

The Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis

Englewood Project September 2007-June 2008 Final Report

Executive Summary

In the summer of 2007, the Charles Marks Charitable Trust committed a grant of \$60,000 to the Institute for Psychoanalysis for the purpose of providing individual and group therapy to elementary school students who have been exposed to violence and loss in their community. Because exposure to violence, as victim or witness, has a traumatizing impact on children that can affect subsequent emotional development, this intervention is intended to ameliorate the effect of exposure to violence on vulnerable children. This report describes the effective intervention at School J* during the 2007-08 school year.

The initial goal of the project was to identify a school receptive to the goals of the grant and to work with the school principal and other personnel to implement the groups. This was a time-consuming but critically important aspect of the project that, in the long run, insured its success. In the midst of this process, an unanticipated crisis occurred as School J was one of the schools CPS decided to close. With this announcement, the students, teachers, and administrators at the school now were confronted with the loss of the school itself. For the school community, School J represented a safe space within a larger environment racked by violence, so the loss of the school had a very direct meaning in the context of the goals of this project.

Referrals for the groups came from teachers and administrators because of a history of loss or experience with violence as evidenced by behavior, social, or emotional problems. Three groups were initially established: Group 1 had four 6th grade boys; Group 2 had six 6th grade girls; and Group 3 included ten 6th and 7th grade students, 3 girls and 7 boys. A fourth group formed spontaneously after a shooting episode across from the school that a large group of older girls witnessed; this group had 14 7th and 8th grade girls. A total of 34 students participated in the groups.

Each group developed its own identity and style of expression, but consistently, the students in each group expressed awareness of the amount of violence in the neighborhood, the absence of safety, and the pervasive sense of danger in their daily lives. School J provided an oasis in which they felt protected from this ongoing assault and now they had to deal with the loss of this safe space. The students spoke of this in terms of the events in family life, their nighttime dreams about violence, and their despair as well as hope about the future.

To help with this experience, group leaders developed a photography project in which each student was given a disposable camera and encouraged to photograph meaningful people and places at the school. Everyone received an album, which represented a way to hold onto the opportunity to express their concerns and anxieties with the group and the positive, safe experience within the school. The report describes the process of the groups, responses of the students in detail and ends with a series of recommendations for future school interventions in the Englewood Project.

* The names of schools and school personnel have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Background

The Englewood neighborhood on Chicago's southwest side is a community in crisis. This predominantly African-American area had been in decline since the mid-1970s and perhaps reached its low point in 1991 when 81 murders took place between January and April. Today Englewood is making attempts to gentrify, but many of its buildings are in decay and over 40% of its residents live below the poverty line. Crime is rampant. Numerous community programs now operate in Englewood, funded by a mix of public and private sources; one of the latter is the Charles Marks Charitable Trust.

In the summer of 2007, the Marks Trust committed a grant of \$60,000 to the Institute for Psychoanalysis to provide individual and group therapy for 32 weeks (the length of the academic year) for a total of 40 children at a primary school in Englewood. The targeted service population was to be children in grades K through 5 who have been affected by violence and loss in their community—either directly as victims of violent crime or as witnesses or innocent bystanders. Exposure to violence, as victim or witness, has a traumatizing impact on children and the goal of this grant is to provide services that help ameliorate the psychological impact of exposure to violence.

Identification of the School

In September 2007 representatives of the Institute attended a meeting hosted by the Instructional Officer of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Cluster 5 Area 14. At that time the Institute was asked to participate in the newly formed partnership between the Englewood schools and a variety of city, community social service, not-for-profit, educational, and mental health organizations. Other meetings followed.

During this period, the Institute became acquainted with Ms. A, principal of School J. Ms. A knew of the Institute because Barr-Harris had provided crisis intervention support in the past after the killing of a School J student. Ms. A stated that gun violence was a daily experience for the students and staff of School J; during the past academic year, the neighborhood around the school had experienced continuous shootings and 10 killings. She explained that the school served as a “refuge and safe haven” from shootings, both during and after the regular school hours. Ms. A and her assistant principal are both trained counselors with the ability to be reflective, introspective and psychologically oriented. These administrators expressed interest in working with the Institute to provide therapeutic and consultative services to their students and staff. Tentative plans for the project were discussed.

Modification of the Project Goal

In January 2008 the Chicago Public School system announced its intention to close School J (grades 4 through 8) at the end of the school year. They planned to combine it with its feeder school, School D (grades K through 3), to form a new entity, School M, in September 2009.

Students from the merged schools would be grandfathered into the new magnet school for the first year, but they would have to perform at magnet school levels in order to remain enrolled. It was feared that many former School J students would not be able to achieve or maintain such proficiency and likely be relocated once again to another school. A *Chicago Tribune* article at the time cited that in the 2007 Illinois State Achievement Tests, only 44.8 percent of School J students met or exceeded state standards compared with 71.4 percent of School D students. Another concern related to the merger was the stipulation that faculty and staff of School J and School D were not guaranteed that they would be hired to work at the new magnet school.

Announcement of the planned closing and merger had a devastating effect on the students and faculty of School J, a school that was still recovering from the recent death of two students and the victimization of a third in a sexual predator case. This followed a series of losses the school community had suffered over the prior 3 years. As a result, students and faculty were faced with another grieving experience that seemed part of an endless and protracted mourning process.

With these new developments at the school, Ms. A requested that the project be expanded beyond its original mission of addressing the impact of crime and violence on the students, to also address the impact of the closing of the school. She requested that the Institute work with the most vulnerable students to assist them in dealing with the loss of the stable environment provided by the school and the uncertainties about their future. The assumption was that this current loss would evoke feelings about previous losses for the students, so that addressing the present loss would inevitably lead to other losses and thereby help with the cumulative impact of these traumas.

Ms. A also requested that Institute project staff provide consultation to her and the teachers because she was concerned about how they, themselves, would deal with the loss of the school and the symbol it had become for the children and the community. She was hopeful that through consultation the Institute staff could provide a “container” that would help teachers with their feelings of anger. Without such support, she feared those feelings might be acted out in the classroom or in the teachers’ relationships with the students.

The Institute viewed this situation as a real crisis for the Englewood community and concurred with Ms. A’s reasoning about the need to provide psychological support for teachers and staff as well as the children at School J. The Institute sought approval from the Marks Trust to use a portion of the aforementioned grant money for a brief crisis intervention program to help alleviate some of the emotional turmoil caused by the CPS decision. The Institute viewed this initiative as an important way to build trust and good will within the Englewood community as well as to provide tangible help to those in need.

Service Delivery Planning

In late February, School J principal Ms. A sent Institute Director David Terman a memo stating, “We are ready when you are,” and the project moved into the next phase. Erika Schmidt, LCSW, the Institute’s Director of Clinical Services for Children, served as overall project coordinator.

Project staff included Ed Kaufman, LCSW; Nancy Marks; Heather Patay; and Sharon Williams, LCSW. Mr. Kaufman is Director of the Institute's Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy Training Program (CAPPT) and Ms. Williams is a therapist at Barr-Harris Children's Grief Center.

Over the next two months, this group, except Ms. Williams who joined the project later, met with Ms. A and her staff for planning purposes. In the course of several meetings, they decided on a plan for teachers/staff and students to meet separately in homogenous groups, organized by grade level. Teachers' participation was voluntary. Students' participation was determined by teacher recommendation of students they assessed as benefiting from being in a short-term group. The group focus was on children who had experienced violence and loss and were suffering from the effects of these traumas. Scheduling of the groups had to be flexible, determined by the organization of the school day since the meeting time was carved out of the regular school day.

Though the project staff was eager to begin the groups, Ms. A requested that the groups with teachers, which would begin prior to the groups for students, not begin until April, after spring vacation, because feelings were "running too high" regarding the school closing. She felt that teachers would not be able to engage in a group process because they were so preoccupied with questions about their own careers. Institute staff believed that the groups might be a place to address these concerns, but respected the principal's decision about this. It was instructive for this project, and future projects, to recognize the importance of relationship-building with the principal and significant figures within the school structure.

Teacher Groups

After spring vacation, three group meetings were held with teachers, organized by grade level and scheduled during their planning time or when they were "released" from the classroom by arrangement with the principal. The teachers spoke of their anger and confusion about the closing of the school. Like the students, they, too, felt betrayed and unsure about their future. Many expressed a wish to stay with the principal which hindered their ability to move forward to explore job options. The possibility of setting up some time for the teachers to work together on job applications was considered with the principal as a way to address the teachers' difficulty. After 3 meetings, the teachers elected not to continue the group meetings, presumably because they did not want to open up the feelings about the loss of their jobs and uncertainty about the future.

However, the teachers were very interested in talking about the students and assisting project staff in identifying students for the groups. In this task, they were helpful and forthcoming and later, when the groups were underway, they provided further assistance and sought out project staff to discuss particular students.

In total, the teachers' groups included ten classroom teachers, one special education classroom teacher, eight teacher assistants, and two other school personnel. Throughout this process, project staff met with the principal and assistant principal to discuss the progress of the groups and to assess and plan the ongoing work with teachers and students.

Student Groups

The process of forming the groups for students involved referral from the teachers and brief individual or group interviews with each student prior to the beginning of the groups. Because the groups were meeting for only a few sessions (since the school year would be ending shortly), consent from parents was not necessary. Ms. A was skeptical that consent could be easily obtained because of the parents' general tendency to remain uninvolved with school programs. The teachers referred about 40 students. Then this list was revised by the principal, eliminating some students and adding others, based on her assessment of the student's need and the student's availability for intervention.

A familiar teacher brought the students to the screening interview with Institute staff, but the students had not been told the purpose of this interview or anything about the groups. The teacher remained in the room, serving as a familiar and trusted presence. The teachers later added information about the students and their families. The therapist explained to each student who they were, why they were there, and reassured students that they were concerned about their welfare and understood something about the nature of the tragedies they had experienced. They also acknowledged the questions and concerns students faced with the closing of their school. The therapists described their own experiences working with other kids in other schools. They presented themselves as having helped other kids deal with difficult situations by helping them feel less fearful, have fewer frightening thoughts and dreams, and feel more in control. Each student was invited to participate in a group for the next four weeks, the duration of the school year.

From this pool of students, 3 groups were organized. Group 1, run by Ed Kaufman, served four 6th grade males and met for 4 sessions. Group 2, run by Sharon Williams, had six 6th grade girls and met for 5 sessions. Group 3, co-led by Nancy Marks and Heather Patay, consisted of ten 6th and 7th grade students, 3 females and 7 males, and they met for 5 sessions. In addition, a fourth group of 14 7th and 8th grade female students was initiated in response to a crisis. This group started when, at the end of the second week of the groups, the project staff and students were leaving the building as a shooting took place. The library specialist had been preparing to take a group of girls on a community service field trip. Ms. Patay met with this group in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, and was able to intervene in this timely way, and, at their request, she continued to meet with this group of girls until the end of the school year.

Group 1

“If there were no gangs, no guns, and no violence, people in the neighborhood would be ‘dancing in the street.’”

The boys in Group 1 began by talking about the violence they had been exposed to, cataloguing who had been shot and what had happened to them or family members or someone else they knew. This became a competitive “retelling” of stories of violence and loss. In the camaraderie of these conversations, one boy, who had been shot at himself while riding his bike, introduced his feelings about liking his neighborhood, except for the violence. Everyone in the group agreed that if there were no gangs, no guns, and no violence, people in the neighborhood would be “dancing in the street.”

In the next session, the boys demonstrated dance steps to each other, suggesting that the group had become a safe space for them in which they could engage each other in playful ways, temporarily suspending their anxiety about the unsafe environment. In this poignant moment, the boys expressed their hopes for the future through the mode of dancing. As they anticipated leaving the school, the boys expressed much uncertainty about their future after being at the “best school” they had ever attended. Yet, they also shared some ideas about their aspirations for themselves. This group very quickly achieved a sense of community and sharing.

Group 2

“I don’t want to leave you. I don’t want the joy to end.”

The girls in Group 2 similarly shared their sense of connection to the school, each other and the community, and they too noted that except for the violence, they recognized positives about the area. They talked of the various losses they had experienced, including the loss of their school, and were able to use the group to think about this most recent loss. The discussions of loss led them to also talk of sexuality, with one girl’s association being that she would not want to bring a child into this violent world. These strong emotions could become overwhelming and anxiety producing, but they were able to use the leader’s assistance in managing their distress through games, music, and art. As did the boys, the girls fantasized about a different kind of world where there was no violence, wishing that soldiers could be sent to stop violence in Englewood as well as Iraq. With the ending of the group, the students asked if they could bring their friends to the final meeting to share in the rich group experience. The girls ended the last session by singing.

Group 3

The girls spoke about the relatives who had been killed, the Facebook memorials, flower altars, prayers, and obituaries, the ways they have of remembering. The boys spoke about fearing the night, darkness, sleep, and garages because that is where things burn and ‘you can get lost’.

Group 3, the only group that mixed girls and boys, was a larger group with two leaders. Both boys and girls addressed violence and loss, but approached these topics in different ways. The girls spoke more openly about loss and sadness, whereas the boys focused on danger, the places where violence lurked, and the steps they took to cope with fear.

The girls reported the violent events that occurred that spring, but the boys did not bring up these events though they did not deny them. The girls elaborated on the ways they remembered people they had lost; the boys spoke of dangerous places and times, like garages and nighttime, when they felt vulnerable. In the course of the group sessions, several members experienced violence directly in that the young brother of a friend was killed in an accident, a sister was shot in the stomach, and a garage in the neighborhood burned down. They brought up these episodes in the group and tried to make sense of them. This subject matter made both boys and girls anxious, leading to some restlessness and need for the leaders to help them manage the arousal. This group also readily began to cohere and the students’ attachment to the leaders was evident.

Group 4

“The only safe place is School J. Danger is everywhere. You can get shot even in your own front room.”

The crisis intervention group, Group 4, began on the basis of a direct, shared experience of violence. Ms. Patay happened to be in the parking lot when the shooting occurred, so she was able to offer crisis intervention in the immediate aftermath of this incident. The girls in this group were very open about their fear, distress, and uncertainty about safety. They felt that School J offered the only safety. As one girl stated, *“It’s not even safe under your own bed because I know someone who was shot in her own room under her bed.”* They described a sense of a foreshortened future. One student said, *“I might as well have a baby now because I don’t know if I’ll be alive to have a baby later.”* These students expressed some anger at the group leader. They demanded, *“You here for what? You going to save us? You going to take the bullet for me? If you take the bullet, then you are dead and what good are you then?”*

Through a discussion of dreams, these students conveyed their sense of the world as a dangerous place where they felt quite exposed and vulnerable, where they attempted to hold onto some hopefulness, but had difficulty maintaining confidence about this. A girl reported a frightening dream: *“I was being chased by a man in a black coat. He was everywhere and I ran. I ran and couldn’t run home, but I did find a tree. He was trying to grab me and I climbed the tree and then he could not grab me.”* These chase dreams were prototypical and in the other dreams, as in this one, the place of safety was available but not necessarily the sturdy “vessel” that could contain the danger.

The “Farewell to School J” Photography Project

As the four groups began, the leaders struggled with the problem of how to help the students with the current loss of the school, its symbolic representation as a place of safety within a treacherous, violent world, and the past losses that were now evoked once again. While recognizing the sadness and anger about this loss, they also wanted to provide a means to help them hold onto positive aspects of their school experience at School J. The “Farewell to School J” Reminiscence Photography Project became a way to do this. Each student created a photo album as a way to create and retain memories of school and the important people there. To achieve this, the project provided each student with a disposable camera and encouraged them to photograph the school, their friends, the teachers, the classroom, and other important people and places.

The goal was to facilitate conversations about the thoughts and feelings associated with loss and it modeled a strategy for dealing with these thoughts and feelings. This process became a very positive experience in and of itself as the students, with their teachers’ support, took pictures and were able to individually consider what meant the most to each of them. Students discussed in the groups what they had photographed and why, thereby explaining what the photos captured about their experiences. The film was developed and each student was given a photo album, which became a tangible way of demonstrating how to remember important people, places, and experiences. A number of them commented, *“I’ll have this forever.”*

The Group Process

Each of these groups worked a little differently, depending on the dynamics of the group and its leader. However, a number of general observations about the groups can be made.

- The students quickly formed an attachment with the project staff. Their “hunger” for adult contact was evident in their behavior and verbalizations.
- The groups developed a sense of identity early on so that students had a sense of belonging to the group.
- With little prompting, there was much material about exposure to violence, death, loss, and disruptions. There was some talk about dreams, in which these themes were prevalent.
- Though there was much talk about this distressing material, students maintained defenses about their feelings and vulnerability, sometimes by talking about it in terms of other people and sometimes by expressing anxiety through behavior (moving around, restlessness, or active games). The students manifested significant difficulty integrating these experiences with emotional responses.
- The photography project provided an excellent means for helping the students organize their emotions about loss.
- The girls and boys expressed their sense of vulnerability differently, along gender lines, with the girls quickly moving to talk about sexuality, rape, and early pregnancy, while the boys responded to it with discussions about fighting and prowess.
- All students conveyed a sense of uncertainty about the future, sometimes complicated by shifting, unstable family constellations. Unpredictability and lack of control over their own fate was a recurring theme for most of the students.
- The students expressed tentative hope about finding a sense of safety and protection, mobilized by the experience within the group.
- The termination process reflected the students’ difficulty with endings and loss as well as their efforts to cope with it. Students denied awareness of the group ending, some students wished to share the “goodies” from the group with others, and they expressed pleasure in their photo albums.

Recommendations

On the basis of this experience, the following suggestions should be taken into account in planning future projects.

1. The school culture does not necessarily match the clinical culture and requires that project staff be willing to work within the school community, with its schedules, calendars, and time boundaries.
2. The establishment of a good alliance with the administrators directly responsible for implementing the project is critical. It may take time to develop trust, understand the needs of the school, and work out goals for the project. The time spent in meeting with administrators prior to the beginning of work with students is time well-spent and necessary for the success of a project.
3. Project staff will need to continue to maintain relationships with administrators and the teachers and develop a means for regular communication, possibly through meetings during each school visit. This person provides an opportunity for ongoing feedback and assessment.
4. In communities such as Englewood, staff should expect to allocate time for unanticipated but important interventions, such as the one that occurred in the aftermath of the shooting at School J. The ability to respond quickly, directly and effectively in the midst of a crisis like this demonstrates the utility of the project's underlying values and goals.
5. Project staff should be prepared, to the extent possible, to intervene in crisis situations within the inner city.
6. The groups for students should be single gender at the middle-school level.
7. Students will need opportunities within the group to deal with the anxiety generated by group discussions. This often gets expressed in behavior and action, so the group leaders should consider ways to assist the students to mediate their anxiety.
8. Having food and snacks for each meeting is a concrete expression of the willingness and interest in providing help that is meaningful for students.
9. The project should run for an academic year in order to have adequate time to develop strong, trusting relationships and to deal more thoroughly with the emotional aspects of exposure to loss and violence.
10. The grant should support time for project staff to debrief and to plan and to offer each other collegial consultation.

Looking Ahead

The Englewood Project at School J was a time-limited intervention that occurred in the midst of the unanticipated crisis of the closing of the school. In these difficult circumstances, the project therapists were able to assist both school personnel and 34 students in dealing with this present loss and, through this focus, also address the ongoing exposure to violence, danger, and loss. The project staff's responsiveness to their feelings and recognition of the significance of the loss demonstrated an acceptance of emotions and conveyed that these feelings can be dealt with openly. Using the photography project, the students were offered a model for a way to deal with loss. Even though this was an unusual situation, it is clear from the responsiveness of students and staff that this project can be usefully replicated in other settings to help ameliorate the traumatic impact of exposure to violence and loss.

Project Staff

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