

From ‘The Dungeon’ to the Desired: One School’s Incredible Transformation

by Sara Easterly (September 20, 2016)

Six years ago, Neufeld faculty member Martine Demers took on a particularly noteworthy challenge: helping to turn around a K-6 elementary school nobody wanted.

Over the 20 years that Martine has been the behavioural consultant at her school board in Quebec, she’s certainly run into her share of challenges. How could she not encounter some tough trials, after all, overseeing 17 different schools and working with students, teachers, educators, administrators, after-school daycare educators, and parents?

Long considered “undesirable,” this elementary school of 270 students was really struggling. Due to student population decrease, a nearby elementary school was closed and most of its students and staff were being transferred to this school. A wide range of emotions were stirred, as most people were not in favor of the school closure – nor the transfer to this school. The beginning of the school year also brought the arrival of a new administrator, Elizabeth Gillies-Poitras, and the obstacles she and Martine faced were numerous.

Set in a community with a range of low to medium socioeconomic backgrounds, some children come to this school lacking supplies, enough food, or adequate clothes for Quebec’s notoriously bitter winters. Some of the children live with difficult circumstances – fractured families, disengaged parents, unsafe homes. Some children are in foster care, or youth protection is involved due to suspected child abuse or neglect.

Within this range of backgrounds and needs there are also many children with high sensitivities. “These are diverse kids – as learners, as well as in their expressions of behaviour,” Martine said. Some of the elementary students are on the autism spectrum, and a number of the students have mental health diagnoses such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Reactive Attachment Disorder, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Some students also struggle with anxiety/alarm problems.

Parent involvement in the school wasn’t strong, either. Many parents had a hard time in school when they were young, and so to shield their hearts from painful memories, they cloaked themselves in an armor of defenses when communicating (or not communicating) with teachers or bringing their children to school.

Before Martine and Elizabeth set their sights on making a difference there, the school followed strict policies for dealing with meltdowns, recess conflict, and in-classroom turmoil – usually involving consequences. The energy at the school rightly earned it the nickname of “The Dungeon.” “It was a ‘You’re out of here’

mentality,” said Martine. “When adults were overwhelmed or at their wits’ end, they’d send students who acted up away to the office with an expectation that they would be suspended and sent home.”

There also wasn’t much nuancing of age and developmental capacity between kindergarten and sixth graders when it came to discipline. “It was a one-size-fits-all” intervention,” Martine said. As a result, there was a lot of frustration all around – from students and adults alike. Already frustrated students felt more frustrated and thus acted out more, while adults became more and more frustrated that the problems weren’t going away – and sometimes getting worse.

Martine and Elizabeth’s ultimate goal was a rather lofty one: opening up diverse minds and fostering a community where everyone belonged. Elizabeth’s motto was, “Everyone belongs. Everyone has a place in life, with their strengths and weaknesses. We all need to work together to make it a good place.”

Martine and Elizabeth settled on four key tasks on their path towards making this big shift.

1. Partnering with teachers and other adults, using a hands-on approach.

Despite her consultant title, Martine saw her role as hands-on. She worked most closely in a special class with students with severe behavioral and emotional problems. She partnered with the teachers and spent a lot of time in the school, rolling up her sleeves and helping out in the classroom. She got to know the students. Elizabeth, Martine, and other team members worked together to progressively start shifting how crises and challenges were being approached and handled.

Elizabeth also led by example. “I didn’t ask anyone to do something I wasn’t ready to do ... I got involved hands-on,” Elizabeth said. She needed “to count on everybody and for them to count on me.” She hoped this would lead to a strong sense of community.

Martine knew that she couldn’t tell the staff what to do, which would trigger resistance and resentment. Instead, she saw her role as coming alongside educators, offering empathy and words of understanding:

- *Yes, how tiring, exhausting, frustrating this is!*
- *It’s really hard and really isolating.*
- *We need to share the weight of these situations together.*
- *Nobody should carry that weight alone in a school.*

Through a unique “we’re-in-this-together” spirit, Martine aimed to support the adults at the school in order to form the full village to support these kids. She’d often say to the staff, “We’re going to brainstorm, pull together, laugh together, and maybe even cry together. But we will get to the growth on the other side.”

Meanwhile Elizabeth conveyed a message of “accepting the students for who they are at the present time, their individualities,” as well as “recognizing efforts and improvements, celebrating moments as they take place, and building on the positive.” In developmental psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld’s words, Elizabeth was priming connection and teaching staff to solicit good intentions from the students.

2. Sharing insights and gradually re-introducing the children to the adults.

Martine also helped the adults see situations differently, stressing the children’s immaturity and vulnerability. For instance, teachers were fed up with meltdowns common after recess. But Martine helped them see that recess was an alarming time for the kids. They didn’t feel safe there, and so when they returned from recess, all of their big emotions erupted. Meltdowns could be prevented by the adults working together to help the children feel safe at recess.

Martine also helped teachers understand the importance of rituals and connection. “Some teachers were starting their days without even greeting their children,” she said, referring to what Dr. Neufeld calls “the collecting dance.” “It was, ‘Okay, let’s get going! We’ve got a lot to do today and we don’t have any time to waste!’ But how could the kids be receptive for learning, or taking direction, when nobody had even greeted them?”

Again and again, Martine stressed, “We can put out our hands a gazillion times, but it’s only when they’ve hooked onto us that we actually have them and they will truly do our bidding.”

3. Changing interventions.

Instead of sending disruptive students away, interventions were changed so that students with big emotions visited the “Feelings Room” – recognizing, as Dr. Neufeld has articulated, that the first key to emotional health is that emotion needs to be expressed. Students visit the room with an adult – a special education technician or attendant. There, they find gymnastics mats, oversized balls, big pillows, and beanbags, all of which they can throw, kick, punch, or even pile together and slam their bodies into. They get bubble wrap to stomp on, cardboard to destroy, skipping ropes, exercise dice. Martine said, “Whatever we find is the child’s bent, we add to the sidelines of this room so it can easily be pulled in if needed.”

In the “Feelings Room,” children are given a generous invitation to get big emotions out in a safe way. They hear words such as:

- *Nothing here will hurt you.*
- *Sometimes we have big emotions that need to come out.*
- *I don’t have a problem with those words, but we have a place for them.*

Staff members are reminded over and over not to take any of the eruptions personally (as tall an order that may sometimes be). “What happens in the ‘Feelings Room’ stays there,” Martine said.

The room provides space for the kids' emotions, and nobody is getting hurt – neither the child involved or other students. “It’s a safe place to evacuate that preserves the child’s dignity. It’s not in front of other students who are going to laugh or make comments.”

Once the storm has passed, the adult helps the child to name the emotions and recognize changes in the body – toward the important reflecting work that Dr. Neufeld says provides the ultimate resolution to emotional health and maturity. Now the messages conveyed become:

- *Where is it coming from? What’s not working?*
- *You’re not alone.*
- *Nothing’s wrong with you.*
- *I can help you with that.*
- *No wonder there was an explosion! The emotions are bigger than your body.*
- *Sometimes there’s just so much sadness it just overflows.*

4. Teaming up with parents.

As part of her work in the special class with students with severe behavioral and emotional problems, Martine implemented parent groups. In these supportive groups, Martine offered an inside view of where their children were developmentally and helped make sense of where their kids’ big emotions were coming from. Most importantly, she supported them as they shifted their stance to come alongside their children. For many parents, this equated to making space for their kids’ emotions, providing generous invitations for their children to be in their presence, and setting the stage for growth by changing their discipline practices (moving away from separation-based discipline, which only fuels dynamics in a downward spiral of defenses and stuckness).

Parent support meetings take place in the classroom, where parents squeeze into kid-sized chairs and enjoy food together (leaving plenty of extras for the children to enjoy the next day). Parents learn about the school’s philosophy, and the developmentally friendly, attachment-based approach of Dr. Gordon Neufeld upon which it is based.

Parents and teachers focus on how to team up together. “It’s okay for parents to have disagreements with the teachers,” said Martine, “but we’re not hashing it out in front of the kids.” She asks parents to be careful about what they say in front of their children. When it’s necessary to bring students into a meeting, teachers meet first with the parents, and come to an agreement about what to say to the kids, so that kids see parents and teachers working together. “It is key, and important, for families to feel the support provided to their child, that we understand them and that we don’t judge them,” said Elizabeth.

SOME BIG SHIFTS!

transformed-school-image Since the school team became more aligned and began implementing Martine's and Elizabeth's approach six years ago, there have been many signs of growth.

1. A softness to the school.

The school that formally felt like "The Dungeon" now has a calmer, softer energy. There is a sense of community and support. For instance, teachers are greeting students first thing each day. Staff members bring in used clothes to donate to families in need, striking a gentle balance between providing support and preserving dignity. Staff team up together – no longer working in silos and feeling so isolated.

Teachers still use some consequences, because there needs to be social justice, but it's delivered in a gentler way. "I'm really sorry, but there is a limit," they might say. Interventions also take into account the age and developmental capacity of the child.

2. A safe place, with caring adults, for the students.

Students know they can count on the adults in the school and believe the adults are on their side. The frequency and intensity of their crises has lessened now that they have a place for their expression to come out. Many kids are starting to name their emotions.

In June, as school ends and students are facing separation from their teachers and this safe, predictable place, there is an increase in defensive detachment and alarm. While the subsequent resurgence of meltdowns can be challenging, it's a testament to the predictability and stability the kids experience at school. They're expressing their emotions of upset and injustice that school has to end.

3. Parents, invited and welcomed into the school, have become more supportive.

Now, parents have a hard time leaving parent meetings, wanting to linger, too, in this place where they feel heard and supported. Parents' most frequent feedback is one of appreciation – for not being judged, and the revival of their intuition, which had often been questioned or extinguished by other approaches. Parents begin to retake their rightful position as their child's best bet and being in the lead.

"They realize they share a common ground," said Martine. "They're not crazy or alone, when everybody else is telling them they should be putting their child on medication for their big outbursts." Some parents may need additional help for their children, but if this is the case, they are accompanied by someone at the school.

4. Once the school nobody wanted, now it's the school many families are opting into.

Regularly, there are visits with parents and children who want to transfer to this school.

“They’re hearing about how it’s more of a community, how it helps children with special needs,” Martine said. “The school is packed. We’re bringing new kids to the school that would not have come before.”

Pride in showcasing involvement and improvement in all domains. The school has established mentoring opportunities where older students help younger students. “The beauty of relationships is a wonder in development!” Martine touted.

“I’ve seen good growth ... and we have more headway to make,” Martine added. “And that’s okay, because there’s always shifting and changing. Each school year brings new challenges and opportunities that re-confirm our resolve that a developmentally friendly, attachment-based approach is the best way to support the children in their growth.”

ADVICE FOR OTHER SCHOOLS

For other schools interested in implementing a similar approach, Martine warns, “It’s not always easy, and sometimes it can be tiring. But at the same time, the value of it is incredible.”

Here’s how Martine recommends planting seeds for growth in other schools:

- Prime attachments with staff and students.
- Believe in connections.
- Take it one step at a time.
- Get the team to hold together. Provide support regularly, deal with challenges as they arise, rather than when they have overgrown and staff feel overwhelmed.
- Share the weight of the challenging situations. Be creative and think ‘outside the box’ for alternative ways to support students and teachers.
- Remember that you’re not alone.
- Invite and aim to work with parents. When you have them on your side it will be easier to build attachments with their children.

Be patient. True growth takes time!