

Vanguard Secondary: Turning SKIDS into KIDS

by
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During two years of hands awkwardly putting mics on my collar and floating boom mics over my head, I often asked myself, “Why am I doing this again?” When answering myself, I would recall my administrative assistant saying, “there’s some guy on the phone wanting to talk with the Principal.” I remembered thinking, “great...I wonder what’s wrong or what bad has happened.” Somewhat reluctantly I answered, “put him through” and again, as all Principals must often do, I prepared my nervous system for the unknown. A gentleman with a charming accent introduced himself as Gary Turner from Barbershop Films and told me he was given my name by a colleague at a nearby secondary school. Gary informed me about a project he was undertaking. It was a loose original concept documentary intended to explore the culture of bullying within schools, and he had heard that the students and staff at Vanguard Secondary (Langley School District) had a very different perspective on bullying. More importantly,

he had heard we were developing a school that was reversing the negative effects of labels upon youth, and we had the neuroscience expertise to support it. The school was in its second year of development and was already earning a reputation for innovative trauma sensitivity and therapeutic programming.

Knowing how much work had gone into creating the school’s safe, therapeutic culture, the vulnerability inherent in the willingness to be filmed fell into the realm of a challenging juxtaposition. I struggled with deciding if the value of a possible story was worth the potential negative risks to students and staff. There were many potential contrasting impacts in the filming process. I would often re-imagine that ‘Dummies Guide to Being a Principal’ that we don’t get, and thought of all that could go wrong. What confidentiality issues will be infringed? What child protection concerns need to be acknowledged? And of course, what are the FOIPPA issues I may have overlooked? Ultimately, I reminded myself

of one of our District's core values: courage. So, I sucked up my shyness and my hatred for the sound of my own voice and carefully, with the support of our District Office team, explored the permissions and processes required to tentatively support its production. In order to ensure safety for all, I made sure to position myself and our Superintendent with ultimate veto power over the final production.

The students, their families, staff members and District Leaders were consulted. Once most of the fears around the production were addressed, we had to trust the film crew and their sensitivity to uphold our school's mandate: to overcome developmental traumas and their effects. With the intent to authentically capture what we were doing at Vanguard, the students and staff were filmed mostly candidly and without any script or direction from the film crew. Almost all conversations were ad hoc and spontaneous moments, which could have led to many different stories and many different messages. Once we trusted the process and the Barbershop Crew, we were introduced to the themes being observed and captured on film by the producers and director.

What the documentary showed us was who we – the students and staff of Vanguard – are. It confirmed what neuroscience has been telling us for years. All the neuroscience teaches us beyond the simplicity of 'Occam's razor' is that basic, healthy humanity gives students what they need: it helps them balance their neurochemistry and recover from trauma. Our team at Vanguard has slowly built expertise and practice, not in the multitude of textbooks and advanced degrees within our walls, but by being in the often-forgotten learning trenches within alternate schools. We have learned by unknowingly stepping into the war of attrition with every unhealthy identity that walked through our doors. Of course, we need the Psych Eds, School Based Team referrals and resource interventions, but none of that matters if we

fail to see the youth for who they really are, rather than who they are trying to be. We see and hear an identity, we are told by others within the system 'who' that child is, and even the child communicates to us their chosen identity, but we forget that they are only children. Some of our older youth look and act like they have it all figured out. Often, they are burdened by developmental traumas, early learning challenges and addictions. As a result, their nervous systems and their complex interrelationships affect their emotional systems, confusing and ultimately delaying their identity development. For most youth, rebelling against adults is expected and is considered developmentally normal and a component of healthy identity development. For these students, rebellion reinforces their unhealthy concepts of normal, thus impairing their healthy identity development.

It is easy to get lost in the language of best practice and theory but, ultimately, we find it again in our humanity. We do this by treating every child like our own, looking beyond behaviour and its context within our own definitions of 'normal' and finding empathy, and more importantly authentic appreciation for that child's strengths and resiliency. Within this, we cannot forget the adults. When you are in the thick of the battle, and in particular the frequency of very high stress situations experienced within alternate schools, it can be easy to overlook the complex neuroscience behind the incredible staff willing to work within these schools. They self-sacrifice daily and work incredibly hard to understand their roles and responsibilities in relationship to their students and families and each other, always while

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enduring the abusiveness of unhealthy, traumatized youth behaviours. We too need the same basics of humanity. While these challenging students test our own abilities to regulate emotions and reactions, we are equally responsible to be aware of our own neurological responses to stress, whether personal or work-related, and to know and meet our own needs accordingly.

The documentary's greatest and most unanticipated effect is that it reminded our students and staff that we are all human. While at times weak and exhausted from trauma and life's unpredictable events, we can also be strong. As our school's three-winged (*Safety, Adaptation & Leadership*) logo reflects, our students and staff have realized that we are all responsible for ensuring that we don't let labels and wrong assumptions make us feel unsafe and that we must continually adapt to each other's needs. We understand the importance of being open

to and welcoming change, and that we are always influencing others, thereby leading.

Our students requested that the documentary be titled SKIDS, to symbolize and reflect a common hurtful name that many in our society have used to label them. Rather than allowing that to stand alone, the producers and I chose to have the first 'S' disappear, because they are just KIDS. Kids that have grown up in a time where some have forgotten the basics of humanity, the fundamental importance of how we treat each other and how words and labels impact our identities and who we want to become.

SKIDS can be viewed on
Telus Optik TV on Demand,
& on the STORYHIVE YouTube Channel
youtube.com/OptikLocal
and search SKIDS

