

DR. STIRLING MCDOWELL  
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FOR  
RESEARCH INTO TEACHING



**TEACHING AND LEARNING  
RESEARCH EXCHANGE**

**Community Schools  
Transitions Support  
Project**

Terry Cratty, Belinda Daniels-Fiss, Sharon Laflamme,  
Ben Garchinski and Beverley Hanson

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Research Coordinator  
Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation  
2317 Arlington Avenue  
Saskatoon SK S7J 2H8  
Telephone: 1-800-667-7762 or (306) 373-1660

# Research Goals

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The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not a continued connection between at-risk students and a prominent figure from their elementary school would help facilitate for those students greater academic success, a smoother transition to high school and a feeling of belonging in high school.

There were three stated objectives for this study:

1. To keep at-risk students in the school system and ease the transition to high school.
2. To help at-risk students succeed at school, develop a greater sense of belonging, and reduce feelings of isolation.
3. To provide high school teachers with an increased insight into at-risk students.

Throughout the research, the project coordinator, Terry Cratty, met at regular intervals with the at-risk students and staff members involved in the project. At meetings involving teachers and staff from the high school, students who were having difficulties were identified and strategies to assist them were discussed. Meetings between the project coordinator and students involved in the project focused on discussions of the students' feelings in regard to how school was going, their personal achievement, and the goals they had set for each semester. As well, the project coordinator helped the students identify and connect with supports available at the high school.

The students also met together twice as a group to share their experiences with one another and to reconnect as a group.

The project was important in that it sought to improve teaching and learning by addressing the problems at-risk students, particularly those of Aboriginal ancestry, in adjusting to high school after leaving elementary school. Most current programming for these students seemed to focus on how high schools could help ease this transition, whereas this research explored the contribution to smooth transitions that elementary schools could make as well.

# Motivation for Engaging in Action Research: Terry Cratty

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The idea for the project came out of my experiences as the grade 7 and 8 teacher at St. Michael Community School in Saskatoon. I had observed for myself and heard from parents and former students about the difficulties that students from our school experienced when they entered high school. Many students reported feeling isolated and intimidated by the number of students and the size of the school. I became convinced that these feelings came as a result of having to make a transition from a school of under 200 students to a school of over 1300 students. The majority of my students were also Aboriginal and, therefore, a visible minority in their new school. More needed to be done to make the transition of these students to high school more successful. They needed to feel like they belonged and were an important part of their new school community.

# Description of Action Research

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## PREPARATORY HIGH SCHOOL VISIT

The research began in May when I met with the counselor and the learning assistance teacher from E.D. Feehan High School to discuss class scheduling. At this meeting, we set up a program for each student of the six students expected to make the transition from St. Michael's to E.D. Feehan next fall. We also discussed some of the students' backgrounds and issues that might arise.

I also met with the administrators from the high school to go over some of the planning for the project and what it would look like in the fall.

Near the end of the current school year, I sent home with students explanations about the research that would be conducted and had parents sign permission forms. I also discussed the project with parents when they came to the school for the grade eight farewell. All the parents with whom I spoke thought the project was a good idea, and all those parents whose children were going to attend E.D. Feehan High School signed permission forms.

## FIRST HIGH SCHOOL VISIT

I met for the first time with students at their grade nine orientation on August 27th. I sat with them in the general assembly and helped them each find their classes. I also introduced them to some of the teachers and staff at the school. After their classes, I talked with them about how the day went and how they felt about the school. The students reported that they felt the day was a good experience.

While the students were in class, I met with Belinda and we went over class schedules and planning for the year. To help Belinda build a connection to three of the girls, we transferred them into the same English class, which was taught by Belinda. After our meeting, we sought out the other teachers of these students and discussed the project with each of them.

I returned to the high school one week later to follow up with the students and see how their first week had gone. I began the day with Belinda and then went to invite each of my former students to come to a lunch at 12:00.

In period one and two, I met with some former students and helped with the scheduling of one student who had arrived unexpectedly at the high school that morning.

In period three, I co-taught with Belinda a lesson in ELA 90 to the class that contained three of my former students. After class, my former students met for a pizza lunch with myself and Belinda and talked about summer and school.

After this meeting, I was transferred from St. Michael Community School to St. Joseph High School. This move altered some of what was to happen in the research, but as I will discuss later, the integrity of the project remained intact.

## SECOND HIGH SCHOOL VISIT

I returned to E.D. Feehan High School two weeks later on September 17th. The morning was spent meeting with each of the students individually. We discussed how things were going in school, both academically and socially, and also how things were going at home. Each student had areas of concern. I talked with them individually about strategies and role-playing, and made sure they knew how to go and ask for help from teachers and others in the school. Two of the students also brought up concerns about other students and things that they thought someone should know.

At the end of the meetings with the students, I had recommended that one go and speak to one of the school counselors. With permission from this student, I set up a meeting and talked with the counselor about the issues that the student had raised. A time was set up for the counselor and student to meet.

I also had a talk with one of the teachers about a student who was having difficulty in class and was afraid to ask him for help. I discussed the student's problems, informing the teacher that the student would come and ask for help but had wanted me to mention her problems before she came. The teacher said that he hadn't been aware of her difficulties and if she didn't come to see him in the next few days, he would approach her to see if he could give her extra help.

I also met with another teacher who worked in the co-teaching classroom about a student who said that she was experiencing anxiety and often felt overwhelmed. He said that he would be able to work with her to help overcome the difficulties she was having.

One student was absent on this morning.

In period three, I again helped co-teach ELA 90 with Belinda. After class, I discussed the morning with Belinda and made plans for the next time I would come.

## THIRD HIGH SCHOOL VISIT

I returned to E.D. Feehan on October 1st. I again met with each student to discuss their individual concerns and what things were going well for them. Overall, the students seemed to be making a much better adjustment. Three of the students reported that things were going well and they were enjoying high school.

One of the girls had met with the counselor. She was having a lot of difficulties at home that were beginning to affect her attendance and school work. In elementary school, she had been a very capable student but she was having difficulty now

because of all the issues with which she was dealing with. Her problems had not been solved but she now had someone at school that she could talk to about them.

Another student was very happy because she had made the volleyball team, and although they hadn't won a lot of games, she was really enjoying being part of the team.

Another student was having trouble in her classes and didn't feel like she fit in at school. I asked if she had a connection to any of her teachers. She said she did and named her English teacher as someone she identified with. I asked if it would be all right if I shared her concerns with her teachers. She said that it would be fine.

I later met with her teacher to discuss what this student had told me. She said that she wasn't aware that this student identified with her. She said that she would make an effort to check on her and see if she could give her any assistance.

I again co-taught a lesson in ELA 90 with Belinda. We went over the day.

## UNSCHEDULED VISIT TO A STUDENT

On October 9th, I received a phone call at school from three of the girls. They said that one of the students had run away and that they didn't know what to do. I sent them to the social worker at E.D. Feehan and called ahead to let him know that they were on their way. I also told him all about the missing student and where I thought she would have gone. I said that I would meet him as soon as I was done at the school.

By the time I left my own school, the missing student had been found. I met the social worker and the students who had called me at the home where the missing student was staying. I spoke with the social worker, the student and the family. We came up with some plans that involved a schedule for both the school counselor and social worker to work with the student.

## FINAL HIGH SCHOOL MEETINGS

I went to E.D. Feehan two more mornings after this meeting and one afternoon. This last meeting was the result of a phone call I received from one of the students who was experiencing difficulty and didn't know where she could go for help.

Each of the last two meetings followed the same format. I met with the students, co-taught a lesson in English and met with Belinda to debrief. I also met once again, with the school counselor and the learning assistance teacher to go over how particular students were doing.

# Results

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At the end of the first semester, of the six students involved in the study, only one had failed more than one class and only three had failed any class. The one who had failed multiple classes had had attendance issues caused by problems at home that the school social worker, counselor and I were working to correct.

Two students also had averages of above 80%, which was impressive when you consider the much poorer results for students who had made the transition from our school to the high school the previous year. None of these earlier students had passed all of their grade nine classes, and many had failing averages.

By the end of second semester, only one student had failed a class. The student who had failed multiple classes in the first semester had moved to British Columbia in April. At the time she left, all of her marks were passing. I continued to keep in touch with her after she left. She entered a high school in Victoria and is repeating most of her grade nine classes. From what she has said, she is doing better.

When I began the project, many of the six students would call me weekly to discuss issues from school. As the project progressed, the students called less and less. They were able to make connections to the high school in order to receive the help they needed.

I firmly believe that these six students would not have adjusted to high school life as successfully as they did had I not stayed in contact with them. Through my contact, the students reported that they felt someone cared about how they did. When other students would ask them who I was, they would tell the students that I was their old grade eight teacher. The students would often reply that they wondered why their grade eight teacher never came to see them; it was easy to see the pride in the face of my students. My presence at the high school also gave these students a guide and an assistant in knowing how to and who to approach for help.

The students were able to find supports within high school, in part, because they had someone who could tell them how. Too often, at-risk students are afraid to ask for help, even if they know where to go, which often they don't. This project's importance comes from the fact that it built on strengths that were present in the students' lives before they went on to high school, and it built bridges for those strengths to accompany them into high school.

Since some of these students had already surpassed their parents' level of education, the knowledge that their education was valued by others may have given them a very valuable motivation for success.

This project combined effectively with other programs that work from the high school level to the elementary level. It indicates that further exploration into how elementary schools can become increasingly involved in the transition process may increase the ability of at-risk students to succeed in high school.

# Areas for Growth

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## 1. ON-GOING FUNDING

Initially, this project called for the project coordinator to be at the high school more often than actually happened. As a result of my new teaching assignment, I needed to alter the research plan. In retrospect, the modifications made the project more realistic and economically feasible for a school board to implement. My high school visits required four or five substitute days, which could be easily implemented within the budget of any community school. It is my hope that with this reasonable level of cost, programs similar to this one could become a regular part of school budgets.

## 2. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE DATA

It was very difficult to compare student attendance rates between schools. I tried looking back two years for attendance data about students who had come to high school from St. Michael Community School in previous years. I found three sources of difficulty:

- 1) Only one student from two years ago still went to E.D. Feehan High School. All the other students had either dropped out or moved to other schools.
- 2) The students from the year before were part of the same program that I had instituted as a trial for the current project so their attendance would not be an effective measure for comparison.
- 3) There were no students from the other community school feeding E.D. Feehan who were still in attendance at the end of the year.

However, it may be suggested that this very lack of information indicates that because four of six of these students continue to be in attendance at E.D. Feehan a year later, the project may be deemed a success in regard to attendance. Of the two students who left, one moved to Calgary and the other to Victoria. The student in Calgary finished grade nine with honors and continues to call me at least twice a semester. The student in Victoria is still in school and calls me at least once a semester. In both cases, continued contact between teacher and student may be seen as contributing to student success.

### 3. IMPACT ON HIGH SCHOOL STAFF

Personally, I felt that my ability to come to the high school greatly increased staff and teacher awareness of particular students. I was also able to act as a resource for teachers, who would often ask me about how these students were doing and how they might help. I felt that a bond was beginning to form between the elementary and high school that had not previously existed. It was a wonderful way to help build vision and partnerships between the elementary and high school. As well, many teachers mentioned that they wished that they had the type of background information about other students that I provided about the students involved in the project.



**2317 Arlington Avenue  
Saskatoon SK Canada S7J 2H8  
Phone: 306-373-1660  
Toll Free: 1-800-667-7762  
Fax: 306-374-1122  
E-mail: [mcdowell@stf.sk.ca](mailto:mcdowell@stf.sk.ca)**

**[www.mcdowellfoundation.ca](http://www.mcdowellfoundation.ca)**