

A Community Youth Development Project

ROBERT F. DE HAAN
and HENRY B. HACKAMACK

Community leaders and a staff of university faculty members are at present cooperating in a long-range research project of youth service and development. Robert F. DeHaan is instructor in human development, University of Chicago, and Henry B. Hackamack is director of special school services, Quincy Public Schools, Quincy, Illinois.

DURING the past twenty years there have been a number of major scientific studies of children which have indicated that signs of maladjustment on the one hand, and indications of special talent on the other, make their appearance in children's behavior as early as nine or ten years of age. These studies also indicate that preventative treatment, if it is to be effective, should be undertaken early in the life of the child.

RESEARCH ASPECTS OF THE PROJECT

The Community Youth Development Project is an experiment which has grown out of these findings. It is designed to test the general hypothesis that a community, through local people appropriately trained to study and assist children, can increase its production of unusually able, creative young people and can reduce its production of socially and personally maladjusted young people.

The hypothesis will be tested in the following manner: Two age groups of children have been selected. The groups are separated by two years; the older group being born mostly in 1910, the younger in 1912. From each age group will be screened comparable subgroups

composed of potentially talented and potentially maladjusted children. The older subgroup will provide the control; the younger subgroup will be the experimental group. The experimental variable is the ten-year program of special study and assistance to be given to the children in the experimental subgroup by the local staff of counselors. The control group will receive no assistance other than that usually given by the community to all groups of children.

The children in both subgroups will be observed, and their development will be recorded. At the end of the project, the two groups will be compared on the basis of school adjustment, vocational choice, early marriage adjustment, indications of social leadership or artistic productions, intellectual achievements. Any difference between the two subgroups can be attributed to the specialized assistance given to the experimental subgroup, since all other influences bearing on the two groups are practically equal.

The first year of the project is being devoted to the two major tasks of training the counselors for their part in the project and of initially screening all the children in the two age groups in

order to identify the children who will make up the subgroups.

COMMUNITY ASPECTS OF THE PROJECT

A distinguishing feature of this project is that it is primarily a community and not a university project. The community assumes responsibility for the success of the project and uses the project to fit its own unique needs. This relationship of the community to the project is maintained by four specific groups: a Community Commission, a Professional Committee, the Community Counselors, and the University Consultant Staff.

The Community Commission is made up of citizens who are interested in children but who have no direct professional contacts with them. The commission is the governing body of the project, determining all major policies and giving its moral support to the project. It has organized itself around problems arising from the project; approved an interest inventory which was sent to parents of all fourth and sixth grade children as one device for finding talented children; helped to organize committees of citizens for the purpose of discovering and developing talent in children; reviewed all published material and acted, in part, as an informal liaison between the project and the community.

The Professional Committee is made up of citizens who work professionally with children in youth serving agencies. These people, since they are acquainted with most of the youth-workers in the community, provide the necessary point of contact with the already existing network of formal and informal organizations concerned with the develop-

ment of youth. The Professional Committee has recruited the counselors for the training seminar and has helped to organize the talent committees. Both the Professional Committee and the commission are kept in contact with the University Consultants by means of monthly meetings and through the work of the executive secretary of the commission.

The community contributes manpower and skills to the project through the group of counselors. The counselors, sixty in number, have committed themselves to give small amounts of time consistently to work on the project. This year they are being trained; next year they will operate as teams, each team being responsible for studying and helping in a special way a given number of children who have been found to need help.

The Consultant Staff, besides being responsible for the research aspects of the project, provides technical assistance in screening the children and training the counselors.

This is also a community project in the sense that it depends on the cooperation of all the agencies that serve youth—schools, churches, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, YMCA, YWCA, recreation agencies, service clubs, courts, and social agencies. These agencies have assigned staff members to work on some aspect of the project, and will also provide much of the social framework within which the work with the boys and girls on the project will be carried out.

A second distinguishing feature of the project is the definition of the two types of children to be included in the subgroups. Children who give indications of being especially gifted

or talented are one type. Incipiently maladjusted children are the second.

Gifted children fall into three general categories: (1) those gifted in the fine arts and craftsmanship, (2) those with superior intellectual gifts, and (3) those high in social leadership. Giftedness or talent is defined empirically as the upper two or three percent of the children in each of these areas.

The group of potentially maladjusted children fall into two categories: (1) the aggressively maladjusted, and (2) the withdrawn children. Behavior of the aggressively maladjusted children is characterized by the breaking of rules relating principally to property (stealing and destruction), sex, and relations with people (assault and fighting). Such children are vulnerable to delinquency.

The withdrawn child is the one who is pathologically timid, whose usual mode of adjustment to social situations is retreat, and who shows signs of the kind of behavior which, in extreme cases, results in placement of the child in a mental hospital as a schizophrenic.

It was felt that the needs of these two types of children are less likely to be met in a community than are those of the average child since the public educational system and community organizations are forced to serve the greatest possible number of children and, therefore, may tend to neglect the unusual or extreme child. For this reason, the gifted and maladjusted children were selected.

A third feature of the project is the systematic screening of the children in the attempt to determine, while they are still young, which of them fall into

the above categories. Screening will be accomplished by three types of methods: (1) "objective" tests, self-reports, and individual products; (2) sociometric judgments by age-mates; (3) behavior reports by teachers and other adults. Predictions of future maladjustments and potential talent will be based on symptoms of maladjustments or evidences of talent brought to light with these screening devices.

A fourth feature of the project is the *team* method which will be used by the counselors. The team is the basic element of study and action in the project. Teams will consist of a variety of people, e.g., teacher, nurse, parent, religious educator, and social worker. Team operation is designed to pool the varied experiences, community contacts, skills and points of view of the counselors in order to give maximum flexibility and comprehensiveness to any plan to help a youngster.

A fifth feature to be noted is the nine-month in-service training program for the Community Counselors. Weekly meetings, two hours in length, are held under the guidance of the Consultant Staff. Principles of child study, counseling and psychotherapy and group dynamics form the core of the content of the training program. During the first hour of the training meeting a member of the staff presents concepts and principles in the above areas to the total group. In the second hour, discussion groups are formed around case histories of the kinds of children who will be dealt with in the project.

In general, the training program has been designed to create in advance the kinds of experiences and problems which the counselors will encounter in

the future on the project. It has been designed also to encourage indigenous leadership, and to provide opportunities for reorganization of attitudes as well as for the attainment of new skills.

NATURE OF THE TREATMENT PROGRAM IN THE PROJECT

The teams will generally follow a four-step cycle in working with a child. These steps will be followed for a gifted child as well as a maladjusted one. The first step will be to study the unique needs of the child and the possibilities in his environment for treatment. The second will be to plan some sort of assistance which can best meet those needs. Thirdly, the team will take whatever steps are necessary to carry out the plan. Finally, the team will evaluate what has been done and use this as a basis for further analysis, etc. Every cycle will not necessarily evolve a radically new plan of treatment, since the decision, reached on the basis of the evaluation, may be to continue whatever plan is currently being carried out.

Studying the child involves collecting information about him and organizing it in order to discover his unique needs. Some of the data will have been collected by the Consultant Staff, and will consist of the child's scores on the various tests used in screening the children and data on the child supplied by the schools. A team, however, will undoubtedly need further information in order adequately to plan to help a child. One of the tasks of the team will be to decide how much more information is needed, what kind of information is needed, and how it will be obtained.

In planning to help a child a team

will have to consider what kind of help is most appropriate to his unique needs. Possibilities for help range from setting up simple changes in the child's environment on the one hand through arranging for therapeutic relationships for the child on the other. Several principles can be stated which can guide the teams as they consider the most appropriate plan. First, the child must be dealt with in terms of his own needs and in his own environmental setting. Rather than trying to fit him into the program, the program will be made to fit his needs. Secondly, it follows that a therapeutic relationship must be such that the child can participate for reasons of his own not for reasons extraneous to himself. Such a relationship might be a friendship, an employer-employee relationship, or a relationship centering around a common hobby or recreational pursuit.

Plans to help talented children will be based on the same principles as plans to help maladjusted children. It is assumed that if a team gives the same consideration to the unique emotional needs of a gifted child as it does to the maladjusted child, the gifted child will develop and use his talents to serve the community and to meet his own needs.

The team itself may, but does not necessarily have to make the actual contact with the child in carrying out the plan of assistance. It can call on other agencies or groups such as the Scouts or another person to provide the setting or the desired relationship. The team would function to plan for and supervise such relationships and provide a way to evaluate their effectiveness as a basis for continuing them or modifying them.

Copyright © 1952 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.