

Inner-City Children Can Learn

Oakdale Park School, in the Jane-Finch Corridor, is closing the gap

by John Barber

Before even asking, one senses that basketball could be a touchy subject with Daphne Changoo. As principal of Oakdale Park Middle School in a predominantly black, "inner-city" neighbourhood of suburban North York, she could boast that her boys' team is district champion. But she glosses over that. Instead, she leads the way upstairs to one of the school's science labs. "This is the first time it has been used in half a dozen years," she said proudly, opening the door of one of Oakdale Park's two labs.

The reason the labs were closed, she explains, was because of a supposed lack of space for the school's other programs. She thinks that was just an excuse and easily found extra physical space. The hard part has been finding room — amid all the standard assumptions about poor, immigrant kids in Toronto — for the simple notion of academic achievement.

While the basketball coach complains fruitlessly about substandard balls, Ms. Changoo is devoting her resources to re-equipping and re-staffing the science labs. It's just one of the programs she has radically changed or newly established since she became principal about two years ago. Science teachers, new computers, regular testing, an honour roll for high achievers and a whole gamut of remedial programs for under-achievers — all of it focuses on "structure, self-discipline and the direct instruction of students."

The new music program is "performance-based," according to Ms. Changoo, because the skills and self-confidence learned in performance spill over into other areas of life. As a former mathematics teacher, she wants even basketball practice to become a lesson in angles. "Everything we do, we try to link to literacy or mathematics."

Oakdale Park is one of the main schools of the Jane-Finch corridor. Almost all of Oakdale Park's parents are poor immigrants who live in nearby high-rises and town-house complexes, much of it public housing.

What makes Oakdale Park really different is the complexion of its staff, which under Ms. Changoo, of Caribbean origin, is quickly coming to resemble the complexion of its student body. Oakdale Park is becoming one of the city's first "black-focus" schools, the sort that leaders of the local Caribbean community have long been demanding. Officially rejected by both the province's former NDP government and the Toronto Board of Education, black-focus schools seem to be evolving naturally in Oakdale Park and another nearby middle school.

If Oakdale Park is any indication, such institutions are nothing like what anyone expected. Ms. Changoo and her staff are offering virtually the same training that all parents want for their children, with an emphasis on discipline and accomplishment. But that's a radical break from a tradition that used to automatically stream black students into technical subjects and sports.

Ms. Changoo began by rejecting all the excuses. She first heard them in 1989 when she took a job at Bathurst Heights Collegiate, after teaching for 10 years in the private Crawford Adventist Academy in Toronto. "It was very traumatic," she recalled. "What I saw I couldn't believe. I couldn't believe the *laissez-faire* atmosphere, and that students were not being pushed." "What can we do?" her colleagues shrugged, offering the standard litany of reasons from home life to culture shock — for why the students couldn't succeed.

"I found that incredible," Ms. Changoo said. "I couldn't believe that people felt that way. The backgrounds of kids by themselves do not determine how far they can reach. To say that they can't because of their background is abrogating our responsibility as teachers." Ms. Changoo lost a quarter of her staff after her first year of whirlwind change at Oakdale Park. "I think many teachers were accustomed to hearing how well they were doing with inner-city kids," she said. "I came in and said, 'You're not doing well.'"

The school is rich, the beneficiary of a funding formula that channels extra resources to the neediest schools, and its facilities are excellent. The students are poor, but most of them have been in the North York system all their lives. Few go to school hungry. "What is it, then, that prevents us from saying they need to work at a higher level and they need to be self-disciplined? That was difficult for people to hear." But the new staff, both in its complexion and in its renewed academic focus, reflects her own image and aspirations.

Ms. Changoo's secular bible is North York's School and System Profiles, which measures achievement in individual schools according to standardized tests. She knows the ratings by heart — exactly how far behind Oakdale Park is in different categories, how fast it is closing the gap. This year, she put the whole school through monthly, full rehearsals of the benchmark tests.

"There's no way we can help kids escape from their environment unless they have an education," she said. "Here, we look at education as the vehicle of social mobility."

(Reprinted with permission from The Globe and Mail, May 7, 1997)