

Touching Base with Parents—Neglected ICP Stakeholders

By Grant Linney

My purpose here is to introduce readers to another key and, to-date, largely neglected stakeholder in high-school integrated curriculum programs (ICPs). If we wish to have a deeper understanding of the unique, powerful and lasting impacts of these programs, we must include the perspective and input of participants' parents. My hope is that this article will encourage much more research in this area.

My caution, both to me and to future writers, concerns a delicate balancing act between enlightenment and suffocation. There is no doubt in my mind that, with the "right" combination of teachers/leaders, participants, outdoor and experiential programming, setting and parents, these programs become transformational in their permanent impacts upon life skills and attitudes. To examine these elements in a variety of ways is well worth the effort, but understand that one must also leave space for certain "real intangibles" including affect and magic; an over-scrutiny of such phenomena can lead to their demise.

Context

On a Friday afternoon last February, seven parents and one former student met with me at a Guelph cafe to discuss ICP programs. All were connected to the well-established Grade 10 Community Environmental Leadership Program (CELP) and/or Grade 12 Headwaters program. Guelph Centennial teachers Mike Elrick, Katie Gad, Janet Dalziel and Joel Barr have run these semester-length programs. I was already familiar with these particular programs due to multiple visits and conversations with teachers, parents and students over several years.

Thanks to Katie Gad for sending a notice to parents of present and former students about this gathering. Thanks also to those parents who took the time to participate. Their six families all have at least two offspring who experienced one or both of these programs.

Observations

The parents attending had a strong desire to share highly favourable impressions of the ICP experience(s) of their offspring. Words like *transformative*, *life altering* and *life changing* (three parents used the last descriptor) were used to describe the impact of these programs.

These parents identified the following attributes of their sons and daughters as being significantly developed thanks to the CELP and/or Headwaters programs:

- People/life skills, particularly in making and keeping friends, managing group dynamics and taking on leadership roles. One parent noted: "The relationships and bonds define the experience so much." Another spoke of how friendships formed were deeper and lasting than before the experience.
- Maturity, accountability, ownership, flexibility, integrity, respect, awareness, balance.
- Self-confidence, empowerment.
- Social conscience.
- A powerful sense of place for their community.
- Practical skills relating to sustainable living.
- An ability to see and make connections between "here and now" concerns and the bigger (in many cases, global) picture.

The parents identified the following program elements as responsible for this impact:

- The attributes of the ICP leaders: They are gifted teachers, knowing how and when to effectively frame experiences. They are practised at group dynamics, knowing when to hover in the background and allow the group to wrestle with issues and challenges, and when to draw meaning from their experiences. They really know the students. ICP leaders adopt markedly different roles with Grade 10 versus Grade 12 students. They have excellent listening skills, particularly one-on-one. They possess humour and they expect

accountability. They walk their talk. They have impeccable judgment when it comes to the physical and emotional safety of their charges.

- Particular note must be made of the great fondness and respect these parents expressed for Mike Elrick, the founder and driving force behind both of these programs. Mike lost his life to cancer in the fall of 2009. He is remembered as a low-key but high-impact person, a third parent, and also the one who taught the parents about letting go; a leader from behind; one the students never wanted to disappoint; one who also knew the importance of keeping principals and superintendents in the loop.
- Extended wilderness trips (snowshoe travel and winter camping, canoe tripping), fostering a deeper connection to the outdoors as well as to each other.
- A classroom that is away from the normal school setting and that includes ready access to both natural settings and the home community.
- The kind of learning (experiential, authentic, integrated) and the kind of conversations that follow (effectively facilitated by experienced teachers).
- A strong connection to the local community by way of teaching younger students, making presentations to parents and the public and carrying out environmental service projects.
- Opportunities to develop new and potentially lifelong skills such as canoe tripping, winter camping and sewing (e.g., moccasins), and a much-heightened awareness of food skills, including the 100-mile diet. More than one parent spoke of how sons and daughters are now proudly preparing meals for their families, while also delivering mini-lectures on healthy and sustainable eating.

When asked to discuss concerns regarding the future of ICPs, this group identified the following needs:

- Advocacy on behalf of these programs, and for utilizing parents as a powerful voice in this regard.
- Recognition that parents can help with

specific aspects of the program. It was suggested that a “gifts bank” be created wherein parents can make the ICP teachers aware of particular skills they possess.

- Establishment of community partnerships.
- Deliver of effective and ongoing communication with all stakeholders, including other students and their parents in the feeder schools. This is to offset a variety of negative perceptions, including the program being regarded as elitist, lax and/or virtually impossible to include within the confines of a four-year high-school program.
- Significant funding, particularly in light of the recent Ontario Ministry of Education ruling regarding no extra program fees.
- Encouragement of graduates of such programs to transfer their newly developed skills and attitudes back to the home-school setting.

In Conclusion

The parents of ICP students represent a powerful and underused source of insight into and advocacy for these transformational programs. Significant research is needed to capitalize upon this potential. The voice of parents is sorely needed to move these programs from their current peripheral and precarious status in our secondary schools.

*Grant Linney is a career outdoor and environmental educator who has observed and written about ICP programs for many years. He is intrigued with their similarities to other extended experiential programs for adolescents, such as those found at the Ontario Camp Leadership Centre (Bark Lake) when it was run by the Ontario government, and at the Lester B. Pearson College of the Pacific, a United World College located on Vancouver Island. He highly recommends a timeless article by Bert Horwood (1995) entitled *Energy and Knowledge: The Story of Integrated Curriculum Packages* (Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education, 7(4)).*