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A SCHOOL CAN ADD THE COMMUNITY TO ITS STAFF!

*A Report on a Three-Year Program of School-Community
Cooperation in Vancouver, B.C.*

We live in a time when increasing public focus on education places demands on the public school system to do more and more things for more and more children. Administrators react by pointing to the high pupil/teacher ratio and talk of all the things the schools *could* do if only they had a larger staff.

In many centres across the country, schools *are* successfully adding personnel without increasing the tax burden, and pupils are being involved in growth-experiences not normally available from already overloaded teachers.

The solution is a simple one: schools are finding that other social agencies and other professions have a great deal to offer to the development of children. School administrators are discovering that other community personnel have skills and resources that both supplement and complement the educational role of the teacher, and that these resources can be effectively involved in the traditional school program.

In our particular experience, this kind of inter-disciplinary cooperation began in September 1966 when a casual coffee-break conversation between a school counsellor and a neighborhood-house director found the counsellor asking the director if he had ever considered involving some of his staff in small-group programs in the school. The intention of such programs was to assist children to develop better skills in human relations.

The director's response was immediate and enthusiastic, and more serious discussions followed — gradually including an ever-widening circle of personnel. Two months later the first group began.

SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT GROUPS

The format was essentially simple. Six boys in a grade-2 class were selected for the first group because of their proven ability to consistently and repeatedly interrupt the work of the class. A social worker from a neighborhood house was to meet with them once a week for about sixty to ninety minutes commencing one-half hour before the regular afternoon dismissal. The time would be spent off the school grounds for the most part (to the beach, the parks, the aquarium, museum, a nearby forest, etc.) and the activity chosen for the day would provide the context in which the worker would assist the children to find happier ways of relating to their classmates, and thereby gradually feel better about themselves.

Typical of the growth opportunities provided was the day the boys were loading themselves into the worker's station wagon. A squabble developed over the preferred seat at the tailgate. Rather than arbitrarily deciding the issue the worker engaged the boys in a discussion as to whose rightful

turn it was that week. It took them five minutes longer to get away, but the boys had learned something about sharing!

Another group that year was formed from students in grade 7 — fourteen boys and girls who were having coke and cigarette parties at night on the gym roof. Other indications pointed to more serious trouble to come. The neighborhood house provided two young workers, male and female, who took on this drifting mass of energy. They quickly won the confidence and respect of the students, and became so meaningfully involved from the kids' point of view, that at the end of the school year the group members wanted the program continued through the school holiday.

The early success of these programs, in terms of response by the students, appreciation from parents, and — more significantly — whole-hearted cooperation between social worker and teacher, caused us to look around for other community resources that could be tapped.

OTHER AGENCIES GET INVOLVED

Actually, the surprise factor at this point was the readiness of other agencies and the university to make personnel available when they were approached. It seemed that they were simply standing around waiting to be asked! The net result during the three years has been the direct involvement within the school personnel from the following resources in the community.

1. The Neighborhood House: Five social workers leading small groups ranging from kindergarten to grade 7 in two elementary schools.
2. Family Service Centre: Four social workers leading Family Life Education groups for parents in elementary schools.
3. Mental Health Centre: A psychiatrist and a social worker leading weekly group-therapy sessions in the secondary school.
4. Faculty of Education: Twenty-five graduate students in counselling trying experimental weekly programs in group counselling in two elementary schools.

Twenty-four undergraduates serving as tutor-assistants one-half day per week, helping individual children with learning problems.

5. Metropolitan Health: A psychologist and a social worker leading weekly group sessions in human relations with secondary-school students.
6. Y.M.C.A.: Two group-work specialists involved in both an elementary school and a secondary school in weekly small-group counselling sessions.
7. Faculty of Medicine: Forty-two senior medical students, under faculty supervision, involved in an elementary school for field-work experience and supplementing the work of the regular school medical staff.
8. Community Center and Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation: Eight recreation leaders conducting after-school activities on school premises in one elementary school — a program involving the "latch key" child whose working parents are not at home until the dinner hour.

(The figures indicate the total number of workers from each source that have been involved during this three-year period; not the number involved at any one time.)

Even as I write this, the list surprises me in terms of the number and

variety of personnel. But, of course, the other side of the story must also be told. We had many problems and made many mistakes.

PROBLEMS IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Early problems centered in prejudicial feelings by one profession toward the other and a deficiency of understanding regarding each other's role. Some senior-school administrators were uneasy about the precedent of bringing in non-teaching personnel, and anxious about their qualifications for this specialized type of work. Some teachers had limiting and sometimes unfavorable images of social and community workers — and the latter had little or no conception of the demands made upon both teacher and student in the formal educational setting. Many meetings with a lot of listening and sharing, and a willingness to work toward honesty with each other, were the only ways in which these difficulties could be reconciled.

Our mistakes were prolific, but profitable. For the most part, they consisted of failure to involve personnel early enough, or often enough, in developing the working plan. The result was the need for a lot of diplomatic backpedalling to fill in the gaps we had unwittingly created.

Example 1: Feeling confident over the first success of the small group program in grade 2, we decided to continue it the next year with the same children. But we forgot to take enough time to tune in their new teacher. We expected her somehow to pick up the feeling and the purpose by osmosis — and two months passed before we realized why she had unrealistic expectations as to what the program was designed to accomplish.

Example 2: When we tried to arrange for community centre recreation workers to conduct after-school programs in the school gymnasium, we encountered roadblocks raised by rivalling civic departments. Clearing these away so consumed our attention that we neglected to keep the school P.E. instructors informed about the plan as it developed, and, worse still, failed to involve them in its development! Result: the first day the recreation leaders arrived to set up operations, they were puzzled, frustrated, and offended by the attitude of the P.E. staff who indicated quite plainly that they resented having outsiders working with kids in "their gym," and reinforced the message the following week by securing all the gym equipment under lock and key.

Example 3: This year, the third year, we experienced a new type of problem from an unexpected source. In June, 1968, at the conclusion of year two, an evaluation by the combined personnel from school and neighborhood house had strongly recommended that more groups be set up at primary-grade levels — to do preventive work at younger ages.

Therefore, in September 1968, we arranged exploratory meetings with the primary teachers and, almost without exception, encountered resistance and even open opposition. It seemed incredible that after two years of increasing success, we were now encountering this kind of foot-dragging.

Taking the time to discuss the matter individually with the teachers, we uncovered two salient facts: first, some of the school staff interpreted social adjustment groups as some form of deep and mysterious psychological therapy, and cast themselves in the role of protector for the child. Second, primary teachers develop understandably possessive feelings toward their

children and are reluctant to share them with anyone else. The teachers, therefore, saw the social worker as an intrusion into the world of these children whom she claimed as hers — and resented the implication that she was somehow not able to meet all their needs. This was a very difficult combination to work through — and the truth of the matter is that we haven't completely resolved it yet. We need more time.

SECONDARY-SCHOOL PROBLEMS

In the secondary school, the involvement has been in the form of small-group counselling sessions, conducted weekly, in school time. The problems with staff, in this setting, have been more diffuse than at the elementary level because the secondary staff numbers more than eighty, and very few have had any opportunity to meet with the workers from the community. Some have seen the benefits of this program in particular students with whom they were directly concerned and have been generous in their praise. Others felt it was a nuisance and reacted by withholding permission for the students to leave the classroom for that period.

More significant, to me, has been the change in the attitude of those of us responsible for directing the program. Three years ago, we initiated the groups almost in a cloak-and-dagger fashion. Their specific purpose was disguised by innocuous titles designed to avoid any implication of their being groups for "disturbed" people. Students selected by the academic counsellors as potential group members tended to be all the troublemakers, low-achievers, truants, and tardies. When these students asked, quite logically, why they were offered the opportunity to participate in the group, and why they had been chosen, we evaded the real reason, and I'm sure even the slowest students detected our deception. Through our failure to be candid, we brought into groups people who continued to ask: "Why was I picked for this?"

So this year, we announced to the entire student body of 1,800 that human relations groups were available to those interested in increasing their self-understanding and in developing new skills in relating meaningfully to others. Enough students volunteered to form the five groups that began in October; we have since added three more. With an average of ten in a group, this is involving eighty students weekly, and a waiting list has developed of those who want to be included when there is space.

We feel good about this transformation from working behind closed doors to operating in the open. We hope that we are getting the message across that growth in human-relations skills is a vital area for every human being — regardless of his present state of development.

If we had enough staff time, we would have another type of group to which particular students *would* be invited. These would be the ones who are showing the usual behavioral symptoms of poor adjustment: frequent tardiness, truancy, under-achieving, class disturbances, etc. They would be told, quite frankly, that they are giving out very clear signals about themselves as persons; that the school is concerned enough to want to offer them help; that if the student accepts the invitation, attendance is compulsory; that their parents will be informed of the group and its purpose.

The school would, in effect, be saying to the student: "We think you have a serious problem. We are worried about you and you should be worried

too. The group experience will not be an easy one for you, but it is a way of helping yourself to function in a more satisfying way."

COMMUNICATION

Let me say something about follow-up. Getting programs like these into operation takes a lot of effort — and once under way, it's easy to feel that the job is complete. It is true that some of the programs are self-sustaining and accomplish their purpose without any additional support, but others require regular opportunities for the group worker and the classroom teacher — along with the school nurse, counsellor, remedial teacher, and principal — to check out with each other how the child is presenting himself. It creates a sense of teamwork, and avoids misunderstanding that so quickly builds up without this kind of face-to-face sharing and clarification. When necessary, we have also involved the parents as part of the team, and have found them grateful and cooperative.

THE BENEFITS OF COOPERATION

1. To the children:

Modifications in attitude and behavior as observed by group workers, teachers, and parents, have been significant. The children have found a safe environment in which to test out unused potential and form a more positive self-image; overly-aggressive children have been helped to discover why their behavior is irritating to other people and discover more satisfying ways of relating.

By directing resources toward the earlier school grades, changes have been accomplished more rapidly, with greater ease, and a higher degree of parental support.

2. To Parents:

Most parents, in my experience, want to do their best for their children. But often they fail to reach their own expectations for lack of knowing what to do, or because they believe they alone — of all the parents in the neighborhood — are having their particular family difficulties. When the school expresses its concern about Johnny, his mother and father are usually worried too, and are relieved to discover that the school's concern is a validation of their own. When the school can offer some specific form of practical help, parents are grateful to discover that they no longer have to work alone. The parent groups have helped mothers and fathers to realize that being a parent is the world's most difficult profession; that all parents have problems that perplex and frustrate them; and that seeking help is a sign of strength, not of weakness.

3. To the Teachers:

Closer involvement with social workers, doctors, psychiatrists, and group workers has helped teachers to discover the fact that other professions can bear some of the burden of enabling the child to grow and develop his full potential. A subtle but recognizable shift has taken place in the attitudes of many teachers who gave lip service to the concept of "teaching the whole child" but saw academic achievement as the thing that mattered most.

These teachers now realize that they are involved in developing children into responsible decision-making persons — not just training minds to become computers. Our next step will be to enable more teachers to understand that they influence the personality development of children whether they want to or not. In every classroom it is happening every day, and too much of what is happening is producing children who haven't learned to make choices or to accept responsibility for consequences.

4. To the Community:

The rationale of all that has been described above is basically this: the school is the one institution that is assured a long-time contact with every family in the community. The school, therefore, is the logical channel through which to make available to family members the many community resources that are available for the improvement of family living and the rearing of children.

The social agencies, which have so much to offer in this regard, are dependent upon people voluntarily asking for their assistance. By their own admission, the agencies find that people too often wait until the problem has become severe, because it is difficult to ask for help and thereby admit failure as human beings.

By working cooperatively with community agencies, the school is able to offer programs for children and parents that are preventive in their purpose. We are in a position to say to children, teachers, and parents alike: "We know that all of us have difficulties in getting along with ourselves and other people. Here is an opportunity through which we can help each other find better ways." The school has the children and the opportunity to assess the needs; we have the interest and concern of parents who see progress in school as an important evaluation of their children. The agencies have trained staff to do specialized programs for child and parent development. For us, putting these in touch with each other makes sense.

L'ECOLE DOIT AJOUTER LE GROUPE COMMUNAUTAIRE A SON PERSONNEL!

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Dans un rapport qui couvre les trois ans d'un programme écologroupe communautaire, l'auteur raconte l'histoire d'un projet d'équipe qui s'était ébauché à partir d'une conversation amicale entre le conseiller scolaire et le directeur d'une entreprise voisine. On se fixa comme but d'aider les enfants dans leur adaptation sociale. Une fois lancé, le projet groupa les personnels d'un service familial, d'un centre de santé mentale, d'une unité sanitaire, d'un Y.M.C.A., d'une faculté d'éducation, de médecine, d'éducation physique et de loisirs d'une université.

A l'élémentaire comme au secondaire des groupes d'étudiants ont rencontré des individus qui n'appartenaient pas au personnel scolaire, ceux-ci les ont aidés à structurer leur adaptation sociale et humaine.

L'auteur énumère ici les problèmes et les difficultés rencontrés dans l'application de ce programme et il essaie d'en évaluer les résultats.