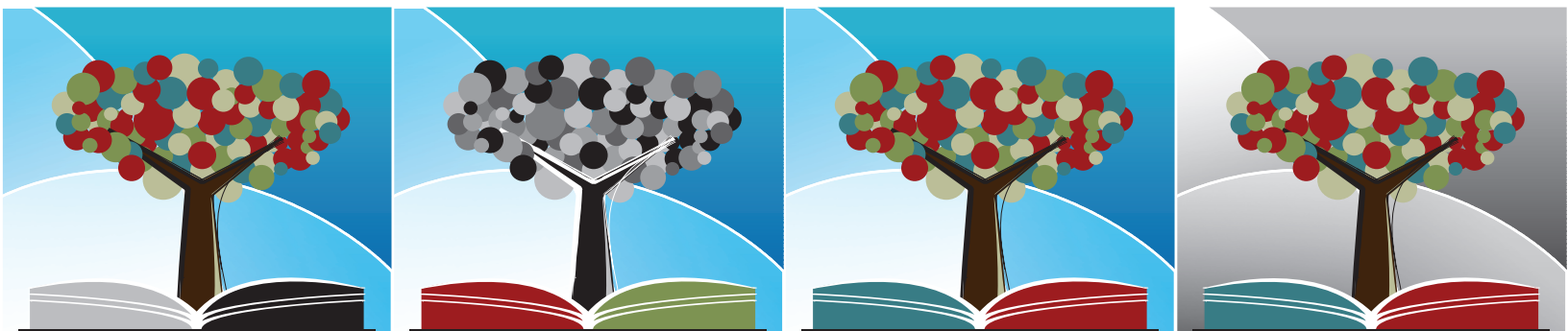


K N O W L E D G E D E V E L O P M E N T C E N T R E



Women and the Volunteer Experience in the Midtown and East Hill Areas of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan

Research Report

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".

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Women and the Volunteer Experience in the Midtown and East Hill Areas of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan

Introduction

“The volunteers are learning to take ownership of their community, become active leaders, and assert their perspectives and visions of what they want their community to become.”

Community School Coordinator, Prince Albert,
Saskatchewan

The community school model, which encourages and fosters parent and community participation in schools, is acclaimed in the Province of Saskatchewan and elsewhere. The success of this model is demonstrated by the growth in the number of community schools in the province from 16 in 1980 to 98 in 2004.

Furthermore, the delivery of primary education is refocusing towards the incorporation of this method into all Saskatchewan schools through the School^{Plus} program.¹

Although the community school initiative has been a success overall, community schools have struggled to fully engage parents and communities. However, two schools, the Riverside Community School and the King George Community School in the Saskatchewan

Rivers School Division #119, have been particularly successful in recruiting and retaining community-based volunteers, despite the fact that both schools are located in the economically and socially disadvantaged areas of Prince Albert.

To gain insights into the success of the volunteer programs at these two schools, we undertook research on the motivations of the women volunteers engaged in them. Our study explored how the efforts of these volunteers have benefited their schools and communities as well as themselves. We also identified any perceived barriers to participation in these school-based volunteer programs and tried to demonstrate that institutions in low-income neighbourhoods can become hubs of activity for strengthening community rather than being perceived as unfriendly environments. Despite the obstacles faced by the women who volunteer at these schools (e.g., lack of availability of childcare, difficulties of meeting their children’s needs with limited financial resources, being a single parent, unstable income, and transportation difficulties), many of them have become dedicated volunteers.

¹ School^{Plus} is a term coined by the *Task Force on the Role of the School* (1999–2000) that describes a new conceptualization of schools as centres of learning, support, and community for the children and families they serve. This model builds on the successful practices of schools and community partners to date and strengthens their capacity for meeting the needs of all children and young people through the creation of a new social institution directly supported by other human services. It more actively involves family and community members to help provide all children and young people with the supports they need for healthy development and learning success. These supports may include health, nutrition, recreation, culture, social, and justice services for children and their families, as well as advanced learning opportunities for adults. See Government of Saskatchewan (2004).

This report summarizes the findings from our research. We begin with a brief overview of the importance of volunteerism in low-income and indigenous communities. We then described the history, of and philosophy behind, the community school initiative in Saskatchewan and present a profile of the Midtown and East Hill areas of Prince Albert. Next, we describe our methodology. Finally, we present the findings from our research including some thoughts on changes one should make to the research methodology for future projects. We attempt to draw out lessons that may be helpful to organizations that are contemplating or planning volunteer initiatives in schools or other institutions in low-income neighbourhoods. We hope that our research will demonstrate the potential for positive impact of volunteer programs in economically challenged neighbourhoods.

Our research in context

Volunteerism in low-income communities

Volunteerism among low-income residents in poor communities has emerged as an important research focal point. The U.S.-based Points of Light Foundation is a leader in analyzing volunteering or “neighbouring” in marginalized communities. Its report, *A matter of survival: Volunteering in, by, and with low-income communities* (Points of Light Foundation, 2000) confirms that volunteers play an essential role in the infrastructure of low-income communities. They deliver programs and services but also serve as a bridge between professional service providers and community residents.

Volunteers who reside in the neighbourhoods in which they volunteer are attuned to their neighbourhood’s needs and norms. They understand what is required for community well-being. They also know how to approach their friends and neighbours to encourage them to get involved. Although the involvement of volunteers is essential in low-income neighbourhoods, the importance of this type of volunteer is often overlooked because volunteering is typically seen as something that is done for, rather than by, people in low-income neighbourhoods.

Our research explores the role of low-income volunteers in a Canadian context, recognizing that they are central to revitalizing marginalized neighbourhoods. We discovered through our examination of community school volunteer programs that when volunteer programs are designed to foster inclusion and respect, they result in engaged and committed volunteers even when the programs are situated in the inner city. Both the organization and

the volunteers benefit, and volunteers increase the organization's capacity to serve its clientele. For example, because of the volunteer programs in the two community schools we studied, residents of the area surrounding the schools have gained access to much needed goods and services. The involvement of residents as volunteers ensures that school programs serve and reflect the cultural makeup of the community.

According to one community school coordinator we interviewed for this project, "*low income people don't just have things done to them... they do [for others]. They can take their volunteerism from involvement [defined as participation] to engagement [defined as leadership].*"

Involving indigenous communities in education through volunteerism

According to Saskatchewan Justice and Saskatchewan Corrections and Public Safety, the indigenous community has made important strides in achieving higher education. The report *Working Together for Safer Communities* notes that "there has been a marked increase in education levels" (Saskatchewan Justice and Saskatchewan Corrections and Public Safety, 2003, p. 21). It further states: "The proportion of the Aboriginal population 15 years of age and older with less than grade 9 fell from 37.3% in 1986 to 23.1% in 1996. At the same time, the proportion with some university studies almost doubled from 7.3% to 14%, while the proportion with a university degree increased from 1.9% to 3.9%."

Volunteer programs like the ones we analyzed for this study, which transfer skills and provide leadership training, are stepping stones towards the positive transformation that is all ready underway. They enhance and build the community's capacity to shape and deliver educational programming. The involvement of parents within school settings has been found to be an essential determinant of success for Aboriginal children and youth (McDowell Group, 2001).

The authors of *Indian and Métis Education: Engaging Parents as Partners* state that engaging indigenous communities within learning institutions is often challenging because of longstanding tensions.

A substantial number of Aboriginal parents distrust the school system because of unpleasant memories of their school experiences. It is not unusual for certain community and family factors to further inhibit parental involvement in schools. Consequently, it is vital that when addressing parental involvement in a context where there are Aboriginal parents, a working relationship be established that provides for the development of mutual trust and respect. This means that plans to increase parental involvement have to be developed with parents and not for parents (Saskatchewan School Trustees Association, 1993, p. 8).

The volunteer programs in the two community schools we studied actively work against this historic distrust by treating parents and students as whole people with many gifts to offer. Because of this, parents are able to benefit from the forward thinking of the school-based volunteers and from their commitment

to a better future for the children. Through our research, it became clear that the well-being of children is a strong concern in the Midtown and East Hill areas of Prince Albert. The First Nations and Métis parents who were involved in our research reported that they saw themselves as partners in their children's education and believed that their volunteer involvement was as important to their families' prospects as it was their community's future.

Community schools in Saskatchewan

The Province of Saskatchewan is an acknowledged leader in the development and expansion of community schools. Community schools are governed by the belief that education is a partnership between institutions, communities, and families. As the community school coordinator of King George Community School states on the school's website, "it takes a whole community to help our children develop into wonderful citizens."² Parents are encouraged to become actively involved in their children's schooling.

Saskatchewan's community school program began in 1980 with 16 designated schools located in Saskatoon, Regina, and Prince Albert (Government of Saskatchewan, 2005). By 2004, the number of community schools had expanded to 98. The first schools were established to "provide a holistic, culturally affirming program to help Aboriginal children who face barriers to learning" (Dorion, Prefontaine, & Paquin, 2000, p.6). Community schools are guided by a vision of neighbourhood and family involvement. They respect diversity and serve as a vehicle for social inclusion. They operate in accordance with an established set of principles that affirm the importance of values ranging from self-determination and leadership development to inclusiveness,

responsiveness, and lifelong learning (Government of Saskatchewan, 2003). A complete list of principles for community education can be found in Appendix 1, p.24.

The responsibility for seeing that the principles of community education are followed falls largely on the community school coordinators in each school. The community school coordinators work with the school principals, teachers, other professional staff, and volunteers. One community school coordinator involved in this project described the qualities required for the job as an understanding of the principles of community education, knowledge of community development, and the ability to take the ideals from theory into practice by working closely with parent and community volunteers. From her own experience, she has learned that:

"the movement from involvement to leadership or engagement occurs with the mentoring provided by the Community School Coordinator or other staff members. Engagement is encouraged by the coordinator and practiced gradually in small steps as volunteers take on more responsibilities and practice the skills they are being taught."

Overall, the community school initiative has been viewed as a positive achievement. A report published by the Government of Saskatchewan in 2005 documents the progress of the community education approach, which emphasizes the school as a centre for individual learning and community visioning through collaboration and partnerships. As mentioned previously, Saskatchewan is also currently

² See <http://www.srsd119.ca/kg/>.

implementing the School^{Plus} initiative to integrate the community school philosophy into all schools in the province. However, some schools have experienced challenges in fully realizing the community partnerships mandated by the model:

Despite these positive assessments, Community Schools appear to still face many challenges as they seek to become fully inclusive and to promote new roles that involve shared leadership and responsibilities. Staffs are generally concerned about how best to achieve increased community involvement and parental responsibility (Government of Saskatchewan, 2005, p. v).

A profile of Prince Albert

The two community schools that we studied are located in an inner-city neighbourhood in Prince Albert known as the Midtown and East Hill areas. This neighbourhood shares many of the problems faced by other inner-city neighbourhoods, including substandard housing, homelessness, high crime rates, high unemployment rates, prostitution, and addiction (Kuzbik, Nosbosh, & Sutherland, 2002).

As the province's most northerly major centre, Prince Albert is described as the "gateway to the North." The city also serves as a catch point for families exiting from the North, generally to seek opportunities in urban centres. Consequently, there is a large First Nations population in Prince Albert made up of people moving into Prince Albert from nearby reserves or moving south from more northern communities. Because rental housing is more affordable in the Midtown and East Hill areas, individuals and families with limited incomes often settle there.

There are several correctional institutions in Prince Albert, including the Prince Albert Penitentiary for federal inmates serving sentences of more than two years and the Prince Albert Correctional Centre for inmates serving less than two years. Prince Albert is also home to Pine Grove, the only Saskatchewan prison for women serving provincial sentences. The presence of these institutions results in a transient population in these areas. Families may move to this relatively low-cost area of the city to be close to incarcerated loved ones or to get back on their feet after their loved one is released. Many of these families struggle with the problems associated with displacement and economic readjustment. A substantial number of households are led by women and seniors who are responsible for caring for extended families.

The Midtown neighbourhood is sometimes described as "tough." Riverside Community School plays an important role in countering the negative influences that can lead to poor performance by the area's children. This role is valued and applauded. One of the volunteers who participated in our research commented that:

"everybody had something good to say about Riverside, [and] so I think the volunteers here have helped make it that... because...there is a place to go for the kids."

A King George Community School volunteer stated that the problems associated with the inner city should motivate involvement, not complaints:

“It is very easy to stand on a step and call the kids riff raff or whatever, and to complain about the group over there or complain about this, or the house that was broken into. It’s all very easy to sit there and complain. But I challenge any of those people who sit there and complain to get into a school and volunteer and try to make a difference.”

The First Nations and Métis residents of the Midtown and East Hill areas are reclaiming their cultural practices and traditions that were weakened through the colonization process and further undermined by recent relocation. However, they also bring traditional knowledge and a model of strong family connections to their new community. By tapping into this, community schools are able to provide a better educational foundation for their students and have a positive impact on the broader community.

The research process

Objectives and questions

The objectives of the research were to identify the motivations of female school-based volunteers in an economically and socially challenged community of Prince Albert; the benefits that volunteering brought to these women, their schools, and their communities; and the barriers, if any, that they faced to volunteer participation. Although volunteering in community schools is open to both men and women, we focused our research on the women because they tended to be more active and because so many families in Midtown are led by single mothers.

Our research questions included:

- What are the motivations for women volunteers in economically challenged communities?
- What benefits do the women volunteers experience, as a result of volunteering?
- What barriers to volunteering exist and how have these been overcome by the women or addressed by the voluntary organizations?

Overview of the research

We obtained ethics approval for the research from the Saskatchewan Rivers School Division. At the outset of the project, the research team met with the Director of Education and the community school coordinators about the project and about their work as leaders in the community school movement. The research team attended a parent council meeting in September to announce the project and to invite participation from the volunteers. We distributed a sign-up sheet at the parent council meeting and provided information about the project in plain and easy-to-understand language. We explained that the researchers

were working on a project to collect the ideas and experiences of the volunteers at the Riverside and Prince George Community Schools. We further stated that the information we gathered would be used to prepare resource materials for use by other schools and community groups to help them provide more successful programs for their volunteers. Those who were interested in participating were invited to sign up and were contacted about when the first meeting would be held.

Two focus groups were formed at Riverside Community School and one group was formed at King George Community School. A total of 17 volunteers and two community school coordinators participated in the groups. Each group met four times between September and December 2005. At the first focus groups, participants completed consent forms that explained the project and guaranteed anonymity. The use of straightforward, clear language ensured that the consent form was understandable to persons at a range of educational levels.

In February 2006, the research team held a follow-up meeting with the volunteers of the Riverside Community School. At this meeting, the volunteers were asked what advice they had for other organizations and were told their suggestions would be incorporated into information resources for dissemination to people in other communities.

The community researcher

The focus groups were moderated by Judy McNaughton, a community-based researcher located in Prince Albert. Having served as the Artist in Residence at the Riverside Community School from 2002 to 2004, she was very familiar with the schools and the volunteers. As a result of her residency, Judy is an established figure in Riverside Community School. Both schools in this project were involved in the residency: Riverside served as host, and King George participated in a wind-up celebration. Judy regularly visits the schools in her capacity as the Northern Coordinator with Commonweal Community Arts, Inc., an organization with an office in Prince Albert that does arts-based programming aimed at community development and capacity building.

Overview of focus group participants

Many focus group participants had several years of experience in the two community schools that we studied. These established volunteers brought depth to our research. The newer volunteers, on the other hand, offered a fresh perspective on what had attracted them to the program. Most of the participants became involved in school-based volunteering because their children or grandchildren attended the school. One participant started to volunteer because she was required to through the Fine Option Program, which allows people convicted of minor criminal offences to perform community service work to avoid paying fines.³ This volunteer had performed her community service hours in a community school and had been an active volunteer for eight years.

³ For more information, see <http://www.cps.gov.sk.ca/Corrections/commservice.shtml#FOP>.

Characteristics of volunteer participants

Age	
Under 30	4
30 to 39	5
40 to 50	3
Over 50	5
Total	17

Ethnicity	
Métis	3
First Nations	5
Other	9
Total	17

Length of time as a community school volunteer	
Under 1 year	3
1 to 5 yrs	10
Over 5 yrs	4
Total	17

Presence of children in school	
Have children in school	10
Do not have children in school	5
Have grandchildren or ward in the school	2
Total	17

Education level	
Completed elementary school (Grade 8)	3
Completed high school (Grade 12)	3
Attended or completed technical training	2
Attended or completed university	3
Total	11

Note: Six participants did not respond to this question.

How participants rated their own experiences as students prior to becoming adult volunteers	
Very positive	6
Somewhat positive	3
Adequate	2
Somewhat negative	1
Very negative	2
Total	14

Note: Three participants did not respond to this question.

Research findings

General findings

By locating and supporting leaders within the community, the volunteer projects at the two community schools in our study strengthened the opportunities for people to become engaged in their city. The Riverside and Prince George Community Schools build on the strengths of the diverse communities in which they are located. For example, they use the belief, strongly held within First Nations and Métis communities, “that it takes a whole nation to educate a child” (Dorion et al., 2000, p. 4).

The authors of *Understanding the early years: Early childhood development in Prince Albert* made several positive comments on the City of Prince Albert. They noted, for example, that:

Prince Albert had high scores on wider community indicators describing its levels of social support, social capital, and safety of its neighbourhoods, despite relatively low levels of socio-economic status. The children of Prince Albert were healthy and showed signs of positive development and readiness for learning (KSI Research International, 2002, p. 6).

The schools we studied effectively build on the community strengths. In their publications and through word of mouth, the schools encourage parental involvement. For example, the Riverside Community School describes its volunteer programming on its website and encourages parents to participate:

We are a large Pre-K-8 community school in Saskatchewan. Our strength is our people. We have an excellent facility and a caring, committed, hard working staff. An excellent academic program is complemented by a strong extracurricular sports and band program. *We encourage students and parents to become involved in the total life of the school community.* As a community school, there are many programs operating in the evening and after school for...students, parents and community members. Parents are encouraged to become active members of our Parent Council and help us choose the best programs for our students and community (Riverside Community School, 2006, emphasis added).

The community school coordinators have worked to create a friendly, welcoming environment. For example, at Riverside Community School volunteers have permanent space, which they know as “the community room.” Coffee is available and muffins are served.

Participants in our focus groups commented on their reasons for volunteering in an environment that is economically challenged. Experiential knowledge about successful volunteer programming exists in both community school programs, as evidenced by the comments of the volunteer participants. It has taken years of development and experimentation to bring the organization to its present state.

The role of the community school coordinator

Both community schools in Prince Albert employ paid community school coordinators. The work of the coordinators was frequently mentioned as key to the success of the volunteer programs. One of the coordinators expressed her commitment to her work: *“I’m very much a self-taught person. That’s the way I learned. I learned by experiencing things. And I learned about community education. I really found a home in community education.”* The other described the highlights of working with the volunteers at her school: *“One of my best experiences is when I see people come in and volunteer and then go on. Sitting at the table, we have someone who came in to volunteer and is now at Saskatchewan Urban Native Education Program.”*

The volunteers who participated in our focus groups appreciated the mentoring of the coordinators, which helped them move from volunteer participants to decision-makers. When they begin their work, the volunteers understand that they are committing to more than just involvement; they are expected to develop towards leadership roles in their community. According to one community school coordinator, *“some [complain] about it because it is challenging, but they know that they will be making a contribution.”*

Beyond the open door policy: Golden rules for parent/community involvement

Volunteers at Riverside Community School have developed a policy document that stresses the importance of an open school where families and community members are made to feel welcome and appreciated (see Appendix 2, p.25). This document emphasizes that the school is a focus for community

well-being that provides ways to meet some of the basic needs of local low-income families. For example, Riverside Community School provides:

- a community kitchen, a bread and homemade soup depot to ensure food security for families at risk;
- a clothing depot where families can obtain clothing free or at low cost;
- a meeting place for seniors and elders that provides social support; and
- a centre for families to meet and give mutual support to each other.

Through negotiation and discussion, the volunteers at Riverside Community School decided on guidelines for the behavior of participants. For example, the volunteers agreed to avoid gossip because it creates divisions that negatively influence the volunteer program. They also have a policy encouraging new volunteers. Through interaction with the community school coordinator, volunteers commit to treating the guidelines as governing standards rather than “words on paper.”

Motivations: The connections between volunteering and personal beliefs

In the first of our series of meetings with each focus group, we asked participants how their volunteer experience coincided with their personal beliefs. The responses to the questions were varied. Some participants found it difficult to put the link between belief systems and volunteering into words.

For example, one participant said:

“All I know is I love it. I like working here. I like working with the people. I like working with the staff, the teachers, and the students. I think the students should try to get involved in the volunteering.”

Another stated:

“It’s just a matter of wanting to help, of wanting to be there to see something through. If you believe in those things, what better place to do that than in the community school? It might come from home for some people or religion or whatever, but really it’s what’s in your heart.”

Many participants linked their volunteering to their personal convictions. We have summarized and grouped their responses under four main headings: early family experiences, humanitarian goals and personal growth, volunteering as a reflection of positive parenting, and volunteering and civic responsibility.

Early family experiences

A number of focus group participants reported that the importance and value of volunteering had been instilled in them early in life. Some participants had observed their parents’ involvement in formal volunteering while others had been exposed to the idea of “helping out” informally in the community. For participants, volunteering fits with the encouragement to serve others that they received in childhood from Elders and parents who actively served their community.

One participant said:

“I think [that volunteering] is something my mom taught me ‘cause she was always kind of strong that way. I had a lot of foster brothers and foster sisters, I’ve lost count. So she participated that way. If someone came into the house and they didn’t have something, then she provided it. Seeing her example set a big influence for me too.”

Not surprisingly, some women cited previous or additional volunteer experience, which included volunteering in Africa with the Baha’i and volunteering with Canadian-based organizations such as the Special Olympics and the Salvation Army.

One focus group participant with grown children stated that one of the benefits she obtained from volunteering was passing on to her children the importance of giving. Because they saw her volunteer in their schools, they are now active volunteers themselves.

Humanitarian goals and personal growth

Many volunteers who participated in our study were inspired by humanitarian motivations and the desire to obtain high moral standards. For example, one focus group participant stated that the only acceptable reward that one should seek from volunteering “*is the reward of the happiness that you give.*” Another expressed the view that programs proceed more smoothly when “*people are motivated by the desire to do good rather than to make money.*” Another motivating belief was the view that volunteering is an important stepping stone to personal growth.

Volunteering as a reflection of positive parenting

Some of the participants in our focus groups were motivated by a strong belief that constructive parenting means knowing where one's children are and who their playmates and their playmates' parents are. By volunteering in the school, parents are more involved in the lives of children and are able to satisfy their personal beliefs about positive parenting. Many participants strongly believe that parents should serve as positive role models for the children in the community and that having a parent volunteer in the school gives children *"something to feel proud of"* and sets a good example. This view flowed from the conviction that *"helping out children is important, for they are the future."*

Volunteering and civic responsibility

Some focus group participants expressed the idea that action should be taken when problems surface. For example, one participant stated that she became a school-based volunteer after seeing needles left by injection drug users around the school grounds. She wanted this issue to be addressed and knew that her volunteer contribution would result in a safer, more caring community.

In other focus groups, participants commented on the ways that volunteering had strengthened their belief in civic responsibility and their willingness to become active citizens. As a result, the volunteer initiatives in the schools led to the development of other community programs, for example a study designed to determine if inter-agency coordination could better meet the needs of the homeless and those at risk of becoming homeless. The volunteers in that project were trained at Riverside Community School and then went into the community to train others. As a result of

volunteering at the school, one woman became active in Neighbourhood Watch. Another volunteer said that her involvement with the school and the parent council led her to care more for the community and particularly the children within it.

Although volunteering was not always motivated by personal beliefs, the volunteer experience convinced many participants of the importance of community participation. Many of the volunteers in the two community schools we studied have become active leaders in their community. Among other volunteer contributions, they:

- sit on community committees and boards;
- contribute to focus groups held by municipal and provincial government departments, such as SaskLearning, Early Learning, and Childcare & Sask Literacy Network;
- hosted a volunteer-led "Food Secure Saskatchewan" provincial conference at the Riverside Community School in Spring 2006; and
- deliver presentations at conferences locally and across the province.

Because they are central players in the schools, the volunteers see themselves as key to the success of their community. With the support and encouragement of the community school coordinators, they are actively shaping policies and programs within the school and beyond it.

Volunteer experiences

We asked focus group participants to describe their best and worst experiences as a volunteer. Negative experiences were limited and ranged from being late for noon-hour supervision and managing difficult children to cleaning up vomit and fielding rude comments. Positive experiences were more plentiful and more detailed. One participant said that the question was hard to answer because *“it’s hard to put it all into words because it’s more than words, its feelings.”*

Among the positive experiences reported by focus group participants were the following:

- observing breakthroughs in literacy among children and adults;
- supporting people’s efforts to “make a difference” or to have a positive impact on children, schools, and communities;
- overcoming shyness;
- having a place to come when one is unhappy or having a bad day;
- being recognized in the community and being acknowledged and greeted by the children;
- knowing that other parents and community residents who drop in are comfortable in the school and can have coffee or discuss issues;
- knowing that volunteering is making a difference for children and families;
- seeing growth in the community school and in the community room;
- seeing the evolution of the volunteer program at the school as things get bigger and better;
- influencing students’ lives for the better;
- being thanked for the volunteer efforts at the school;
- being able to see the community in a positive light (e.g., one participant said that she could see the positive features of the community even though her son had bad experiences in the neighbourhood);
- seeing people use their volunteer experience as a springboard to other opportunities;
- gaining confidence in one’s self as a result of volunteering;
- seeing the positive things that go on in the school and wanting more of those experiences; and
- being seen as a role model for the community and being viewed as someone who could make positive change occur (e.g., one participant said two little girls came to her door to report that others were smoking because they thought she could stop it. While she could not prevent smoking, she was pleased that the children viewed her in this way).

What the volunteers said about their best experiences

“Having a kid, student, child...whether they’re in Pre-K or grade eight, saying hi to me with a smile on their face.”

“Knowing that I am helping the kids and helping the community – feeling like I have a voice, that I’m a valued member of the community and hopefully passing that on to my daughter.”

“I may yell out my door sometimes at those kids, but I know their names! They know I am serious and they know who I am and they will come and apologize or they will fix it or whatever, and that makes me feel good.”

Benefits of volunteering

For women in the Midtown and East Hill areas of Prince Albert, volunteering builds self-esteem and promotes self-improvement, educational achievement, and work readiness. The women identified various personal benefits, including greater confidence, a place to belong, a reason to set routines, and an opportunity to give of themselves. Importantly, their children, the schools, and the community also gained from their volunteering. The benefits were numerous, from channeling the energy of mischievous youngsters to creating a safe learning environment.

Benefits for volunteers and students

We asked focus group participants how they and their children had benefited from volunteering. The benefits they identified were:

- expanding and deepening personal connections to their children, other volunteers, and educators;
- the contacts and friends that they made while volunteering, which can open up opportunities including the chance to further one's education, employment possibilities, and social networks;
- a sense of accomplishment through making a difference and contributing to society;
- gaining confidence; developing skills; and improving self-esteem and self-worth;
- having something to look forward to; volunteering helps some women make it through rough days and provides a place to go for emotional support and meaningful work;
- countering some of the negativity that often exists in struggling communities and shedding some "light of goodness" to foster positive change; reducing depression (e.g., one participant reported that volunteering helped her to find out who she was and who she was meant to be);
- a sense of giving back to the community and being able to take part in the community;
- a place to feel comfortable and at ease; after years of volunteering, some participants reported that the volunteer program in their school was a home;
- developing good friendships and expanding one's circle beyond church and classmates; meeting interesting people;
- the satisfaction of helping someone without expecting anything in return;
- a place where volunteers feel good about themselves and are "wanted most of the time;"
- giving children a chance to do activities that might not be available without the volunteer program;
- providing a smiling, reassuring face to someone who might be in difficulty; feeling good as a result of making others feel good;
- happier husbands who see their wives busy and doing good things for the community;
- economic efficiency, (e.g., one focus group participant reported that she uses the TV, furnace, and lights less when she's at the school; another trades goods and services with other volunteers: "*I gave her some cat food. She gave me a high chair.*");
- being able to share in their own children's school lives and being close at hand (e.g., "*My daughter, she thinks it's pretty good that I'm coming here and that her mom's always around*");
- developing an extended family through the friendships and networks made while volunteering ("*So this way, you've got extra family, extended family, so they're not just friends, they're like family*");
- relief from the boredom of being at home;

- establishing new routines (e.g., one focus group participant reported that when the children go to school, she goes to her volunteer position and that volunteering gives structure and purpose to her day);
- being involved with one's children and grandchildren at the same school; and
- a positive impact on children (e.g., one focus group participant reported that her children feel happy because they see that she is accomplishing things, is happier, and feels good about herself).

Riverside Community School volunteers' comments on the benefits of volunteering

"First of all, it's helped with [the children's] self-esteem tremendously. It's helped with their grades improving. Their attendance is up."

"Just a sense of belonging to the school. We're really being involved in it."

"My mom and stepdad, they live away, and so now [my son] has lots of Aunties and Kokums."

"If we're doing good things in the school, if we're volunteering and good things are happening and good programs are happening and it's a very busy school and the kids all feel good about themselves and there's after-school programs and they're being kept busy and they're being taught responsibility and respect and if everything within these wall[s] is happy and busy and a learning experience and we're part of that, then it goes into the community."

"It helps to teach them respect for the neighbors and the community or respect for the cars in the parking lot, responsibility at home. Where there might not be very much respect or responsibility at home or at the store or down the block, if we can help to build it here in our volunteering hours and our process and things, then it's an outward motion from us going into the community with the students."

"Just being here gives you a feeling of self-worth, a better sense of self. You see the benefits – it's almost like a ripple effect. If you can change the tiniest little thing in something that you've done and it's so rewarding, it's such a nice feeling."

"It helps a lot with self-esteem, associating with people everyday, meeting new people, the opportunities you're given to help. You get a good feeling at the end of the day like you did something worthwhile. It helps a lot with the kids, to get them that extra boost."

"He [my pre-schooler] is talking so much better than [my nieces and nephews] are, but that's because he's always around so many people who are talking to him all the time."

Benefits to the school and the community

The volunteers and the community school coordinators identified the following benefits of school-based volunteering.

- Volunteers provide direct services to the community school, including creating displays for the school display case; giving presentations on the volunteer program; keeping the school organized (e.g., cleaning the cupboards, organizing the craft and bake sale to raise money for the school); holding a community supper.
- Volunteers make the school friendlier and more inviting, which makes people want to come around; seeing people volunteering helps others to get involved and/or feel more comfortable in the school.
- Volunteers give kids in the neighbourhood a good place to go.
- A strong volunteer program results in increased respect for the school from the community and from other community schools.
- Children are more at ease and confident because they know that a parent is nearby if they encounter difficulty or need support.

Focus group participants' comments on benefits of volunteering for the community

"They do so much that they are never thanked for. I think they matter in ways that are hard to put into words."

"I think it's like this little seed and the plant gets bigger and bigger and branches out and I think it has great effects. It's something that you might not see for a month or two months or a year."

"We each bring a different wisdom, different knowledge, different experiences."

"Showing to the kids that there are adults who care and who will take the time to be involved."

"The presence of volunteers at the school makes the 'whole ship' run more smoothly; the children are more at ease with the involvement of their parents and families. The administration has a greater range of people at the ground level ensuring the smooth running of the operation."

"Helping those kids that might get into mischief in the community stay out of mischief."

"I think in the more general sense it totally benefits the community that the school is here. The community knows that there's people who care at the school and that makes a big difference."

"I think it says something really big for Riverside, because I've never seen it at another school like this, that there's such a large group of adults that do dedicate a lot of their time to volunteering, to improving the lives of the kids."

"You always get fresh ideas or reinvent old ideas just by having people there in the school. You need all those to work together and to keep things running."

"The stuff I do...I know that it's just a small contribution, but it contributes to the daily running of the school. Whether you're answering the phone or doing photocopying, you know that it's helping someone in the school some way or another. Being able to be there to help a teacher or someone in here that needs help, you know in the long run it's all for the good of the school. So the contributions that I'm able to make by volunteering, just being part of the chain, it's cool."

- Volunteers create a safe environment where children can express their needs (e.g., being hungry, not having any socks, etc.).
- The volunteer program gives people a place to go if they need support (e.g., someone to talk to).
- Volunteerism leads to a “cycle of respect.” That is, it generates an attitude of caring towards the school which leads, in turn, to an attitude of caring about the neighbourhood. One participant said that, due to her volunteering, she has a cleaner home and yard. Her efforts inspire others to be equally caring.
- Volunteers encourage other people to get involved and offer their skills (e.g., teaching the children to make dream catchers).
- Volunteers interact with the wider community and let others know about the resources and programs in the school.
- Through the volunteer program, the children know other parents and can locate safe havens if they are in trouble; the volunteers look out for other children in the community, even those whose parents don’t volunteer.
- Volunteers develop connections with students, even when they go on to later grades.

Barriers to volunteering

We asked focus group participants what barriers they faced when volunteering at their community school. This did not yield much information, likely because most participants were active volunteers. One participant expressed the views shared by others when she said:

“I try hard to put a lot of effort into the things I do, to make sure I’m reliable and honest in the things that I do and try to be the best person I can when I’m representing others, so I don’t want to go and not be reliable. That wouldn’t help my purpose at all.”

However, another participant said, *“I am a stay-at-home mom, so my schedule is open and occasionally other commitments get in the way.”* Volunteering is sometimes interrupted by family commitments, emergencies, doctors’ appointments, caring for grandchildren or sick children, personal illness, or lack of transportation. One participant stated that she was sometimes questioned about why she put her time into the school and that the doubt expressed by others was a barrier, albeit a limited one, to her volunteering.

Supports for volunteers

The volunteers who participated in our focus groups reported that support for their volunteering came from several sources, most notably friends, family, church members, the teachers, the principal, and the community school coordinators. The volunteers were also a strong support for each other. Participants reported that they made strong friendships that were essential to their ongoing participation.

The support provided by the children was also cited as essential to volunteering. The children responded with enthusiasm to the volunteers, greeting them warmly, asking them when they would return. Knowing that the children valued their role was an important motivation for the continued involvement of the volunteers who participated in our focus groups.

When we asked our focus groups what supports would further enhance their volunteer experiences, they had a number of suggestions.

- Establish a talking group or sharing circle. This would allow volunteers to discuss and share issues and ideas.
- Provide a chance to “vent and visit,” and give volunteers a chance to talk about what is coming up with regard to volunteering.
- Hold a monthly get-together or appreciation night. This would serve two purposes; it would express appreciation for current volunteers and would welcome others who would like to come into the group.
- Offer transportation to volunteers. One participant suggested that those with cars could “*offer rides for people who want to come but can’t get here because they are 8 or 10 blocks away and it’s 40 below.*”
- Provide childcare for parents with young children so that those who cannot afford the childcare costs will still be able to volunteer.
- Encourage volunteers to continue their education (e.g., form study groups for people who are going back to school).
- Allocate funds to buy volunteers lunch when they perform extra work for the school.

Comments by a community school coordinator:

“I love the idea of celebrating and meeting socially. We should be appreciating each other because one never really knows how much time we have. We just get so busy and we just work and do whatever it takes to make the world go around and we just forget to say thank you to one another. And that’s a support in itself.”

Lessons Learned

We learned many lessons from this project. We discuss these below in two categories: (1) lessons for other organizations that are contemplating working with volunteers in low-income areas, and (2) lessons for researchers interested in doing further work on this topic.

Lessons for other organizations

Our research findings may be helpful to other organizations that are contemplating or planning to work with volunteers in low-income areas.

First, our findings suggest a few practical steps that such organizations can take. The participants in our research stressed the importance of a welcoming environment where their skills, abilities, and knowledge of the community are acknowledged and put to use. Such an environment can be created by ensuring that space is provided for volunteer meetings and community gatherings, making coffee available to volunteers, and allowing volunteers to bring their pre-school children with them when they volunteer or attend programming at the school. They also suggested a range of supports such as assistance with transportation, opportunities for volunteers to share ideas and discuss concerns, recognition for volunteers, etc.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the Prince Albert experience demonstrates that institutions in low-income neighbourhoods can become hubs of activity rather than unfriendly environments that are perceived as working against, rather than for, the community. The school coordinators who participated in our research recognized that the strength of the local community is the knowledge and experience

found among its residents – even those who may sometimes be thought of as “difficult” due to their lack of material resources. Coordinators found they were able to mobilize parents around the issue of childhood development and educational enhancement. As a result, the First Nations and the Métis members of the community are rebounding after years of colonization and oppression, which largely occurred through institutions like schools.

The two community schools in our study have been able to mobilize people because of the strong sense of identity and connectedness shared by parents in their neighbourhoods. Mobilizing them has also been possible because of the common problems they face and the common dreams they have for their children. The schools treat their volunteers as partners in program delivery. According to one community school coordinator, *“lots of people start their volunteering in the school because that’s the easiest place.”* After they develop confidence and gain new skills, many of these volunteers become involved in volunteer initiatives outside the school and in this way further enrich their communities.

Other important learnings from the research are discussed below.

Challenge traditional notions of volunteering

Volunteering has traditionally been viewed as an activity that the affluent perform for the benefit of economically-challenged individuals and communities. However, as we have seen in this study, volunteerism is central to life in low-income communities. The volunteer initiatives in the Midtown and East Hill areas of Prince Albert demonstrate that programs staffed by community-based volunteers are essential. It creates a sense of local ownership, which makes people more

willing to contribute their time to ensure a program’s success.

Build the community where the volunteers live

The Midtown and East Hill areas is home to many programs that rely on local volunteers. These programs have helped to revitalize community infrastructure. Local involvement of community members in school volunteer programs has strengthened the neighbourhoods around the schools. It has instilled the belief among residents that they are partners and co-owners of the schools’ volunteer programs and have valuable knowledge and skills to contribute. As a result, volunteerism has become a way of life in the Midtown and East Hill areas. The community school coordinators at the Riverside and the King George Community Schools define their role broadly and have readily supported a range of programs designed in collaboration with the community.

Support the volunteers along with the volunteer programs

The participants in the volunteer program identified the supports that they receive as an important factor in their involvement. While volunteers provide necessary and valuable support to the school, they also feel supported by the volunteer program. The volunteers work diligently to meet the needs of the programs, but also see the program as meeting their needs – for social support, meaning, and recognition, as well as for personal and professional development.

Create a friendly, welcoming environment

The research participants commented on the fact that the community schools were welcoming, friendly places that invited their participation. Many were particularly pleased that their younger children were

able to come to the school with them when they were volunteering. According to the volunteers at the Riverside Community School, an open and welcome school has the following characteristics: a non-judgmental environment, friendly faces that *really* see and hear you, verbal appreciation as well as gifts and tokens, and “someone there when you need him or her to help and guide you” (see Appendix 2, p.25).

Build the volunteer program on a theme that unites the community

Most families and communities want the best for their children. In low-income neighbourhoods, the safety and well-being of children is commonly identified as an issue of paramount importance. The volunteers that participated in our focus groups stated that they became involved in school-based programming to support their children. The school programs bring into play the parents’ concern and passion for their children’s well-being to motivate their engagement.

Lessons for researchers

The focus group approach to the research was successful. It provided a safe environment in which even the more reserved participants could share their views. In retrospect, however, we believe the process could have been improved in several ways. For example, the question about the connections between personal belief systems and volunteering was not well understood and did not generate as much discussion as we had hoped it would. Furthermore, some of the information we gathered was repetitive. The question on why the participants continued to volunteer generated almost the same responses as the questions on personal motivations and benefits. While some repetition was expected, differently-worded questions could have lessened this and possibly enriched our understanding of why people volunteer.

Focus Group, Special Session Feb. 23, 2006 – Riverside Community School

“I’ve been volunteering at the school for 7 years. And I love it...I started volunteering because of my children, I wanted to be involved in their lives, what they’re learning, get to know the staff. It’s been really beneficial to me...the school has sponsored me to go to so many classes that have to do with literacy.

I volunteer here to give back what I have learned, and it’s very sad for me to leave. [Note: The family was relocating.] Now my goal is to volunteer wherever I live close to, at the school. I am also going to school at the Saskatchewan Institute for

Applied Science and Technology taking an early childhood development program. Volunteering gives me the wisdom and the strength to go on getting a career.

You know when you’re a mom at home...and you come here, you feel like you can make a difference and you make friends and stuff. [The community school coordinator] always encouraged us to be leaders, to do things, nudging us in that direction. She realizes our gifts are before we even know it. “

~ School volunteer

With regard to how questions are posed, a better way to explore the importance of volunteering among low-income people would be to ask more general, less directive questions such as “Why do you volunteer?” or “What purpose does volunteering serve in your life?” Such open-ended questions might have elicited richer responses by the participants. During the research we tried to obtain information on the best and worst experiences of volunteering. These questions generated very specific answers, such as having to clean up after a sick child. Posing the questions differently (e.g., asking “What do you like best about volunteering? What do you like least about volunteering? What are the rewards and problems of volunteering?”) might have provoked more reflection. We also realized that although we tried to develop questions in plain language, the wording was sometimes too complex and could have been simplified for greater clarity.

Finally, because the involvement of children is central to the community school model, further research on school-based volunteering would benefit from including children in the research. Children’s input about the impact of volunteering by local residents could be gained by asking them to draw pictures showing what it is like for them to have their mother and neighbours volunteering in the school. The children’s perspective, combined with that of the volunteers and school coordinators, would have provided a more complete understanding of the value of volunteer programs in the community schools.

Conclusion

This study has shown that school-based volunteerism has a direct impact on the volunteers involved, their families, their schools, and the community at large. The women who participated in this study reported positive gains in self-confidence and an improvement in their skills. They received respect from their co-volunteers, the school, and the community at large. Their children benefited by seeing their mothers actively involved in the school; their behaviour and their capacity to achieve learning-related goals improved.

In *Being involved and making a difference: Empowerment and well-being among women living in poverty*, Hilfinger Messias, De Jong, & McLoughlin (2005) report on the findings of interviews with eight women living in poverty who were involved in community volunteering. Although the study was based in the U.S., their conclusions parallel the ones from this study:

Women living in the context of economic poverty are likely to experience material deprivation, social marginalization, alienation, insecurity, fear, and frustration. For the women who participated in this research, volunteer community involvement provided an alternative context – that of being active contributors to the community rather than marginalized recipients. In small but significant ways, these poor women became a part of the solutions to social problems rather than the source of those problems (p. 83).

The volunteer programs at the King George and Riverside Community Schools teach the participants many skills, including public speaking, constructively handling group dynamics, and time management. Participation in the programming organized for volunteers fosters self-confidence. It enables the participants to articulate their needs, perspectives, and visions for their community within and outside of volunteer meetings. Through the training they received, the volunteers in the two community schools we studied have moved from performing tasks such as cooking for school events and assisting with childcare to serving as community leaders active in civic development and crime-prevention programs who are working towards the betterment of their own lives, of their families, and that of their communities.

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Appendix 1: Principles of community education⁴

Self-determination

- Community members are involved in identifying local needs, issues and solutions.
- Parents, as their child's first and most important teacher, play a vital role in their child's education.

Self-help

- Independence is encouraged.
- Community education helps build the capacity of students, parents and community members to identify needs and plan how they will address those needs.

Leadership development

- Local leaders are identified and their input is sought.
- Leadership skills are developed among students, parents and community members.

Maximum use of resources

- Community resources, financial, physical and human, are used to the fullest to meet the diverse needs of students and their families.

Decentralization

- Services, events and activities are provided in the community, in easily accessible locations.

Integrated services

- Organizations and agencies collaborate to deliver services targeting students and their families.
- Whenever possible, services and programs are offered at the school.

Inclusiveness

- Programs, services and activities involve a broad cross-section of community residents.
- People from all age, income, gender, ethnic, religious and racial groups participate in activities.

Responsiveness

- Services and programs respond to the changing needs of the community.

Lifelong learning

- Learning begins at birth and continues throughout life.
- Learning opportunities are available throughout the community for residents of all ages.

⁴ Decker and Romney (1992) as quoted by Government of Saskatchewan (n.d.).

Appendix 2: Beyond the open door policy

Golden rules for parent/community involvement

1. Open and welcome school

- Welcoming Environment: Non-judgmental
- Having a place to go
- Friendly faces (they really see and hear you)
- Community to belong to – a second home
- Feeling important/needed/capable
- Verbal appreciation/gifts/tokens
- Having other believe in you so you can step out of your comfort zone
- Feeling like you can make a difference
- There is someone there when you need him or her to help and guide you

2. Something to do

- A chance to get involved with our children and other children's schooling
- A chance to give back
- Being needed to answer phone, helping teachers, helping children

3. Basic needs

- Community kitchen
- Bread depot
- Clothing depot
- Elders
- Open to all family members
- Hugs and pats on the back
- Embrace parents regardless of child's issues

4. Learning opportunity

- Opportunity for personal growth
- Adult classes
- Teaching opportunities
- Conferences/workshops

NOTES



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