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L'Allié: A multimodal approach to remedy behavioural problems and prevent violence in schools

1. Introduction¹

L'Allié² is a multimodal intervention program intended for students aged 8 to 12 (in Grades 3 to 6 of elementary school) who exhibit externalized behavioural problems, and are at a high risk of school and social maladjustment.

As a targeted multimodal eco-systemic program, L'Allié proposes a combination of interventions among children's three main socialization agents: family, school, and peers. Based on practices with demonstrated effectiveness, this intervention helps to build the target group's social and conflict resolution skills. It also improves parenting skills that facilitate children's adaptation at home and at school, and enhances communication and consistency between the various caseworkers working with the children.

L'Allié features two intervention components facilitated by professionals in the field. In the first component, children with behavioural problems and some peer-helper classmates participate in a program that builds social and interpersonal problem-solving skills through 16 one-hour meetings. The suggested ratio is six peer-helpers for six children with problems, although one peer may be paired with two students in his or her class. The second component consists of 15 two-hour meetings with parents to improve their parenting and educational skills, and foster their collaboration with the school environment.

An educational package is provided containing the instructional material required to implement, monitor and assess the L'Allié program. Training is also offered to ensure its optimal and successful use. The primary group of participants is selected based on indicators such as aggressiveness, opposition, provocation, difficulties in social relations, the attribution of hostile and negative intentions to others, social rejection by peers, and affiliation with deviant peers. Participants must demonstrate a minimum of functional skills which enable them to benefit from group intervention.

Implementing this type of intervention is a priority in the school environment, as these students are at risk of dropping out, use up school resources, and compromise the classroom learning climate.

After a preparatory phase launched in July 2007, the implementation phase of the L'Allié program (covered by this evaluation summary) was conducted between 2008 and 2010.

¹ This summary evaluation is based on the final evaluation report submitted to the National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) in connection with funding 6350-U4 under the Crime Prevention Action Fund (CPAC). NCPC budget was \$354,302 for a total budget of \$480,473.

² The L'Allié program was developed by Nadia Desbiens and her team in the Department of Psychopedagogy and Andragogy at the Université de Montréal. It impacts were evaluated between 2004 and 2006 in eight elementary schools in the Montreal region using a semi-experimental research design (Desbiens, N. and S. Pascal, 2006. *Réussite scolaire et sociale des élèves présentant des difficultés de comportement au primaire : rapport d'évaluation des impacts « volet parents » du programme multimodal l'Allié* [Academic and social success of students with behavioural problems in elementary grades: Evaluation report of "parent component" impacts in the multimodal Allié program], Université de Montréal, School Environment Research Group. L'Allié is now considered to be a promising program by the National Crime Prevention Centre and, as such, is included in the Promising and Model Programs Guide.

Twenty schools in nine school boards³ participated in the Greater Montreal region (including the North and South Shores). More than 200 teachers, some 40 professionals (psychoeducators, specialized educators, social workers, and psychologists responsible for facilitating the intervention), up to 182 students exhibiting behavioural problems (the attrition rate was 3.3%), and 55 parents (attrition rate 9.1%) contributed to the study, demonstrating that the program is sustainable in a school environment. The knowledge transfer process and program ownership by the practice environments were the subject of a study funded under the National Crime Prevention Strategy.

2. Evaluation of the Program

The evaluative research presented in this summary was designed to validate the knowledge transfer process by the L'Allié program of the best interventions for students with behavioural problems to ensure ownership and sustainability.

Implementation quality is defined using the model by Bowen et al. (2005)⁴, under which the quality criteria are adherence, exposure, engagement, satisfaction, and autonomy. The quality conditions are the solidity of the theoretical and empirical foundations of the intervention program, its flexibility with regard to adjustment to environmental specificities, the mobilization and motivation of the practice environment, and the existence of appropriate support by the program promoters.

The process evaluation design included the collection of quantitative data based on the administration of a training evaluation questionnaire to 32 caseworkers after the training. A satisfaction questionnaire was completed at the end of the school year by 33 caseworkers, 62 teachers, 116 targeted children, 96 peer-helpers, and 29 parents.

Those data were the subject of descriptive analyses of implementation quality in connection with stakeholders' level of satisfaction. The practice environments, students and parents expressed their perceptions of improvement in students' behaviour. The teachers helped to measure the program's impact on students' behaviour through a behavioural evaluation ($n = 104$) based on a behavioural scale administered at the beginning and the end of the school year. A paired samples t-test was conducted based on pre- and post-test data from students.

In addition, qualitative data were collected through interviews, project coordinator dashboards, and evaluation forms completed during annual assessments. School staff (management and case workers) were interviewed at the mid-point and end of the implementation, for a total of 67 interviews, including 33 with caseworkers.

3. Evaluation Findings

The process evaluations identified the following favourable conditions for implementing the L'Allié approach:

- Adherence by caseworkers and school management to a common vision of how to intervene with students with behavioural problems
- Teamwork fostering exchanges between caseworkers and school management on the nature of the students' problems and of their solutions
- A shared understanding by caseworkers and school management of the intervention program and conditions for effectively organizing the program in the school environment
- Importance of caseworkers' ability to understand the complexity and importance of school management having a clear definition of caseworkers' roles and responsibilities

³ The following school boards participated in the evaluative research: Beauce-Étchemin, Pointe-de-l'Île, Énergie, Montréal, Des Chênes, Chic-Chocs, Patriotes, Samares, and Pays-des-Bleuets.

⁴ Bowen, F., Fortin, F., Gagnon, I., Bélanger, J., Desbiens, N., Janosz, M. and C. Dufresne (2005). *Rapport d'analyse des processus pour les trois années d'implantation du programme Vers le pacifique du Centre international de résolution de conflits et de médiation (CIRCM)*, Groupe de recherche sur la médiation en milieu scolaire, [analysis report of processes for the three years of implementation of the *Vers le pacifique* program of the International conflict resolution and mediation centre, school environment research group], Université de Montréal.

- Exercise of leadership by school management in promoting and implementing the program, autonomy and professionalism of caseworkers in the conduct of collaborative practices
- Importance of caseworkers' use of available resources, and of the offer of employment conditions conducive to the intervention, by management
- Importance of school organization with regard to distribution of tasks, movement of personnel, and time management by management, caseworkers and teachers
- Mobilization of teachers by management and caseworkers in training activities outside the classroom, to ensure the program takes hold and can be sustained
- A healthy and harmonious group atmosphere facilitating relations and exchanges within the school

The evaluation of the perceived and actual impacts indicated the following:

- According to teachers, the program had positive impacts on children and young people, but those impacts are more at the cognitive than the behavioural level, in particular regarding knowledge of conflict resolution strategies.
- The generalization of the learning to other contexts is more difficult.
- The program led teachers to change their practices and improve their relations with students with behavioural problems.
- The L'Allié program had statistically significant impacts on pro-social behaviour, behavioural self-control, conflict resolution skills, and the ability to control emotions. It also led to a slight decrease in aggressiveness.

4. Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The evaluation of the L'Allié program identified the following lessons learned and recommendations:

- Incorporation of the L'Allié program as an integral part of the school's education project and articulation of other measures for students with behavioural problems
- School management's adhesion to the program's philosophy and an understanding of the conditions needed to ensure its success
- Selection of caseworkers who have been working in the school for at least one year, to benefit from the trust relationship already established with students having behavioural problems
- Mobilization of teachers and their adhesion to the program values, strengthening of appropriate behaviour and use of program content to enhance the impacts of the program on students
- Development by teachers of consistency between behaviour management practices in the classroom and throughout the rest of the school
- Solicitation of teachers in selecting children and young people to participate in the program, to foster their future mobilization
- Selection of children and young people whose problems are not too extreme, to facilitate group work and the selection of peer-helpers who do not exhibit behavioural problems
- Implementation of the parent component and mobilization of parents to participate in activities, to enhance the impacts of the L'Allié program on children and young people
- Use of a pro-active or "aggressive" strategy to recruit parents and offer incentives (daycare services, snacks, etc.)

5. Conclusion

A better understanding of the conditions needed to successfully implement L'Allié will be helpful to schools.

The various stakeholders involved in the program (school management, caseworkers, students and parents) were satisfied with the intervention, although implementation challenges were experienced in some environments. Despite the methodological limitations of the evaluation, in particular the lack of a control group, the results obtained indicate positive impacts on students. The L'Allié program and its educational package are already widely used in other schools and will certainly continue on a larger scale in other environments.

For more information or to receive a copy of the final evaluation report, please contact the National Crime Prevention Centre by e-mail at prevention@ps-sp.gc.ca.

If you wish to register for the NCPC mailing list to receive information from the Centre, please visit the subscription page at: <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/ml/index-eng.aspx>.