

# **An Integrated Programme from the Students’ Perspective: The Bronte Creek Project**

– Jennifer Jupp

During the final months of my year at teachers’ college, my decision to avoid classroom teaching was a difficult one. I was met with skepticism from various friends and family members:

“Didn’t you go to teachers college to teach?”

“Are you going to keep monkeying around with this camp stuff?”

Amidst the never-ending questions and self doubt, I had an overwhelming feeling that there was something out there that for me, reached beyond the classroom in terms of flexibility of teaching/learning and its meaningful life experiences for students. I found what I was looking for in the Bronte Creek Project run by the Halton Board of Education.

The Bronte Creek Project (BCP) has been called the “grand-daddy” of integrated packaged programmes in Ontario and is now into its 14<sup>th</sup> year of operation. Doug Jacques and John McKillop are the teachers at the two BCP rural campsites. They are assisted by Jennifer Jupp (me) and Allison Myers respectively.

For me, the Bronte Creek Project means integration of four grade eleven subjects (environmental science, guidance leadership, phys. ed., and personal lifestyle management). It means freedom from regular classroom timetables and schedules. It also gives high school students across the Halton Board an environmental leadership experience as they facilitate the highly acclaimed “Earthkeepers” and “Novice Day” programs to grades four and five students from area schools. Furthermore, it takes place at an isolated outdoor education site that gives us privacy and high teaching impact. This impact is also high since the students at each site have only two teachers and we the teachers have one class for a full semester.

If one reads through the extensive documentation on the program, the packages sent to students and the curriculum information, one learns that John McKillop and Doug Jacques have developed a unique approach to integration. They believe that having a focus is critical – in this case the focus is the community’s work with elementary children across the Halton Board. The facilitation of the Earth Education programmes provides much of the framework of the BCP. Students are given leadership theory and subsequently “try it out” with the elementary students. Each program is debriefed extensively from a variety of standpoints and voila! one of its operating principals is in part satisfied – it is experiential.

The essence of the Bronte Creek Project lies in the experience of the high school students. In an effort to qualify and further to report this experience I set out on a quest to contact past and present BCP students. I wanted to know whether a student’s experience in the BCP plays any role in life beyond the Project. After many telephone calls and out-of-service numbers, I made contact with ten BCP graduates. The ‘interviews’ were framed by four main questions: 1) What experience did you gain, if any, through facilitating the Earth Ed. Programs? 2) Comment on this program compared to regular high school 3) What are your thoughts and feelings about ‘community’ with respect to the BCP? and 4) Do you feel the program has changed you in some way? How?

Whenever possible I had a cassette recorder running throughout the interviews. I found that we easily forgot about the recorder and often about the questions! I was astounded with the breadth of these students’ experiences – my questions didn’t begin to cover them!

I am left with pages of transcribed conversation from the hearts of these young people. Four main areas emerge: Authenticity, empowerment, responsibility and personal relations. With these classifications for a framework, I will share with you the students' experiences of the Bronte Creek Project.

## **Authenticity**

I was the worst student when I was in regular high school.... I probably didn't do homework for about three years in high school just because I need more of that immediate motivation to do it. I couldn't see the point of it. I didn't see it as a valid responsibility whereas here, the washhouse has to be done and that's my responsibility and if it's not done and someone is going to get back to me right away. They're not going to change my mark but you know that it wasn't done properly. (Todd: Sem. 2, 1991)

In order to get everything done- the whole system running- kitchen, props in etc. requires the whole team working together...just like a soccer team. If the goal goes in, it's not the goalies fault, it's the whole team's fault 'cause why did it get passed to center half in the first place?'(Andrea: Sem.2, 1991)

Everyday life at "school" for students in the Bronte Creek Project requires a community effort. Meals are prepared each day by a crew of ten students. Props, buildings and washrooms require maintenance or cleaning and few tasks can be completed by one person alone. This reality and the immediate success versus failure feedback adds to the authenticity of their "school work".

Problem solving is learned from a textbook in regular school. It's real here. (Ken: Sem. 2, 1989)

You put into practice what you learned...like we spent however long talking about leadership, talking about groups...and then we took that one step further and we actually put it into practice...Instead of sitting in math class for 76 minutes and walking out at the end saying 'I don't understand BODMAS' (Order of Operation), here we talk about leadership and go out and do it. (Jim: Sem. 2, 1994)

Every student in this study spoke of the practical aspect of the program. Theory is taught and learned for a reason – to use it. A Bronte Creek student will not have a single day's notetaking not used in practice by the end of the semester.

The [elementary] kids have one chance to enjoy Novice Day, like it's easy for us to say 'well it's okay, I'll do it better next time'. The kids don't have a next time so we have to pull it off for them the best we can every single time or they'll lose that experience. (Darren: Sem. 1, 1993)

If you don't do it right, it's failed; it's not a blip on a screen somewhere, it's on the kids faces, success versus failure. (Darren: Sem. 2, 1993)

It's almost like you are a parent and you have fifteen kids and there's not a teacher around to do it...They're your kids; if they don't eat anything it's your responsibility and you have to get them back to the bunkhouse at night. (Andrea)

The roughly eight weeks of Earth Education Programs (affectionately called Kids' Days) are the number one factor in making the Bronte Creek experience authentic for the high school students. During Kids' Days, the teachers on site become program facilitators whose main role involves keeping the day running smoothly and handling large issues such as decisions during torrential downpours and emergencies. The Bronte Creek students deliver the Earth Education Program. They are the teachers and counselors. They feel completely responsible for the program delivery and therefore for its success. Furthermore, they become the main caregivers for the elementary children during their overnight stay. In essence, the high school students are doing front line work with younger people who need them. The results and consequences of their efforts or lack thereof, are immediate and real. Every Bronte Creek student knows that the BCP relied on the Earth Education Programs for finances and program structure. A poor experience on a Kids' Day can lead to a loss of that elementary school as a "customer". This reality seems to reach beyond marks on a page.

Finally, many of the students commented on the setting as a contributing factor in making the experience "more real".

How can you teach people about the environment and being connected to the earth, when you're in a classroom with fluorescent lights buzzing? (Steve: Sem. 1, 1990)

For the students of the Bronte Creek Project, this type of schooling is more authentic than traditional high school – their responsibilities reach beyond work habits and marks. The theory is put to practical use and the outdoor setting makes them feel alive and connected to their subject matter.

## **Empowerment**

I learned more than I had anticipated about each student with respect to motivation and empowerment. The program seems to help students feel better about themselves. They become proactive with respect to the environment and to their futures.

BCP really focused my ideas- When you have something that you believe in, you get more inner strength to go out and change things...It's whoever gets to these kids first who's gonna make a big impact on how they view the environment. (Steve)

Before BCP I didn't care much for the environment...[BCP] helped me with my career planning...Now I want to go into architecture to renovate homes to make them more environmentally sound and I'm in civil engineering as a first step right now.(Rene: Sem. 1, 1993)

I came here and my head was all cluttered and I didn't know where I wanted to go and you know while you're sitting in the woods, it's amazing how something like that can lead you in the right directions. I could not do that looking at the four walls....

This place has given me time to focus towards my life so I can prepare myself for that I want. (Joanne: Sem 2, 1994)

Other students reported finding out that they are likable individuals, that they felt accepted by a group of peers for the first time in their lives, that they could drop the person they were trying to be to be who they really were and that they were worth more than they had previously believed.... Wow! These changes to self in all cases helped students in their lives beyond the Bronte Creek Project.

## **Responsibility**

Other changes in the students interviewed that reached beyond their BCP semester were in the area of responsibility. Once again, I chose four from dozens of quotes saying similar things.

My realizing how kids reacted to me made me realize my responsibility as a role model. I now remember my role-modeling role all the time. (Peter)

I learned all this responsibility. I don't have to get drunk to have fun and I won't get in a car if I've been drinking...my parents put all this trust in me...my parents love the Bronte Creek Project...they see so much change in me. (Andrea)

If you don't take charge, nothing will ever happen. You can relate that to everyday life. (Steve)

Being in BCP put everything in perspective...I have different priorities in my life now. Getting drunk on a Friday night is not a priority; other things are.... I lead an environmental group at my school.... You know? Different things are important now. (Darren)

You learn that the present is important. What you leave behind is not as important as how you lead your life now. (Steve)

These students felt responsible for their own actions. They feel that they are responsible members of society. They feel responsible for the future of the planet. And, they enjoy this responsibility. It makes them feel in charge of their lives in positive ways. I believe that this feeling of responsibility is due to several factors. The authenticity of the program, especially on Kids' Day allows the high school students to experience true responsibility. Success during and following these days leads the students to feeling positive about responsibility. I think responsibility is then no longer something to be feared, but rather something to be sought. They feel confident and empowered – ready to take more responsibility in their lives outside the BCP.

## **Personal Relations**

All interviewed students reported major changes in their relations with teachers, parents, peers, and employers.

I used to be really judgmental, looking at a person and deciding whether or not they were what I was into.... I think that came from school. (Joanne)

(Jim speaking with Joanne) Ya, you had to be careful who you made friends with 'cause if you made a mistake, first if all you'd be a geek or a loser or something. (Jim)

They [parents] can see results that they've never seen before. Like my dad would get mad and all of a sudden I'd be saying, 'let's talk about it'. Like I used to yell back and what's that solving? (Andrea)

We learned to deal positively with outcasts regardless of the circumstances. (Ken)

I found that I'm a pretty likeable guy.... [BCP] made me realize what I can do in a group instead of sitting there. I became sort of assertive in groups so things would get done instead of arguing. (Peter)

I used to even scare myself when I'd get angry...like Angry angry.... It gets back to the slowing things down instead of blowing up and completely losing control.... I now go, 'okay why is this person making me so mad, like what is it that's happening that's making me so angry?' (Jim)

While I realize that these changes may seem to be merely a result of the normal maturation process for these young people, in each instance quoted here, the student states that he or she feels the Bronte Creek Project was an instrumental factor in the "life changes." Mentioned above.

As with most research, during the course of interviews and writing, many other questions were raised in my mind and in later interviews I began asking, "How does this happen? What aspect of the program is helping to elicit these changes?" I'd like to share with you a few responses to this question.

You're put in a situation with twenty people and you're with them five days a week for practically the whole day and you have to get along...Since you do things together you either hate him or you get along with him and find out who he really is. (Andrea)

We spend so much time with each other that you can't help but learn who people really are...their true selves, not just who they try to portray. (Joanne)

At the beginning we do things that make everybody look stupid. It sorta helps shed your inhibitions 'cause everybody's doing it...People stop wearing make up, you can show up looking 'horrible'. Like you would never show up at school like that or people would think you're completely off your bean, but people come like that and we still realize that they're cool and stuff. (Todd)

The Bronte Creek Project provides students with an opportunity to work with their peers in a unique fashion. They have high exposure to each other which allows their true

selves to emerge over time. Teamwork is essential. It pushes their limits with respect to peer relations. They need to “get along” and work together effectively – to drop stereotypes and divisional behaviours. Furthermore, they are given many opportunities to feel success. This leads to empowerment and higher self-confidence.

One day not long ago, Doug Jacques and I were standing watching our twenty students work through an activity in small groups. I noted how much one particular acutely introverted student was contributing to the group.

“It’s hard to believe he’s the same guy as on September seventh, eh?” I said.

“Some people just need encouragement, space and community”, Doug responded.

I think that about says it. The Bronte Creek Project gives students encouragement, space and community in a unique format of outdoor experiences and leadership opportunities. Students find the program authentic; they feel empowered and motivated; they become more responsible young adults and their personal relations improve substantially.

The classroom plays an essential role in our educational system. I believe students need classroom experience. I also believe there is a place for integrated programs – a much-needed and often misunderstood place. May we always listen to the students when we make important changes in our educational system.

*Many thanks to Ken, Rene, Steve, Darren, Peter, Andrea, Todd, Joanne, and Jim for your time, commitment, and compassion.*

Jennifer Jupp (JJ) brings great energy and insight to the Bronte Creek Project at Rocky Ridge Ranch. During the summer she brings those same qualities to Arowhon, where she runs the camp’s leadership programme.

*Pathways: Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education, 1995, 7(4), pp. 19-23.*