

# **Learning for Life: The outcome of an educational and motivational program for at-risk youths over a 7-year period.**

Barbara Vaughn Deodat  
Distance Education Department  
Institute of Distance and Continuing Education  
University of Guyana  
Email: barbara.deodat@uog.edu.gy

## **ABSTRACT**

This case study reports on the outcome of a seven-year multi-method structured program of social activities and innovative approaches in the development of non-formal skills for 46 at-risk youths, aged 11 to 15 years, from a low-income community in an urban area of Georgetown, Guyana. These youths were at risk for early sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, poor academic performance and dropping out of school.

It all began in 1996 when The Community Church for Better Living (a CBO) in a depressed urban community of the city explored ways to help at-risk youths in the immediate community. Assistance was sought from the Extra Mural arm of the University of Guyana and partnerships were forged with other organizations to provide support for this program. Youth members identified their learning needs and areas of interest and these were integrated into activities that built on one success at a time.

The program ended in 2003. By this time the 11-15 year old had become 18-22 year old and had by then taken on much of the responsibility for the program activities. In 2013, ten years later, the coordinator, having stayed in touch with many of the participants and followed their progress, found that a majority had achieved worthy careers as well as a sense of social responsibility. They have all attributed their achievements to this program's early intervention in their formative years and the many lessons they learnt from their involvement in it.

It is the author's view that the immediate and long-term positive outcome of this program has highlighted how lives of at-risk youths can be changed, molded and motivated with the right intervention, care and attention, at the right time. Such an initiative also underscores the on-going need for, and the importance of such programs for at-risk youths in poor communities.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 1990's in Guyana saw the advent of the "cane juice" parties, mostly in the urban areas, which became a major attraction for some teens and great concern for parents. The parties would take place on playgrounds or wide open spaces. Organizers built tents with cane stalks to give the party a "jungle" look. Cane juice, cane wine and marijuana were the highlights of the party, with ear-splitting music to spice things up. These parties were an excitement for some teens and contributed to an increase in risk-taking behaviours that had some adverse effects on their well-being. This included behaviours like youth violence, substance use, smoking, alcohol use, dating abuse, sexual risk behaviour and teenage pregnancy (which at that time, had increased significantly).

In addition to the fad of the time (cane juice parties), there were some other factors that contributed to some of the risky behaviours of young people, like poor parent-child relationship, little or no parental monitoring, and little or no family support. This sometimes contributed to poor academic performance that led to some youths dropping out of school.

In some instances, parents themselves engaged in risky behaviours, so the teens followed the example. Other variables such as poor neighbourhood quality, low socioeconomic status, and no relationship with older adults outside the family contributed to the risk for negative behaviours.

The Church body of the Community Church for Better Living was concerned about youths in their own urban community who were at-risk for alcohol and drug abuse, dating abuse, sexual risk behavior, teenage pregnancy, youth violence, poor academic performance and dropping out of school.

The Church sought assistance from the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education, the Extra Mural arm of the University of Guyana, to develop training programs that were helpful for the youths (and were certified by the Institute).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A literature review was undertaken at that time to find a suitable guiding model for the program. Since the focus was to provide support to reduce or remove the risk factors faced by the young people, a prevention approach was needed as a guide. The prevention approach had existed since the early 1900s according to Kumpfer, Molgaard, & Spoth, (1996), and was widely used in the youth development field, serving as the primary blueprint for drug, delinquency, violence, and adolescent pregnancy prevention programs. The prevention approach was also used as the foundation for youth initiatives, such as the Communities that Care program (Hawkins, Catalano, & Associates, 1992) and the Prevention Youth Development Model (Lofquist, 1983).

According to the literature, traditionally three types of prevention had been identified: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary prevention was concerned with preventing the initial occurrence of a problem within a normal population. Secondary prevention involved intervening with populations that showed signs of early problems so that more serious problems could be avoided. Tertiary prevention involved the reduction of a problem among a group of people who already were experiencing it (Bloom, 1996).

## **GETTING STARTED: HELPING AT-RISK YOUTHS TO PLAN THE WAY FORWARD**

A community meeting was held in the church to provide information about the plan to have a youth club for the youths in the community. Parental support was sought and a needs assessment was then conducted among the youths. Following the needs assessment, a meeting was held with youths (with parental permission) and parents (who could have attended). This meeting was the initiative to get the youths together to form a youth club. Out of this meeting the Inspiration Youth Club came into being. Drawing upon aspects of the traditional types of prevention, a multi-phase strategic plan, with multi-method structured programs was designed to provide integrated social activities and innovative non-formal skills for development.

### **Innovative Approaches**

Taking the three types of prevention into consideration, the program activities also included two key strategies in the prevention approach discussed by Durlak (1997) which were to (a) reduce or remove risk factors and increase or encourage protective factors, and (b) to enhance the strengths, skills, or capabilities of the youth members so that they were better able to cope with the pressure or challenges of future problems. Partnerships were then forged with other organizations (in, around and outside the community) to provide support for this youth program in keeping with the plan.

### **Livelihoods: Non-formal Skills Initiative**

Many of the young people in this urban area were not completing traditional schooling, and therefore had few if any good life choices ahead of them. They were youth at-risk who found themselves in various challenging social situations. They were not given correct career guidance in terms of subject choice or future study or employment opportunities; did not have access to resources; lacked self-esteem and

hope; and did not have good role models.

The structured programs addressed those needs – exposing the youths to different training modules – computer repairs, computer skills, tailoring, sewing, writing skills, reading skills, problem solving skills and others that were both needed and relevant.

The approach used with the forty-six youth members of the Inspiration Youth Club focussed on promoting normative youth development. The structured programs involved workshops, seminars, short interest based courses (during the out-of-school holidays) vocational and technical courses (some evenings of the week) and guest speakers who addressed topics of interest. There were educational tours, residential camps (holiday weekends and one week during August to have time together to discuss issues), drama sessions (addressing their own situations or concerns), interpretive dance (expressing their feelings about their issues and concerns), interactive and competitive activities with other youth groups. They were also involved in their own fund-raising activities and the development of their own youth club library.

### **Learning and development of “play” as a social and non-formal skill**

In order to achieve the goals of the program, the young people had to learn to play with each other and respect each other. This was the first innovative approach and a great challenge for the youth members and the program coordinator. Initially, when the program started, playing out-door games was one of the planned activities, but the team who lost would “wage a war” against the team who won and then it took some work to get things back to normal. Out-door games were then put on hold for a short time until other skills were developed.

Still focusing on “play” as a learning tool, indoor games were used as a “warm-up” activity before a youth club session or as a “wrap-up session” after a youth club activity, but not in a competitive way. Instead, the youth members were encouraged to play “mime” games, word games and mathematical games. These games generated much humour and the young people had fun while they became comfortable with the activities and with each other. The indoor games helped the group members to begin to develop positive social and emotional skills and values. It also helped to stimulate their intellectual development by challenging them to think quickly and correctly.

When it was evident that the youth members had become comfortable with each other, out-door games resumed. There were no more “wars” at the end of a game. Instead, there were praises from both teams for how each played, and friendships remained intact. This was the signal that the youth members were ready to work together and embrace new learning experiences.

### **Collaborating for technical and Vocational skills training**

The Community Church for Better Living (a registered CBO) collaborated with the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education, the Extra Mural arm of the University of Guyana, (which provides organized educational service for adults and youths, so as to equip and assist them to make a continuing and increased contribution to the economic, social and cultural development of the Guyanese society) to provide courses to meet the needs of the young people; to provide professional support for the delivery of these courses; and to certify these courses at their completion.

### **EDUCATIONAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT THROUGH OPEN, DISTANCE AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING (ODFL)**

The educational courses provided for the youth club members helped to support their school work and provided them with functional skills. Some of these were writing skills, reading skills, numeracy skills, problem solving skills and communication skills and were done in phases, starting at the most basic level and progressed at a pace that was comfortable for them. The educational support helped

them to improve their school work and provided the motivation for them to stay in school and graduate.

### **VOCATIONAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT THROUGH OPEN DISTANCE AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING (ODFL)**

Spread out over the seven-year period, some of the vocational courses the youth club members were taught were computer repairs and computer skills, tailoring and sewing (sewing included cushion and curtain making), hairdressing and barbering, woodwork and masonry, automotive service and repairs. These were done in phases, starting at the most basic level in the first year and progressed at a pace that was manageable to the youth members. Entrepreneurial skills training was later included, so that the youths could consider using their skills to generate an income from home, if they were so inclined.

#### **THE BENEFITS DERIVED FROM THE OPEN DISTANCE AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING APPROACH TO EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT**

There were clear advantages and strengths derived from Open, Distance and Flexible Learning. This approach engaged the young people in a community building process, going from an individualistic way of learning to a socially cohesive one. The lessons provided for the educational skills development were print-based and video recorded and the young people worked together – often in small groups - helping each other to learn. A tutor met with them once per month, but was available to answer questions by telephone at specified times. Tests were set for them when they indicated that they were ready for them.

The vocational skills were learnt both theoretically and practically. The theoretical information was also provided via print based materials and video recording. For the practical aspect, they were “apprenticed” to relevant organizations during the out of school period (by prior arrangement as part of the collaborative efforts). The same arrangement applied here as with the educational skills.

In addition to their school work, these activities kept the club members focused. They later admitted that they had great respect for the mode of study because it made them more disciplined: they had to develop the ability to balance their activities and be committed to meeting deadlines.

#### **Open Distance and Flexible Learning – a vehicle for empowerment and transformation**

The greatest benefits the young people derived from Open Distance and Flexible Learning were their empowerment and transformation. While involved in learning hard skills and technical skills, they also learnt soft skills and living skills that placed them in a better position to make choices and set goals.

Learning by distance mode taught them to work together and rely on each other for help and support. Being attached to agencies and organizations helped them to develop interpersonal skills (and other soft skills) and taught them how to deal with customers and interact with the public. Their development of soft skills helped them to think on their feet, solve problems, and motivate themselves and others. They were able to develop the (living skills) needed to gain employment and earn a paycheck. They learnt good work habits and work responsibilities and what employers expect in the workplace. These skills were integrated into their own lives and helped them to evolve into better people.

#### **OUTCOME OF THE EDUCATIONAL, VOCATIONAL AND MOTIVATIONAL PROGRAM AT THE END OF THE SEVEN-YEARS PERIOD.**

At the end of the seven years period (1996-2003) the 11-15 year old had become 18-22 year old and had taken responsibility for their life. The seven years of exposure to non-formal skills development and technical and vocational skills development through Open, Distance and Flexible Learning (ODFL) created a group of young people who had become equipped socially, emotionally and cognitively to cope with their life and its responsibilities.

In order to move themselves from where they were in their thinking and behaviour, the young people needed to achieve their own empowerment: to work on changing their behaviour and attitude; to stop blaming others for their mistakes; to take responsibility for their own actions; to believe in themselves; to love themselves; to realise that they had potential and could achieve the academic and professional goals they set themselves.

At the end of seven years in the youth club, they had achieved their goals ably and admirably and were taking their life in positive directions. Some were working, some were pursuing advanced technical skills training at the Technical Institute, some were attending the Teachers Training College, and some were attending the University. Some of them married and started their own family, some of them were self-employed (home-based business). Some had the opportunity to migrate after the program ended.

Ten years later, in 2013, still following the progress of these former youth club members who are now 28-32 years, it is worthy to note that they have kept their lives channeled in positive directions. Of the forty-six young people in the Inspiration Club no one became victims of drug or alcohol, there were no teenage pregnancies or involvement in sexually risky behavior, no school drop-outs and no youth violence. No one went to prison for any criminal offence.

The youth club was a pioneering venture in that particular depressed urban community and had a positive impact on the lives of the young people involved, as well as on their parents and siblings. They became the change agents in their home and in their community. They gained respect for their work, their behavior and attitude and for the adults they became.

### **Lessons learnt and worthy of mention**

Because risk-taking behaviours were significantly impacting on the lives of young people and those around them (in that particular community) at that time, it was important for parents to develop additional skills to help them and their children. It was also essential that educators and other concerned adults became aware of the prevalence of those behaviours and the contributing factors to those behaviours and help to prevent them.

The development of the plan required an understanding of the community, including its characteristics. In executing the plan, strong will and efficient coordinating mechanisms were vital for the success of this process. The overall development and training outcome was the result of the collaborative support of parents and guardians, resource providers and the willing participation of the youth members.

### **CONCLUSION**

Teenage years, while being an exciting and unique period of life, are full of changes and challenges. This is a period when young people are particularly susceptible to behaviours that put them at risk for many social ills and often it is not enough just to tell a teenager to 'say no' to engaging in these behaviours. Parents need to clearly express their expectations, and help equip their children to assess risks, to be assertive, and to have the self-esteem and forbearance to withstand external pressures that might push them toward risky behaviours.

The caring and timely intervention by a Church body, parents, community leaders and concerned organizations who came together to support a needed urban community youth development program made a difference in the lives of forty-six youths. Even today, as adults, they are much richer for having had that fruitful experience and they continue to draw upon the skills and lessons learnt in their youthful days to guide their choices and decisions and to live productive and successful lives.

## REFERENCES

- Bloom, M. (1996). *Primary prevention practices*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hawkins, J., Catalano, R., & associates. (1992). *Communities that care: Action for drug abuse prevention*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kumpfer, K., Molgaard, V., & Spoth, R. (1996). Strengthening families to prevent drug use in multi-ethnic youth. In R. Peter & R. McMahon (Eds.), *Prevention and early intervention: Childhood disorders, substance abuse and delinquency* (pp. 241–267). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lofquist, W. (1983). *Discovering the meaning of prevention: A practical approach to positive change*. Tucson, AZ: Associates for Youth Development.
- Durlak, J. (1997). *Successful prevention programs for children and adolescents*. New York: Plenum Press.