

Contributing Toward a Language of EMOTIONAL HEALTH

A study of emotional health among junior and senior high school students is developing closer cooperation and more insightful understanding of research among staff members and consultants in this University School.

WITH THE IDEA THAT social research can be "both socially useful and scientifically meaningful" (6), two agencies of the Ohio State University are collaborating in a study of emotional health among junior and senior high school students. One of the agencies is the University School, a demonstration and experimental unit of the College of Education, in which youngsters are enrolled from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. The other is the Occupational Opportunities Service, a department in the Office of the Vice-President in Charge of Student Relations, which provides counseling, testing and research services for the University. In this report, the background, purposes and preliminary results of this collaboration will be discussed.

Because its job is to provide educational leadership, the University School staff is continually seeking to improve its methods of working with students.

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An important teaching objective is to help young people learn to work and play together. Such diverse situations as the classroom, athletic events, money-making projects, class trips and other social events provide many opportunities for this kind of teaching. Considerable attention is paid to students' individual needs. For example, core teachers devote from one and one-half to three hours per day to individual conferences. The staff also includes a part-time school physician and a full-time nurse, whose work is closely integrated with that of the teaching faculty.

The administrative policy of the University School is consistent with its attempts to teach youngsters how to behave democratically in social groups. Faculty members and parents participate actively in policy-making and in the carrying out of policy (1). Thus, although the school staff spends the bulk of its time in actual work with students, much additional time is devoted to various kinds of committee work. In this democratically ordered scheme of events and with a major commitment to demonstrate an outstanding instructional program, the staff has had relatively little time for

the design and execution of research projects. This state of affairs has been frustrating because the staff is keenly aware of its obligations to find out more about its students and to develop more effective ways of meeting their needs. It is not surprising that for many years research activity was subordinated to teaching demands. Particularly at the upper grade levels, research was relatively sporadic and uncoordinated, consisting of a few theses and dissertations conducted by staff persons and the work of several outsiders who wished to obtain data about elementary and secondary school children. Thus, ideas about and practices of working with youngsters had far outstripped formal research inquiry. Over the years, too, a genuine concern with the welfare of University School students had contributed to a growing suspiciousness and resentment of persons from outside who wanted to conduct research in the school. Much of this attitude was well-founded; frequently the outsider, engrossed in his own research objectives could be construed as openly exploitative.

Yet, outside help was vitally necessary if the school's research objectives were to be met, because the faculty itself could not do this job without neglecting its other important commitments. Hence, a test project was devised, calling for the aid of outside consultants and the employment of a research assistant. To this end, a modest research grant was requested and obtained from the Ohio State University Development Fund for a study of emotionally disturbed youngsters.

Meanwhile, the Research Division of the Occupational Opportunities

Service was seeking to establish its credit as a resource for studies contributing to the understanding and development of students enrolled in the Ohio State University. The long range objectives of the research group were to provide information that could be put to practical use by teaching and other service units of the University, and to contribute to basic research on human behavior. Now these are seemingly irreconcilable objectives, chiefly because in this area practitioner and scientist rarely trust each other's motives. The scientist is stereotyped as having a dispassionate carelessness toward the welfare of his subjects, and the practitioner, as being uncritically "rule of thumb" in his service function. On the assumption that practitioner and scientist roles could be reconciled (5, p. 7-15), several University departments, including the University School, were sounded out on the idea of collaborative inquiry. The initial operations of the Occupational Opportunities Service research program are described elsewhere (4).

A Study of Pupils' Anxiety Symptoms

Preliminary discussions between the University School and Occupational Opportunities Service groups were held in the fall of 1952. Although the talking was done informally over coffee in the school cafeteria, these conferences were marked by defensive sparring that included open expressions of hostility. One of the problems here was that of communication between the groups. Where there had been little experience in common, terms used had different referents for the two staffs. If there

were to be a joint study of emotional disturbance in youngsters, for example, the meanings of "emotional disturbance" and of "study" had to be explored.

Finally, with much crossing of fingers, it was agreed to begin by studying a specific aspect of emotional disturbance in youngsters—how they manifested anxiety symptoms. As a means of "coming to terms," it was agreed further to study the frames of reference¹ of teachers and other professional workers toward such symptoms. First, 18 teachers volunteered for interviews that would elicit from them behavioral descriptions of anxiety symptoms in youngsters with whom the teachers had worked. During these interviews, teachers were encouraged to talk freely. Second, verbatim and near-verbatim recordings of these interviews were sifted to obtain 100 non-overlapping items descriptive of manifest anxiety. Third, these items were submitted to University School teachers, teachers in the Columbus schools, social workers and psychologists, to determine whether these groups could agree in categorizing the items along a dimension ranging from "most important" to "least important" in describing anxiety symptoms in children. It was found that the two groups who sorted the most alike were the University school teachers and the psychologists, but that within the University School, teachers differed widely² among themselves. These and other

findings were reported back to the teaching faculty and formed the basis for exciting discussion meetings. Throughout the entire study there has been an attempt to "feed-back" regularly to the teaching faculty material that it could help interpret as well as use.

The finding that there was considerable specificity and not a general agreement among the teachers in viewing anxiety symptoms led to the suggestion of a behavior clinic in which intensive case studies could be made of individual students in the University School. With this in mind, a graduate student in clinical psychology was hired as a research assistant to make the case studies, under the supervision of a senior staff member in the Psychology Department. Faculty members selected four adolescent boys for study, two considered "well-adjusted" and two as "poorly adjusted." Case conferences including teachers, clinicians, and members of the research staff were held at bi-weekly intervals during the spring quarter of 1953. With the help of her supervisor, the research assistant presented, in written form, a detailed summary of each case, to which questions for group discussion were appended. Although there was unanimous judgment about the poorly adjusted students, one of the youngsters selected³ as well-adjusted was revealed as a highly anxious person, strongly sensitive to conformity pressures from peers, teachers and parents.

¹The "mind-sets," as one helpful teacher explained in translation.

²This research was conducted by Paul D. Hood (2), then research assistant in the Occupational Opportunities Service. It was Dr. Hood who proposed the behavior clinic (see next paragraph).

³We are grateful to Judith Worrell, who served as research assistant, and to Alvin Scodel, who served as clinical supervisor, for making these case studies. A summary and discussion of the two "well adjusted" cases may be found in (5, p. 101-108).

Thus, it became increasingly obvious that faculty members could differ among themselves in their views of students and that their evaluative judgments might not be supported by evidence from other sources. Moreover, it became evident that there was much to be learned about emotional health as well as pathology. In 1953-54, then, a large-scale investigation could be made of the entire junior-senior high school population, now with active participation and support from members of the teaching faculty. Currently, we are studying the relationship between a student's expressed standards of behavior and other overt acts involving group participation, physical skill and academic performance. It also involves a comparison of expressed behavior standards held by students, teachers and parents (3). These data are now being analyzed. This research is more formal and rigorous in design than any attempted heretofore by a research team at the University School, and it is so precisely because the faculty wants it that way. And the faculty now has an owner's pride in the research program. Added to this is the encouragement provided by a recent financial grant from the University Advisory Committee on Research for further intensive case studies in 1954-55.

We think it is important to tell how the University School and Occupational Opportunities Service staffs are contributing toward a language of emotional health. Too frequently, research is dichotomized as either "action" or

"basic." If basic, the research may contribute to behavior theory but have little practical utility. If action-oriented, it may give to those who participate a sense of well-being, because they are involved and have a stake in what is going on, yet the contribution to knowledge is apt to be trivial. Undoubtedly, there are occasions when either kind of research alone is defensible. We are accumulating considerable evidence which seems to support the belief that their separation is not necessary.

References

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