

Doctoral candidate explores alternative high schools' success

BY NANCY BURCHETT

CORRESPONDENT

Suzette Parkin successfully defended her dissertation as a doctoral candidate at Saint Mary's College Kalmanovitz School of Education in October. Her topic was the academic success and educational resilience of students in three alternative high schools in Contra Costa County.

Parkin is herself an education success story. The child of a single mother in England, she thoroughly disliked school, especially as a teen. After she took her O level examinations at age 15, she stopped school. In the back of her mind, though, was a persistent question: Should I teach? Couldn't I make learning better for kids like me?

After coming to the United States at age 20, Parkin began to attend community college. It took her eight years to earn a Bachelor's degree in English from Cal State Hayward, now East Bay. She went on to get a Masters in Education. Then she set her sights on a doctorate.

She visited Saint Mary's and "fell in love with this place," knowing it was a perfect fit for her.

While she has worked on the degree, she also has been an instructor in Project Pipeline, a credentialing intern program. In addition, she supervises student teachers and teaches four days a week in a Hayward public school that has many Title 1 students.

"You can't just look at a student and say he's a problem. You have to see the child's whole story," she asserts.

The children she works with have no other resources. Their parents, she says, have all they can do to put food on the table. Many have little education themselves, so can't help their children.

Some years back, the Contra Costa Economic Partnership contacted Saint Mary's. After noting the book "Silent Epidemic", about the alarming school dropout rate, the county wanted research on local dropouts and what leads to the high rate — 30 percent nationwide.

Parkin wanted to focus on the children who didn't drop out, the ones who stayed against great odds. The Partnership agreed that this would be a fruitful endeavor and her



JIM CHAPMAN/SPECIAL SECTIONS STAFF

SUZETTE PARKIN, SMC Ed.D. candidate, came to Saint Mary's College to work on her doctorate. Her project was spurred by a request by Contra Costa Economic Partnership: After noting the book "Silent Epidemic", about the alarming school dropout rate, the county wanted research on local dropouts and what leads to the high rate — 30 percent nationwide.

research began.

Three local school districts agreed to be involved. Parental permission to participate was obtained for all students under 18. Eventually, Parkin was able to interview 16 students at length. They were from the Mt. Diablo, John Swett and Antioch unified school districts. All were studying in their districts' alternative schools.

Children who go to alternative schools are at risk for academic failure in their usual schools. They lack the number of units necessary to graduate. In most cases enrollment

in an alternative school is considered a last resort.

Parkin found that at these schools, instruction was differentiated to meet the students' unique needs. The staff figured out what the kids needed in order to be successful, and created a program to lead to that success.

The school day is flexible. The day's schedule is shorter to accommodate those students who have jobs.

In the interviews, Parkin learned what put the students at risk. Often their stories included family problems with alcohol, drugs, abuse and joblessness. Many families struggled on welfare.

What she found among the students was that all had a sense of purpose. They had goals for the future. They had hope. The students yearned to succeed. They had a healthy self-esteem, and she was delighted to find that many had a sense of humor.

All of them had the capacity to learn, with teacher and school support.

"They had the ability to separate from the dysfunction. They recognized their problems, but saw that this wouldn't work for them in the future," she said.

Importantly, all had someone who, they felt, cared. It could be a friend, a teacher, an aunt or even a boss. Knowing someone

was pulling for them made a big difference in their confidence and hope.

Parkin found a very low dropout rate in the alternative schools, and attributed this partly to the very supportive atmosphere.

The conclusions, states Parkin, are so obvious:

■ Schools must provide teachers tools and education so they understand the needs

of an at-risk population.

■ As a society, we must help children develop resilience from kindergarten on, treating each as an individual.

■ Learning must be a partnership between a child and the school.

■ Children must have caring adults who notice and affirm them.

■ Counselors are greatly needed. Parkin is heartened that funding for counselors is on the increase after decades of decrease.

Parkin also urges flexibility in the school day. "One size does not fit all," she says. She notes that students who progress at a faster rate should be allowed to move on. Failing children need greater attention. Holding them back almost guarantees future dropouts.

She suggests flexible homework policies. Some children literally have nowhere to do homework, and when a grade is tied to completing such assignments, that child will fail.

Parkin thinks alternative schools, which by title alone have a negative connotation and often imply shame, should be called opportunity schools instead. They exist, after all, to help children reach their full potential. She also thinks that many schools are too big.

One student drops out every nine seconds in America, she notes. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of "disconnected" students grew by 700,000.

"Recognize the at-risk child in kindergarten," she pleads. "Don't wait until 11th grade." She goes on to say that, often, instead of dealing with the child, we end up dealing with the disenfranchised adult.

Her car has a bumper sticker that reminds that it is better to build schools for the children than prisons for the adults. "We pay at the end instead of at the beginning," she laments.

"I really care about this. I could have easily dropped out. I have something within me that kept me going. I think it can be nurtured" when [that quality] is recognized in others.

About Paul and Lydia Kalmanovitz

The naming of the Paul and Lydia Kalmanovitz School of Education at Saint Mary's College recognizes a generous gift of \$10 million from the Kalmanovitz Charitable Foundation. Paul and Lydia Kalmanovitz met and married in New York City after separate immigrations to the United States in the early 1920s. They moved to California in 1935, where they acquired the first of many real estate interests with the purchase of a Los Angeles service station (where Lydia pumped gas). Paul worked on the personal staffs of Franklin D. Roosevelt, William Randolph Hearst and Louis B. Mayer before going to work in the brewing industry. Paul and Lydia continued to acquire more real estate as well as brewing companies, including the famous Pabst Brewing Company in Milwaukee and the Falstaff Brewing Corporation, among others.

Paul and Lydia moved to Tiburon, Calif., in 1972. He became involved in helping the Guide Dogs for the Blind in San Rafael, Calif., and several other charitable organizations. The pair gave generously to colleges, universities and hospitals throughout their lives.

After Paul's death in 1987, and Lydia passing in 1994, most of the Kalmanovitz Estate was left to a charitable foundation for hospitals and universities — the Kalmanovitz Charitable Foundation — to continue the tradition of giving. Their legacy lives on with the opening of the Kalmanovitz School of Education at Saint Mary's College of California.

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