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Curriculum for Caring: Service Learning with Behaviorally Disordered Students

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The difficulty that seriously emotionally disturbed persons experience in forming or maintaining effective interpersonal relationships is an almost universal component of federal and state definitions for this disability. Yet, in the face of this impediment in the social domain, our curricular approaches in behavior disorders have been almost exclusively individualistic. While we are able to document our successes in instructing to precisely measured objectives, we too often have fallen short of the goal of instilling prosocial, responsible, caring interpersonal behavior in troubled children and adolescents.

There are now abundant signs that our field is in the midst of a course correction toward the interpersonal approach as seen in the interest in topics such as social skill instruction (Cartledge & Milburn, 1980; Brendtro, Ness, & Milburn, 1983), peer tutoring or counseling (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1981), moral and value development (Lockwood, 1978), collectivity reinforcement and cooperative learning (Johnson, & Johnson, 1975). This paper highlights one other promising avenue for teaching responsible behavior and values. While compatible with any of the above strategies, our goal is much more ambitious, for we propose the development of a "curriculum for caring," to use a phrase from Fantini (1980).

Lest such a lofty goal as teaching caring be seen as Pollyanna, let us dispel any illusions and state what we believe:

1. Troubled youngsters will not necessarily learn to be caring just by being exposed to teachers who care, though such models are certainly necessary.

2. Troubled youngsters cannot be taught how to care by teaching them about caring (Fantini, 1980).

3. It is not likely that one could develop a curriculum for caring simply by breaking such behavior down through some task analysis and then teaching these molecular skills like we might an arithmetic problem.

4. Most behaviorally disordered children want to be altruistic, helping, or kind. However, many have learned to view hurting behavior as fashionable while helping or being "nice" to others is seen as a sign of weakness.

What we report here is the result of several years of efforts to directly teach caring behavior and values to troubled children and adolescents through a curriculum based on *service-learning*, viz. *involvement in meaningful, genuine volunteer projects undertaken solely for the intrinsic satisfaction of helping others* — all of this by children whose trademark has been narcissism.

Before proceeding to our discussion of the specifics of service-learning, a note on the evolution of this concept is in order. This program is a natural extension of our earlier efforts to develop positive peer subcultures among delinquent adolescents (Vorrath & Brendtro, 1974). Even though these programs were able to tap the power of the peer group and involve troubled youth in the responsibility of managing their behavior, a number of serious questions remained (Brendtro & Ness, 1983). Two of the most troublesome issues were these:

1. *The problem of generalization.* Intensive group programs tended to create a "greenhouse effect." While youth became very involved in helping members of their immediate group, there was a lack of effective procedures to generalize this behavior. *How could helping and caring be transferred to the real world?*

2. *The problem of genuineness.* Too often it seemed that groups were only playing an institutionalized "helping" game. As they worked to assist one another in gaining release from incarceration, they were actually developing a sophisticated "escape" plan. The self-serving payoff of getting out of the program only served to enhance conning behavior. *How could self-centered youth learn to genuinely care about others?*

The service-learning programs at The Starr Commonwealth Schools have been specifically designed to address these issues. Starr Commonwealth is a nonprofit organization with campuses at Albion, Michigan, Van Wert, Ohio, and Columbus, Ohio which operates residential treatment schools serving a total of 250 boys and girls and also conducts alternative day school programs and community counseling centers. Referrals to Starr's programs are made by court, social service agencies, and school personnel. Most youth have had some contact with the police, have come from problem families, and have generally poor records of school adjustment. They are the dropouts and pushouts of mainline youth organizations, and their referral to Starr Commonwealth is often the next-to-the-last step on a journey that might otherwise take them to a state institution. Residential cottages are comprised of 10 to 12 students who spend much of their time in recreation, study, and group living with this particular group of peers. Through a process of regular daily group meetings conducted by staff, coupled with the coordinated teamwork of teachers, child care workers, and counselors, the youngsters participate in a carefully planned milieu designed to create positive, caring culture. Typical length of stay is approximately 9 months to 1 year.

One component of the educational and treatment programs emphasizes a positive peer culture process to promote responsibility to self and others. A parallel emphasis is placed on the importance of helping beyond the confines of the educational or treatment group. Through participation in a variety of community service activities and person-to-person helping projects, young people become a resource to the community at large.

Over one hundred helping projects are conducted each year at The Starr Commonwealth Schools in a wide variety of settings. Some of these projects are of short duration while others are carried on regularly over a period of many months. Illustrations include:

- Serving as teacher aides at a community day-care center
- Operating summer recreation programs for neighborhood children
- Assisting in Special Olympic events for the handicapped
- Working with retarded children at a special school and a state hospital
- Earning money to provide food for a needy family
- Chopping firewood for the disabled
- Visiting shut-in citizens

As Fantini (1980) has stated, the range of possible service-oriented activities is virtually without limit if educators use a little thought and imagination.

Making Caring Fashionable

While participation in helping projects offers the potential for increased self-esteem and competence for troubled adolescents, these programs must surmount a formidable obstacle. Among students who may be notoriously self-centered and exploitive of others, caring is not fashionable. To transcend this egocentrism, they must become committed to caring. Saurman and Nash (1980) correctly prescribe service to others as an antidote to narcissism. The real challenge is to get individuals hooked on something beyond themselves.

Service-learning programs can capture the commitment of troubled youth by appealing to their natural interests and motivations. For example, many are more receptive to approaches that reinforce their maturity ("you can be of real help to these people") than those approaches that maintain their dependence ("this will help you with your problems"). Helping others needs to be seen as an act of strength ("this will be a tough job") rather than weakness ("this will be easy"). Service projects must also be seen as exciting and spontaneous rather than routine and regimented. In writing about city youth and the spirit of the city streets, the pioneer social worker Jane Addams (1909) observed that many of the problems of delinquency really were only expressions of strong appetites for excitement and adventure. Highly adventuresome projects may be rare and are often only spontaneously available (although groups of delinquents have built levees to stop a flood and assisted with disaster work after a tornado). Yet with creative forethought and planning it is possible to eschew repetitive, non-challenging helping projects in preference to projects with interest, variety, and challenge. Since adolescents need continuity and security as well as change and stimulation, successful helping projects cannot be either "one night stands" devoid of relationships, or institutionalized rituals without meaning.

Traditional group counseling programs have attempted to tap the potential in troubled youth to be of service to their peers. Yet caring for one's close peers is not the ultimate proof of humanity since even members of criminal gangs have such solidarity. Programs that make a lasting impact must generalize helping behavior beyond the "in" group. The more irresponsible the youth has been, the greater the need for involvement in significant roles of service. Precisely because many troubled youth have

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been deprived of positive interpersonal relationships, projects involving genuine people-to-people service are preferable to depersonalized, more abstract helping.

The question has been posed as to whether a service-learning program would be effective with younger children or in another treatment philosophy. While service-learning with adolescents has received most attention, these programs can also be used with younger children as well. The following projects were successfully completed by boys and girls between 8 and 12 years of age who were students at the Columbus, Ohio campus of The Starr Commonwealth Schools in a program utilizing a social learning theory modality:

- Preparing a house and yard for a new refugee family, planting flowers, bringing toys to welcome the children.
- Buying canned goods for needy families using money accumulated by the children as a result of no breakage or vandalism in the school over an extended period.
- Culminating a week-long summer school module on "Helping Someone Else" by putting on a rhythm band concert at a camp for the mentally retarded.

With activities appropriate to the maturity of students, service-learning projects show promise with elementary-age children as well as adolescents.

Developing Successful Projects

In completing a large number of successful service-learning activities, staff have developed a core of "practice wisdom" concerning the ingredients of successful projects.

When groups are first beginning, it is usually best to attempt small, simple projects with limited time horizons. A highly disorganized group may also respond better to a project that is heavily motoric than to one requiring sophisticated interpersonal relationships. One such group readily accepted the challenge of painting the bridges in a city park; another group had a very positive experience chopping firewood for a large family of small children where the father was temporarily disabled. Success in such limited projects can then lead to helping relationships of a more complex nature. Thus a more mature group assumed responsibility for rebuilding a burned-out picnic shelter at the Camp Fire Girls' campground. This project called for a great deal of cooperative behavior over an extended period of time, but resulted in a high level of community recognition for the young people involved who became veritable heroes for their feat.

- Although sound planning is important for the success of complex projects, this does not preclude the realistic possibility that many successful projects develop around events that are spontaneous, serendipitous, and even a bit adventurous. For example, a group of youth who had been highly disorganized and incapable of complex helping projects responded enthusiastically when they were called upon to join in a search of the woods for a lost preschool child. Staff were even able to involve the negative peer leaders in the group who, although resisting more mundane service projects, readily participated in an activity with a flair for adventure. Once negative leaders find that they can also obtain satisfaction from positive leadership roles, the foundation for further service-learning has been laid.

In effect, youth previously denied satisfaction from exploiting others now have become hooked on helping.

A somewhat different example of a spontaneous project was seen in a group which successfully solicited surplus flowers from a department store the day after Mother's Day in order that these might be redistributed to residents of a nursing home "who didn't have anybody give them flowers on Mother's Day."

The variety of helping projects offers many opportunities for integrating service-learning with other areas of the curriculum as seen from the following examples:

- Students who participated in a "Sitting Tall" program of horsemanship for severely crippled children were simultaneously involved in studying the history of the handicapped in our society as well as learning communication skills which would enable them to relate to the severely disabled.
- In constructing the picnic pavilion for the Camp Fire Girls, youths worked closely with their industrial arts instructor to master the woodworking and building trade skills necessary for completion of this particularly complex project.
- A group of students studied clowning in art and drama which led to a series of clowning performances for small children in the community day-care center.
- A program of visitation to the community senior citizens' home led to a study of the process of aging and death in the social science curriculum. This was particularly relevant to students since upon return visits to the senior citizen center they would typically find that someone they had helped at a previous visit had subsequently died.

Conventional practice in most schools is to give the highest recognition to self-serving personal achievements by students such as scholarships to the gifted and trophies or letters to those with athletic prowess. While competitive activities by individuals and groups do receive their share of attention, teachers make an attempt to dramatize and reinforce the importance of successful bulletin board displays with photographs from various projects, to post the letters of appreciation from community leaders, and when appropriate, to encourage newspaper publicity surrounding a particularly interesting and successful community service activity.

Stages of a Curriculum for Caring

In spite of the great diversity of projects, most service-learning activities proceed through four stages, namely identification of project, orientation of students, implementation, and evaluation.

Identification. In this initial stage, members of the staff work independently or with students to identify potential areas of service. The projects must meet several criteria. These must not be "make-work" but reflect a genuine need that exists in a community. Care must be taken that students are not exploited through the particular voluntary work they are to undertake. The task must be appropriate to the maturity of the young people involved. For example, the students who worked with retarded youth were quite capable of carrying out extended relationships with a group of seriously handicapped persons; not all groups would be ready to undertake

such a complex project initially. Staff members must determine that the project is in fact feasible, that the logistics of money, regulations, travel, etc. will be workable and will not interfere with the successful consummation of the project.

Orientation. The next stage is to orient the students to the proposed project and to determine their possible interest in service. This involves exposing young people to concepts, people, or situations so that they develop an awareness of the existence of a need for service. In some cases the need may be dramatically self-evident. In the case of a tornado one had only to explain to the group that an entire community had been devastated and volunteers were sought to help clear the rubble. In another situation the need may be introduced more obliquely to arouse interest. A psychologist from a state hospital for retarded children came to present a color slide show on mental retardation. This created initial interest which was followed by a tour of the hospital. Only at that point, dependent upon the reaction of young people during this period of orientation, was a decision made that a specific proposal for involving the youth as recreation aides might be placed before the students. When students are aware of a need and motivated to be of service, then staff members and youth can begin planning the third stage, participation in service activity.

Implementation. Young people are involved to the maximum extent possible in organizing the project, executing the activity, and evaluating the service experience. As seen from the great variety of activities, each project requires its own unique pattern for organization and implementation. Successful involvement in providing a genuine service to others usually increases motivation for further service. The project can continue until the need is met and/or until new challenges are desired. At that point, students and staff members are again ready to identify further potential areas of service.

Evaluation. Almost all evaluations of projects to date are based on ongoing informal, interpersonal feedback among staff members, students, and those being served. In the final analysis the goal is to create a positive caring atmosphere where service to others becomes a life style; youth should not experience such activity as some kind of "treatment program" but as a community of humans reaching out to one another.

While qualitative evaluation is useful, nevertheless there is a need to develop creative evaluative designs to more precisely assess the nature of the impact of service-learning on students and those they serve. In ongoing evaluations of a Starr Commonwealth program utilizing a peer group process with a strong service-learning component, a number of positive gains were noted in the following areas:

1. statistically significant increase in self-esteem using a pre- and post-test design;

2. statistically significant increase in a measure of locus of responsibility (internal locus of control); and

3. increased gains of educational achievement with 1.5 years of overall average gain per year.

In addition, staff members reported overall reductions in vandalization of school property, length of stay in the program, and incidence of truancy.

While these results are encouraging, one must be cautious against draw-

ing direct causal relationships because of the interaction effects of the various program components. This underscores the need for further research.

As with any other education activity, service-learning programs are not without their problems. However, once the group of young people become invested in a project, they encounter suprisingly few difficulties as there is strong peer support for succeeding. Members of the staff make an attempt to have the entire programs seen as belonging to the young people themselves and not as a program imposed by adults. Perhaps the most frequent difficulty experienced has been dealing with isolated members of the group who resist involvement while most of the group is motivated for a project. The resonsibility for dealing with such problems is left with the group as is seen in the following account:

> A class group was planning on a project at the state hospital for the mentally retarded when a particular youngster became rather adamant in his refusal to join in this activity. After his peers talked with him for some time about his feelings, it was finally revealed that his own mother was mentally retarded, a fact which he had tried to hide from his friends. His conflict about being ashamed of his mother while still loving her was brought into focus by the anticipated helping project with retarded children. After expressing these feelings, the youth was able with the support of the group to enter into a most successful service-learning activity which helped him gain a new perspective on the difficulties and challenges experienced by his mother.

Once young people experience the satisfaction that comes from helping others, they frequently express concern about how they might be able to continue service once they return to their own community schools. This poses a most ironic situation: those who previously were the greatest troublemakers now desire to help others but the school and community have few appropriate roles for such service. Too often, a student returning from special education placement encounters reluctance and distrust on the part of faculty who remember the past and are skeptical about the youth's motivation. Unless other school personnel are exposed to the concept of service-learning, they will have little sensitivity for using once-troubled youth in these important roles.

Prior to the student's reentry into the mainstream, it is crucial to carefully communicate the changes that have occurred in the young person and give examples of positive service activities in which the student has been involved. The idea of service-learning is not inherently difficult to communicate, and many school counselors or principals are ready to use the young person in a positive manner once they understand the concept. Schools can be encouraged to adopt programs for such students. Thus, one girl, upon her return to a public school setting, was assigned for a portion of the day as a peer helper in a resource room for the handicapped, while another student worked parttime with the guidance department in a peer counseling program. These examples suggest that to fail to provide an avenue of service for these motivated youth who have learned to help others is a waste of human resources just as if nurses or teachers or doctors were deprived of opportunities for practicing their skills.

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