

**AN EVALUATION OF THE *CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES*
PROGRAM**

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INTRODUCTION

*Choices and Consequences*¹, a four-day program developed by the Law Courts Education Society of British Columbia (LCES), was designed for students ages 11 to 14 years who have been suspended or are at-risk of being suspended from school for having made “poor choices” which resulted in inappropriate behavior. The program utilizes a “resiliency model” for encouraging the development of “socially competent” decision-making skills so that students can be successfully returned to the classroom. Anticipated learning outcomes are: “(1) A greater understanding of legal processes. (2) Fewer discipline problems in school. (3) Improved attitudes towards self and others. (4) Greater empathy for victims. (5) An increased ability to consider the consequences of choices and to suggest alternative solutions to problems.”

During the 2006-2007 school year *Choices and Consequences* was piloted in six schools located in four communities in British Columbia. Seven groups of six students each completed the four-day program taught jointly by LCES staff members and school board personnel. The 42 students in the study were enrolled in grades 5 through 10, with the majority (34/42; 81%) being in Grades 7, 8, and 9. Twenty-nine (69%) of the students were boys and 13 (31%) were girls.

The assessment program consisted of the pretest and posttest administrations of an instrument (*Student Survey*) purported to measure knowledge of British Columbia’s legal system and two similar “follow-up” questionnaires designed to elicit the opinions of students and school personnel (teachers, counselors, administrators) concerning the program’s effect on incidence of discipline problems, attitude toward self and others,

¹N. Gambioli (2006). *Choices and Consequences: You Are In Charge*. Law Courts Education Society of BC. 260-800 Hornby Street, Vancouver, BC. V6Z 2C5.

empathy toward victims, and ability to make proper choices. The knowledge instrument (*Student Survey*) and the two questionnaires (*Follow-up Questionnaire for Students*, *Follow-up Questionnaire for Teachers/Counselors/Administrators*) were developed by LCES staff. This evaluation is based on the analysis of the pretest and posttest data and the responses of students and school personnel to the items in the follow-up questionnaires.

ANALYSIS

Part A: *Student Survey*

Thirty of the 42 students completed both the pretest and the posttest, similar instruments containing 10 items. With a pretest mean of 6.2 (1.80) and a posttest mean of 8.5 (0.86), the mean gain of 2.3 was statistically significant ($t = 6.774$; $df = 29$; $>.01$). The mean gain for boys (+2.6) was slightly larger than the mean gain for girls (+1.4).

Posttest items on which 90% (27/30) or more of the students scored correctly pertained to the role of sheriffs in the courtroom (Item 1), public access to courtrooms (Item 2), victim impact statements (Item 3), youth court (Item 4), the legal meaning of “Regina” (Item 8), and the role of the Crown Counsel (Item 10). Twenty five students (83%) correctly answered questions concerning the use of the judge’s gavel (Item 7) and whether judges alone decide on the guilt or innocence of the defendant (Item 5). Twenty-three students (77%) knew that a youth’s record is not automatically removed (from police databases) when he or she reaches 18 years of age (Item 4). The number of students who responded correctly to the remaining item (9), however, fell dramatically to 11, indicating that only 37% of the 30 students knew that there are three levels in British Columbia’s court system.

Part B: Follow-up Questionnaires

The two follow-up questionnaires were completed approximately one month after the conclusion of the *Choices and Consequences* program.

1. Follow-up Questionnaire for Students

Completed follow-up questionnaires were received from each of the 42 students. Anonymity was guaranteed, and only the respondent's sex and grade were reported on the questionnaire.

(a) Discipline Problems

Sixty-nine percent (29/42) of the students declared that they had experienced fewer discipline problems since the completion of the *Choices and Consequences* program. The percentage of girls (77%; 10/13) acknowledging fewer problems was somewhat greater than the percentage of boys (66%; 19/29). Fewer discipline problems, the students reported, had resulted in fewer trips to the principal's office for 28 of the 42 students (67%), fewer reprimands from their teachers for 23 (55%) students, and fewer detentions for 21 (50%) students.

(b) Attitude toward Self and Others

Eighty-eight percent (25 of the 29 boys and 12 of the 13 girls) acknowledged an improved self attitude and attitude towards others following the *Choices and Consequences* program. As indicated in their responses to the eight sub-items in Item 2, this improvement was manifested in a number of ways. For example, a majority of students stated that they had "discussed the [*Choices and Consequences*] program with other students, friends, or ...family" (60%; 25/42), that they had "shown better cooperation" (62%; 26/42), and, that they had "argued/fought or resisted less...." (52%; 22/42), somewhat less than half of the students reported participating in "group/team

activities” (43%; 18/42), being “more kind/courteous” (41%; 17/42), or acting “more socially responsible” (40%; 17/42). Furthermore, in the month following the *Choices and Consequences* program, 12 students (29%) stated that they had experienced an increase in their “grades/marks”, and one-quarter (24%; 10/42) had “changed or made new friends.”

(c) Empathy for Victims

“Yes” responses, implying increased empathy for victims, were reported by 31 of the 42 students (74%). Nevertheless, this increased empathy resulted in only a few students feeling “sorry for...a victim” (43%; 18/42), assisting “someone...being bullied” (29%; 12/42), or volunteering “to help ...a victim” (12%; 5/42).

(d) Ability to Make Good Choices

Ninety-two percent (12/13) of the girls and 76% (22/29) of the boys, for a total of 34 of the 42 students (81%), responded that their ability to make better choices had improved as a result of the *Choices and Consequences* program. And, almost all students (98%; 41/42; the lone dissenter being a girl) agreed that not only do they “want to try to make better choices [leading to more socially responsible behavior] but that, with “practice”, they were now more capable of doing so. It was interesting to note that while half (21/42) of the students admitted to having “resolved conflicts with ...friends and families”, less than one-third (31%; 13/42) had used the 3Cs model and only 5 of the 42 students (12%) had utilized the “Restorative Justice techniques” taught in the *Choices and Consequences* program to do so.

(e) Written Comments

The final question in the *Follow-up Questionnaire for Students* was simply “Any more comments?” Nine of the 42 students replied. Their comments are included below.

- It was fun. (boy)
- I had fun and it was way better than school. (girl)
- I am exact the same as I was. (boy)
- The program did have an effect on me. [Student then goes on to describe the difficulty she is having trying to cut down on drugs when her family members use drugs and smoke marijuana.] (girl)
- I liked being in the classroom. (girl)
- I really liked the program. I wish we could do it again or have it all the time at school. (girl)
- I hope there are more classes like this, I really really X a million loved this workshop. (girl)
- I liked coming to court instead of school. (boy)
- I like the things we learned. _____ (name of LCES instructor) was really nice to me. I wish she was my teacher cause she listened and cared about me. (girl)

2. Follow-up Questionnaire for Teachers/Counselors/Administrators

Items on the *Follow-up Questionnaire for Teachers/Counselors/Administrators* were similar to those on the questionnaire completed by the students. However, whereas the student questionnaire was anonymously reported, this questionnaire required the respondent to specifically identify the student to whom the responses to the particular items were directed. Thus, it was not possible to compare a student's responses to the items in *Follow-up Questionnaire for Students* with responses to similar items in the *Follow-up Questionnaire for Teachers/Counselors/Administrators*.

Twenty-three follow-up questionnaires were collected. Of these, two respondents had misinterpreted the questionnaire and instead of commenting on a specific student in the *Choices and Consequences* program they had used the questionnaire to remark on the program itself. Additionally, in one school, a single questionnaire was submitted with the statement that it applied to all six students in the program. The latter three questionnaires were not used in the following analysis. The remaining 20 questionnaires referred to 14 boys and 5 girls (the sex of one student could not be determined). The position (i.e.,

teacher, counselor, or administrator) of the respondent was identified on only 3 of the 20 questionnaires.

(a) Discipline Problems

Responses in 13 of the 20 (65%) questionnaires indicated fewer discipline problems for the specific students observed. As above, the percentage of girls (80%; 4/5) for whom the number of discipline problems declined following the *Choices and Consequences* program exceeded the percentage of boys (57%; 8/14). Although the number of follow-up questionnaires written on girls was too small to suggest reliable generalizations, it is possible that, as the students indicated above, the data here imply that for both boys (64%) and girls (60%) the decline in the incidence of discipline problems was most likely reflected in fewer trips to the principal's office. Additionally, respondents reported that 60% (13/20) of the students were now receiving fewer reprimands in the classroom and that detentions had declined for 9 of the 20 students (45%) who had completed the program.

(b) Attitude toward Self and Others

Reports on half (6 of 14 boys; 4 of 5 girls) of the students noted an "improved attitude" toward self and others. Thirty-five percent (7/20) of the students were characterized as being more cooperative; 25% (5/20) were described as arguing, fighting and resisting less and acting more "socially responsible"; 20% (4/20) were adjudged to be more "kind/courteous"; and 15% (3/20) were seen to be participating in more "group/team activities", to have "changed or made new friends", and to have improved school "grades/marks." On only one questionnaire was it reported that the student had "discussed the [*Choices and Consequences*] program with other students, friends or...family."

(c) Empathy for Victims

Only four questionnaires (20%) identified students who following the *Choices and Consequences* program showed “signs of more empathy for victims.” Three of these students were said to have shown compassion for a victim, and one student had acted to assist someone being bullied.

(d) Ability to Make Good Choices

Respondents reported that following the *Choices and Consequences* program 7 students (35%; 4 of 14 boys and 3 of 5 girls) displayed an improved ability to make better choices. By whatever means, respondents were aware that two of the 7 students had resolved “conflicts with...friends and families” and had applied the 3Cs model taught in the *Choices and Consequences* program. Two other students were also said to have resolved “conflicts...”, but they apparently had not utilized the 3Cs model or “Restorative Justice” techniques to do so. Another student was apparently observed using the 3 Cs model but the context for its application is not known. Although respondents acknowledged the remaining two students’ “improved ability” to make better choices, they had no knowledge of them resolving conflicts or using the 3Cs model or “Restorative Justice techniques.”

(e) Written Comments

Two open-ended questions concluded the *Follow-up Questionnaire for Teachers/Counselors/Administrators*. The first question requested comments about ways to improve the *Choices and Consequences* program. The second question simply read “Other Comments.” Fifteen respondents to this questionnaire replied to either one (9 replies) or both of these questions (6 replies). When these replies were categorized they

were found to refer either to the *Choices and Consequences* program or to individual students who had taken the program.

Comments about the program were:

- The presenters were the most valuable.
- From my perspective it was very good. 3 day sessions for these students certainly an “eye-opener” for them to understand the process. _____ (name of LCES instructor) was great on how she handled the students.
- I was extremely pleased with the Choices & Consequences Program. It was very real for the students and I think it helped some of them to realize they need to make better choices.
- I think the benefit of a program like this one is long term and cumulative with other social learning – difficult to point to it as a specific cause of behavior change in the short term for every student, appeared to make a difference immediately for some.
- Too much time in the court room.
- I am wondering if we should perhaps do this program with younger-grade 8 & 9 possibly too old to introduce concepts.
- Perhaps more follow-up.
- [Make] no changes [in the program].
- Workshop a useful tool to use as a reminder.

Comments pertaining to individual students described two students who were attempting to improve their behavior, three students whose behavior had not changed, and one student who had moved from the school district.

DISCUSSION

The evaluation of the *Choices and Consequences* program consisted of the analyses of a test to assess students’ knowledge of British Columbia’s legal system and questionnaires designed to elicit their perceptions and those of their teachers, counselors, and administrators of changes (1) in incidence of disciplinary infractions, (2) attitude toward self and others, (3) empathy toward victims, and (4) ability to consider the consequences of inappropriate choices and to suggest socially responsible alternative solutions to problems. The question to be answered is, then, does the participation of “at-risk” students in the *Choices and Consequences* program result in an increase in

knowledge of British Columbia's legal system and in a decline of disciplinary events, an improved self-attitude and attitude toward others, increased empathy toward victims, and an ability to make better choices leading to more socially responsible behavior.

The strength of any conclusions based upon the test of British Columbia's legal system and two follow-up questionnaires developed for this evaluation will be directly correlated with their respective content validity—that is, the extent to which these instruments actually relate to what is to be assessed and whether they include enough items to adequately measure what they are intended to measure.

The test used to assess students' knowledge of British Columbia's legal processes was developed by LCES staff under the supervision of a BC-trained lawyer who also was responsible for directing the development of the *Choices and Consequences* program. This evaluator assumes, then, that the 10 items in the test have been carefully selected to assess students' knowledge of legal process as taught in the *Choices and Consequences* program. That said, it seems reasonable to conclude that inclusion in the program resulted in an increased knowledge of British Columbia's legal processes (to the extent that many students were able to answer most items in the posttest correctly), and that this objective was achieved for most students.

Each of the four primary items in the follow-up questionnaires was used to assess students' and teachers/counselors/ administrators' perceptions of a specific behavior (i.e., incidence of discipline problems), attitude (i.e., feelings toward self and others, empathy for victims), or skill or ability (i.e., making better choices). The sub-items suggest how changes in each specific attribute may have been manifested, and thus observable.

The *Follow-up Questionnaire for Students* is a self-report measure. Self-report measures are used frequently in educational research, but they are used with the

understanding that they are only accurate to the degree that the self-perceptions are accurate and to the degree that the respondent is willing to express them honestly. It is possible that the greatest threat to the veracity of the students' responses to items in this evaluation is their attempt to provide socially desirable answers. That is, some students may have believed that even though the questionnaires were anonymously submitted, because of the small group size their authorship could be recognized, and this concern may have led to these students selecting what they believed to be the correct or desired answer.

Additional information from reliable sources is required to substantiate the findings from the student questionnaires. The opinions of persons who are in positions to directly observe students' behavior may be one source of such information. Thus, the *Follow-up Questionnaire for Teachers/Counselors/Administrators* was intended to provide information that would corroborate students' responses.

Since each student questionnaire was completed anonymously it was not possible to match specific student and school personnel questionnaires. Neither was it possible to select the group of 20 students (a sub-group of the larger group of 42 students) on whom school personnel had submitted questionnaires and treat the data collected from each as coming from correlated groups. The possibility existed, therefore, of a comparison of what well may be unequal or dissimilar groups of students. For that reason, whether the group of 20 students on whom school personnel completed questionnaires is representative of the larger group of 42 students is a question that has a direct bearing on the validity of the conclusions presented here.

Responses of students and school personnel to items in their respective questionnaires are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of Student and School Personnel “Yes” Responses to Items in the *Follow-up Questionnaires*

1. Have you noticed fewer discipline problems in school for this student since the program?	Students 69%	School Personnel 57%
1a. Fewer reprimands from his/her teacher?	Students 55%	School Personnel 60%
1b. Fewer detentions?	Students 50%	School Personnel 45%
1c. Fewer trips to the office?	Students 67%	School Personnel 60%
2. Have you noticed an improved attitude towards him/herself and others since the program?	Students 88%	School Personnel 50%
2a. Argued/fought or resisted less lately?	Students 52%	School Personnel 25%
2b. Shown better cooperation?	Students 62%	School Personnel 35%
2c. Been more courteous?	Students 41%	School Personnel 20%
2d. Participated in group/team activities?	Students 43%	School Personnel 15%
2e. Changed or made new friends?	Students 24%	School Personnel 15%
2f. Acted more socially responsible?	Students 40%	School Personnel 25%
2g. Improved your grades/marks at school?	Students 29%	School Personnel 15%
2h. Discussed the program with other students, friends, or family?	Students 60%	School Personnel 5%
3. Have you noticed signs of more empathy for victims since this program?	Students 74%	School Personnel 20%
3a. Volunteering to help someone who was a victim?	Students 12%	School Personnel 0%
3b. Taking steps to help someone who as being bullied?	Students 29%	School Personnel 5%
3c. Feeling sorry for someone who was a victim?	Students 43%	School Personnel 14%
4. Have you noticed an improved ability to make good choices by this student?	Students 81%	School Personnel 35%
4a. Using the 3Cs model?	Students 31%	School Personnel 20%
4b. Using Restorative Justice techniques	Students 12%	School Personnel 0%
4c. Resolving conflicts with his/her friends and families?	Students 50%	School Personnel 20%

Although the percentages may differ somewhat, “Yes” responses on both questionnaires indicated clearly that discipline problems in both the total group (42 students) and the sub-group (20 students) were perceived to have decreased for a majority of students following their completion of the *Choices and Consequences* program. For

these students, there now appears to be fewer trips to the principal's office, fewer classroom reprimands, and fewer detentions. Without doubt, these findings suggest that inclusion in the *Choice and Consequences* program resulted in fewer incidence of discipline problems, with an obvious reduction in the time spent on reproving these students in the classroom or office.

Most of the 42 students believed that their attitude toward self and others had improved since the *Choices and Consequences* program. School personnel acknowledged such an improvement in only half of the students on whom they reported. This pattern is continued in each of the eight sub-items where percentages of "yes" responses for the total student group exceed those calculated from the questionnaires completed by school personnel. And, as can be seen in Table 1, a similar situation occurs for both of the remaining items and their respective sub-items, raising the question of the accuracy of students' responses.

It may well be that some students replied to their questionnaire in a less than honest manner and that the responses of the school personnel are more accurate. On the other hand, there may be other equally as plausible hypotheses which may also explain this discrepancy. For example, a principal or a teacher simply may not have had either the opportunity to observe the particular behavior (e.g., the act of making new friends or being more courteous), or seen enough of it to check it on the questionnaire. And, a principal or teacher may be at a loss to decide whether a particular student feels "sorry for someone who was a victim" or whether this student "discussed the [*Choices and Consequences*] program with students, friends, or family."

While the exact percentage of students whose self attitude and attitude toward others changed following the *Choices and Consequences* may be in doubt, both the

student and school personnel questionnaires suggest that such a change did occur, and that this attitude change was most frequently observed in students becoming more “cooperative.” Moreover, at least one-quarter of the students were judged by school personnel to have fought, argued, or resisted less and to have acted in a more “socially responsible” manner since the program ended. For a few students, attitude change appeared to influence their participation in “group/team activities,” their friendship patterns, and their good manners.

Empathy occurs when a person is able to share in another person’s emotions, thoughts or feelings—it is a difficult psychological construct to assess. Thus, it was on Item 3, in which respondents were asked about an increase in student empathy for victims, where the greatest distance (54 percentage points) separated the percentages of students’ and school personnel’s “yes” responses. “Volunteering to help someone who was a victim” (3a), “Taking steps to help someone who was being bullied” (3b), and “Feeling sorry for someone who was a victim” (3c) were given as “signs of more empathy,” but very few of these “signs” had been observed by school personnel. Therefore, while increased empathy for victims likely occurred in some students, it was not readily manifested in observable behaviors.

As above, the percentage of the 42 students who claimed that their ability to make good choices improved following the *Choices and Consequences* program was far greater than the percentage reported for the 20 students observed by school personnel. It appeared that most students believed that their ability to make more appropriate choices had improved, and half of these students reported that they had actually assisted friends or family members to resolve conflicts. In marked contrast, however, of the 20 students reported on by school personnel, slightly over a third of them were said to have increased

their ability to make good choices, and only one-fifth were observed (by whatever means) resolving conflicts. Almost one-third of the 42 students acknowledged using the 3Cs model taught in the *Choices and Consequences* program for making decisions, and one-fifth of the 20 students were apparently observed by school personnel utilizing the same decision-making model. While the exact number of students whose ability to make good choices improved as a result of the *Choices and Consequences* program is unclear, it seems reasonable to suggest that for at least a few students this did occur.

The preceding comments about the discrepancy in the findings from the two questionnaires raise an important issue about using similar questionnaires for both students and school personnel.

The *Follow-up Questionnaire for Teachers/Counselors/Administrators* was a replica of the questionnaire completed by students. Having similar questionnaires, however, may not have been the best means for collecting information from school personnel. That is, asking very specific questions that describe anticipated behavioral outcomes of a change in attitude or ability may be appropriate for students, but requiring teachers, school counselors, or principals to respond to the same questions may not be practical and may, in fact, yield data that lead to invalid conclusions. To be specific, for a teacher or principal to collect enough information to respond to the sub-items in, for example, Items 2 and 3, he or she would likely have to spend a substantial amount of time observing the child in the classroom, the halls, the playground, and perhaps even on his/her trip to and from school—certainly an unreasonable expectation. It is possible that many of the behaviors described in the sub-items and checked by a particular student in the follow-up questionnaire occurred but that they were not witnessed by the principal or teacher who filled out that student's questionnaire. Furthermore, a principal or teacher

may have observed only one or two of the behaviors listed in Item 2, but concluded that because more or all the remaining seven sub-items of Item 2 were not seen the respective student's "attitude toward self and others" had not improved. Most likely this was the case with a few respondents who checked one or two sub-items but failed to check "Yes" for the item itself.

CONCLUSION AND COMMENTS

Choices and Consequences is an ambitious but well-thought-out program that has as its primary objective the preparation of young students for their successful return to the classroom. The program was designed to provide experiences that influence the development of socially competent choices. Anticipated outcomes pertain to knowledge of British Columbia's legal process, discipline problems, attitude toward self and others, victim empathy, and making appropriate choices.

The degree to which the program outcomes were achieved varied. Unquestionably, the findings indicated that the knowledge objective had been achieved for most students and that the incidence of discipline problems had declined for a clear majority of the students.

Conclusions were less well-defined for self attitude and attitude toward others and ability to make good choices. That is, while a large number of students acknowledged that they had become more empathetic to victims, only a few teachers or administrators had evidenced this. Similarly, while most students reported that their ability to make good choices had increased, support for this claim was found in only a few responses from school personnel.

These preceding comments give rise to the query "Do these findings justify the costs of offering the *Choices and Consequences* program?" This is a question of

educational significance, and it is concerned with the practical value of the program. Neither the statistical technique used to test for a pretest—posttest difference in students' knowledge, nor the percentages calculated from the follow-up questionnaires can answer it, although they may be important and necessary factors in the decision. Additional factors have to do with, among others, the attributes of the students involved, conditions in the home, school or community that influence students' choices and encourage inappropriate behavior, the difficulty of modifying anti-social attitudes and behavior, and the personal consequences of being expelled from school. When these and other relevant questions are considered, reasonable outcome expectations for a four-day program such as *Choices and Consequences* emerge and educational significance can be determined.

The findings of the pilot program support the conclusion that the *Choices and Consequences* program effectively changed the attitudes and behavior of at least a few students, and this may well be enough for some school administrators to conclude that the program was justified and should now be made available to similar students in their school districts.