger & Isaksen, 1992), and following the Creative Learning Model therein began teaching the inmates CPS strategies in singularly direct fashion. Our aim was to help the participants to develop their problem solving abilities and then, gradually, to apply these tools to their own life situations. Initially, thinking it would be the simplest and most efficient teaching guide, we stuck closely to the linear model outlined in Figure 1 - we assume most of the readers of this monograph will be intimately acquainted with this framework.

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Figure 1. Linear View of CPS Components and Stages
(Treffinger & Isaksen, 1992)
The approach worked relatively well, but we weren't entirely satisfied. Members of our first group began to assert, as others have done in later work (Isaksen, Dorval, & Treffinger, 1994), that life isn't merely a “marble drop”, where problems are magically solved by applying easy-to-follow, step-by-step formulae. Fortuitously remembering the make-up of our target population and the Native emphasis on circular world views, we changed gears abruptly. Since sharing circles and models such as the Circle of Courage (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990) seem to be preferred by our Aboriginal community, it only made sense to shift toward the circular representation of the CPS process shown in Figure 2. That simple change made a radical difference – things hummed along nicely from that point.

![CPS Framework Diagram]

**Figure 2.** Circular View of CPS Components and Stages (Treffinger, Isaksen, & Dorval, 1995, 2000)

As in all our CPS training programs, we strove to help the participants in question develop a creative climate, use their own problem-solving styles effectively, learn to differentiate between creative and critical thinking, and build personal “tool boxes” of practical techniques. By training's end, the emphasis had moved toward dealing with relevant issues, generating workable ideas, and taking meaningful action. The job placement portion of the project offered all individuals a chance to practice their newfound skills in an authentic, real-life context.

To put it succinctly, our mission was successful. After individuals in our two Second Chance groups had “done their time”, completed the program, and been released into society, they were monitored for a year to see if they would “go straight” or run afoul of the law once more. Simultaneously, members of a matched group of Native Canadian offenders – from the same home reserves as our participants – were monitored over the same period. People in this control group, however, were simply
warehoused through the correctional system in the traditional manner, and left to fend for themselves upon release. That is, unlike their Second Chance counterparts, they received no pre-release support whatsoever. The recidivism rates for the control group and the two Second Chance groups are compared in Figure 3.

This schematic makes it abundantly clear that the project had a prodigious impact. Recidivism during the follow-up year was 90.32% (28 of 31) for the unsupported control group, but only 38.71% (12 of 31) for our “second chancers”. While the distressingly high rate of re-offending in the non-treated condition is an indictment of our present judicial and penal systems, the results suggest that promising alternatives – featuring a combination of CPS, career awareness, and work experience – are worthy of serious consideration.

**Lost Prizes**

Picking up on the successes and lessons learned in previous work, three Manitoba school districts – Agassiz, Interlake, and Lord Selkirk – began the joint Lost Prizes venture to “recapture” at-risk, high-ability school dropouts. Despite their talents, these young people had been lost to the system: they had left (or been “asked” to leave) school and were basically “going nowhere”. At best, they were accomplishing little; at worst, they were in serious trouble with the law. The intent was to reconnect with these troubled youth, awaken dormant creative potential, and encourage thoughtful and productive action on their part.
Over the years, this flexible, off-site program has been described thoroughly (cf. McCluskey, Baker, O'Hagan, & Treffinger, 1995, 1998; McCluskey, McCluskey, Baker, & O'Hagan, 1996, 1997). Similar in many respects to Second Chance, it too featured Creative Problem Solving, career exploration, and work experience/mentoring. Supported by a grant from Manitoba Education and Training, Lost Prizes ran from September 1993 to June 1996. During that period, 88 students participated. Each year, using Feldhusen's (1995) Talent Identification and Development in Education (TIDE) model, educators in the three jurisdictions identified dropouts who had displayed talent in the domains shown in Figure 4.

![Talent Identification and Development in Education](image)

**Figure 4.** Talent Identification and Development in Education (Feldhusen, 1995)

The project ran separately, for two months per year, in each of the districts. From the outset, the majority of students let it be known that they were decidedly reluctant to return to their high schools – too many unpalatable things had happened to them there. Therefore, during the month-long first phase of the program, our facilitator – along with many invited resource people – delivered the information sessions, career exploration curriculum, and CPS training in rented premises away from the schools.

This time around, using the approach outlined in Figure 5, we placed much more importance on the need for the re-engaged young men and women to consider how to move from their “current reality” to a “desired future state” (Treffinger, Isaksen, & Dorval, 1994). Individual Growth Plans were mapped out to help each “prize” identify and work toward goals (Feldhusen, 1995). Gradually, the emphasis shifted to real-life problems, generating more and better alternatives, and moving good ideas into action plans. Throughout the in-class segment, there was plenty of opportunity to practice and develop the skills involved. Students completing this part of the program earned one high-school credit.
One word of caution. With our first group, we made the mistake of preparing only one Growth Plan per participant: there ended up being several disappointed young people who did not achieve instant success on their chosen path. Learning from experience not to put all our eggs in one basket, in all subsequent groups we urged the “lost prizes” to develop multiple plans. Each student learned to ask: If my first plan doesn’t work, what might I try next? And after that? Single plans usually did not do the trick, but having two or three fall-back positions worked like a charm.

Phase two of the program, again a one-month job placement (that matched student interests to the employment site), allowed the young men and women to gain experience in the world of work. Quite clearly, they benefited from the opportunity to encounter and address some real-life problems with the help of caring partners in the business community. Using prescribed guidelines, these workplace hosts – along with the facilitator – monitored performance. Students faring satisfactorily in the workplace received a second credit.

Entrepreneurs in the respective regions were eager to provide training grounds for the refocusing youth. In truth, the business partners were not expected to offer a traditional work placement as such, but rather to serve as “philanthropic mentors” to guide and support the students in a concrete way. Most, working cooperatively with the school systems, bonded with, went that extra mile for, and virtually “adopted” their students. By the way, one ingredient that helped establish a firm foundation for Lost Prizes was the in-depth training put in place for many of the business partners and educators. During this and related programs, several of the “names” in the fields of Creative Problem Solving, talent development, and mentoring (i.e., Dorval, Feldhusen, Isaksen, Noller, Renzulli, Treffinger, and others) visited Manitoba to conduct intensive workshop sessions.

Not every one of the participants blossomed: they were, after all, chosen from a seriously at-risk population. A total of 21 young people, uninterested or overwhelmed...
by further troubles of one kind or another (e.g., run-ins with the law, family break-ups, pregnancy, illness, and so on), withdrew without completing even the first credit. And 10 others (who had earned at least one credit) moved and were impossible to track. Nonetheless, as a result of Lost Prizes, many formerly disenchanted, disillusioned, and disconnected dropouts did respond by “getting their acts together” in dramatic fashion (once their talents were identified, appreciated, and nurtured). A 1998 “current status” review of successful participants – summarized in Table 1 – showed that 24 entered the work force and obtained permanent, full-time employment (4 of these graduated, and 2 were self-employed), 18 returned to school and were performing solidly, 9 had just graduated from high school, and 6 more went on to university or community college after completing grade 12. Of the 88 at-risk dropouts who were enrolled in Lost Prizes, then, 57 (or 64.77%) ended up returning to high school, entering post-secondary programs, or securing employment (McCluskey, Baker, O’Hagan, & Treffinger, 1998).

Table 1. Number of Lost Prizes Students in Each “Current Status” Category

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returned to and performing well in high school</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just graduated from high school</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated &amp; attending college or university</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrew</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>41</strong></td>
<td><strong>23</strong></td>
<td><strong>24</strong></td>
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Perhaps the highlight of the project occurred in November 1995, when seven of the “prizes” with very visible talents were invited to speak at the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) Conference in Tampa. I imagine the excitement of young people, most of whom had never left the province, on the plane to Florida. I imagine the trepidation of the adult supervisors, traveling with and responsible for several known drug users with checkered pasts. Happily, the former problem students – determined to make the most of the opportunity – all behaved in an exemplary manner. During the session at the conference, each spoke briefly about troubled lives and suddenly promising futures. The poets recited, the photographer showed slides of his work, and the artists displayed their wares. And the band, formed just a couple of months before the big event, belted out original and powerful songs. The novice presenters took the proceedings seriously, rehearsed speeches and songs for hours, and bonded into a tightly-knit group. It was work, but great fun as well. (We’ll let those of you who know the McCluskeys guess whether or not the group made it to a few theme parks.) Five years later, the Lost Prizes travelers are all still close and supportive of one another.

Ryan Gauthier, one of the students, made a comment during the adventure that put everything into perspective. This talented young man had come a long way, moving
from incarcerated delinquent (doing time regularly for drug possession, robbery, break and entry, and assault) to aspiring artist. Ryan’s intriguing story has been chronicled in the article, From Down-and-Out to Up-and-Coming (Gauthier, 1999). After the NAGC session, members of the audience began offering rather exorbitant amounts (in US dollars – gold to Canadians) for his sketches and paintings. Swamped by positive attention, compliments, and hard cash, Ryan – in the midst of signing copies of the newly-released Lost Prizes book (which featured his cover art) – exclaimed excitedly: “This is a bigger high than drugs”. That sentiment really sums up the program.

Not long after the NAGC experience, the Lost Prizes project became the stimulus for another productive partnership. Building upon the project philosophy and outcomes, three school districts (Agassiz, Evergreen, and Lord Selkirk) and The University of Winnipeg planned and launched Dream Quest: An International Conference on Talent Development. Hosted by the University, this popular event for Manitoba educators continues to focus on nurturing the potential of all populations, including those most at risk. At the first Dream Quest, of course, the Lost Prizes students made another, highly-acclaimed appearance.

Northern Lights

There is widespread concern in Manitoba that one particular segment of our population is, in many ways, being marginalized. Disturbing facts abound: half of Aboriginal young people live in poverty; the death rate of Aboriginal infants and children is four times higher than the provincial average; the suicide rate among Aboriginal teens is six times higher; almost three quarters of youth housed in correctional facilities are Aboriginal; and alcoholism and violence surface in 80% of the families in some Aboriginal communities. As the agency that gathered this information concludes, Aboriginal children and youth in our province are clearly at greater risk than non-Aboriginals for “not becoming healthy, competent, productive, and happy adults” (Children and Youth Secretariat, 1997, p. 23).

Not unexpectedly, there are educational consequences. Data from the Census Division for the city of Winnipeg (our capital of some 600,000 inhabitants) showed that in 1996, 50.3% of Aboriginal youth dropped out of school, compared to 19.5% for non-Aboriginals (Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 1999).

On the larger North American stage, some researchers assert that the abundant talent of Native students is being left largely untapped. In their comprehensive report, for example, Callahan & McIntire (1994, p. v) indicates that, more often than not, capable Native students are given little opportunity to hone emerging skills. In fact, their potential often goes entirely unnoticed: “Even as musical ability is not developed and recognized without the opportunity to experience music, distinguished cognitive ability will not develop and materialize without the opportunity to engage in challenging intellectual activities.” To further bring home the point, although participation in gifted/talented programs averages 8.8% nationally in American schools, Native involvement is only 2.1% (U.S. Department of Education, 1991).

Although they have long struggled to address the issue, educators in the Lost Prizes
zone (i.e., the Agassiz, Interlake, and Lord Selkirk districts) - like those in most regions of our country - have not been especially successful in meeting the needs and unlocking the talent of Aboriginal students. To illustrate, in one of the partnering districts, a longitudinal review of the academic histories of 23 Aboriginal youngsters who entered in kindergarten revealed that only one graduated from high school. In another, only one of 25 Aboriginal students who left their reserves to attend high school made it all the way through the system.

Thinking that perhaps an overemphasis on “problems” had caused us to miss out on some strengths and opportunities, Agassiz, Interlake, and Lord Selkirk followed up on Lost Prizes by putting in place a similar proactive, positive program aimed directly at underachieving Aboriginal students. Northern Lights, which ran from September 1996 until June 1999, got off to a rather shaky beginning, but eventually it too made a real difference. In other articles, the project has been described both in general terms (McCluskey, McCluskey, Baker, & O’Hagan, 1997) and in considerable detail (McCluskey, O’Hagan, Baker, & Richard, in press).

Since it didn’t appear to be “broke”, we at first saw no need to adjust our format. Supported once more through funding from Manitoba Education and Training, Northern Lights started out being almost identical to Lost Prizes. The Aboriginal participants, despite exhibiting specific talents, had left or were about to be removed from school for attendance, behavioral, or academic reasons. Of the 58 young people selected over the three-year time period, 34 (58.62%) were Métis, while the remaining 24 (41.38%) were status Native. In each district, training and support were once again provided through in-class sessions and work experiences, each four weeks in duration. And again, students were given a credit for completing each segment.

Much to our surprise and discomfort, the program encountered immediate and severe growing pains. We may have become unrealistically sanguine in the planning stage due to the fact that previous projects had always gone relatively smoothly. As well, working effectively with an at-risk Native population in Second Chance likely lulled us into a false sense of security. That undertaking was different, however, in that the participants were quite literally part of a captive audience. In contrast, recalcitrant adolescents in Northern Lights could simply get up and walk out; and many did! Further, we had misread a number of other variables, including the extent of the drug and alcohol abuse, the influence of ever-recruiting youth gangs, and the fact that even the seriously-minded students in the group had limited experience with sitting, listening, and attending to “academic” material. Many of the teens also felt the need for more emphasis to be placed upon retention of cultural heritage and identity (cf. Callahan & McIntire, 1994).

It became self-evident that some fine-tuning was in order, so we adjusted on the fly, so to speak. Of Métis descent herself, the facilitator sought ways to increase the cultural content during in-class sessions. More of the day was devoted to discussing personal problems, dealing with group concerns, and fitting in the sacrosanct “smoke breaks”. In effect, much more time and energy were spent – in true CPS fashion – tackling real-life issues. Because so many of the youth were “crying out” for mentoring support, the work experience phase was also increased from four to five weeks.

From a systems perspective, the school districts also made major adjustments. One freed up a psychologist to oversee the goings-on and strengthen communication
among students, teachers, parents, and workplace mentors. Another brought their Aboriginal social worker directly into the project, such that he became partly responsible for choosing and counseling students, reaching out to the families, and connecting with the First Nations community. The third actually hired their own Aboriginal social worker and educational assistant to help develop growth plans, support students and their parents, and monitor work placements. And all the districts began to tie Northern Lights participants more closely to local intervention centers offering academic tutoring, computer-assisted learning, and specific enrichment programs.

Since the “current status” of work-in-progress youth can change very quickly, it would be a mistake to attempt to draw definitive conclusions only slightly more than a year after the program’s end. In all, 58 Aboriginal students (34 male; 24 female) – the majority between 16 and 18 years of age – began the in-class session. Looking at the downside first, of the original group, 8 dropped out the moment the project started. Recent monitoring of the 50 students who finished one or two credits indicated that 10 have had unhappy life experiences since Northern Lights drew to a close: 4 are out of school, without work, and floating aimlessly, 1 is receiving treatment for mental health concerns, 1 has developed a serious physical disability, 2 are now single mothers receiving social assistance, 1 is incarcerated in the provincial youth center, and, tragically, 1 has committed suicide.

Despite these unfortunate occurrences, however, overall initial outcomes have been encouraging. Table 2 shows the current status of the 40 remaining students who completed one or two credits. We were unable to track 2 of these individuals, but 38 have either returned to school, graduated, or found employment. With 38 of the original 58 young people responding positively at some level, it might be argued that the current success rate of the program stands at 65.52%. This general result wasn’t achieved easily, but it is similar to that of Lost Prizes. Whatever the precise number, there is no denying that several hitherto disenfranchised Aboriginal youth have experienced some measure of success due to the Northern Lights intervention.

Table 2. Number of Northern Lights Students in Each “Current Status” Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Returned to and coping in high school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending school and holding a part-time job</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in an adult education program</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 months or less from high school graduation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated from high school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part-time</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated and employed full-time</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated and in a post-secondary program</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prism

Three of the present writers have recently moved from the public schools to a university setting (following the lead of the third author, who had done the same several years earlier). Perhaps as a consequence, all of us take seriously the fact that Hunt (1987) thought it necessary to admonish university types to put away their “little professors”, to remember that in the beginning there was experience (not a blackboard), and to show proper respect for work done by caregivers in the field. In our Education Program at The University of Winnipeg, we are committed to getting into the community and working directly with educators, agency personnel, parents, and needy children and youth. Prism was our first university-based step in that direction.

The project itself was inspired by a study undertaken by Baum, Renzulli, and Hébert (1995). Rather than the traditional we’ll-cure-what-ails-you remedial approaches typically employed with students experiencing difficulties, these investigators decided to use Type III enrichment to try to reverse underachievement in talented school children. For those unfamiliar with Renzulli’s (1977) seminal work, the goal of Type III enrichment is to give students a chance to become actual investigators of relevant problems and bring their results to bear on real-life situations. In the Baum, Renzulli, and Hébert undertaking, some of the youngsters eventually built a rocket for launch, constructed a school planetarium, drew a cartoon strip for publication, wrote a choose-your-own-adventure book, or designed a prototype for a solar car. These are clearly higher order, Type III activities.

Figure 6. The Prism Metaphor for Reversing Underachievement
(Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1995)
Baum, Renzulli, and Hébert (1995) also offered the Prism Metaphor, pictured in Figure 6, to illustrate the impact of enrichment on underachievement. Just as a prism somehow converts nondescript white light into a magical array of colors, so can Type III enrichment – according to this thesis – move underachieving students toward productivity.

There is reason to believe that there might well be something to this optimistic view. In the original Prism Metaphor study, supported under the Javits Act Program, 12 trained enrichment teachers identified and guided 17 underachieving gifted students – aged 8 through 13 – through a Type III experience. For one academic year in most cases, the educators acted as research facilitators and worked closely with the children on enrichment investigations. Using the constant comparative inductive method to code and analyze data gleaned from logs, interviews, and assorted documents (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967), Baum, Renzulli, and Hébert showed that students improved as a result of the Type III intervention. Summarizing parsimoniously, significant growth was the order of the day for almost all of the children. No differences in treatment effects were found between students in the elementary and secondary grades. A more thorough description of the methodology, results, and analysis is, of course, available in the original report (Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1995).

In a recent article, some additional thought has been given to extending the paradigm beyond the narrow gifted spectrum to include talent development for other at-risk populations (Renzulli, Baum, Hébert, & McCluskey, 1999). With funding support from Human Resources Development Canada, we decided to spearhead one of many moves from theory to practice at The University of Winnipeg by putting our own version of Prism into place. The first author of this monograph designed the project, the second delivered several of the workshop sessions, the third coordinated and supported our teachers-in-training mentors, and the fourth worked directly with the participants in her facilitator role.

In our variation on the original theme, the participant group ended up being comprised of eight young adults – men and women in their late teens or early 20s – who had been identified as at-risk by various social agencies. Half were Aboriginal. Some possessed clearly identified talents; others did not. Most had not completed high school. As per usual, for one month, we provided workshops (building in ones on attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, time management, and organizational skills – concerns for several of the young people); career exploration, and intensive CPS training. As part of the individualized, Type III enrichment experience following the in-class phase, we hired several pre-service teachers from our university to act as mentors and enrichment-activity guides. This mentoring went on for another month. Since the project took place in a rural setting, considerable travel was involved. During regular “debriefing sessions”, members of our project team met with mentors to explore possible enrichment options, including apprenticeships, community projects, job shadowing, and our specialty – the formal, post-secondary education route.

In “action research” projects, particularly ones of this sort with a small and diverse client group, it is not easy to quantify successes. A variety of pre- and post-tests (using inventories measuring self-concept, career interests, life stresses, and so on) did not provide much in the way of tangible information in this instance. One instrument, however – administered almost as an afterthought – did yield some suggestive results.
For many decades now, Rotter (1966, 1973, 1975), Nowicki and Strickland (1973), and others have created and worked with questionnaires to measure locus of control. Taking their theoretical perspective, individuals with what is termed an internal locus of control believe, to a very large extent, that they are in charge of their own destinies. In contrast, those with an external locus of control feel that their futures will be determined predominantly by fate – life is, to them, essentially a crap shoot. It has been argued, quite convincingly as it turns out, that internally-directed people are likely to be more independent and better able to plan ahead than their more external counterparts. It has even been suggested that internal locus of control folk are less likely to smoke, and much more likely to buckle their seat belts in cars, resist peer pressure, and practice birth control (cf. Myers, 1987).

As part of our pre- and post-testing in Prism, we had our participants complete Nowicki and Strickland’s “Locus of Control Scale”, reproduced and reviewed in Aero and Weiner’s (1981) manual. The 40-item, yes-no instrument includes questions such as: “Do you believe that most problems will solve themselves if you just don’t fool with them?”, “Are some people just born lucky?”, “Do you believe that if somebody studies hard enough he or she can pass any subject?”, and “Do you think it’s better to be smart than to be lucky?” A low score on this questionnaire indicates an internal locus of control, and vice versa.

Interestingly, among our Prism participants, locus of control scores went down after the two-month intervention. Table 3 shows that while the responses and magnitude of the difference varied markedly from person to person, in every case participants scored lower (i.e., toward the more internal, independent direction) following the combined in-class, intensive CPS, mentoring “treatment”. When a non-independent two-tailed t-test was applied to these data, that difference was found to be significant (t = 3.719, df = 7, p < .01). Again, given the small N and other confounding variables, it wouldn’t do to jump to conclusions here. Still, the trend might cause one to speculate that this type of intervention just may build resilience in at-risk individuals by helping them to become more self-assured and inner-directed. As so many graduate students say in their dissertations, additional research is required to examine this possibility more thoroughly.

### Table 3. Pre- and Post-test Locus of Control Scores of Prism Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
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</tr>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean 17.5 13.0
From where we now sit, however, data are not just numbers. Words, opinions, and personal observations can tell us a great deal about “what went down” in any particular program. With that in mind, we will offer the words of two of our pre-service teachers as they comment about their mentoring experiences (Bergsgaard, Land, & Myles, in press). Even though we have permission from all parties to use this material, the names of the “mentees” have been changed to protect confidentiality as much as possible.

One mentor, Elizabeth Myles, put it this way:

My first insight into “Meghan” came through a brief autobiographical sketch. ... The profile presented was that of a teenage mom living in an abusive relationship, a high school dropout, and former foster child. ... She wanted to be heard. She laid her life story before me, chapter by chapter. ... Within a matter of hours, I felt a strong connection to Meghan. The genuine baring of her soul, willingness to accept me as her mentor, and keenness to proceed with the setting of both academic and personal goals impressed me. ... Before entering the Prism program she was floating aimlessly, and feeling hopelessly stuck in a rut.

Meghan required not only an academic component, but also a plan for her social and emotional development. She was desperate to have someone hear her, and accept her with her flaws and bruises. ... It seemed that every week there was a different man in her life. ... She wanted to be nurtured and loved. ... Meghan had spent years breaking rules as a cry for help and attention. Instead of being heard with concern and understanding, her pleas had been met with discipline and punishment. In hindsight, I feel Meghan fell through the cracks of our society. ... My role became that of an active listener; someone who could mirror back her feelings with the conviction that they were legitimate.

During the mentoring process, Meghan practiced driving and obtained her beginner’s permit. This not only gave her a new sense of freedom, but also allowed her to feel success for the first time in a long while. ... To address her academic needs, we reviewed her past school records and agreed that there was a need to continue from grade 10 and concentrate on full-time studies at the Adult Education Center. Through many discussions and exploring career information, Meghan decided she wanted to become a legal secretary. I obtained information from several community and private colleges to give to Meghan. Her career goal was now becoming more specific: continue working toward her high school diploma and, upon successful completion, register in the legal secretary course at a private college. Meghan registered for three of her six required grade 12 credits for her high school diploma (and eventually graduated). She reported daily to the Center to work on her courses in law, family studies, and mathematics. She also met with me every two weeks to discuss social and emotional issues and work through academic challenges. For Meghan, both pieces of the puzzle needed to fit for success.

My fear was that although the seed for learning had been successfully planted, Meghan would easily slip back into her old life style and lose focus without continued social and emotional support. ... Rome wasn’t built in a day; it will take time and support for her to be successful in reaching her goals.

“Meghan”, in conversation, reported that:
I have a new purpose in life. I'm feeling a sense of accomplishment in finishing high school, and I'm looking forward to taking the legal secretary course. I think I can do it. I know there will be some problems to work through, but I believe I am ready to handle them now.

Ryan Land, another mentor, wrote in his log:

“Evan” (a capable but bitter, 19-year-old from an unsettled home situation) was angry at the school system which he believed had failed and, ultimately, expelled him; he seemed to be in perpetual conflict with certain people.

I found myself asking a number of questions at the time. How might I give Evan the academic and inspirational nudge he needs in order to move beyond secondary education? How can I begin to encourage him to believe that he is capable and deserving of the pursuit of his goals, whatever they may be? And finally, how will it be possible for me to convince him to avoid dwelling on his losses, in order to get him motivated to achieve success, without denying him the feelings that I know little or nothing about? ... I've resisted his subtle attempts at confrontation by asking him to take very small risks in the beginning, so that they did not seem like risks to him at all.

Evan's exposure to Creative Problem Solving was useful. It gave him the ability and confidence to contribute to his future rather than watching events and people (including me) "happen" to him. He slowly got into the habit of being proactive in the face of adversity, rather than constantly perceiving himself as victim. ... When he was provisionally accepted at university, Evan's grin was wrapped almost completely around his head. ... I am pleased to be able to add that Evan met his commitment and is currently studying at the University (he eventually completed an Education course with flying colors). Evan ... made an impressive and measurable beginning in the attempt to reverse his underachievement, though it is not possible to say for certain who "mentored" whom. And I like that.

“Evan” also wrote some comments, working them - entirely of his own volition - into a university exam and a term paper.

I spoke (to my mentor). This was the beginning of what I consider an important relationship in my life. ... It was a great feeling for me to know that someone believed in my abilities, and would help me along the way. I feel it's one thing to tell someone that he has the potential for greater things, but it's another to actually get in there and help. ... Ryan and I seemed to connect the very first time we met. We had similar interests ... and his "never say never" attitude was refreshing. He is one of the most compassionate people that I have ever met. ... Ryan was very supportive throughout my whole ordeal (a drinking and driving charge during the project), and he helped me keep a somewhat positive outlook on things. I eventually worked things out, but I don't think - actually, I'm pretty sure - that I couldn't have done it without Ryan's help. ... When I had to go write my school tests, nearly a month after Prism had concluded, Ryan was kind enough to pick me up, let me stay at his house, and take me back home. I have family members who wouldn't do this (and other things) for me, yet Ryan had no problem with it.
Prior to my involvement in the project, I was heavily into drugs and alcohol – I was headed for destruction. As a participant in Prism, I went from high school dropout to university student in one year. ... The educational system is not adequate for at-risk students. The curriculum is sometimes boring. The attendance policies are too strict and the teachers aren’t usually very supportive of at-risk students. ... Type III enrichment really opens the door for a variety of options. The main focus of the Type III intervention was on mentoring. I personally found this experience to be wonderful, as my mentor opened my eyes to all the possibilities I could have, either through his expression of his own life experiences or through simple things that I’m sure most kind people do everyday. ... I ended up in a totally new group of peers. ... The attitude change I went through in a mere couple of weeks might be considered amazing, as I feel I was once a lost cause. I am now enjoying everything I can, even things I never liked before.

The Creative Problem Solving training was a different experience, to say the least – it was wonderful having such an energetic person instructing the class. CPS teaches valuable lessons, not only for at-risk children and youth, but for non-at-risk as well. I found that participation in the CPS process left me equipped to make better decisions, determined to continue my education, and eager to prove to myself and others that I could make it.

Now my path to nowhere in society has taken a complete turn, from high school dropout to university hopeful. It all seemed to happen so fast that, in hindsight, I never really had a chance to reflect on what was going on. Like so many at-risk students, I knew myself that the potential was there; it just needed to be tapped. Prism did that for me.

In reality, in-the-trenches projects rarely go the way they’re supposed to go. Indeed, carefully laid plans very often end up giving way to seat-of-the-pants adaptations. Certainly, there were all sorts of shortcomings with this project. For one reason or another, far fewer young people participated than had been targeted originally. The academic abilities and experiences of the group were also much more varied than had been anticipated at the outset. And, due both to our inexperience and an unavoidable time squeeze, the mentors weren’t sufficiently prepared for the challenge confronting them. Be that as it may, after hearing and reading feedback from the mentors and mentees, we are convinced that Prism has made a genuine difference in the lives of many of them. As Martha Stewart would say, “That’s a good thing.”

MARS and Other Planets

“We teachers can only help the work going on, as servants wait upon a master.” Maria Montessori (1949), The Absorbent Mind

Without wishing to sound insufferably pleased with ourselves, we’ve always felt a sense of accomplishment whenever we look back upon past projects. However, looking back has also caused concern about one major issue – sustainability. The pattern has been clear: ideas are generated; funding is obtained; projects start up; good things
happen; positive outcomes are measured and shared; funding runs out; projects die. The question naturally becomes, “How might we have a more enduring impact?”

We’ve learned through experience that some elements of our programs are “musts”, pure and simple. CPS training, for one, is an obvious “keeper”. Prism taught us that mentoring too has some exciting possibilities for reclaiming at-risk populations. However, feeling that we had fallen somewhat into the mentoring-without-thinking trap in that endeavor, we decided to backtrack and define terms and goals more carefully. The term mentoring truly is bandied about indiscriminately in the media and in the professional literature, to the point where many well-intentioned initiatives become loose, unfocused, and less effective than first envisioned. There is need for clarification (Treffinger, 2000).

Torrance (1984, p. 2) has suggested that “A mentor is a creatively productive person who teaches, counsels, and inspires a student with similar interests. The relationship is characterized by mutual caring, depth, and response.” This refreshing definition has many interesting components: it emphasizes the relationship, the high expectations of the commitment, and the two-way nature of the connection. Our view that a mentor ought to become a “talent spotter” fits nicely into this conceptualization (McCluskey & Treffinger, 1998). Daloz (1986) stated that a mentor should be a guide, rather than a tour director, who offers support through advocacy, listening, sharing, establishing structure, emphasizing strengths, and making the experience positive. Kierkegaard, without using the term, captured the essence of the mentoring experience by observing that life is lived forward, but understood backward. And Grey Owl summed it up well when he noted that, “A mentor is a person whose hindsight can become your foresight.”

Like so many other terms, the word “mentoring” has come down to us from ancient Greek literature (Nash & Treffinger, 1993; Noller & Frey, 1995). It originated in Homer’s epic poem, The Odyssey, wherein Odysseus (Ulysses) – setting off for the Trojan wars – left his son Telemachus in the care of his trusted friend Mentor. To complicate matters in true Homeric style, Mentor eventually turned out to be the goddess Athena in disguise. Boston (1976), linking his argument to mythology, proposed that ideal mentoring should involve three crucial elements: (1) servicing other roles while entering into the relationship (Mentor did not allow himself to be simply a full-time babysitter); (2) becoming a conduit for the wisdom of others (Mentor, as the proverbial “guide on the side”, provided direction for Telemachus by channeling information to him from many other sources); and (3) building a long-term connection (Mentor continued to provide support as the boy grew to adulthood). It is worthwhile keeping these components in mind when developing a mentoring program.

There are other lessons to be learned from the foregoing attempts at definition: emphasize the quality of the relationship, expect creative productivity, and match mentors and mentees extremely carefully. Of course, informal, “spontaneous” mentoring often happens naturally (Noller & Frey, 1995) – unplanned connections can uncover and nurture talent in troubled individuals (cf. Brown, 1983; Seita, Mitchell, & Tobin, 1996). In other situations, relationships are definitely planned and systematic. Such “instrumental” mentoring tends, not unexpectedly, to be much more far-reaching than chance encounters (Noller & Frey, 1995). Several useful “how to” manuals focusing on topics like models, procedures, selection (of mentors and mentees), training, contracts, and evaluation have been developed to assist with designing and
carrying out formal mentoring programs (e.g., De Rosenroll, Saunders, & Carr, 1993; Haeger & Feldhusen, 1989; Nash & Treffinger, 1993). Other publications focus on mentoring to develop the talents of at-risk populations (McCluskey & Mays, in press), including economically-disadvantaged children from minority cultural groups (Torrance, Goff, & Satterfield, 1998). In their annotated bibliography, Noller and Frey (1994) give 36 examples where formal mentoring programs have been used to help various at-risk populations.

At California State University, Fresno, a large-scale initiative has been developed to support young, high-risk students (Meyer, 1997). In that program, pre-service teachers mentor needy elementary school children from local communities. In other words, mentoring is being used to help address issues of cultural diversity, parental neglect, poverty, transient lifestyles, and low academic achievement. What better training for pre-service teachers than to establish real relationships with at-risk children? And what a potentially important support for youngsters in desperate need of attention, understanding, and direction. Through this ongoing project, collegians work with the children in the schools - typically twice a week at day's end. The amount of person-power involved is considerable: by late 1997, there were 180 pre-service teachers in the program. Undoubtedly, several lives have been touched through this work.

Following this lead, and responding to The University of Winnipeg's mandate to address urban, inner city, and Aboriginal issues, we in the B.Ed. Program have recently introduced several mentoring projects of our own. General reviews of these programs are available (e.g., McCluskey, McCluskey, & Noller, in press), as well as more thorough discussions of the overall approach (McCluskey & McCluskey, 2000). In a forthcoming chapter, project outcomes are also considered in some detail (McCluskey & McCluskey, in press). Substantial funding from the provincial and federal arms of the Winnipeg Development Agreement and other sources has helped support many of the undertakings.

We believe that, for a number of reasons, The University of Winnipeg's mentoring efforts move far beyond those offered by most other agencies and academic institutions. For one thing, there are several committed faculty and staff - including a Mentoring Project Coordinator - who devote considerable time to the programs. As well, although mentors opt in altruistically (i.e., we select only from among those who express an interest), there are course requirements that remove some of the uncertainties that plague many volunteer operations. Most importantly, we have the advantage of drawing mentors from a population of pre-service teachers who have received considerable preparation for the task at hand. Since careful screening took place prior to their acceptance into the B.Ed. Program, the majority of these educators-to-be have solid academic ability to go along with their passionate desire to work with young people. And far from being neophytes in the university setting, our mentors - with several years of post-secondary training under their belts - already possess a broad repertoire of developing skills.

We've also upped the ante considerably by developing a third-year course, Issues with At-Risk Children and Youth, to introduce our education students to topics such as resilience, gangs and gang prevention, bullying, diversity, and the "Circle of Courage" (Brendtro, Brokenleg, Van Bockern, 1990). In the course, which now runs three times a year, the pre-service teachers also have an opportunity to learn about
Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) (Wood & Long, 1991), a strength-based technique that helps caregivers: (1) reframe problems as learning opportunities (i.e., shift from “crisis management” to “crisis teaching”), (2) redefine the conflict cycle (i.e., understand the triggers, reconsider the phases, and explore strategies for de-escalating aggression and counter-aggression), (3) decode the meaning of behavior, and (4) recover after a crisis.

It goes without saying that Creative Problem Solving figures in the mix as well. All students in the At-Risk course are given basic information about CPS, some of its tools, and its potential role in talent development (including the use of the current realities/desired futures approach outlined in Figure 5). Our university now offers, on a fairly regular basis, three-credit-hour courses devoted entirely to inner city issues, LSCI, and CPS. In our CPS Summer Institutes, students – including many of our mentors – are exposed to the newest, user-friendly models and terminology, and to other recent theoretical and practical developments in the field (Isaksen, 2000; Isaksen, Dorval, & Treffinger, 1998, 2000; McCluskey, 2000b; Noller, 1997; Treffinger, Isaksen, & Dorval, 2000; Treffinger & McCluskey, 1998).

The point is, of course, that our pre-service teachers are not just thrown willy-nilly into the breach: they bring relevant knowledge and talent to their mentoring relationships. Chosen from among the ranks of interested students who have completed the At-Risk course, these mentors take part in what is essentially a practicum providing the experiential link between theory and the real world. To sum up briefly, the pre-service teachers mentor for four hours or so per week for one university term. Very frequently, though, the experience gets extended: many mentors warm to their mentees, put in far more time each week than expected, and continue their involvement long after the practicum officially comes to an end. While the At-Risk course is run in fairly traditional fashion – with tests, term papers, and letter grades – the Mentoring Practicum itself is much more flexible. Mentors are connected with mentees on an as-needed basis, and meetings take place whenever it is most convenient for the individuals involved (including evenings and weekends). Since we didn’t want to take away from the focus on the relationship, pass-fail grades are assigned based upon “following through” and recording experiences in personal reaction logs. In their logs, mentors note down their objectives, action plans, strengths and needs of the mentee, supports and resources provided, successes, concerns, and possible follow-up issues. Contact hours, meeting times, and other observations are included as well.

MARS (Mentoring At-Risk Students) was our first kick at the can. Our partner in this venture is Winnipeg Native Alliance (WNA), an agency dedicated to reclaiming Aboriginal young people who have joined youth gangs or who are at risk for gang involvement. Its founder, Troy Rupert, is a study in resilience: he has come full circle, from life in Native gangs, multiple stints in the youth center, and “hard time” in federal penitentiary, to tireless community worker and director of a respected social agency. WNA maintains core programs in school outreach (geared to keeping high-risk youth in the educational system), urban sports camps (to facilitate access to recreational and spiritual activities), and institutional support (to provide help, guidance, and direction to youth while in custody and upon release). As an inner city agency facing formidable challenges, WNA is always on the lookout for more human and material resources. Our mentors, matched with needy mentees by the agency personnel, have been a tremendous help in reaching at-risk children and youth who otherwise might have been lost.
PLUTO (Please Let Us Take Off) was the second mentoring project. Similar in many ways to its predecessor, it targeted a part of our city that was once dubbed “Hell’s Half-Acre”. Although many good things have recently taken place in the neighborhood as a result of active community involvement, there remains a lot to be done. The University of Winnipeg, wanting to be part of the transformation, has made another cadre of our students available to area schools. This time around, the mentors are being chosen from Winnipeg Education Center (WEC), an off-campus “access” program created to give disadvantaged people from our inner city the opportunity to pursue a career in teaching. Part of our Bachelor of Education Program, more than 60% of the 80-plus WEC pre-service teachers are Aboriginal (and another 25% are from other minority groups). Coming from the inner city themselves, they are uniquely positioned – by virtue of background, past experience, and training – to meet the needs of at-risk youngsters.

We actually have several other projects up and running that also rely heavily on university mentors. These include VENUS (Versatility in Educating Non-attending Underachieving Students) – a tutoring program for at-risk adolescents developed in collaboration with a grade 7-12 inner city school; NEPTUNE (Nurturing Enrichment Programming Through University Networking and Empowerment) – where, after completing part of an Enrichment and Talent Development course, pre-service teachers guide talented students from a partnering district through Type III experiences; and SATURN (Storefront Activities To Unleash Resilience and Nurturing) – a vehicle to encourage and support inner city parents in developing literacy and other skills in their preschool children. This “storefront operation” has been set up in a rental housing complex beside one of our city’s most culturally-diverse elementary schools. We admit the planetary acronyms are a bit of a stretch, but – as we tell the funding agencies – as long as someone’s got the money, we’ve got the planets (even if we eventually have to move on to other solar systems).

With respect to data collection, it is not difficult to gather information concerning behavioral incidents, dropout rates, and school achievement of mentees. However, although our original intent was also to obtain precise pre- and post-test measures of self-concept, creativity, and the like, in the face of feedback from mentors – who insisted that any kind of formal testing of the mentees interfered with rapport-building – we abandoned the more grandiose plans in favor of relying primarily on the reaction logs, growth plans, and life accomplishments. Early indications (from our Mentoring Project Coordinator, who is beginning to pull everything together for analysis) are that this type of information will end up being very rich indeed.

In closing, mentoring through The University of Winnipeg provides tangible, meaningful support to large numbers of at-risk children and youth. It is difficult to imagine a youngster who would not benefit from a relationship with an empathic mentor, and, at present, we send out 70-80 pre-service teachers per annum. Since most of our current projects are sustainable, the waves of mentors will be available year after year. Although the emphasis is naturally upon the mentees, MARS, PLUTO, and so on (ad infinitum) also open up wonderful, authentic opportunities for pre-service teachers to experience the at-risk situation firsthand by getting into the real-world trenches. As such, everyone benefits from the approach (likened, by some colleagues, to a TELESCOPE – Teaching Effective Lessons to Every Student with Capabilities Overlooked by Popular Education).
A Final Word

We have welcomed this opportunity to review many of our projects of the past decade. Because they all were designed primarily as educational support programs, the main focus has always been on the action goal of making a difference, rather than with experimental rigor. Still, although it was never our intent to attempt to quantify so many uncontrolled and overlapping treatment variables, some interesting data has emerged. Surely, it is clear that the total package approach has generally had a positive impact, and that Creative Problem Solving has been an integral part of the process. Indeed, the CPS piece of the puzzle has become the cornerstone of much of what we do. When all is said and done, however, what really matters is that – as a result of programs featuring a combination of interventions – many formerly at-risk individuals have succeeded in turning their lives around.

“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.” Albert Einstein, Motto for the Astronomy Building of Junior College, Pasadena, California
References


The Creativity Research Unit draws upon an internationally-renown network of creativity researchers with expertise in topics such as the climate for creativity, organizational leadership, change and idea management, cognition, problem solving, personality and creativity development.

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