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AUTHOR   Blancero, Douglas
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ABSTRACT
                YOUTH DARES (Dynamic Alternatives for Rehabilitation
through Educational Services) is a program that services a variety of
communities located primarily in Brooklyn, New York. It was founded
on the belief that the problems facing young students require
alternative and imaginative solutions. YOUTH DARES believes there are
three major environments youth come into contact with or that impact
on their development: the family, the educational system, and the
"street." YOUTH DARES is attempting to create a fourth environment,
one that would bring all the environments in contact with each other
and draw on their positive traits. The goal is to strengthen the
family unit, provide a viable avenue for effective education, combat
the negative influence of the addictive personality and nuture a
positive peer group. YOUTH DARES is a multi-service agency that
supports the development of a non-traditional curriculum of studies.
It advocates a course of studies that would imitate the workplace by
providing an environment which exposes the students to a set of tasks
involving the use of various skills such as would be encountered in
the real world of work. While YOUTH DARES offers various services,
community centers that can house these services are essential to the
well-being of communities, families, and children. (NB)

[Douglas Blancero]

EDUCATION, ECONOMICS & YOUTH

Education is the foundation of any free society. It was one of the principal priorities of our founding fathers. Thomas Jefferson proposed education for all citizens "to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom." These words have even more importance in today's world. In the book "Winning the Brain Race" the authors state, "We are producing a generation of young Americans that neither understands nor appreciates democracy. They do not have the education to develop a solid commitment to those 'notions and sentiments' essential to a democratic form of government."

In addition to the above scenario, there is also the issue of values and how to impart them in an educational setting. Many of the negative decisions young people make in regard to their lives are value decisions. It is the responsibility of education, in conjunction with the family, to teach a system of thought that incorporates a set of values. This is not the case and the result is obvious--behavior that is both self destructive and/or harmful to others.

YOUTH D.A.R.E.S. (Dynamic Alternatives for Rehabilitation through Educational Services) addresses these issues through a wide range of programs, but most directly by its educational component Project B.E.S.T. (Begin Excelling Starting Today). The program services a variety of communities primarily located in the southern tip of Brooklyn. The borough is most aptly described as a community of neighborhoods. These neighborhoods range from those suffering from urban aging to those experiencing a commercial revitalization. Residents are working class poor and middle class families. The area suffers from both chronic street fights between neighborhoods and racial tension and as a result is often a ripe atmosphere for violence.

An estimated 20% of the population is under the age of 20. This growing youth population is currently experiencing increasing truancy and drop out rates, as well as increasing unemployment, job/career disillusionment, and family breakdown. Both school and family breakdown have contributed to the "street" becoming the main vehicle of education where youth are presented with the stagnant role models of petty thieves and addicts. Moreover, due to the program resistant nature of these targeted youth, extensive street outreach must be done to win their confidence and loyalty. Alienation and apathy have increased the necessity, in most cases, of individualized supportive services. The overall result has been increased incidents of vandalism and graffiti, drug involvement (an estimated 80% of the participants have at least experimented), car

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theft (one of the highest rates in the city), assaults, neighborhood gang fights, bias incidents, and of course, truancy and drop outs. During the year 1990 the area experienced the highest rate of growth of violent crime in the borough. Parents are experiencing self-doubt, anger, frustration, and uncertainty. In most instances, families either do not seek help because they fail to recognize the problem, or they turn to the court and police for direction; a direction that is more times than not suppressive of the problem rather than rehabilitative. Denial always plays a major role in the family's ability to cope with the situation.

The problems facing young students require alternative and imaginative solutions since academic difficulties--which are often symptomatic of greater social problems--can, if not properly treated, remain with a person throughout his life.

An additional population that bears examining is that of the learning disabled or "special education" student. According to a news article that ran in the October 31, 1988 edition of the New York Times, there is a definite link between learning disabilities and crime. The article states:

> "Preliminary results of a pilot study conducted by the foundation in Brooklyn Family Court, which was released several weeks ago, show that 40 percent of juveniles who appear in Family Court have learning disabilities. The majority are age 7 to 17, and have failed in school or have dropped out and have engaged in antisocial and criminal behavior, from robbery to drug dealing to murder..."

The connection between the "drug abuser" and "learning disabled" becomes all the more apparent when we look at some other characteristics. Again in the same article we read:

> "People who are learning disabled have difficulty in processing and understanding spoken, written or visual information...those people are average or above average intelligence...may have also have problems getting along with others...
>
> There is no cure for the learning disabilities and no one fully understands their causes. Recent studies show, however, that if a child is reached at an early age, he can learn to function adequately and be successful...
>
> ...Children with undiagnosed or untreated disabilities are more likely to get into trouble

3

because they are unskilled, suffer from low self-
esteem and can be easily swayed by others..."

Another significant point the article makes is that the
present educational system has remained constant in overall
population but, "the number of children in special education
programs has increased to 112,000 last year from 35,000 in
1976."

Although there are areas of agreement with the facts
presented in this article, our conclusions differ.
Obviously, there is some relation between the populations
that are learning disabled and criminally involved.   But,
rather as seeing them as one population, we see them as two
distinct groups sharing some common traits and these
characteristics may be described as addictive.   Moreover,
the approach to dealing with this situation is usually
oriented toward changing the youth, rather than changing the
systems which are supposed to serve these youth.   YOUTH
D.A.R.E.S. creates systems that are sensitive to the needs
and wants of our clients and their families.

Finally, Carol Rozelle, founder of the Foundation for
Children with Learning Disabilities, in the same article
states, "There is a tremendous growing underclass of kids
with nowhere to turn, with no hope and without anyone to
care for them or to love them..."

A final layer of the problem is that of economics.
According to the William T Grant Foundation's report
entitled "The Forgotten Half", our young people are faced
with a dismal future.   The report states that the American
Dream of "ever increasing purchasing power" died in 1973.
It goes on to state that our children may never match our
purchasing power and most definitely never surpass it.   The
report goes on to state that youth have borne the brunt of
our economic slumps.   The following quote illustrates this
point graphically:

> "...the median income of households headed by
> persons under age 25 declined 26.3 percent between
> 1973 and 1986 (in constant dollars), from $20,229
> to $14,900.   If we recall that the drop in
> personal income during the Great Depression from
> 1929 to 1933 was 27 percent, we can better grasp
> the extent of the "New Depression" being
> experienced by America's young families today."

The net result is often academic failure and frustration.
Students lack coping strategies and, therefore, cannot deal
with school pressures.   They do not possess the patience to
work within the system; instead, they seek immediate
gratification.   Without support from the home or school,
students develop poor self-images and lose any desire to

4

learn. They cannot see any future or any way out of this confusion.

YOUTH D.A.R.E.S. believes there are three major environments youth come into contact with or that impact on their development and growth. The first environment is the family, the basic unit of society. Unfortunately, it is the deterioration of this unit that is often at the core of future problems. The family should be the anchor in a child's life: their source of identity. For any number of reasons, it is not. Some of the contributing factors are recent (within the last 20 years) economic climate, the need for two working parents, the rising number of single parent families, early marriages and youthful, unprepared parents. Another aspect of this environment is the "addictive family" in which the cycle of addiction is passed on from generation to generation. Families also are capable of underscoring and reinforcing the messages of society discussed previously. Parents, unconsciously, provide a set of values based on society's mixed messages that often prioritize results before process. The bottom line? Youngsters, not all, but a good percentage, are not identifying with their families and an absence of early role models and security is apparent.

The second environment youth come into contact with is the educational system. For many of our students, the school system is more "confrontational than educational". Often, it is the same for the teachers as well. Other factors are the lack of meaning or relevance the subject matter has to the students, the impersonal environment of the schools, and the lack of student involvement in the educational process. High school graduates are finding no pot at the end of the rainbow. When we consider that we are dealing, in a large part, with a population of results orientated youngsters, the need for concrete, not abstract, benefits of a high school diploma becomes that much more important. Simply put: students need job guarantees, students need life living skills, students need to be able to apply learned skills to the real world. Recent studies seem to demonstrate that more learning is happening in the work place than in school. Literacy skills are developed to a degree never approached in the traditional school setting. So again, an environment which was intended to provide positive role models and an atmosphere of support fails this percentage of students we are discussing.

The third environment these youth come into contact with is the "street". Both school and family breakdown have contributed to the "street" becoming the main vehicle of education where youth are presented with the stagnant role models of petty thieves and addicts. It is here in the street they find acceptance, maybe for the first time. As long as they follow the mores of the group they are "hanging

5

out" with they are not challenged. These groups are all the more cohesive, because they are comprised of youths looking for the same thing: an identity and the acceptance and love that goes along with it. They think they have found it in the street and to some extent they are right. When we ask them to leave these "negative" groups, we are also asking them to leave the "anchor" in their lives and the comfort that goes along with it. What complicates the situation is that there are some positive elements in these street groups: loyalty, sincere friendship, and unity.

We are attempting to create a fourth environment. One that would bring all the environments in contact with each other and draw on their positive traits. Through the various services offered, we hope to strengthen the family unit, provide a viable avenue for effective education, combat the negative influence of the addictive personality and nurture a positive peer group.

The next piece of our approach is really the keystone on which all our services and activities are built upon: LOVE. The first and primary service we offer the youth coming to us is we sincerely care for them. We build relationships with our clients first. Once a relationship of mutual trust is established then the tutoring or the counseling will be effective. One insightful and progressive educator said that once love is present the most effective punishment is the removal of that love and the acceptance it stands for.

We must ensure that the youth we serve are full partners in their treatment. If we are truly to respond to their needs then there must exist a system of communication. This communication must be two sided and not patronizing. Within the proper atmosphere youth can be motivated to invest in the program fostering a feeling of ownership, rather than that of belonging.

All of these factors bring us to the conclusion that the development of a new alternative system that addresses the needs of this population is necessary. The reasons for a new approach should be apparent to those who have been observers of the traditional educational system. The number of young people dropping out of the system is increasing, despite the reports that inform us of increasing "percentages" of graduating seniors. A conclusion might be that the existing educative process needs to be expanded so as to include new concepts which embrace non-traditional vehicles to educate our students.

An additional indicator of a failing educational system, that at first is easy to misinterpret, is the increasing number of students receiving their General Equivalency Diplomas (GED). Although on the surface this could be seen in a positive light, it still illustrates the fact that

6

students are leaving the schools early. Those who go on to obtain their GED (and not all do) either enter the job market two years earlier than their counter parts remaining in school, or begin their collegiate career two years earlier. In either case, students who stay in school and do the "right thing" seem to be penalized as they go for a job.

As a youth service provider offering a GED program we also have the opportunity to observe the number of students that legally sign out of school to join a legitimate GED program, but never follow through to its completion. They are legally out of school and the system has a legitimate statistic that demonstrates a decreasing drop out rate.

Above and beyond the above stated factors is the question, "Is education achieving its goals?" and "What are these goals?" Both of these inquiries could and have been the topic of much longer papers than presented here. Suffice it to say, in the opinion of this agency, for the population we are serving, education is not reaching its goal.

Youth D.A.R.E.S believes the goals of an educational system are multi-faceted. In its most general sense this goal is the preparation of students to succeed in life as productive individuals of society, active citizens in their government and successful employees in the career of their choice. In its most specific sense, education should impart to students the skills of critical and abstract thinking, as well as the ability to problem solve. Armed with thinking skills, students are not only able to learn in a variety of different arenas, but are also able to make healthy value judgements in their lives regarding such topics as addiction, relationships, and criminal activity. True learning occurs when one is able to transfer one's skills from one experience to another, from one forum to another.

One of the major reasons students are leaving the educational system is that material is presented to them in a manner that renders it meaningless. There is no connection between the classroom and the workplace, despite the fact that literacy demands in the workplace are increasing and according to studies is, in fact, greater than the demands in the classroom. Modern times has seen the end of jobs that require little or no literacy skills.

The educational system seems to take for granted that literacy skills learned in the classroom are going to be easily transferred to the job place. Studies indicate that gains learned in the class are lost after around 8 weeks. This is not the case in skills learned in the work place. Studies performed by the Army demonstrate that "personnel retained 80% of their end of course gain in job literacy training [but] only 40% of their end of course gain in general reading." (Stricht, 1981, p 40)

7

This retention can be best explained as a result of workers coming into contact with a greater variety of reading material in the course of their work. Another factor to be considered is the learning that is accomplished through the socialization process that occurs at work, but seems not be occurring at school. In other words, an environment suitable for learning must be established. If this is true, and we believe it is, then teachers must build their curriculum around experiences involving thinking and problem solving. Lessons should incorporate realistic learning experiences requiring thinking.

Another important difference, illustrated by recent studies, is the fact that in a survey of workers and students, workers read to learn and assess, while students read primarily to learn and, for the most part, not to assess. Over all students spend less time reading in school than workers did on the job.

In response to this situation YOUTH D.A.R.E.S. supports the development of a non-traditional curriculum of studies. This course of studies would imitate the workplace by providing an environment which exposes the students to a set of tasks involving the use of various skills such as would be encountered in the real world of work and taught in the school. In essence, we are talking about the marriage of the pedagogue and the practitioner being consummated in the classroom.

The objective of the project is provide a forum where skills, traditionally taught in the classroom, can be presented for learning in an environment reflective of the workplace they will encounter upon graduation; and where skills and thinking processes are presented in a manner making them transferable to the workplace.

YOUTH D.A.R.E.S. is a multi-service agency. We agree with Leah Koenig, Director of Project Concern of School District 18, who in her testimony before the Senate Committee stated, "...for the programs to be effective, they must be multi-faceted. They must be designed not only for children, but for parents, teachers, the community and society at large."

Again, in the same report, it may be read, "Programs involving teachers and families; alternative classrooms for high risk children; attention to the many other self destructive behaviors associated with substance abuse noted...such as truancy, dropping out, teenage pregnancy, suicide-- the scope... appears endless." In other words the state of our youth and the forces influencing them affects

many levels of our lives and the proposed answers must address these many levels.

YOUTH D.A.R.E.S., through its various services, attempts to address these many levels. The necessity for community centers that can house these services is essential to the well being of our communities, our families and their children.

DOUGLAS BLANCERO