

Dal News

Helping teens to find their way

By Marilyn Smulders - May 26, 2009

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Labels were starting to stick to 14-year-old Jesse; the Grade 8 student known to play with a switchblade was known as “dangerous” by younger kids in his neighborhood, and as “disruptive” by his teachers, when he made it to school at all.



And yet, Jesse may yet beat the odds; two years on, he’s still in school, he has a girlfriend, he even joined the school track team.

What services help kids facing adversity to survive and thrive?

What made the difference for Jesse? Was it the school guidance counselor who hauled him into his office and asked why he was skipping school? Was it the Big Brother whom he was matched with years before? Was it the drop-in centre down the street that started opening its doors late at night for kids to play basketball?

Those are the kinds of questions the Pathways to Resilience Project is probing, comparing kids who thrive with those who struggle. The goal of the five-year study is to learn what patterns of formal service and informal support work best in different cultural contexts to mitigate risk and promote well-being.

“What we want to understand is what makes the difference in kids’ lives,” says Michael Ungar, the Dalhousie professor who leads an international team of resilience researchers. “How do we get them the right services so it’s going to make a difference?”

Michael Ungar That effort just got a big boost with an infusion of \$2 million in research funding through an International Community University Research Alliance grant: providing \$1 million (through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) to expand research in Canada and \$1 million (through the International Development Research Centre) to be split among three partners: in the Free State province of South Africa; Medellin, Colombia; and Beijing, China. New Zealand, with \$7 million in funding from its own government, is the fifth country site.

In Canada, the research builds on a study already in progress. The first wave of data collection (funded by the National Crime Prevention Centre and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research) looks at 600 high-risk teens, ages 13 to 19, in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Labrador. In the first phase of the study, the young people participating complete a comprehensive questionnaire documenting the services they used and their experiences. In the next phase of the study, selected youth will be invited to take part in in-depth interviews.

“It’s a chance to really get to know their lives and understand them,” says Dr. Ungar.

In the context of the study, the services they use may include child welfare agencies, schools, mental health supports and correctional services. Informal supports include families, peers and communities. Further, “resilience” is defined as the capacity of the individual—in the face of significant adversity—to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that sustain their well-being; it’s less about individual strengths and more about seeing what kinds of environments make resilience more likely to appear.

The new grant money will allow researchers to talk to an additional 2,000 young people in Canada alone. Director of Research Linda Liebenberg is ramping up the project: setting up offices and hiring additional staff. The methodology developed by the Dalhousie team will be shared among the international partners.

Members of the international team are expected in Halifax for meetings on July 2 and 3. As well, a large conference on resilience is planned for June 2010 at Dalhousie.

Readers Say

Michele Gallant

May 27, 2009 9:03 PM

I work at my former high school as an Educational Assistant and spend time with some apparently troubled teens. My emotions range from heartbreak to rage when I cannot help or understand where they're coming from. The proposed research endeavors are to be applauded.

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amanuel melles

May 28, 2009 6:58 AM

It's exciting to learn that Canada is joining hands with other countries to delve deeper into the issues of youth resilience. I encourage you to include in your sample data newcomer youth who live in Canada, many of whom come from experiences of war and displacement. I suspect we may learn a great deal about resilience when issues and challenges of settlement/adaptation intersect with trauma and the aspirations of a renewed life in Canada.

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Erica Corbett

May 28, 2009 10:30 AM

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Pam Jobe

December 27, 2009 4:50 PM

Michael and firends/ associates... I look forward to your findings. I work with teens who have significant issues. These include chemical imbalances, poverty and trauma histories. The one common denominator is that they are all "fighters", both in the physical sense and in their spirit. They have all been diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder, which has, perhaps helped them to survive thus far but is now counter productive to their success in school and life.

I am also interested in commuity resilience following disasters and economic catastrophies. If any of your associates has published research in this area please have them contact me.

Thank you and good luck.

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