

A New Look at Dropouts

Introduction

Recent years have seen the development, at several places in the U.S.A., of a remarkable new kind of community program. Mental health and other workers are being hired to locate and get in touch with homeless people in the community, to attract them into official places where they can be provided with housing and other resources. This “aggressive outreach” movement began in Wisconsin several years ago but has since been adopted in other states, including Illinois and California. In California, for example, laws were enacted in 1999 and 2000, to send workers into hidden places in communities throughout the state, to find homeless “adults and older adults” who appear to be mentally ill, and to offer them services they have not been receiving—including housing, medical care, employment or other income source, academic or vocational education, vocational rehabilitation, etc. The workers go into the by-ways and cracks of society, into the parks, under the bridges, into the jails, into the wilderness areas, onto the sidewalks, into the vacant buildings, etc., as well as the jails and hospitals, to find and contact people who are homeless—and to invite them into a relationship that can result in fulfillment of a variety of desperate needs.

An essential part of these programs is the interpersonal skill needed by workers who will make these contacts. To be effective they must know how to contact people who may be afraid, withdrawn, violent, etc., and who may be under the influence of drugs or alcohol. They may be desperately hungry, extremely ill—possibly even infectious—completely out of touch, etc.

Workers are being trained on how to contact people who are “on the edge”. They are learning that personal relations are essential, that threats and intimidations do not work. Many sensitive contacts may be required, before a given individual is willing to go with the worker, to obtain needed services or resources. The art of conversation becomes critical. How does one talk to people who feel threatened by many things in the “legitimate” world, frequently for good reason? E.g. people living in the cracks more easily get in trouble with the law, for many reasons. They get arrested for petty theft, substance abuse, disturbing the peace, vagrancy, trespassing, battery, jay walking, etc., as well as more serious offenses.

The new approach is a significant departure from traditional methods in which people in desperate need are expected to appear on their own, in an office somewhere, to demonstrate that they are qualified for a particular service. Under the traditional system they may have been required to do this repeatedly and regularly, in many different locations and with little assistance, to obtain the basic services. For many disturbed, ill, or alienated people this is a painful process. It frequently has meant remaining homeless, doing without, or doing less than well with regard to food, medical care, clothing, income, etc.

Drop Outs

As an educator I am intrigued with the possible implications of this kind of community effort for an entirely different category of left-out individuals—the vast army of young people who do not participate effectively, in schools or other essential organizations, to build lives that are personally satisfying and productive. Many are caught in a web of humiliation and despair, or intense anger at their world. They may seek solace in drugs or alcohol, or participate in delinquent behavior or gangs. They frequently hate school. Young women on the edge frequently are trapped in early motherhood. Without adequate resources, they may enter into lives of bewilderment, despair, and loneliness—with little prospect of escape. They sometimes rear children of their own who are full participants in pain, rage, and futility, well before they are teenagers.

Yet each person is an extraordinary being, no less important than any other person in the world. When we get in touch with the dreams and yearnings of each person, remarkable things happen. When we build a warm personal environment where security, acceptance, and excitement with learning prevail, and where the needed resources are available, young people are able to create for themselves the most enjoyable and productive existence.

What we are proposing is an education-based program that will find and contact left-out young people in the cracks, and bring them into key community organizations and relations, including special alternative schools, where they can build a better life. Because these special schools can mediate the function of other community organizations and relations—while providing an education—they will be at the core of the program.

It is often said that marginal young people have “fallen through the cracks.” In fact they have fallen *into* rather than *through* the cracks. They have not vanished from sight, but are still with us. *They live much of their lives in the cracks or gaps of society*, in the spaces between formal structures such as institutions, organizations, and programs—and between formal substructures (norms, rules, procedures, expectations, requirements, etc.) within these structures. Individuals in the gaps are alienated from and without viable access to the formal systems that comprise legitimate, successful living. We commonly try to deal with their problems by merely altering the face of formality. We should not be surprised that formal, impersonal structures often turn out to have the form but not the substance of effectiveness.

The cracks where left-out youth exist are reflected in deep and painful gaps in their experience. They appear prominently in their yearnings for a better life. Young people frequently feel separated from the things they need. Many of these things are, at the same time, repellant to them, because of the cruel or indifferent forms in which they seem to appear.

Special Alternative School Program

What we are proposing is a small education-based program for high-school dropouts, with eight secondary level teachers and sixty students. Four teachers will work in a special alternative high school and four will work in the community. All eight teachers will receive extensive training in working with left-out youth, as well as regular teacher training oriented to certification.

The community-based teachers will work in the gaps of society—in the cracks between formal institutions and organizations and between the formal structures within them. They will find and contact the young people who have “fallen through the cracks” and who still live their lives in the cracks. The teachers will continually extend the kind of sensitive invitation that will attract the involvement of left-out youth.

The community teachers will work closely with the teachers in the school, to jointly develop school- and person-oriented curricula. These curricula and the relevant interpersonal methodologies will be developed to fit the learning and life of each singular young person. It must be understood that teacher-student activity in the community includes school-oriented learning as well as problem-solving learning, all suited to the experience and ability of the individual young person. When a teacher and a student are together, working on subject matter, school is in session.

The community teachers must be highly skilled and must have an open and interested demeanor--as well as an outward appearance appropriate to the situations where they will meet and spend time with young people. They must know how to extend an informal invitation that is considerate and responsive, that is not offensive to young people. They must know how to use educational methods appropriate to personal relations.

Teachers in the school must also be highly skilled, to continue and strengthen the relational processes that began in the community. Sensitive invitation does not stop at the school door. It is a key element in the entire interpersonal process in which young people learn how to build a better life, including the learning that leads to graduation.*

The community teachers are not just concerned with bringing left-out youth into the school. They are elaborately involved in organizing community processes that can help them build a better life and stay in school. This is a time-consuming, problem-solving project. It is concerned with the hazards and obstacles that frequently confront left-out youth and threaten to ruin their lives—or at least make it difficult to complete an education. Working in the gaps means spending time with them where they are, working with them to find solutions with regard to housing, medical services, legal problems,

*The “entire interpersonal process” of which sensitive invitation is a key element is discussed in David Brewer and Clyde Tidwell, *A Theory of Personal Democracy*, Tucson: Democratic Processes Center, 1985

family relations, substance abuse, mental-emotional problems, employment, child care, etc.

Community teachers take the young person with them into places where solutions may be worked out. This is not referral—it is accompaniment. Going together and working together to overcome serious obstacles, they get in touch with a variety of valuable community resources, including job finding services, job training, child care, welfare and other financial support, housing resources, legal representation or advice, drug and alcohol counseling, recreational opportunity, family counseling, medical care, mental health counseling, labor union services, religious participation, transportation resources, consumer support, etc.

As they go together to meet resourceful people in various agencies and organizations, they are jointly creating personal relationships wherever they go; networks of problem-solving relationships are being formed even while answers are being searched out. Such a system is far more effective than so-called “referral” in dealing with situations that can threaten to disrupt a life or destroy a dream.

Teachers in the school and in the community discover, through accompaniment, how each young person learns and what needs to be learned. The learning process is then oriented to abilities and experiences that are specific to that person. The kind of individualized learning which has been celebrated, advocated, and idealized by some of the greatest minds in the history of education is then developed in its best possible form, in a program where real-life problem-solving is not divorced from education.

Training

How can teachers be trained to do these things? The whole notion of personal relations has to be thematized and taken seriously. It has to be elaborately developed as a practical and effective system of behavior—not just as an ideal. And it has to be developed around a clear concept of ethics and of the equality of persons. No shortcuts can be taken if training in personal relations is to be effective.

This specialized training program may be a part of a certification oriented teacher-training organization or it may be independent. It should include practice teaching within the alternative school program, for outside as well as inside teachers. The result will be the continuing development of teaching skills oriented to personal relations and the maintenance of the delicate personal environment that is so valuable in working with left-out youth.

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