Abstract

This paper describes a process for change in schools, which operates on the premise that low performing schools can experience dramatic transformation when low self-esteem is addressed. This is done through a methodology, the main components of which are a creative, risk-taking leadership; identification and development of the cultural and social interests of the students; weaving these into the curriculum; capacity-building among the teachers; and involvement of parents and the wider community.
Introduction

It happened in the year 1995. He was a 17-year-old student in his final year in a high school in one of our inner-city communities in Kingston, Jamaica. He was aggressive, performing below his age and grade level and lacking in self-esteem. One day he barged into the Principal’s office: ‘Conflict in Grade 11’ classroom. Come quick, Miss, and deal with de problem!’ The Principal quickly abandoned the activity in which she was engaged and accompanied by Kevin, went up to the classroom. For approximately two hours, she sat in awe and experienced this aggressive, low-performing boy interacting and intervening with the two conflicting parties, and in the end, resolving the problem.

The following day, a special General Assembly of the school was called and the student body informed of Kevin’s feat. The Principal declared: ‘From this day henceforth, as long as this young man remains in this school he shall be called “Peacemaker”.

For the remaining two terms at the school, ‘Peacemaker’ got a new sense of himself. He confided that at home he loved to cook. This was confirmed by his mother who revealed to the school that she was seeing a transformed child at home. He continued to be involved in conflict resolution in the school, he was placed in the Food and Nutrition classes, where he began learning to read, starting with words related to that curriculum — seasoning, diet, vegetable.

Peacemaker graduated at the end of the school year and received a prize for the most improved student. After Graduation, with the help of the school, he enrolled in the HEART Programme, where he received training in the culinary arts. Seven years later, Kevin opened a small take-out cook shop. Clearly and brightly painted at the front of this shop, was the name – PEACEMAKER.

We know that there are many Kevins in our school system — many angry, aggressive, low achievers. This is not surprising, as the research available confirms in no uncertain terms that children live what they learn. Scott (1997) reveals that of the 57,386 children from zero to five years old seen in the Emergency Department of the Bustamante Hospital for Children during 1996, 4,430 or 7.7 per cent of them were victims of violence. Meeks Gardner et al. (2003) report that 75 per cent of students felt that a student not inclined to fight would be ‘picked on’; 33 per cent had been victims of violence and 60 per cent had a family member who had been a victim of violence. The Injury Surveillance System Report
(2003) records that four per cent of the injuries reported in the Accident and Emergency Department in nine Government hospitals occurred in schools, and 65 per cent of these injuries involved the age group zero to eight years.

Not only are children victims of violence from their very early years, but they are also the traumatized witnesses. Of a sample of 400 Grade 8 and Grade 9 girls in Kingston, 79 per cent reported witnessing conflicts involving a weapon since entering Grade 8 (Walker 1997, 11); and according to Mathias Antoine (1997, 16):

Television is an important source of entertainment in Jamaica, and viewing of both local and foreign programmes is available throughout the day. It is cause for concern that children watch without adult supervision; they are, therefore, exposed to televised violence, and cartoons, the mainstay of many children’s viewing, are especially laden with violence.

Early exposure to violence, coupled with absentee parents, leads to a devalued self, a self which is unable to see the good that lies within it and, therefore, enters school already defeated, already feeling that no good can come out of this body.

That was how Kevin felt, how he acted, how he was perceived. But what made that difference? What opened up that small window, revealing a ray of sunshine in his life? This is what, in this paper, I wish to share — a Project called ‘Change from Within’ (CFW).

**Change From Within Project — The Genesis**

When in 1992 Sir Philip Sherlock, a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, set up an ad hoc committee of educators at the University’s Mona campus to examine the causes of violence in our society, and the possible role of education in mitigating it, this was the reality: a steady rise in the number of murders committed every year — 414 in 1988, 439 in 1989, 542 in 1990, 561 in 1991, 629 in 1992 (Planning Institute of Jamaica 1993). Minors were responsible for 7.6 per cent of the murders which resulted in arrests in 1990, and 11 per cent of those in 1991. Of the 625 shootings which resulted in arrests in 1990, and 582 in 1991, 16 per cent were committed by juveniles (Planning Institute of Jamaica 1993).
Statistics like these do not convey the personal fears and anxieties experienced daily by the general student populations in violence-prone communities. Based on regular searches conducted in one high school in 1994, one-third of the boys carried weapons such as knives and ice-picks to and from school, and two toted guns.

Sir Philip’s Committee concluded that over the years, beginning from the pre-independence era of the anglophone states of the Caribbean, our educational system emphasized preparation for economic and industrial development, to the detriment of an emphasis on the development of social capital — social skills and values for life.

But what could be done about it? Convinced that there must have been some schools somewhere which were grappling with the problem, the Committee undertook a search, and came upon four schools, two primary, one all-age and one high. When they were ‘discovered’ by Sir Philip and his team, all four, unknown to each other, were tackling, with some success, the problem of low self-esteem and the predisposition to violence in the inner-city communities where they were located. Each was employing a similar methodology of change, namely, creating a partnership with the community and the wider society, and utilizing the positives among the students (sports, drama, music) to enhance their development.

The Committee decided to analyse and document the philosophies and methodologies of the four inner-city schools, pulling them together into a mutually supportive network. Through the help of the Grace Kennedy Foundation, workshops and seminars were held to improve the knowledge and skills of the teachers, focusing in particular on the leadership. The principals began to share experiences and to assist each other in the processes underway in their individual schools.

Within one to three years of systematic application of this new methodology, by using the positives as building blocks to other dimensions, the schools began to observe an increase in self-esteem among students, teachers and parents. This new valuing of self began to manifest itself in an improvement in discipline and academic performance, an increase in parental involvement, and, predictably, a reduction in aggression and violent behaviour.

In one of the four schools, St. Peter Claver Primary School, in the heart of a very violent community in Kingston, the new principal arrived in 1988 to find a school with an enrolment of 310, one-third its capacity,
a teaching staff which concurred with the parents that nothing good could come from the children, and a student body that, through reinforcement from the adults in their lives, had come to accept that they could amount to nothing. The first Parent–Teacher Association (PTA) Meeting attracted 25 parents. In the year that had just ended, only one student had passed the Common Entrance examination to gain access to a high school.

Taking stock of the situation, Mrs Bolt, the new principal, looked around and later observed: ‘Many of the children were illiterate, but they knew the popular songs and they had good memories.’

There and then, she realized that the morale could be lifted through the children’s knowledge, love of, and ability to remember songs. CFW began from that very day in this school. Music by artists such as Jimmy Cliff, Bob Marley and Tony Rebel was introduced into the curriculum and became the medium for teaching and learning. An improvement in language and reading was observed, and as the children recognized that they could learn to read and to write, the attendance also began to improve. These developments in turn, impacted positively on the teachers. As they experienced positive results, using the new method, they began themselves to become more innovative, searching for new methods that would enhance their teaching skills and result in even more improvement in learning.

The use of the music as a platform for learning also served to encourage the parents to become more involved in the life of the schools. One young man from the community, on hearing the music coming from the walls of the school, volunteered his musical talents to assist the school’s performance. He was followed by another young man, through whom drama became a new avenue for learning.

The teachers then began expressing a desire to see where the children lived, so they started to do weekly walk abouts in the community. There, they began to have a better appreciation of the social conditions under which the children lived.

Finding many homes without modern sanitary conveniences, they embarked on a programme of socializing the students in the use of toilets, and with external help, prompted the building of several in the community. Thus the parents and the wider community became more involved in the life of the school, in protecting it and showing more interest in their children’s development. The following diagram illustrates the process as
it unfolded.

Within one year, the Common Entrance passes moved from one to eight, then to 45 the following year, and continued to rise year by year. The Grade Four National Literacy Examination results of 2002 show St. Peter Claver at the top of the 16 schools in the area in which it is located: 77 per cent of their students were reading at or above the Grade Four level; 11 per cent slightly below, and 12 per cent were at risk. The results of the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT), which has replaced the Common Entrance Examination, show that, in 2002, of the three levels of rating — low, medium and high — St. Peter Claver was rated Above High (above the National Average). Today, its graduates are competing well in all the High Schools in Kingston and St. Andrew.

From a student population of 310 in 1988, the school is now having great difficulty keeping to the 960 student enrolment capacity, with an average attendance of 91.5 per cent. Moving from the 25 parents in 1988, PTA attendance has soared to between 500 and 600. Through a system of rotation, parents monitor children on the streets. The PTA also ensures that each vendor at the school gate is a parent. Recently, the first group of parents was trained in a project called ‘Parents in Partnership’. Through this project, teachers train parents in helping to solve disciplinary problems, an acquired skill these parents give back to the school once or twice weekly. CFW, therefore, in this school example as well as in the other three schools, which helped form the core strategy, takes a holistic approach to the definition of a school, and recognizes that just as the school has to motivate the children, so too the teachers and the parents
who are the messengers, are in need of motivation. That is why the method of change involves workshops and seminars for teachers and parents, in personal development as well as in professional issues.

**Programme Expansion**

In 1996, with sponsorship from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and UNESCO, the process was documented in a booklet titled 'The Story of Four Schools', and in 2000 the Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture, in collaboration with the University of the West Indies, published a collection of best practices in schools, most of them outside the CFW network, with a view to promoting creative approaches to change. To date there are 30 primary and high schools, in addition to two teachers’ colleges, which are participating in Change From Within project.

In 2002 the project benefited from a collaborative research project, initiated in seven CFW schools, by Dr Tony Sewell of the University of Leeds and Professor Barry Chevannes of the University of the West Indies, Mona, with funding from the Department for International Development (DFID), UK. Its aim was to identify the methodology or methodologies being used by the schools as tools for positive transformation. The remainder of this paper is devoted to explaining the CFW methodology.

**Leadership**

The most important factor that characterised the change process was leadership — as exhibited by the principal. Wherever positive changes were underway, the schools were headed by principals with vision, able to see beyond the day-to-day management of problems and to believe in the capacity of the children for change. As bad as their situations were, the principals had a sense that their schools could be as good as the best. Among their other characteristics were

(a) their ability to infuse their vision into some, if not all of the staff;
(b) their readiness to be innovative, willing to think and work outside of existing norms, and to take risks;
(c) their preparedness to adapt the curriculum to the needs of the
students;
(d) their approachability for the staff, the students, and the parents as well; and
(e) their ability to share power.

Where a principal does not possess or develop these qualities, change cannot and does not take place. In one of the schools, where the teachers were ready for change but the principal was not, the change did not begin until that principal left the school, and a member of the staff assumed that position. In another school, the principal, though open to change, did not possess the qualities to move the process, so she allowed the Vice-Principal, whom she described ‘as a people person’ and who had the respect of staff and students, to lead the process.

**Working on the Positives**

The second requirement for transforming a school, from ‘rock bottom’ (a description by a teacher, of his school) up the steps of positive change, is the ability to find the positive elements in the school community and to bring these to bear on the teaching and learning process. At Charlie Smith High School, football was singled out as the positive; at Friendship Primary School, it was the children’s love of speech and drama; at Treadlight Primary School it was farming. The difference between the CFW approach and the traditional teaching methods in other schools is that the leadership and the entire school community treat the music, the sports and the performing arts as positive media for developing discipline and raising self-esteem. The result of this approach is that the overall discipline improves, sports and the arts are used as platforms for learning, and the improvement is then transferred to the academic curriculum. When the school begins to be seen as successful, then the self-esteem of the teachers, the students and the parents is raised, enabling all the stakeholders to become more involved in the life of the school. This creates the conditions for the expansion of positive changes. At Charlie Smith High School in 1995, the football team won the Manning Cup (supremacy in schoolboy football in the Corporate Area), the Walker Cup (supremacy in the Corporate Area knock-out competition), and the Olivier Shield (islandwide supremacy). Best of all, it won a prize for the Most Disciplined Team. There was also improvement in the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) results —
a Charlie Smith student became the first footballer to pass nine subjects. Parent involvement also improved, as the Cost-Sharing Compliance Rate moved from 40 per cent to 85 per cent.

Identifying the positives sometimes means focusing on an individual or a group. At Pembroke Hall High School, in order to combat the accepted outcome of mediocrity in academic performance, the school capitalised on a few exceptional passes in CXC examinations. It promoted those students as heroes, and had them identified by special badges. This acted as a morale booster for the entire school — students, teachers and parents alike. At Allman Town Primary School, the soft side of a very disruptive and aggressive student was identified. Seizing on this discovery, the principal created a special position for him — Chairman of the Hospitality Committee. His task was to welcome visitors to the school and escort them to the office. ("We are now experiencing a lot more of the "nice side" of Anthony. Generally, I think Anthony has been doing very well, even his academic performance has improved.") Anthony was transformed, and his transformation impacted on other students for whom he had been a role model in aggression.

**A New Pedagogy**

The schools involved in the CFW all had to search for new and different ways of teaching. They had to identify areas of interest and use them to teach. Most found innovative and unconventional methods of teaching in order to gain and hold the interest of the students: journal writing, which allowed students quiet time for introspection; Principal’s Hour, which gave the students an opportunity to engage the leadership in issues concerning the governance of the schools; infusion of identity issues in the curriculum; the use of clubs as a means of self-expression and personal development; and responding to gender-specific interests, for example, using football concepts to teach boys mathematics.

At Treadlight Primary School, realising that the boys preferred being out on the farm to sitting in the classroom, the principal came up with the idea of using the farm to promote reading. The girls and the teachers would write the names of the plants and crops and the boys would make a game out of attaching the labels. So while having fun the boys would learn to identify, spell and pronounce the words. The produce from the farm is utilised in the school’s feeding programme and this connects beautifully with the school’s environmental programme, which
is integrated into the entire curriculum. Treadlight moved from 90 per cent of the boys reading at the preschool level, to those same boys reading at a grade or two above the targeted level; student enrolment moved from 313 in 1999 to 544 in 2003; and daily attendance is now at a level of 80 per cent, from 45 per cent in 1999. The changes are also felt in the wider community, where coal burning is an important economic activity, as students teach their parents the value of replacing the trees they cut down.

**Mentoring**

All the schools at some point in time had to come to grips with the idea of the teacher as a mentor. The teacher as mentor becomes concerned for, and involved in, the development of the total child. At Jamaica College, ‘the teacher stands in loco parentis, concerned about the child in the classroom, on the playfield, in the buses, in the games shop, at home’. In response to an outbreak of out-of-school indiscipline, the College formed an ‘Emergency Response Team’, made up of police and teachers networked by mobile telephones, to monitor outbreaks of violence or accidents when they occurred outside of the school or the home. At Pembroke Hall High School, the male teachers have formed themselves into a group that bonds with and counsels particularly difficult boys, sometimes visiting their homes and taking them on trips. They incorporate female teachers when the need arises for female intervention on specific problems. Sometimes mentoring means standing up for a student in the face of a parent who does not understand; or simply hugging children who are in need of the touch of love and reassurance.

At Pembroke Hall students mentor other students. Sean, a rude and undisciplined student, was constantly being sent to the principal for punishment. Mrs Crawford was at her wits end after trying every possible approach. As a last throw of the dice, she called the school’s Head Boy and said to him: ‘Take Sean in hand, befriend him, and show him how to become a gentleman.’ Sean’s behaviour changed over time, and later, when asked to assess the effect of this method, Sean responded: ‘There is a difference in the way people react or respond to me...more pleasantly. I learnt one important thing, Miss: when you show respect, you get respect from others.’

Through mentoring, the school takes on the role of ensuring that the child develops a sense of self, of security, of a safe haven, of the
capacity to grow. This mentoring helps to develop a social being, a rounded individual. A student from Allman Town Primary School, in response to a query about what school meant, responded: 'I feel very safe at school and I feel like my friends and my teachers are my family.'

The Circle of Friends

Gathering the principals of the schools together into a mutually supportive network or circle has proven to be a significant tool in building leadership, and is an important part of the CFW methodology. By sharing experiences, by encouragement and suggestions, principals draw on each other's strengths. The network provides school-to-school support and is now part of the CFW strategy. The principals make workshop presentations to schools throughout the island, while continuing the process in their own environments. Thus as CFW expands, a key strategy is the formation of 'circles of friends'.

Involving Parents and the Wider Community

Each one of the schools in the CFW Project had to come to grips with the low level of parental involvement in school life. Parental involvement is critical to the sustainability of the change process. All the schools, therefore, had to find innovative ways to involve the parents, and the focus was on strengthening the traditional school-home network, the PTA. Here again, the schools had to find innovative ways of engaging parents, using the traditional structure of the PTAs. Most accepted the fact that they had to begin by working with the few interested and involved parents.

In the case of Charlie Smith High School, the traditional Sunday afternoon PTA meetings would compete with football matches in the community. Recognizing that many of the parents, being unemployed, were available during school hours, a competition for parental involvement was designed. Parents would sign in and sign out each time they visited the school, for whatever reason, and at the end of each school term, the parent adjudged the most frequent visitor would be awarded the title of Parent of the Term, and a prize, at a public function held at the school. Twice per year, parents would visit the school to collect their children's reports. After they consulted with the individual class teachers, there would be a celebration in the courtyard, at which students would entertain their parents with cultural performances. Prizes
would be awarded to students and their parents for good performance in the internal examinations.

Having been drawn into the school’s activities, parents began to become aware of their children’s progress, to visit the school more often, and to see themselves as partners in the process — as having a responsibility in determining the educational and social development of the children who attended their school. They became co-owners.

**Involving Students**

The traditional concept of the teacher–student relationship is shattered in this change process. If the school were to be viewed as a profit-making organization, which it really is, the children in the CFW paradigm would be seen as the primary customers, the ones who, when satisfied, would guarantee record-breaking profits. They, therefore, have to be centrally involved in this change process and their opinions and skills have to be seriously engaged.

At Charlie Smith High School, the students chose their prefects and leaders, under clear policy guidelines set by the school authorities, with the right to recall their leaders if they could provide evidence of non-performance. They participated in changing the timetable, bringing to bear a consideration of how they learnt at different hours of the day, and suggested new subject offerings. At Pembrooke Hall High School, consulting students on the menu improved canteen sales, and saved the jobs of the canteen staff. In all instances the students’ active involvement resulted in improvements in discipline and academic performance.

**Special Training (For Staff, Students and Parents)**

One of the qualities of a good leader, as mentioned earlier, is the ability to empower others. This proved to be a very important element in the development of the CFW process, as the principals had to find ways to address weaknesses of the various stakeholders and to strengthen their capacity to understand and own the process. Activities revolved around in-house workshops, retreats, sponsorship and support for group as well as individual professional development.

In one of the schools, over a six-year period, the number of pre-trained teachers was reduced from seven to zero, as teachers were encouraged to enrol in teachers’ colleges or to pursue first and second
degrees. In another, a group of parents were trained in clothing and textiles. Today, they design and sew all the costumes for the students in the dance group, drama group and choir. The workshops and seminars are not always in professional or skill areas, but cover a wide range of development areas, such as health, money management, conflict resolution, parenting and child development. There have been instances in which support has been provided for teachers in need of trauma counselling and guidance in dealing with personal issues. Special sessions in grooming and etiquette, and in leadership training are not uncommon, and even special summer camps have been held for at-risk students. In a number of schools, formal dinners are scheduled by grades, and single-sex schools team up in order that students can simulate dinner dates.

**Conclusion**

Change From Within does not provide a fixed blueprint for change in our schools. There are no workbooks, no equations to memorise, no magic. It is a methodology that focuses on effective leadership and the positive qualities of the students. It is a slow, methodical approach that has its own challenges, which should not be minimised. Finding the financial resources to support the process can pose serious difficulties. But here, the innovative approaches from the leadership to the corporate sector and the church, to the past students and to parents with particular skills, does not only provide funding and other support, but widen the network of stakeholders.

Another challenge, one that cannot be underestimated, is getting members of staff to buy into the vision. In some cases the struggle resulted in the separation of some teachers from the school. Getting the education officers on board was also not in every case an easy task, because the change process almost always involved the reconfiguration of school structures and curricula.

Thirdly, getting the backing of the community, especially where violence and aggressive behaviour are normative, proved decisive. Securing this meant success for St. Peter Claver; losing it meant for Charlie Smith a reversal.

Change From Within is centred on the philosophy that each human is a promise — a possibility. Jolly was an aggressive fourth former from Bridgeport High School, a leader in deviant behaviour, who was constantly being sent to the principal’s office. The teachers wanted Jolly
out of the school. Jolly and his followers would often disturb classes by beating drums and chanting. On one of Jolly’s frequent visits to the principal’s office, Mr Messam then and there decided to negotiate behaviour modification: ‘How would you like to start a band and be the leader?’ Jolly’s eyes lit up. ‘Yes!’

Mr Messam purchased the instruments on credit and Jolly started his school band. The band is now dedicated to serving the school. It performs professionally and enters pieces on behalf of the school in the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission, Gospel and Pop Music competitions. The members all attend classes with regularity and are performing well academically. There have been no more complaints from the teachers. Jolly is doing especially well in Electrical Installation, and he hopes to learn to repair his instruments.

A talk with Jolly revealed that he ‘was trying to be two persons at one time’, the one his mother wanted and the one he wanted. He says that this ‘internal confusion’ led him into the wrong crowd. He confides that he used to visit the game shop and smoke, but he now proudly states that teachers no longer complain about him and he has stopped doing bad things. He feels better about himself.

The band members have now bonded and one of the boys relates that when his grandmother died, his colleagues offered to have him stay at their house. This, he says, opened his eyes to ‘how nice people can be.

CFW is about the hundreds and thousands of Jolly’s. It changes them from within, and they, in turn, change the entire school, and even the community.

Notes

1. Acronym for Human Employment and Resource Training, a national programme designed to assist individuals to acquire employable skills and professions.

2. Absentee parents are those who emigrate leaving their children behind with little if any form of parental support or guardianship.

3. The GSAT is taken by all primary school students at the end of Grade 6 and determines the high school they will attend.

4. This is a system whereby parents share the tuition costs with the government on an affordable basis.
References


