

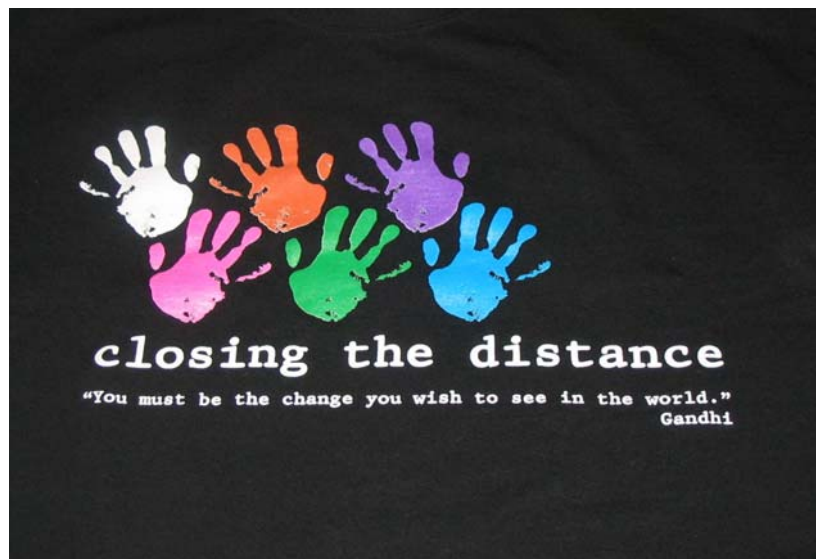
Case Study #3: Closing the Distance for Youth in Thunder Bay

“Supporting Youth Voices Against Racism”

“A student workshop is being held in Thunder Bay tomorrow to help eliminate racism. It will not seek to prevent racism from starting in city schools because it’s already there. How it got there is a matter for all of us. . . . The new neighbour, the person on the street, the people in the car in the mall parking lot can be singled out in derisive terms and tones by adults who need to consider the example they are setting for children who need them for guidance. It takes quite a bit to deflect youth from their natural inclination to like all people; it’s going to take more to get that trust back. A workshop like Wednesday’s gives us hope it can start in our schools.”

(The Chronicle-Journal, April 13, 2004)

On April 14, 2004, a group of about 65 youth and adults spend a day together at a conference entitled “Racism in the Schools”. As participants enter the meeting room, each is given a colourful “Closing the Distance” T-shirt, with “racism – stop it” printed on the back. Spontaneously, almost everyone changes into the T-shirt before the conference begins.

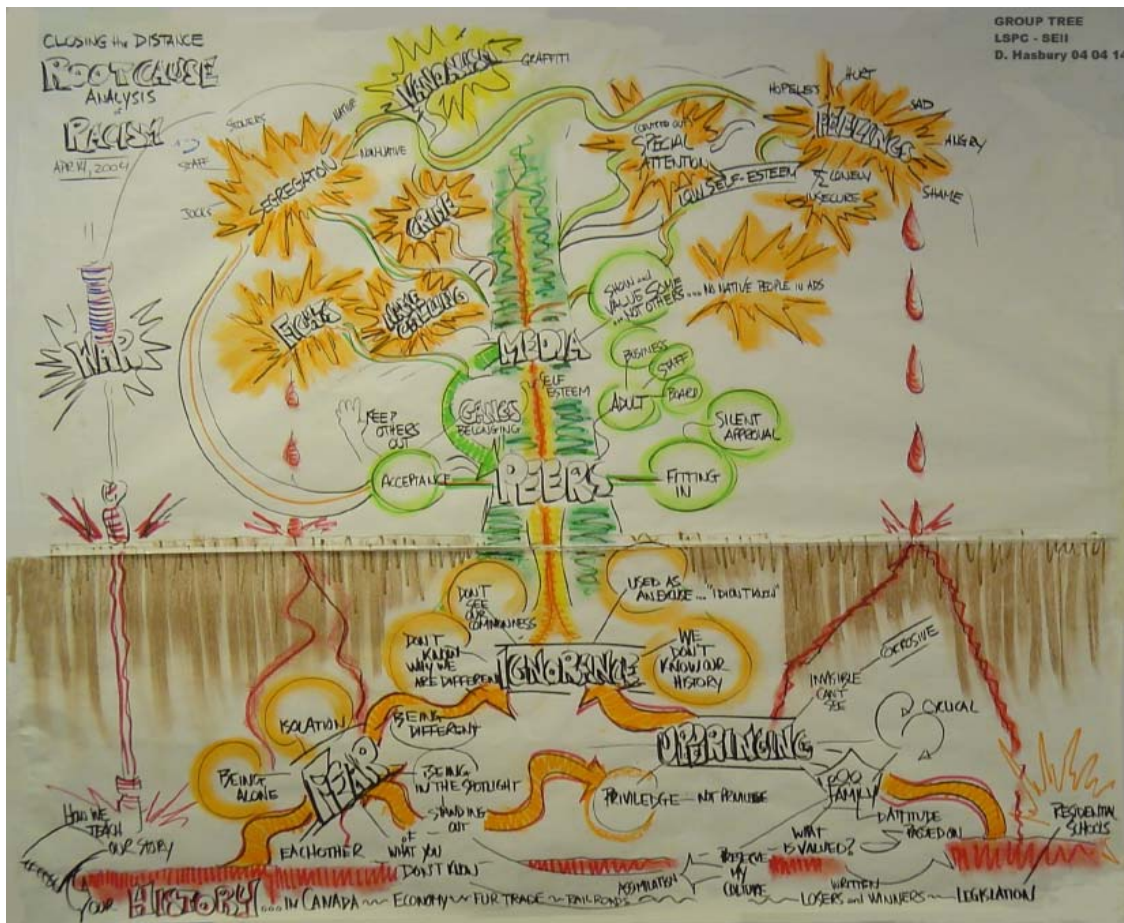


Graphic and message on T-Shirt distributed at Racism in the Schools Conference, Thunder Bay, April 14, 2004

Participants include teachers and guidance counsellors from local high schools, staff from community agencies and about 50 young people, including high school students and young people who are not in school. Young people and adults are paired to co-facilitate small group discussions at the event.

They discuss the issue of racism in Thunder Bay, focusing on how it plays out in local high schools. Several Aboriginal speakers tell some emotionally powerful stories of

their school year experiences of discrimination and racism. In groups and as a whole the conference participants explore and create a picture of the “root causes” of racism in Thunder Bay schools.



Wall Mural on the root causes of racism in Thunder Bay schools produced by the youth and adult participants in the conference

The graphic portrayal of racism is compelling and generates a resolve among the participating youth and adults to work together to end racism in Thunder Bay schools and neighbourhoods. A list of ideas for action is produced before the day is done.

The Project Steering Committee, which includes school board officials, meets to review the results of the Racism in the Schools Workshop. A report coming out of the meeting says:

“It is the consensus of the Steering Committee that not only was the workshop a success, but that the committee should continue to meet to help implement some of the recommendations identified by the participants or other strategies that will foster a safe, inclusive school environment for all students and build relationships between youth and adults.”

(E-mail communication of Lakehead Social Planning Council Board member to Steering Committee members, May 25, 2004)

A year and a half earlier, on December 9, 2002, the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project had begun its journey with a community visioning session. At this session, young people from the Thunder Bay community met with staff from community organizations working on youth issues, and other community leaders working in the health, social, and education sectors. They talked about how young people can become distanced from their parents, adults in the community and their schools, often leaving them out of high school, without a home, or without a job. They discussed how young people have dreams and goals, but often need help to make them a reality. From here, the *Closing the Distance* Project began the journey towards “*building community connections*” between youth and adults in Thunder Bay.

This story is about why the journey began and then progressed on to that exciting Conference in April 2004.

Preparing for the Journey:
Discovering the Diversity of Thunder Bay

“All people have a right to participate in society, regardless of their backgrounds. The problem is that the elite control the decision-making process, an issue that needs to be addressed. Bridges must be built to the traditional thinking of policy.”

(Thunder Bay Roundtable, March 1, 2002)

The first step in creating the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project is a “roundtable” discussion. On March 1, 2002, seventeen community leaders from the health, social, government and education sectors, including several representatives of Aboriginal communities, meet with the Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO) Consultant. He talks to them about Health Canada’s interest in funding a project on Social and Economic Inclusion (SEII) in selected communities across Ontario.

The roundtable participants talk about what “social and economic inclusion” means in Thunder Bay and North-western Ontario. They name geographic distance and isolation as important issues for people in the North, especially for people in remote communities that are far away from cities and services. They identify Aboriginal people and seniors as the groups who are most affected by this isolation. They also talk about how Northern Ontario is poorer than communities further south, and how poverty is an important issue.

Search for a Project Focus

The SPNO Consultant works with the Lakehead Social Planning Council (Lakehead SPC) to organize a second roundtable meeting, to brainstorm a possible focus for a *Closing the Distance* Project in Thunder Bay. At the same time, the Lakehead SPC is looking for a new staff leader, because the Executive Director who has led the

organization for eighteen years is retiring. By the time the second roundtable is being organized, the new Executive Director has started work at the Lakehead SPC. The SPNO Consultant provides support to the new Executive Director in connecting with community leaders. The Consultant also discovers that the Lakehead SPC is part of a community coalition that has done a study called *Diversity Thunder Bay*. The report talks about the different ways that Aboriginal people and visible minorities experience racism in Thunder Bay. It discusses the ideas of “social cohesion”, “social capital” and “social inclusion”, and so it seems to fit well with the ideas behind a *Closing the Distance Project*.

Given this local research, the SPNO Consultant and the new Lakehead SPC Executive Director propose the project focus on diversity in Thunder Bay. At the second roundtable on August 8, 2002, they suggest that some of the *Diversity Thunder Bay* report’s recommendations would be a good place to begin to engage the community and to make policies and community practices in Thunder Bay more inclusive of everyone.

The idea of diversity is discussed at this second community roundtable, and some people volunteer to look into current groups and projects working on diversity in Thunder Bay. They might be able to expand on and contribute to work that has already been started on diversity. The group also talks about finding an issue that is important for many different groups of people. They brainstorm issues that affect many groups, and come up with nutrition, isolation, homelessness and housing, or expanding diversity beyond ethno-racial diversity to include other kinds of diverse situations and experiences.

At the end of the discussion, they decide that more work is needed to create consensus on a focus for the Project.

The SPNO Consultant prepares a summary of the ideas that community leaders in Thunder Bay have discussed as a possible Project focus. He suggests to community leaders some options and next steps for creating a *Closing the Distance Project* in Thunder Bay, which Health Canada would consider funding as part of the SEII.

On September 6, 2002, the Lakehead SPC Executive Director organizes a follow-up meeting. Twelve community representatives, some from the previous roundtables and some new participants attend. They have a long discussion about what focus a Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance Project* should take. The group seems to agree that a “joining theme”, which will be important to many different groups of people, should be the focus.

The group talks about homelessness, racism, housing, children’s services, mental health, access to services and poverty as important “joining themes”. They decide that housing and homelessness should be the focus of the Project. They also talk about what they would like to see in a *Closing the Distance Project*, and decide that people in vulnerable situations who are affected by the issue should be involved directly in the

Project. Many participants agree to take on a leadership role by being part of the Project's Steering Committee.

Over the next two months, members of the Steering Committee create a plan for what the Project will do. Plans change from what was decided at the roundtable. They decide to look at the barriers faced by different groups of people when they try to access services, such as social services and health care, and basic needs, such as food and housing. The groups of people they plan to talk to include Aboriginal people, homeless and street-involved people, and low-income families. They want to find out what services people have trouble accessing, and to try to come up with solutions. By talking to people from all of these vulnerable groups, they hope that people in different situations will find shared problems and concerns, and that they might work together to try to address these issues and advocate for change. They see this approach as a way to work on social and economic inclusion by closing the distance among people who are left out and the larger community.

By October 2002, Health Canada approves funding for the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project. The journey is about to begin.

Phase 1 of the Journey:

Narrowing the Focus to Mid-Teens in Thunder Bay

“16 to 17 year old youth who have left home or dropped out of school...have dreams beyond ‘hanging out’. They want to learn skills. They want to own a home and a truck, or graduate from college, or become a cartoonist. And they begin looking for guides and mentors that can show them the way, that can help them set goals, make plans, overcome barriers, move in the right direction.”

**(Community Visioning Day Narrative, Thunder Bay,
December 2002)**

The Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* journey gets started by hiring two staff people to work on the Project. As the staff become involved, there is some frustration about how to develop a Project that is so broad in scope. The Project focus begins to shift from a focus on how diverse people access services and basic needs to a much narrower focus on a particular group of people – sixteen and seventeen year-old youth, who seem to “fall through the cracks”, so that they don't get the services they need.

On December 9, 2002, two SPNO resource people facilitate a day of “community visioning” to focus and plan for closing the distance in Thunder Bay. In the morning, the Lakehead SPC Project staff and SPNO resource people meet with a group of youth involved in an alternative education program. These youth are enrolled in this program because the mainstream education system has not worked for them, and they have not been able to finish high school.

Initially, the young people are not very comfortable talking about their concerns and ideas, partly because they do not know the Lakehead SPC staff or the facilitators. As the morning goes on, the youth participants slowly become more comfortable, and feel more able to share their thoughts and ideas. Some participants tell their stories of being distanced or excluded. They discuss some of the challenges faced by sixteen and seventeen year-old youth who have left home or dropped out of school:

“[Young people who have left home] have no money and no way to get enough to live on their own. They don’t fit the criteria for Ontario Works. ...If they look for a job and find work, it is usually low paying part-time work. ...Many drop out of school. It is too much to do school and keep the job going. Later they find that they work in dead end jobs, in situations where they are abused and taken advantage of.”

(Thunder Bay Narrative,
December 2002)

They young people talk about what they would like out of life, their dreams about learning skills, going to college, and getting a career. They come up with ideas that could help them to fulfil their dreams, like finding an adult mentor they can talk to.

A colourful wall mural and a narrative are created to capture and portray these stories and ideas about young people’s exclusion in Thunder Bay.



(Mural, Community Visioning Session, Thunder Bay,
December 9, 2002)

In the afternoon, community leaders from the Steering Committee join the group of youth. They hope to continue the morning discussion about youth participants’ concerns, and to talk about directions the *Closing the Distance* Project should take. This is the first time that the young people there meet the Steering Committee. The conversation from the morning continues, but the ease that youth participants had

begun to feel in the morning seems to disappear. They do not participate much in the conversation. By the end of the day, it does not seem like any relationship has been built between the Lakehead SPC Project staff, Steering Committee members and youth participants.

Although the community visioning session does not end up engaging those youth participants to become involved in the Project, it does do some important things. It provides a forum for youth to voice some of their concerns and dreams. It also provides the Project with some insight into the aspirations and challenges of youth in Thunder Bay, and directions that the Project should take to close the distance for this population.

Proposing a Youth Action Network

In the month that follows, Project staff and Steering Committee members get to work on defining the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project's goals. They decide that their project will aim to:

- *“Concentrate on the social status, social networks, and social environments of youth;*
- *“Facilitate making connections and building trusting relationships between alienated youth and adults committed to their well-being; and*
- *“Seek to involve members of this age group directly in a social marketing campaign to change negative stereotypical images of isolated and alienated youth in the minds of the wider population in Thunder Bay.”*

(Closing the Distance Website, Thunder Bay Region)

The next challenge is for the Lakehead SPC is to prepare a proposal to Health Canada to continue to fund the Project from April 2003 to March 2004. Project staff and leadership work through December into early January to create the proposal.

On January 9-10, 2003, Lakehead SPC Project staff join other *Closing the Distance* Project representatives in Burlington, Ontario for a proposal-writing session with SPNO resource people. At this All-Region Workshop, the Thunder Bay group talks about a Youth Action Network, where youth get together to discuss and address issues that are important to them.

On January 17, 2003, a proposal is submitted to Health Canada, entitled: *“Closing the Distance for Isolated Youth in Thunder Bay – Building Community Connections”*. Six main objectives for Phase 2 of the Project are outlined:

- *“To engage sixteen and seventeen year olds of diverse cultural backgrounds in ongoing development, implementation and evaluation of a Youth Action Network;*
- *“To promote and facilitate inter-generational and cross-cultural communication through the creation of a mentoring program;*
- *“To identify and respond to issues that distance 16-17 year old youth from participating in the larger community of Thunder Bay;*
- *“To re-shape public perceptions of vulnerable youth in the community;*

- *“To promote the development of healthy and productive youth-adult relationships;*
- *“To generate wide community support with a vision to make the Youth Action Network sustainable through community resources, networking and partnerships.”*

(Thunder Bay Phase 2 Proposal,
January 17 2003)

The proposed project activities include reaching out to young people from diverse backgrounds to have group discussions about youth concerns and to involve those who are interested in planning and developing a Youth Action Network. Another planned activity is to develop a mentoring program where youth communicate with and get support from adult mentors. The Project also plans to develop a way for Youth Action Network participants to watch for and respond to negative youth stereotyping in the local media on an ongoing basis, and to promote positive images of youth. They hope that the Youth Action Network will be able to create at least one policy change that addresses young people’s concerns.

Reaching Out to Youth

Once the proposal has been submitted, Project staff begin to hold group discussions with young people around Thunder Bay, talking to them about their dreams, the barriers they face to meeting their goals, and what might help them to break down those barriers and achieve their goals.

The three ideas that many youth express interest in are:

1. Setting up a mentoring program where youth form positive relations with adults;
2. Developing a Youth Action Network where youth meet, discuss issues that concern them and take action to address those issues; and
3. Organizing a media-watch, which encourages positive public images of youth by scanning media for images of youth and responding to negative portrayals of youth.

Although Project staff are making connections with youth and hearing what they have to say, these discussions are not part of a path that leads to action. Since there are no concrete plans in place for Project activities, it is difficult to link the young people that staff are meeting with into any involvement with the Project.

For this reason, the SPNO Consultant, who is now the SPNO Project Coordinator for the SEII, suggests to Lakehead SPC Project staff that it might be good to hold a workshop where youth could create a picture of how the Youth Action Network should look. The SPNO resource person who created the mural depicting the community visioning session would facilitate this workshop. At this workshop, youth who showed interest in being a part of the Youth Action Network could also be trained in “graphic facilitation”, the method used to create pictures of group discussions. If a date is chosen for the Youth Action Network design session, Project staff can invite youth they

meet to the event. Their group discussions could be an important way to do outreach for this Youth Action Network design session.

Early Warning Signals of Project Difficulties

On March 29-30, 2003, Lakehead SPC Project staff and three Steering Committee members attend the All-Region Workshop in Toronto with people from *Closing the Distance* Projects in the four other Ontario communities. At this meeting, the Thunder Bay group reflects on what has happened in the Project so far, and makes plans for creating a Youth Action Network. There is, however, no firm plan made for a Youth Action Network design session as urged by the SPNO Project Coordinator. It seems clear from the report that the Thunder Bay Project has much work to do in developing clear plans and strategies.

As Phase 2 of the Project begins in the spring of 2003, Project staff encounter some challenges working with the Steering Committee. Some Steering Committee members are questioning the ideas and plans that staff present to them. It seems like some Steering Committee members feel left “out of the loop”, like they are not really part of the Project.

The SPNO Project Coordinator helps one project staff person to put together materials about “social and economic inclusion”, and to think of ways to make sure that everyone is caught up with the project and its goals. The SPNO Project Coordinator even suggests that maybe the Steering Committee could participate in a small workshop where they work as a team to come up with more defined project goals, activities and an action plan that everyone agrees with. Unfortunately, this workshop does not happen.

Phase 2 of the Journey; *Starts and Stops . . .*

As Phase 2 begins, one of the Project staff decides to leave the project for another job. The SPNO Project Coordinator talks to the Lakehead SPC Executive Director about the importance of hiring another staff person who could work well with the staff member staying. The SPNO Project Coordinator speaks frankly to the Lakehead SPC Executive Director about his concerns that the remaining Project staff person seems to lack the drive to advance the Project without an energetic and outgoing staff partner who could connect well with youth. He suggests one of the volunteer leaders who had attended the All-Region Workshop in Toronto in late March as a good staff person, since she had credibility with youth and connections to community leadership in Thunder Bay. Soon after, the Lakehead SPC Executive Director hires this person to the Project on a part-time basis, which is her preference.

As May 2003 begins, and the Project staff and voluntary leadership become a little more stable, the SPNO Project Coordinator again suggests that a Youth Action Network design workshop be held for Thunder Bay youth to create a vision for a Youth Action

Network. The local Project team decides to hold this workshop in late June 2003. The plan is for youth at the workshop to create a Youth Action Network design, and then for it to be presented to and discussed with the Steering Committee. Youth involved with the Project would then work with the Steering Committee to develop an action plan, and to make the Youth Action Network happen.

In late May, an SPNO resource person meets with Project staff and Steering Committee members to plan for the Youth Action Network design workshop. However, the focus seems to change during this planning session. The Project team decides to hold a youth forum where participants come up with a set of concerns they want to voice to community agency representatives. After coming up with these issues, executive directors and managers from community organizations in Thunder Bay would come to listen to youth participants voice their concerns. Community agency people will be asked to think about how they could respond to these concerns.

Tensions Surface between Project Staff and SPNO Central Support

On June 2-3, 2003, the Thunder Bay Project staff team meets with other *Closing the Distance* Projects in another All-region REFLECTIONS Workshop this time in Waterloo, Ontario. The SPNO Project Coordinator is still concerned that the Thunder Bay Project needs more focus and direction. It seems to him that the June forum in Thunder Bay will be too open-ended, and will not lead to the development of a Youth Action Network and the engagement of young people to build that network.

The SPNO Project Coordinator also challenges Project staff about how the Project plans to close the distance and build relationships between youth and adults as stated in their proposal to Health Canada. There is some tension between one Project staff person and the SPNO Project Coordinator on this issue. The local Project staff person insists that the Project must be “*youth-driven*” and not controlled and directed by SPNO or Lakehead SPC or adult leaders in Thunder Bay.

Initiating a Dialogue between Youth and Adults

In the next few weeks, the Project staff team puts its energy into organizing the June youth forum. The group does outreach to youth who are connected to community programs, as well as senior staff and managers at community organizations.

On June 26-27 2003, the “*Closing the Distance – the Leaders of Tomorrow*” forum is held. Two SPNO facilitators come to Thunder Bay to help with the event.



The Thunder Bay Project Team, John Saxberg, Satu Groombridge, and Duncan Adams discuss Project strategy with Chandra Rice of the SPNO Central Support team at the All-Region Workshop in Waterloo, Ontario, June 2-3, 2003

On the first day, 35 youth are part of the workshop. Youth participants are mainly from community programs and services – groups come from a substance abuse project, a shelter for homeless youth, and a program for youth who were in the correctional system. Many are from a project for Aboriginal people, and some of them, along with their staff leaders, open the gathering with a drumming circle while other participants arrive. Staff from these programs come with the young people. There are also some students from a local college, who had been at the community visioning session six months earlier, and who are already familiar with the Project.

The day starts out slowly, and is a little bit disorganized. The morning is mainly a chance to get to know each other informally. After lunch a more focused discussion takes place. Youth participants talk about many different concerns they have. Many participants raise the issue of racism, and the conversation becomes focused on this. The conversation becomes quite lively – it is clear that for the many Aboriginal youth at the event, this is an important issue that affects their lives. Because there are a lot of strong adult leaders from the organizations working with Aboriginal youth, Aboriginal participants are well supported to talk about this issue.

The next morning, youth participants return for the second day of the forum. They continue their discussion from the previous day, and begin to talk about changes and action they would like to see in community organizations in Thunder Bay.

That afternoon, managers and executive directors from community agencies join the youth participants. When the afternoon session begins, the feeling in the room is a little

uncomfortable. All 50-60 participants sit together in a large group. Youth participants are reluctant to share their concerns with adult managers whom they do not know.

The participants are then broken up into smaller groups, with both youth and managers in each group. In this setting, the youth feel safer to speak. Youth tell managers about their personal experiences and concerns. Some dialogue takes place between managers and youth, on youth participants' terms.

At the end of the day, the group has not accomplished everything it has set out to do at the forum. There is no clear, focused message presented to executive directors and managers from a united youth voice. There are no conclusions or next steps planned. There is no clear way to sustain the momentum that is created. Most forum participants will not have any more involvement with the Project in the future.

Yet some important things are accomplished at the forum. The *Closing the Distance* Project is successful in bringing out a large number of youth, who stay engaged for two full days, despite the fact that the school year has just ended and the warm summer weather has just begun. The Project also involves a large group of managers and senior staff from local community agencies. Also, youth have shared some of their concerns with senior staff and managers. Managers, who have the power to change how things get done in their agencies, have listened. For most forum participants, this is the first time they have been part of such a dialogue.

Some real interest in the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project is also generated among youth and agency representatives. A few of the youth at the forum continue to be involved in the Project, and two young people who become very active go on to later become part of the Steering Committee. A local city politician who also has a column in a local paper attends the forum. He is interested in the Project because many people in Thunder Bay are concerned about why so many young people leave the community. He is excited to see something positive happening for youth in Thunder Bay, and writes two newspaper columns on social and economic inclusion. He also writes a positive article about what he heard at the forum, and the potential he sees for the Project.

A reporter from the CBC radio does a ten-minute interview with a Project staff person and the Lakehead SPC Executive Director about the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project, the forum and youth issues in the community, which airs across North-western Ontario. It seems that the forum has been an important first step for closing the distance in Thunder Bay.

Hopeful Signs of Follow-up Action

Some youth are excited about one idea coming out of the forum. They talk about how great it would be to create a "street rag" or "zine" – an informal magazine where youth could contribute poems, stories, art and articles, which could be distributed to other youth.

In the summer months that follow the forum, there is lots of activity. A young person with a lot of experience working with youth in Thunder Bay is hired for the summer, to replace the part-time staff person who leaves the Project for family reasons, but wants to stay connected as a volunteer. This new staff person creates a website, and invites youth participants to be involved. About ten young people receive training on how to design a website, and together they create a very interesting format. The youth who participate are excited and engaged in this activity. Unfortunately, the content of the site never gets developed so that it can continue to engage youth.

Although few of the participants from the forum become involved in the Project, momentum builds with many other young people in the community over the summer months. A youth group is formed, which meets every week. Many youth participate – sometimes as many as twenty people attend meetings. There are some strong and vocal leaders in the group, such as the president of the Multicultural Youth Council who is also a student representative on one of the school boards.

At the youth group meetings, youth discuss their concerns and the issues they want to address. A major issue that people keep bringing up is racism, as well as sexism and ageism. Young people talk about racism in the community, and especially in their schools. Participants talk about how they want to address these issues. They work on developing a mentoring program, talk about influencing powerful groups such as school boards, and create art.

A Youth Action Network also begins to develop. This group is made of the youth group and adult Steering Committee members. There is strong interest in this network – about twenty-five people come to most meetings. At these meetings, youth present artwork they have created to the adult members. They try to decide on what activities they will engage in, and decide on three areas:

1. Policy – trying to change services and policies that exclude youth;
2. Media – promoting positive images of youth and dispelling negative stereotypes in the media; and
3. Events – organizing conferences, fundraisers and more.

Youth and Steering Committee members join committees to work on action plans in these three areas.

Dissipating Project Energy. . . Looming Crisis

In late August, the Youth Action Network meets again, and the committees working on policy, media and events report what they have come up with. Once again, there seem to be many ideas, but no decisions are made on a focus, direction or action plan to make them happen. As September 2003 begins, the summer Project staff person and many youth participants go back to school, and their time becomes more limited. Many adults also find themselves busier at work, and less able to attend meetings.

Participation becomes low and many meetings have to be cancelled because nobody can come. Unfortunately, the flurry of meeting activity over the summer has not really led the Project anywhere. Although there was hope that the Youth Action Network's activities could be sustained with the help of key youth leaders and groups such as the

Multicultural Youth Council, much of the momentum is lost. The Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project still needs to decide on a clear focus and action plan, and it needs to start working on these activities soon if it hopes to meet the Project's goals.

The SPNO Project Coordinator is very concerned that the Thunder Bay Project is not moving forward. By November, a new youth staff person is hired to replace the student who went back to school. On November 3-4, 2003, the two Project staff and the Lakehead SPC Executive Director join the other *Closing the Distance* Projects for another All-Region planning workshop in Southern Ontario. The Thunder Bay Project staff person who has worked with the Project since the beginning does not want to attend, but joins the others in the end. At this workshop, the SPNO Project Coordinator works with the Thunder Bay group to figure out what they have accomplished so far. It seems like much more progress should have been made.

It does not seem like the Project staff have been able to keep young people engaged beyond the summer. It also seems like Project staff does not know where the Project should be going next. They say they want Project activities to be "youth-driven". Unfortunately, fluctuating youth involvement and changing membership in the Youth Action Network have meant that the Project's focus has changed many times, and that there is no consistent work on Project activities.

The SPNO Project Coordinator asks Thunder Bay Project staff to answer some tough questions. They are not happy with how the conversation goes. Within two weeks of returning to Thunder Bay, the two Project staff persons leave the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project.

In the weeks that follow, the SPNO Project Coordinator works with the Lakehead SPC Executive Director and a Board member by telephone. They talk about the future of the Project. Funding will finish in April 2004, and it is almost December 2003. The Project has shown bursts of energy and activity but has not really clearly developed any of the promising ideas. If they hope to continue, they need to figure out a way to accomplish a lot in the next five months.

By telephone, the SPNO Project Coordinator points out that Lakehead SPC will need to hire a very strong staff person and strengthen the Steering Committee if they hope to accomplish these goals. The Project Coordinator suggests that they find out whether one Steering Committee member, who has very strong connections with youth in Thunder Bay, could be convinced to take on the role of staff for the rest of the Project. This person had attended the All-Region event in Toronto the preceding March and had shown a lot of commitment to the Project.

Unless these things are pulled together quickly, the Thunder Bay Project may have to acknowledge failure and return the remainder of its Project funding to Health Canada. The Lakehead SPC Board of Directors is losing confidence in its ability to continue the Project. One Board member who has shown particular interest in the Project and who has been frustrated by the stops and starts and lack of staff ability to advance the

Project steps forward into a stronger leadership role. The Board agrees to give the Project another chance.

. . . and then a Breakthrough!

“It is our belief that by bringing youth and school officials together to openly discuss the issue we can begin to invoke change within the school system and lessen the effects of racism within our schools.”

**(Summary Statement: Students and School officials,
April 2004)**

A new chapter in the Project journey is about to begin. SPNO resource people work with the Lakehead SPC Executive Director and Board leader to develop a “recovery plan”. They work to get other community leaders to a two-day intensive planning workshop, and to hire a new Project staff person.

In mid-December 2003, an SPNO facilitator meets with the Steering Committee and the new Project staff person, and community agencies representatives to map out the recovery plan. The SPNO resource person provides strong facilitation, and at the end of an intense series of meetings, the group has decided on a direction and issue to focus on, an ambitious but detailed action plan, and a plan for the role of the Steering Committee and Lakehead SPC Executive Director.

The group decides to focus on racism in high schools in Thunder Bay especially with respect to Aboriginal youth. This is an issue that has been raised as important by many young people throughout the Project journey. Many Steering Committee members feel that this is an appropriate focus because youth participants seem to have wanted action on this issue all along. Project leaders plan to mobilize youth to voice their concerns and to get a hearing from principals, teachers and school board officials. They also plan to get commitments from the school boards to make changes based on what young people say needs to change.

In late December 2003, the project team gets ready to begin this new journey. A second Project staff person is hired to help make this plan a reality.

Striking a Chord with Youth on Racism

In January 2004, action on the recovery plan begins.

Project staff work hard to give young people opportunities to voice their concerns, and to mobilize youth who are interested in helping to address the issue of racism in schools. Between January and April 2004, they hold focus groups with about 300 youth in community agencies and programs, shelters and schools. In these groups, youth participants from diverse backgrounds and experiences are encouraged to speak openly and honestly about the following questions:

1. *“In your own words define racism.*
2. *How has racism affected you?*

3. *Have you seen racism in school, and what did it look like?*
4. *How do we stop racism in our schools?"*

(Key Findings – Common Themes: Youth Focus Groups on Racism, April 2004)

Youth participants are very open in these discussions. They express powerful ideas about how racism is based in hate and ignorance:

"Racism is a crime against people because no one should be hurt because of their skin colour...Racism is ignorance, people not understanding other cultures...Racism is hate and violence. It hurts people and can make life very hard if you are different. . . . We need to stop racism everywhere, not just in our schools. We need education and to teach understanding. ...We need to talk about it openly..."

(Key Findings – Common Themes: Youth Focus Groups on Racism, April 2004)

They share emotional personal experiences of racism, speaking honestly of hurt, anger and the fear they have felt, including some tough and painful experiences in their schools, mainly through racist behaviour among students, and sometimes from teachers:

"Racism has affected me because it makes me very angry and sad when I have been called a dirty Indian...It makes me feel bad about myself and angry at the community. ...It makes me feel worthless when I hear people calling me names...I was shopping with friends and the lady in the store said we had to go because she knows our kind was there to steal. ...I stopped going to school because I was afraid every day. ...I've seen some teachers treat the native kids differently... There are clear lines at our school between native and white students. We even have separate parts of the school."

(Key Findings – Common Themes: Youth Focus Groups on Racism, April 2004)

Youth in the focus groups also express their strong desire and ideas to change this situation:

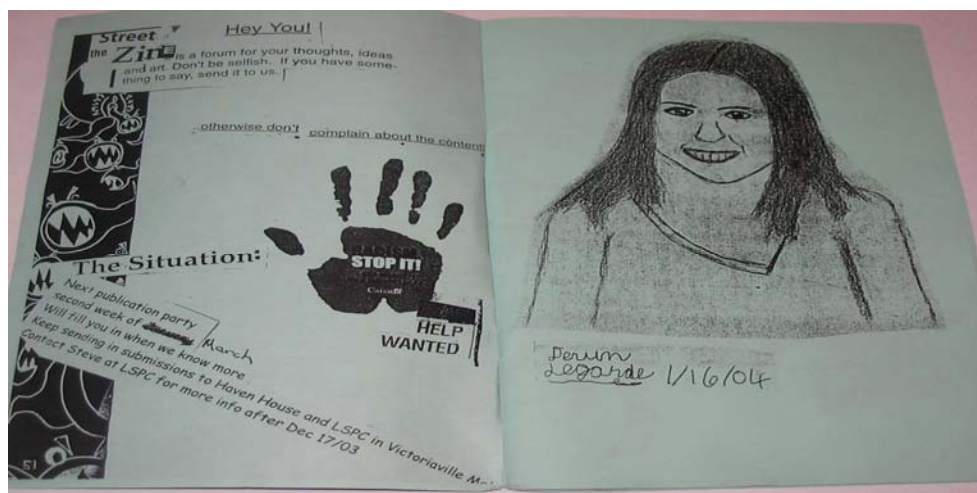
"We should have classes that teach cultural understanding of a whole bunch of different races. ...We need to talk about it openly like we are doing today, things as simple as today have a huge impact on how we look at things. ...We need to educate people from a young age like grade two. ...Teachers and students working together to spread the anti-racist attitude."

(Key Findings – Common Themes: Youth Focus Groups on Racism, April 2004)

Through the focus groups, Project staff identify some young people who want to be more involved in the Project. These discussions with young people also give Project staff a deeper understanding of youth concerns about racism.

Youth Speaking Out in Different Ways

In addition to the focus groups, Project staff support young people to express themselves in other ways. Some youth who get involved in the Project create a street 'zine, where youth can express themselves by contributing poetry, short stories, artwork, rants, photography and other forms of expression. After working to collect young people's submissions, the first edition of the 'zine comes out. Throughout the edition, youth communicate the trials and tribulations they face every day, using a variety of art forms. The 'zine also contains information on topics such as safe sex, and lists community resources and services that youth may need to access. The first edition is photocopied and given out for free to other youth in the community in December 2003 and January 2004.

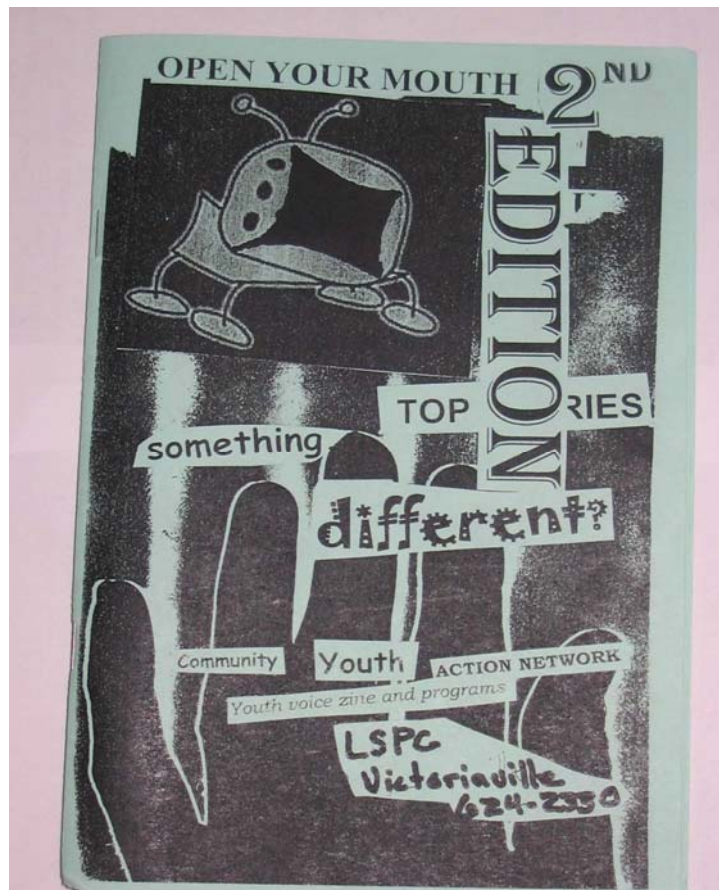


Pages from *Open Your Mouth*, a street 'zine produced by youth in the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project

The first edition is well received by youth in Thunder Bay. The street 'zine is something that is owned by the youth who create it. It is a safe forum where young people can express themselves and communicate to other people in the community. More young people come forward and offer their work. As they begin to plan for the second edition,

the youth working on the 'zine realize that their publication needs a name. They decide to call it *Open Your Mouth*.

The street 'zine is so successful that the CBC decides to work with some of the youth who produce and contribute to it to create a short radio feature, called "Open Your Mouth". In this piece, youth talk about the work they have submitted to *Open Your Mouth*, what it means to them to create art and put out the 'zine, and youth issues in Thunder Bay.



Cover of second issue of Thunder Bay 'zine, "Open Your Mouth"

Project staff also work to create another forum for youth expression: a legal graffiti wall. An outdoor wall where youth could legally create graffiti would be another safe and supportive environment for youth voices. Project staff develop a proposal and present it to Thunder Bay City Council. The proposal explains that:

"For many years graffiti has been seen as vandalism and an outlet for youth to express themselves in what has been perceived as a negative way. Graffiti has been associated with gangs and racism and has not been readily accepted as a legitimate art form. This is changing in communities throughout North America, and the talent displayed by graffiti artists throughout the past number of years has indeed brought legitimacy

to this art form. ...Many communities throughout Canada and the US have begun to offer safe legal areas for these artists to perform their art. ...Studies have shown that a wall that has been painted with a mural is less likely to be defaced...In [large Canadian cities] there has also been a correlation between the reduction of youth crime and graffiti art in areas of the community that are offering free legal walls.”

(Legal Graffiti Wall Proposal to City Council)

Project staff gain the support of many community organizations and local businesses in Thunder Bay before submitting the proposal to City Council. In the proposal, the potential benefits of a legal graffiti wall are outlined, including the low costs involved, the beautification of the city, and the creation of a constructive activity for young people in which they can express themselves and become more connected to their community. City Council considers the proposal, but in the end it is rejected by a vote of nine councillors to two.

However, one of the supportive councillors offers a solution. He owns a store that sells skis and snowboards in the winter, and ice cream in the summer. He volunteers to make the back wall of his building a legal graffiti wall. Although the proposal to the city fails, the wall still becomes a reality. By April 2004, three murals are painted on this wall by youth in Thunder Bay. Meanwhile, the proposal becomes a tool to launch a similar Project in a smaller nearby community, where a youth group borrows from the proposal to try to initiate a legal graffiti wall in their own town.

Taking Youth Stories to the Education System

At the same time as youth are expressing their concerns through many different forums, Project Steering Committee members are busy working to ensure that teachers, principals and school board officials are hearing young people's message.

In January 2004, Steering Committee members contact the Directors of Education at Thunder Bay's two school boards. Each board assigns a Vice Principal to communicate with the *Closing the Distance* Project. Steering Committee members have several meetings with these school board representatives to talk about the issue of racism in high schools, and to talk about how they can work together to address it. They decide to plan a conference in April 2004, where youth, school board representatives, teachers and community members can discuss their concerns, frustrations and feelings about this issue, and talk about ways to address it in the school system.

Work with the school boards is slow going. School board representatives are hesitant to talk about the issue of racism. They even ask Steering Committee members questions like *“How do you know racism is really there?”* and *“How do you know the issue is the schools?”*

Steering Committee members present some of the concerns about racism that many youth have told them about, like how one school is divided into a side for Aboriginal students and a side for non-Aboriginal students. Aboriginal youth don't cross that line,

and vice-versa. Everyone at the school, even the teachers, knows about this division. They also show school board representatives the mural that was drawn at the June 2003 youth forum, where young people clearly expressed that racism was affecting their lives in school and in the community. This picture has a big impact on the school board officials.

The school board representatives become more open to being involved in the Project as meetings continue. But there are still many barriers and challenges to overcome. School board officials face many challenges in working with teachers. They cannot just walk up to teachers and say, *“Let’s address racism”*. Teachers already have big workloads, and often do not have extra time and resources to deal with these issues. Teachers are also used to making their own decisions about what happens in their classrooms.

Despite the challenges faced by the Project, plans for the April conference slowly move forward. Project staff and leaders use a report about the focus groups with youth to outreach to school board officials, principals and teachers for the spring conference. The report presents some tough information that high school students have raised in their focus group discussions with Project staff:

“It seems that the school doesn’t understand our differences and teaches all the same way. Some of us learn differently and sometimes it’s because we are not used to the white school. ...We had a big fight between the native kids and the white kids and it has separated the whole school. The principal even said during the fight that the white kids should go back to their own side. ...Lots of name calling and some fights but mostly name calling and racist jokes.”

(Key Findings – Common Themes: Youth Focus Groups on Racism, April 2004)

While outreaching to school representatives, Project leaders also use a summary of the conference and Project goals. This summary presents the hopeful side of the Project and the changes it hopes the conference and the project can make:

“It is our belief that by bringing youth and school officials together to openly discuss the issue we can begin to invoke change within the school system and lessen the effects of racism within our schools. Our hope is to bring these two sides together in a conference...to develop future steps to be taken to allow for greater understanding and ultimately safer schools.”

(Summary: Students and Schools working together to battle racism, April 2004)

Both the powerful focus group report and the Project summary are distributed to school board officials, in the hope that these will help to draw them to participate in the April conference and beyond.

Dealing with Challenges in Moving Forward

There are certainly some bumps on the road to planning the April conference. At first, school board officials are hesitant to bring people together to talk about the sensitive issue of racism. They are concerned that serious conflict might arise, which could make things worse than they already are. But, the Steering Committee decides on a good strategy – in planning for the conference, only those teachers, students and school board representatives who are already sympathetic to the issue are invited. It is better to build a large group of supportive people first, before trying to change the minds of those who don't think that racism is a problem.



Carol Rusak, lead volunteer with Lakehead SPC in building receptivity to the Project with the local Boards of Education

Other challenges arise. After a conference date has been chosen and initial plans are made, one of the school boards says that their teachers cannot attend on this date because they have to be at another meeting. The Project team doesn't let this stop its plans. They cancel the room they have booked, choose a new date, and find a place to hold the event on the new day. The school boards also ask the Steering Committee who will pay for the teachers who attend the conference to be out of class. Because the conference is on a school day, teachers will need substitutes to teach their classes – the school boards say they can't pay for this. The Steering Committee is determined to make the event happen, so they find money in the budget to pay for these costs. Despite serious challenges, the Project team ensures that plans for the conference continue to move forward.

As the April conference draws nearer, the two school board officials who were introduced to the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project in January 2004 become more involved. Both become members of the Project Steering Committee, and participate in the conference planning. Both work hard to ensure that high school teachers and students will be able to come to the event. One school board representative even gets T-shirts made to give out to everyone who attends.

Intense Preparation for Community Conference

On April 13, 2004, twenty people get together to prepare for the conference. The conference, entitled “Racism in the Schools”, is happening the next day. Many of the activities in the conference will involve small-group work, and each small group will need a facilitator. The Project team has decided that they should have pairs of co-facilitators. Each pair includes one young person and one adult. On April 13th, several youth who have been actively involved in the Project attend the facilitators’ training session, as well as many adults who are part of the Steering Committee, including adults who work at community organizations, and those who work in schools and for the school boards. Two SPNO resource people conduct the training. Together, they plan how the conference will look. They begin by talking about their hopes and fears for the event.

Both school board representatives express some strong concerns. They are worried that the school system will be under attack. They ask again why the focus must be on racism in schools. They say that they feel targeted, and they worry that the school system will be blamed in the conference. They are afraid everyone will forget that the broader community also plays a role in perpetuating racism. They are also concerned that individual schools, administrators and teachers might get named, and that fingers might get pointed.

At the same time, the school board officials have some important hopes. They hope that participants will feel comfortable sharing their thoughts openly and honestly. They hope that after the conference there will be greater understanding and awareness among teachers, school board people and students about the issue and about what schools are trying to do about it. They are also hopeful that this will be a first step in closing the distance in Thunder Bay schools – in addressing and making progress on this important issue.

Youth and other Steering Committee members express some of their hopes and fears as well. They are hopeful that the momentum from the conference will lead to concrete actions to change things. They hope that all participants feel comfortable and can be open, and that different people are able to hear each other and learn from one another. They hope that the adults will respect the young people who speak and believe what they have to say.

Some youth say they are afraid that people will be cut off in discussions, or that others will glare at them and try to intimidate them. If this happens, youth might shut down, and stop talking. They are also concerned that youth will speak out at this event, but that nothing will happen afterwards, so that once again young people will feel like they weren’t really heard. They are worried that people will react defensively or angrily. Many are also afraid that a big conflict might arise, or that tensions that existed before the workshop will get worse after the conference, maybe back at school, or maybe on the street.

After planning the agenda and activities for the day, the group goes back to the list of fears it created. They use these fears to create a set of “safety rules”, which are guidelines that participants will be asked to follow to help ensure that the conference is a safe space where these fears don’t become a reality. By the end of the day, the group has created a list of ground rules that will guide the day:

- *“respect each other*
- *one speaker at a time*
- *no interruptions*
- *share your experience – ‘I see...I hear...I feel’*
- *be aware of body language – stay open!”*

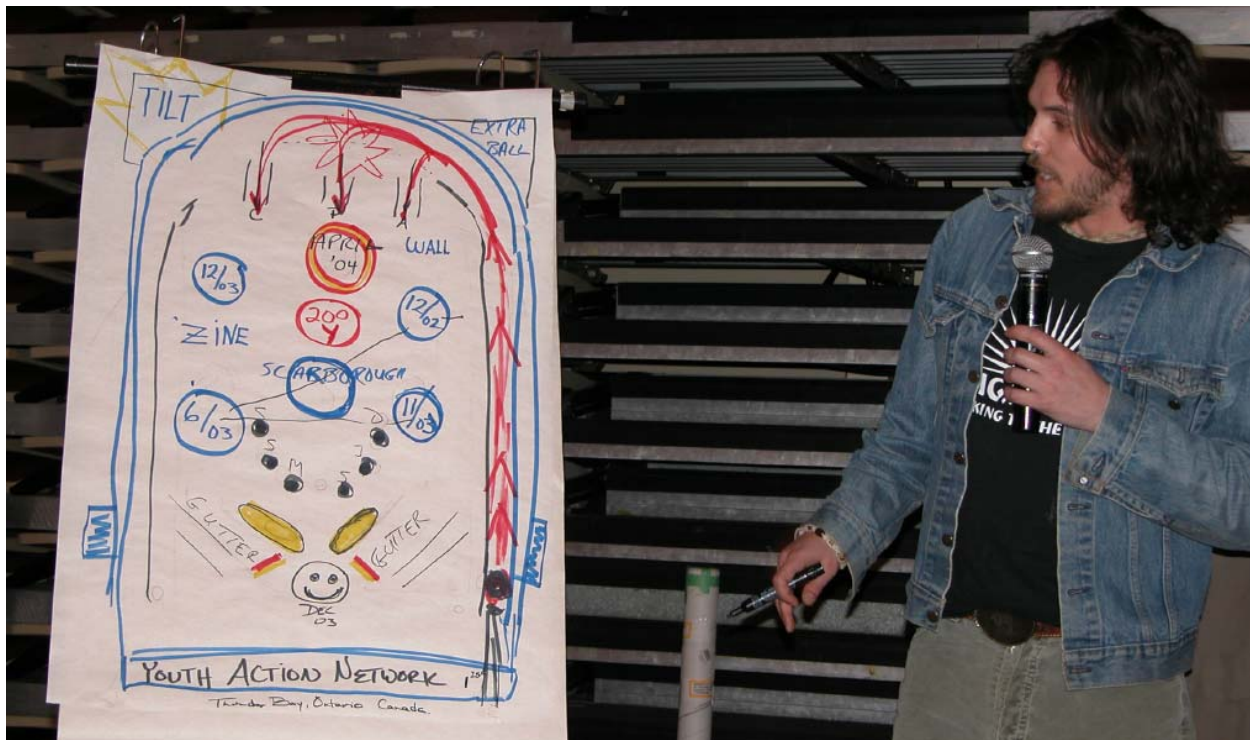
(Guides for Safety handout,
April 13 2004)

The event receives significant public attention the day before it takes place. On April 13, 2004 two articles are written in *The Chronicle-Journal*, a local daily newspaper. One article gives a brief history of the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project. An editorial is also printed in the same newspaper, which briefly explains the Project and discusses the importance of addressing the issue of racism in Thunder Bay. The editorial asks:

“How does the ugliness of racism – the acquired assumption by one student that s/he is better than another who looks or sounds different – get started? How does it then grow to the point where a student feels disposed or compelled to act on these feelings?”

(*The Chronicle-Journal*,
April 13, 2004).

The article goes on to discuss how mass media and popular culture promote and reinforce racist ideas. Finally, the editorial concludes: *“...consider what is said and not said in homes in all neighbourhoods every day. . . . [A]dults...need to consider the example they are setting for children who need them for guidance.”*



Steve Gothard, Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project staff, presenting a graphic chart of a pinball machine to illustrate the “stops and starts” difficulties of developing a Youth Action Network to the All-Region Workshop in Toronto, March 22, 2004

The Next Steps in The Journey: ***Maintaining the Momentum***

On April 14, 2004, about 65 people participate in the “Racism in the Schools” conference as reported in opening the story of this journey. A well-respected Aboriginal leader who has been involved in diversity and racism issues for many years in Thunder Bay, and who has been on the project Steering Committee since the beginning, opens the day. She welcomes all participants and thanks the young people in the room, especially the youth facilitators and Steering Committee members, for becoming involved and giving so much to this Project.

Several Aboriginal keynote speakers, an adult and two youth leaders, tell powerful stories about their own personal experiences with racism in their schools and neighbourhoods. Small groups are organized and the adult-youth co-facilitating teams review in each group the safety rules that will guide the day. The small groups talk about what racism is, and what it can do to people. They analyze their thoughts using a “root cause analysis”. They decide what the “roots” of racism, or its causes are; which ideas make up the “stem” which supports racism; and what the “flower” of racism is – how it shows or represents itself. Each group draws a picture of a weed or a flower which includes all of these parts of racism. Some of the flowers are full of thorns, others have sharp teeth. In several of the pictures, seeds or water run off the flowers into the ground, feeding the roots that cause racism.

Once each small group has explained its picture to everyone, the large group decides on the common roots, stem and flower of racism. An SPNO graphic artist and facilitator draws the large mural representing everyone's ideas about racism, which is reproduced in the opening to this story. The end result is a tough, nasty-looking weed whose roots include fear of difference, rejection, and isolation; value and belief systems learned from families, cultures and privilege. The blossom of the weed, which is the visible part of racism, includes fighting, name-calling and harassment, injustice segregation, low self-esteem, destructive behaviour; and feelings such as anger, sadness, loneliness, shame, hurt and hopelessness.

It is not despair, however, that emerges from this picture but the resolve to change the conditions that create racism. Conference participants move on to identifying what could change things and end racism. They come up with actions that they could take, and actions that they would like to see others take. Several groups decide to start advisory groups and committees at their school. These committees could plan for educational and awareness-raising activities, and could also have students do mediation with their peers when race-related problems arise. Participants talk about how they would like to see the school boards doing awareness-raising education in the high schools, and even in the elementary schools. Some people suggest that this work could be fun and creative, using music, art and drama to educate students about diversity and racism.

At the end of the day, Conference participants are asked to summarize their experience in one word and they use terms such as *"hopeful"*, *"enlightening"*, *"inspiring"* and *"productive"*. Closing the distance in Thunder Bay has taken on a new and deeply felt meaning among many young people and a number of key adult leaders from the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

Several project leaders commit to creating a report about what happened at the conference, and using it to make decisions to continue work on this Project in the future. Although there are no concrete plans made for action to take place in the future, it seems clear that several people are committed to continuing to move the Project forward.

Shortly after the conference, several Project leaders ensure that the momentum of the day is not lost. They organize a meeting, where Steering Committee members and Project staff debrief on the conference, plan the next steps that need to be taken, and set up a "next steps" committee. This committee hopes to create a way where schools can continue to meet to discuss the issue of racism, and to develop strategies to reduce racism in Thunder Bay schools. As the *Closing the Distance* Project officially ends, it seems that a new journey to address racism in Thunder Bay is about to begin.

Reflections on Closing the Distance for Youth in Thunder Bay: A Capacity-Building Analysis

Context for the Analysis

There are several things that are important to the context of the Thunder Bay Project for treatment using Kaplan's Capacity-building Framework:

- It was important for Health Canada to have wide geographic coverage in the five communities funded in the Social and Economic Inclusion Initiative, including Northern Ontario. In accommodating this requirement, the SPNO looked to communities that had strong local Social Planning Councils, which could serve as organizational anchors and hosts for the *Closing the Distance* Projects. There was a good match in that respect between both Health Canada's and the SPNO's requirements in Thunder Bay, where the Lakehead SPC had a long and distinguished community history.
- Unanticipated at the time of selecting Thunder Bay for an SEII initiative was the pending retirement of the Executive Director of the Lakehead SPC, which would take effect after the initial preparatory planning but before launch of Phase 1 of the SEII. While the newly hired Executive Director was not lacking in enthusiasm and support for the *Closing the Distance* Project throughout, he did not have the same community connections as the previous person (she had been in the job for 18 years), nor did he have the same level of Board support.
- At the same time as the Closing the Distance Project was taking shape, the Lakehead SPC was beginning to review its mission, mandate, role and function in the community. There was a concern that an emphasis on its research and community information role had disconnected the organization from working with disadvantaged community groups. The *Closing the Distance* Project was seen as an opportunity to reconnect with community. The SPNO actually did some work with the Board of Directors and staff during the spring-summer of 2003 to redefine the mission and clarify the role of the organization. SPNO saw it as an opportunity to position the *Closing the Distance* Project as a model for other work of the SPC. The Board strategic planning process, however, never took solid root, and the opportunity was lost.

The following chart gives an overview assessment applying Alan Kaplan's Capacity Analysis Framework to the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project. Clearly, this assessment shows a difficult start to the Project with strength building in many of the six elements of the Kaplan framework as the Project responded to the risk of failure. Still, several major capacity issues remain.

<p>Hierarchy of Elements that Build Capacity</p>	<p>Capacity Assessment of the Thunder Bay <i>Closing the Distance</i> Project</p>
<p>1. <u>Conceptual Framework:</u> <i>The organization's understanding of its world (context).</i></p>	<p>The Thunder Bay <i>Closing the Distance</i> Project struggled early on to find a clear view of the world around it. Its focus moved from as broad as “Diversity” in Thunder Bay to as narrow as the marginalization of 16-17 year olds. In both areas, the issue of racism surfaced early. Yet, racism did not become the central focus of the initiative until the last four months, when the Project regained a clear understanding about the world that many mid-teen youth live in and how they are unfairly distanced from health and happiness in their schools and communities. Recognizing the Project’s state of paralysis, community leaders assumed control and established a clear conceptual framework to guide Project activity towards connecting the worlds of youth and the education system on the issue of racism in the schools.</p>
<p>2. <u>Organizational Attitude:</u> <i>Confidence and responsibility to act in its world rather than be a passive victim of external conditions.</i></p>	<p>The “youth-driven” imperative held by the staff of the Thunder Bay Project set a passive and reactive pattern of behaviour. The Project had difficulty moving from outreach and engagement to direction and action on youth issues. Throughout the stops and starts of the Project, however, youth had consistently voiced concerns about the issue of racism in the schools. Although late in the game, Project leadership mobilized its capacity to bring these authentic concerns to decision-makers, managers, and professionals in the education system in order to promote institutional change.</p>
<p>3. <u>Vision, Strategy & Culture:</u> <i>Sense of purpose and ability to plan, implement and adapt a course of action.</i></p>	<p>For much of the Project, the absence of conceptual clarity and a passive/reactive orientation to activity rather than direction undermined any clear vision or strategy. SPNO Central Support failed to assist the Project to break out of its inertia until the crisis of total Project collapse loomed late in 2003. Strategic intervention by SPNO combined with the commitment of a revitalized local Project leadership and new local Project staff framed a compelling and coherent vision based on the issue of racism in schools as voiced by youth in the community. This produced a carefully thought through and adaptive strategy for engaging the education system on the issue and creating the conditions for change.</p>

<p>4. <u>Structures and Procedures:</u> <i>Organized and operationalized in a way that enables fulfilment of purpose, realization of vision, and effectiveness of strategy.</i></p>	<p>The Project started under the guidance of a broad-based community leadership group, which was not effectively supported and sustained by Project staff. By mid-2003, Project staff supervised by the Lakehead SPC Executive Director was managing the Project with little advisory input. Project staff's commitment to the "youth-driven" imperative produced working groups in a number of areas, leading to a flurry of activities in the summer of 2003, which dissipated by the fall. The crisis recovery plan hinged on a recommitment of local community leadership and definition of the roles, responsibilities, and relationships among the new Steering Committee, Lakehead SPC Executive Director, and Project staff.</p>
<p>5. <u>Skills and Competencies:</u> <i>Leadership and staff relevant and appropriate to the organization's mission and work.</i></p>	<p>Unfamiliar with the community and without established community networks and relationships, the new Executive Director of Lakehead SPC was at a disadvantage at the time of the launch of the Thunder Bay <i>Closing the Distance</i> Project, even though he embraced it enthusiastically and remained committed to it throughout. Still, staff hired to develop the Project did not maintain and support a strong Project Advisory Group, which eventually led to Project drift. Strained local Project staff relations with the SPNO Project Coordinator compounded problems. Recruitment of a skilled new Project staff with the trust and confidence of youth combined with a re-committed community leadership group and the assistance of the SPNO Central Support team turned things around in the last five months of the initiative.</p>
<p>6. <u>Resources:</u> <i>Financial means and physical assets.</i></p>	<p>The Project was adequately funded and had enough impact with institutional and community supporters to get endorsements for continued work.</p>

Conceptual Framework

Summary:

The Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project struggled early on to find a clear view of the world around it. Its focus moved from as broad as “Diversity” in Thunder Bay to as narrow as the marginalization of 16-17 year olds. In both areas, the issue of racism surfaced. Yet, racism did not become the central focus of the initiative until the last four months, when the Project regained a clear understanding about the world that many mid-teen youth live in and how they are unfairly distanced from health and happiness in their schools and communities. Recognizing the Project’s state of paralysis, community leaders assumed control and established a clear conceptual framework to guide Project activity towards connecting the worlds of youth and the education system on the issue of racism in the schools.

Discussion:

The Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project struggled to define a place in its local environment in the early stages of development. There was no clear focus for the Project as preparations for Phase 1 concluded. A wide-ranging group of community leaders from a variety of organizations seemed to have consensus on two things:

- (1) Diversity was an issue in Thunder Bay; and
- (2) There were many groups within the community that would benefit from developing a social inclusion and population health framework.

In an interview a year and a half later, one participant commented, “*At the August 2002 roundtable, it was clear that the seventeen different people there had seventeen different ideas, including me.*” One could say that the initial Project leadership had a strong appreciation for the diversity of its local environment, but it was not clear what “closing the distance” meant in this context.

A leadership group did try to formulate a strategy to work with the broad theme of diversity as the Project started to take shape. In consultation with the SPNO Project Coordinator, this group fashioned a plan to reach out to the full diversity of Thunder Bay and to bring representatives from all groups together early in 2003 in order to discover what common issues of inequity different parts of the community experienced. The plan was to design a consensus building process for finding the common ground on which diverse communities could organize. A workplan and timeline were developed to this end.

As Phase 1 commenced and after two Project staff were hired, however, the Project’s focus quickly narrowed. When the Thunder Bay Project staff team came to the first SPNO All-Region REFLECTIONS Workshop in Burlington in December 2002, they reported that the Project’s focus would be on 16-17 year old youth. Although it was clear that this age group had serious issues in terms of being distanced from community supports in Thunder Bay, the decision to focus on 16-17 year olds appeared to emerge primarily from the staff’s frustration in dealing with the breadth of the “diversity” theme

and the difficulty in getting agreement from the leadership group on how to proceed with Project development.

Although the priority population of 16-17 year old youth seemed to be selected more by default than design, there were early signs of promise. The idea of creating a Youth Action Network did recognize that youth in their mid-teen years were distanced from adults in the community and were subject without any voice to a world controlled by adults. The proposal for Phase 2 funding was specific about “closing the distance” for mid-teen youth by establishing “mentoring” relationships with adult community leaders and influencing the media to present a more positive image of this age group to the Thunder Bay community.

In implementation, however, the Project lost its focus on relationship building. The importance that the Project be “youth-driven” became paramount to the local project staff. A lot of activities were organized and conducted for youth participation. Some important issues were identified early on, including the issues of racism in the community and schools, especially as experienced by Aboriginal youth. Planning meetings and events, however, did not develop these issues and themes into clearer forms of expression and action. Consequently, by the last six months of the Project the major focus was on finding suitable space for local youth to meet for their activities. The connection with adult community leaders was pretty much limited to relationships with the Project staff.

The crisis recovery plan formulated in December 2003, the engagement of recommitted volunteer leadership from the Lakehead SPC and other community organizations, and the hiring of a Project staff person well-connected to mid-teen youth, all combined to re-charge the Project in terms of conceptual clarity. The new leadership seized on the issue of surfacing and acting on the issue of racism in schools. “Closing the distance” assumed a new clarity about exposing inequitable and discriminatory school environments and engaging youth and adults in communities and schools in a joint debate about ending racism.

Ironically, the conceptual clarity that the Thunder Bay Project finally achieved had been seeded very early on. Young people had identified racism as a major issue in the first workshop in June 2003. The focus on racism, however, became lost in a flurry of activities in subsequent months.

Also, by April of 2004, the Project was revisiting and reframing its original notions of mentoring relationships between youth and adults. In an interview, one of the community leaders noted:

“In terms of the mentoring, which was one of the original goals of the project, I think that some of the connections that have been formed between youth and EDs [executive directors] from agencies are a type of mentoring, and these relationships might help these youth in the future. This isn’t a formal mentoring program, but you see important connections happening within the school system between teachers, administrators and

teachers, and between EDs and youth; you see relationships starting – at the training today [April 13, 2004], you could see some of those relationships forming. These are important, because in your life you need allies, especially in EDs and managers who might be able to help you out in the future if you're an at-risk youth."

Since December 2003, Thunder Bay Project leadership, led by a Lakehead SPC Board volunteer has shown an acute understanding about what "closing the distance" for many mid-teenagers in Thunder Bay means. Racism in schools is a major issue for many students. Project leadership have heard this and have supported the creation of opportunities for students to express their experiences in a safe way. Project leadership, however, also recognizes that this is an extremely volatile and sensitive issue with the school system, from boards of education, to principals, to teachers. Therefore, the Project has facilitated a deliberate process of dialogue between students and educational institutions that surfaces the needs and fears of both perspectives and identifies possibilities for change. Notably, it was only when community leadership truly took control of the Project, rather than leaving direction to Project staff that a coherent conceptual framework really emerged and became clear guidance for action in the Project.

Organizational Attitude

Summary:

The "youth-driven" imperative held by the staff of the Thunder Bay Project set a passive and reactive pattern of behaviour. The Project had difficulty moving from outreach and engagement to direction and action on youth issues. Throughout the stops and starts of the Project, however, youth had consistently voiced concerns about the issue of racism in the schools. Although late in the game, Project leadership mobilized its capacity to bring these authentic concerns to decision-makers, managers, and professionals in the education system in order to promote institutional change.

Discussion:

The "youth-driven" imperative held by the staff of the Thunder Bay Project set a passive and reactive pattern of behaviour. The Project had difficulty moving from outreach and engagement to direction and action on youth issues. There were a series of promising false starts:

- (a) The Community Visioning Day in December 2002 actually directly involved youth from an alternative school program, but this connection proved short-lived.
- (b) Project staff organized a number of youth focus groups and collected some interesting information on youth concerns over the winter of 2003, but the organization of a workshop of youth and adults to design together a Youth Action Network in the spring never occurred.
- (c) Instead, a much more open-ended workshop was conducted in June 2003. While it generated a lot of participation, excitement and energy among youth

going into the summer, activity became organized around a number of sub-committees, which by the end of the summer had not advanced issues any further. Then, participation fell off as the youth leadership returned to school. The Project entered a period of relative inactivity during the fall months of 2003, the excuse being that youth were not available to participate.

The Project staff lacked the capacity and the willingness to balance a legitimate concern that the initiative be youth-driven with the need to offer guidance to youth leadership on achieving Project objectives. The SPNO Project Coordinator identified this problem early in Phase 2, but failed to develop an effective working relationship with the local field staff to avoid Project drift.

When the crisis recovery plan was developed in late 2004, there was a renewed sense of confidence and responsibility to act for change. The plan centred on the issue of racism in the schools, which was clearly a sensitive, if not potentially explosive, local issue. The Project organized its resources strategically for impact:

- (a) hiring a Project worker with strong youth connections who engaged several hundred youth on the issue over the January through March period; and
- (b) reconstructing a Steering Committee of volunteer leaders who had credibility with and access to school board officials, principals and teachers.

Further, the revitalized Project leadership intentionally adopted a strategy of building support gradually within the school system by first engaging sympathetic and/or open individuals on the inside. As one Project leader explained:

“In our project, the school boards had lots of fear that the most extreme racists would come to our April event, and that there would be conflicts. But what we learned in the Reflections session, and what we said to the school board people, was that this was NOT the idea – the idea was to bring potential allies, or to take someone neutral and try to make them your ally, and to involve others who are already allies – this is a lesson we learned at a Reflections session.”

Clearly, the Thunder Bay Project flirted with failure when its primary concern was just youth directed activity. Recovery and success resulted when it addressed itself to a major youth concern and organized itself strategically for impact on the school system. Again, this reorganization and change in strategy occurred when community leadership assumed Project control rather than leaving it with Project staff.

The Thunder Bay Project offers an important learning on this element. Community mobilization initiatives hold a heightened sensitivity to supporting disempowered groups to participate and assume more control over their own destinies. In Thunder Bay, this conviction became translated into the necessity that the Project be “youth-driven”. Without any strategic guidance or clear sense of direction, however, this primary operating principle produced bursts of activity without much progress on any particular

issue. Respect for the authentic engagement of primary stakeholders, youth in this case, must be balanced with the capacity to move towards real change. In this case, late in the Project adult community leaders and key players in the service system committed themselves to connecting the concerns and ideas of youth to the policymakers, managers and professionals in the education system.

Vision, Strategy and Culture

Summary:

For much of the Project, the absence of conceptual clarity and a passive/reactive orientation to activity rather than direction undermined any clear vision or strategy. SPNO Central Support failed to assist the Project to break out of its inertia until the crisis of total Project collapse loomed late in 2003. Strategic intervention by SPNO combined with the commitment of a revitalized local Project leadership and new local Project staff framed a compelling and coherent vision based on the issue of racism in schools as voiced by youth in the community. This produced a carefully thought through and adaptive strategy for engaging the education system on the issue and creating the conditions for change.

Discussion:

Lack of conceptual clarity and a passive/reactive approach as indicated above naturally affected the sense of purpose, planning and implementation, which is the focus of this element in Kaplan's capacity assessment framework. As previously explained, the Project moved sporadically with bursts of energy and activity from the winter through the summer of 2003. Finally, in the fall, it came to a standstill with little youth involvement and no strategy or plan.

Support from SPNO was important in helping to turn the Project around by providing telephone consultation and on-site facilitation and planning services. It is important to note, however, that SPNO may have been able to provide more and/or different support earlier in order to avoid the crisis that emerged.

It was clear from the spring of 2003 that the Project was showing a poor local ability to plan and move from one stage to the next. The SPNO Project Coordinator assumed a task orientation to the Thunder Bay Project, attempting to support planning from one short-term objective to the next (e.g. participative design session for a Youth Action Network). Working primarily with local Project staff in this way, rather than the whole leadership group, SPNO Central Support probably reinforced the orientation in the Thunder Bay Project towards *activity* rather than *direction*.

Also, SPNO Central Support provided a lot of on-site consulting support to the Thunder Bay Project. This took the form, however, of multiple external resource consultants, five different people altogether between December 2002 and June 2003. No single consultant with relevant experience to the focus of the Thunder Bay Project was given prime responsibility for working with the local Project staff on a continuing basis, as was

being done with the Kingston Project. This may have been even more important to do in Thunder Bay, given the strained relationship that developed between the SPNO Project Coordinator and the local Project staff person between the spring and fall of 2003. While it was important that SPNO maintain a support rather than control function, earlier and/or different modes of intervention might have avoided the need for crisis response by the end of 2003. As one Project volunteer leader indicated in an interview later:

“One area where the SPNO could have done better – we were really plagued with problems, and maybe some intervention sooner...this is not a criticism. I just think, if it becomes apparent that there are serious gaps in skill, commitment, they [the SPNO] should be able to sit down with the Project and say look, this needs to change, we need to intervene. Also maybe being more firm in encouraging Projects to be more focused – community issues are big and broad – but they probably need to get to something more defined, more focused for a project like this.”

While vision and strategy was sporadic through much of 2003, the Thunder Bay Project regained focus and momentum entering 2004 with its crisis recovery plan in place and clear roles and functions established for staff and volunteer leaders. The Project demonstrated a strong capacity both to plan and to adapt to unanticipated circumstances. Project leadership were presented with several barriers or threats to the April event (e.g. school board indicated dates for the conference would not work at the last minute; need to pay for teacher lieu time for conference attendance). At this point, the Project adapted and adjusted its planning flexibly in response.

In adapting to school board concerns and fears, however, the Project did move to a more “low risk” agenda by the time of the April Workshop. In January and February, Project leadership was proposing stronger school response to youth concerns about racism in the schools. By the time a more carefully selected group of 50 students and about 15 school officials were convened and safety rules were set for how the Workshop was to be conducted, some of the edge and sharpness of the issue had been tempered. This did reduce somewhat the systemic focus on the issue of racism in schools.

Still, a sense of purpose and conviction on the issue of racism in schools is indicated by the continuation of community leadership group beyond the funded period of the Project. In July 2004, the Lakehead District Public School Board sent a letter to Lakehead SPC expressing continuing support for the *Closing the Distance* Project in Thunder Bay, stating:

“The April Conference, Closing the Distance, brought both community agencies and students together to discuss Racism in our Community. As a result, our student participants made recommendations and identified areas of growth that would foster and promote racial harmony within our school system. We are excited to explore these recommendations further and to further develop an implementation plan.”

This is testimony to the strength of the vision and of the culture for change that the Project has stimulated in Thunder Bay.

Structures and Procedures

Summary:

The Project started under the guidance of a broad-based community leadership group, which was not effectively supported and sustained by Project staff. By mid-2003, Project staff supervised by the Lakehead SPC Executive Director was managing the Project with little advisory input. Project staff's commitment to the "youth-driven" imperative produced working groups in a number of areas, leading to a flurry of activities in the summer of 2003, which dissipated by the fall. The crisis recovery plan hinged on a recommitment of local community leadership and definition of the roles, responsibilities, and relationships among the new Steering Committee, Lakehead SPC Executive Director, and Project staff.

Discussion:

Although the Project started with a broad community-based leadership group of almost twenty people, it soon became reduced in Phase 1 to a two-person staff team supervised by the Lakehead SPC Executive Director and a small advisory committee with an unclear role and function. The Project staff team operated fairly independently and lacked strong direction. Under these circumstances, the staff fell easily into an activity orientation rather than strategic development of the Project on clearly focused issues.

Some sense of direction and organization emerged from the youth event in June 2003 as three sub-committees of youth were set up to work on policy, communications, and events during the summer. Again, with little adult or agency participation, these sub-committees did not produce a strong sense of concerted direction on any issue, even though racism as a major youth concern had been identified at the June workshop.

The crisis recovery plan in December 2003 specified the importance of a volunteer leadership committee with responsibility for advancing the Project. It also clearly defined the role of the Project staff and the supervisory responsibility of the Lakehead SPC Executive Director. Working together, volunteer leadership reaching out to the school system and the Project staff connecting with several hundred youth, the Project became more effective in the field.

As the funded period of the Project ended in April 2004, there was an ongoing commitment from the community leadership and several school boards to maintain a Steering Committee and to search for resources to act on recommendations coming out of the April Conference.

This is hopeful, but a significant concern remains the Project's organizational base. During Phases 1 and 2, the Lakehead SPC Board of Directors approved and supported

the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project, but not with a high level of understanding and commitment with the exception of one volunteer Board member. By late 2003, with the Project foundering, the Lakehead SPC Board was ready to terminate it and return the unspent funds to Health Canada. Only the commitment of the involved Lakehead SPC Board individual and the creation of the crisis recovery plan averted this development. The progress since December 2003 has restored some of the Lakehead SPC Board's confidence in the promise and prospects for the *Closing the Distance* Project. But, the LAKEHEAD SPC needs to strengthen its own capacity to support such initiatives.

Skills and Competencies

Summary:

Unfamiliar with the community and without established community networks and relationships, the new Executive Director of Lakehead SPC was at a disadvantage at the time of the launch of the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project, even though he embraced it enthusiastically and remained committed to it throughout. Still, staff hired to develop the Project did not maintain and support a strong Project Advisory Group, which eventually led to Project drift. Strained local Project staff relations with the SPNO Project Coordinator compounded problems. Recruitment of a skilled new Project staff with the trust and confidence of youth combined with a re-committed community leadership group and the assistance of the SPNO Central Support team turned things around in the last five months of the initiative.

Discussion:

The Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project faced several challenges at the senior and field staff levels. First, there was an important change in senior staff leadership at Lakehead SPC just as the Project was taking shape. The Lakehead SPC Executive Director of almost twenty years retired in the summer of 2002 after the first roundtable was held to explore community interest in the Project. While willing and enthusiastic about the Project, the newly appointed Executive Director was at a disadvantage in terms of his lack of familiarity with the Thunder Bay community and its key organizations and leadership. The new Executive Director had to make important community connections and build working relationships at the same time as he was developing this major new Lakehead SPC initiative. He managed this fairly effectively, although there was some resistance from some members of the academic community, one of whom was a member of the Lakehead SPC Board, which would not have likely have occurred under previous Executive Director.

Another disadvantage for an Executive Director new to the community was the need to hire Project staff. The staff experience and skill requirements for a Project that was so broadly defined at the time on the issue of diversity were unclear. While the two Project staff hired for Phase 1 managed to develop a relatively strong proposal for Phase 2, there is some question about how well they facilitated the community consensus-building process that moved from the broad community diversity issue to

the narrowly focused 16-17 year old youth age group. This decision appeared to have been arrived at more out of staff frustration than community conviction.

In Phase 2, several stronger staff did not stay with the Project and the staff continuing from Phase 1 did not show the skills necessary to build and support a strong and functioning Advisory Group, nor to convert energy and interest in Project activity into a focused direction on issues. As a middle-aged male, the Project staff did not have a natural connection to youth, although he did show a strong respect for their concerns. Committed to the importance that the Project be “youth-driven”, the Project staff ended up supporting a lot of youth activities with little focus and issue development. Also, the idea of closing the distance between youth and adults (e.g. mentoring relationships) became lost as Phase 2 got underway. A lack of strong supervision, combined with the Project staff’s strained relations with the SPNO Project Coordinator added to problems, which were really not addressed until late in the Project at which time the original staff person left the Project.

The crisis recovery plan in December 2003 depended on getting in place a strong community staff – a person who had good youth connections and could reach out to youth effectively. This happened in the last four months of the Project, helping to turn the situation around.

The ability at the staff level to reach out and connect with youth was complemented by the actions of several volunteer leaders from the Steering Committee to engage school board officials late in Phase 2. This shows the importance of strong Project staff teams or equivalent capacities among staff and volunteer leaders to make connection with both ends of a *Closing the Distance* continuum on the particular issue being addressed.

Emerging from the recovery plan, the Project has a reconstituted and committed Steering Committee made up of senior community volunteers and school board officials. With the end of Project funding, however, keeping a Project staff person in the field and engaged with youth remains an issue. Further, funding issues have created uncertainty in Lakehead SPC’s ability to maintain senior management staff. Although the Project demonstrated late in Phase 2 a capacity to combine field staff and volunteer leadership effectively, by the summer of 2004 the Project still reflected some instability in this regard.

The Thunder Bay Project offers some important learning on this element of the Kaplan framework in terms of the capacities of an external support function. Strained relations between local Project staff and the SPNO Project Coordinator interfered with and even delayed effective and constructive intervention until a state of crisis emerged. Yet, the skills and competencies of the SPNO Central Support team at the crisis stage were instrumental in developing a recovery plan that not only salvaged the initiative but produced impressive results in a short period of time.

Resources

Summary:

The Project was adequately funded and had enough impact with institutional and community supporters to get endorsements for continued work.

Discussion:

The *Closing the Distance* Project was adequately resourced for Phases 1 and 2 to do its work, but required sustaining funding to continue. The Project did show some capacity to generate resources for Project purposes. For example, the school board produced T-Shirts for the April Conference. Also, although the City did not fund a graffiti wall for Thunder Bay youth, a local businessman, who was also a City Councillor, was impressed enough by the youth presentation to City Council that he donated wall space on his building for use as a graffiti wall by local youth.

As a result of the organizing done in the last five months of the Project and the connections made with the education system for the April conference, there was confidence that community and institutional support for moving towards action on the issues raised at the conference. As one volunteer leader commented in interview:

“This Project shouldn’t end when the funding ends – I know people will continue to work on this, people on the Steering Committee like Ann who has been working on racism issues for many years – I hope someone will go to bat with the youth to make sure this work continues.”

In July 2004, the Lakehead District Public School Board wrote a letter of endorsement for continued funding to the *Closing the Distance* Project.

Conclusion

The Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project followed a difficult path to arrive at a place that engaged youth and community leadership on a major local issue – racism in schools. The Project stumbled through several starts and stops before finding a focus and direction and then mobilizing its capacity to act.

The Thunder Bay Project’s problems illustrate the importance of having clarity about the environment in which community organizations live in order to build the capacity to perform effectively. Although youth expressed concerns about racism early on in the Project, there was no strong sense about how to act on these concerns. The delicate balance between respecting youth control and guiding them toward constructive action on their concerns was not found until the last five months. Instead, the “youth-driven” imperative subscribed to by local Project staff produced sporadic bursts of energy on activities rather than substantive movement on youth issues. Also, the key “closing the distance” dimension of the Thunder Bay Project, creating supportive relationships between youth and adults in the community, got lost.

The crisis of paralysis and potential Project failure shocked both local leadership and the external SPNO Central Support team into recovery mode. All the elements that were missing earlier were addressed in the crisis recovery plan:

- (1) A clear focus on racism in the schools as an issue requiring not only youth expression but also response from adults in key institutions such as the schools.
- (2) Conviction that transformative change on the issue could be achieved if dialogue started with selected adults in key positions of power and influence in the schools system (hence the April 2004 conference).
- (3) Strategy that intentionally created a safe environment for both youth and adults to start this dialogue (e.g. youth and adult co-facilitating teams, safety rules for the conference dialogue).
- (4) Reconstruction of a broad community leadership group to guide the initiative, hiring appropriate Project staff to activate youth participation, and establishing clear roles, responsibilities and relationships among all parts of the Project leadership and staff team.

These elements of the recovery plan are consistent with the Kaplan Capacity-building Framework.

Finally, the Thunder Bay Project is also very instructive on issues of how to deploy external resource supports to local initiatives in a constructive and proactive manner. The SPNO Central Support function was consistently involved with the Thunder Bay Project, but might have taken different action in order to avert crisis late in the Project, such as the following:

- (1) Advising the Executive Director of the Lakehead SPC to hire staff initially only for Phase 1 and to reserve the right for renewal or new staff hiring in Phase 2 in order to make sure staff were in place appropriate to the requirements of Phase 2. This might have meant hiring a youth worker and more experienced community worker as a team for Phase 2 in order to develop relationships with both youth and agency leadership (this was almost accomplished with the part-time more experienced community worker hired early in Phase 2, but she was not able to stay past the summer).
- (2) Designating one SPNO Central Support team member to work with the Thunder Bay Project continuously throughout Phases 1 and 2. This would not have precluded introducing other consulting help, but it might have been more influential on local Project staff with respect to some issues such as balancing the youth control issue with movement on their substantive concerns. The Executive Director of the Sudbury SPC provided some consulting assistance to the Thunder Bay Project for the Community Visioning Day. Given her familiarity with issues in Northern Ontario and her successful leadership in the Sudbury *Closing the Distance* Project, it would have been wise for SPNO Central Support to cover several days a month of her time to work with Thunder Bay.

- (3) Creating the understanding and expectation from the outset that the SPNO Project Coordinator and/or assigned consulting associate would have periodic contact with the local Project community leadership group for purposes of monitoring Project progress. This expectation would motivate Project staff to maintain and support the involvement of a community leadership group, which did not happen effectively in Thunder Bay. It would also enable the SPNO Central Support team to alert local leadership earlier to major problems and thus help avert crises. This would have to be a sensitively handled relationship, preserving, not usurping, local control and responsibility. This contact would also enable local Project leadership to identify and express directly their views on the kinds of external support the Project needs.

In the end, SPNO Central Support, through the assignment of one of its skilled team members, worked effectively with a reconstituted local leadership group to design a crisis recovery strategy and plan and to implement that plan very effectively in the last five months of the Project. This is testimony to the important role of an external resource support capacity to local initiatives like the Thunder Bay *Closing the Distance* Project. The experience in Thunder Bay produced some helpful learning on how to improve the external resource support function.