A Locality Development Approach to Delinquency Prevention in Rural Areas

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Abstract:

A delinquency prevention partnership was forged between a school of social work and five rural communities. Using a locality development approach, local teams were formed and empowered to set goals in three areas: to develop more cooperative working relationships between school and juvenile court staff, to establish local interagency staffing groups to plan and coordinate services to troubled youth, and to develop and implement primary prevention plans based on local needs. Strategies are described which were used to create and maintain both the teams and the changes they undertook. Results of the project, mitigating factors, and elements critical to the success of similar programs in the future are outlined.

Article:

Introduction

Rural communities usually lack the variety of resources their urban or suburban counterparts can bring to bear on problems of delinquency. For example, in most rural areas in Georgia, youth service workers have responsibility for multiple counties and carry heavy caseloads, and communities lack local treatment programs. In these same areas, family counseling services are often nonexistent, and mental health workers may spend as little as a day a week in a community. Although schools often educate youth who are delinquent or pre-delinquent, they typically do not acknowledge a role for themselves in delinquency prevention; instead they often expel troublemakers from school (Children's Defense Fund, 1978). Thus, few resources are available to youth service workers whose primary job is to prevent delinquency and recidivism. In rural communities where new resources are unlikely to be developed, one viable approach to problems of delinquency is to mobilize existing resources to work together more effectively.

This paper describes a unique partnership between a university and local communities which was formed to help prevent juvenile delinquency at the local level. The project, which was named the School-Juvenile Court Liaison Project, did not impose predetermined solutions to local delinquency problems. Instead, it used enabling and empowering strategies of community organization to build the capacity of local institutions to deal more effectively with delinquent youth and to develop ways to prevent delinquency. This approach requires that organizations other than the juvenile court and the youth service agency view delinquency as a community problem. Success requires the cooperation of all individuals and agencies concerned with the social functioning of the community and its members.

The project is an example of a model of community organization practice which Rothman (1979) calls locality development, a model which has been used to develop awareness and make changes in rural counties. Locality development emphasizes "democratic procedures, voluntary cooperation, self-help, development of indigenous leadership, and educational objectives" (Rothman, 1979, p. 26). Rather than solve specific problems, the goal of locality development is to help the community enhance its own capacity to deal with community issues, through the use of a problem-solving process that can be applied to a variety of issues. The basic change strategy is to

involve a cross section of people in the process of identifying and solving problems.

Initiation of the Project

In 1983 a state-wide conference was held in Georgia titled "Justice, Education, and the Community." Participants recognized that in order to improve delinquency prevention and early intervention programs, increased cooperation and communication among various agencies were needed. The relationship between local schools and juvenile courts was highlighted as being in particular need of enhanced cooperation.

As a result of the conference, a faculty member of the University of Georgia's School of Social Work wrote a grant to fund the School-Juvenile Court Liaison Project to develop more collaborative relationships between selected schools and courts. Funding to cover a portion of the cost of training workshops and salaries for staff was secured from the Georgia Governor's Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The primary focus of the project was to assist rural schools and courts to find ways to work more closely to help students who had committed delinquent or status offenses and to devise strategies to prevent delinquency.

The organizational approach to delinquency prevention is somewhat novel, but one which has gained sup-port in recent years. In the past, most delinquency prevention programs have focused on the individual, usually after a delinquent act has been committed. However, in their review of the delinquency prevention literature between 1965 and 1974, Wright and Dixon (1977) found few evaluative studies that documented the efficacy of various delinquency treatment and prevention programs. Johnson, Bird, and Little (1979), in their "critical review of contemporary explanations of causes of delinquency and means to prevent it" (p. 92), concluded that programs focusing on selective organizational change showed the most promise for delinquency prevention. In 1984 the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges cited the importance of the relationship between juvenile justice and schools in dealing with delinquency problems. The Council recommended that a "close liaison should be maintained between the courts and the schools" (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 1984, p. 10).

These findings and recommendations, along with those of the Georgia conference, led to the development of three primary project goals:

> a) to develop linkages between schools and courts so that services to youth involved with both systems can be coordinated and early intervention rather than remedial rehabilitation services can be increased;
>
> b) to assist school and court personnel in reaching out to other human service agencies to develop a community-wide system of service coordination for young people;
>
> c) to enable school and court personnel to address youth-related community problems with preventive rather than reactive approaches. (Kurtz and Lindsey, 1986, p. 10).

The primary strategy for achieving these goals was the development of local school and juvenile court teams ranging in size from two to five members and composed largely of school social workers and juvenile court workers. Each team engaged in local needs assessment, goal-setting, program planning, implementation, and evaluation of goals. The authors staffed the project, building the capacity of the teams by means of education and consultation. The five teams were brought together at the university for a series of four workshops held over an 18-month period of time. Team members were exposed to concepts and strategies related to school-court relations, interagency councils, and delinquency prevention. Since the members of the teams lacked familiarity with the concept of prevention, it was emphasized in each workshop. Project staff supplemented the workshops with site visits and telephone consultations to provide technical and problem-solving assistance to the teams. Among the elements targeted for change by the teams were intraorganizational practices, interorganizational relationships and practices, and selected community conditions. Project staff served as catalysts, teachers, coordinators, linkers, and facilitators in helping local schools and juvenile courts build their capacity to work together more effectively.

Selection of Target Communities

Information about the project was sent to nonmetropolitan school systems and juvenile courts in north Georgia. Criteria for selection were established to ensure maximum opportunity for success. Only counties in which schools and courts both submitted applications were considered. Fifteen counties met this first criteria, and their applications were screened on paper to assess court and school staff perceptions of the need for the project in their county. The next step was to make on-site visits to seven rural counties. The purpose of these visits was to gauge interest, need, and support for project goals by school superintendents, juvenile court judges, and other key personnel who might be involved directly or indirectly with the project.

Five of the seven counties were selected to participate in the project. Although all of these counties were rural in nature, they varied in geography, economic base, and distance from a metropolitan area. One county (population 67,680) was located in the north Georgia mountains and had a stable and prosperous industrial base. Another rural farming county (population 19,423) in the eastern part of the state had only a very minimal industrial economic base. Two of the counties (population 49,466 and 55,434) were located in standard metropolitan areas, but were in the process of transition from their historical rural character to a new role as dormitory communities for nearby major cities. At the time the project was initiated, these counties were still fairly sparsely populated, lacked a strong local industrial or business base, and were described by local residents as rural. None of these counties included cities with more than 21,000 residents.

Literature on the implementation of effective organizational change has documented that, if changes are to become institutionalized, approval from the top and input from all levels are necessary (Greiner, 1967). Therefore, site visits were planned to include meetings with personnel from various levels of each system. These meetings gave key personnel a sense of involvement in the decision to join the project, regardless of whether they would actually serve on the school-court team. The sanction of superintendents and judges was necessary, and each was asked to sign a participation agreement. Linkages with the power structure in the school system and juvenile courts helped establish the credibility of the project and secure support for the teams' goals. Thus, the partnership was not just between the team and project staff, but between the local school and court systems and the project.

Creating Change

The partnership approach was more fully developed as the project got underway. The staff of the School-Juvenile Court Liaison Project made it clear that they were offering a process, not a product. The process was a joint venture in which schools and courts would form a new entity, the school-court team; team members would work in partnership with each other and with project staff.

Rubin and Rubin (1986) assert that local control is a key element in any type of community development. In this project, local control was vested in each team, which set its own goals and developed strategies for achieving them. Since project funds were limited to paying for a portion of project staff salaries and workshop expenses, each team had to find any money needed to achieve its goals. Project staff viewed their task as empowering the teams to develop their own capacity to work together successfully to identify and resolve present and future problems.

Stages in Team Development

Team building was a major emphasis in the project. Burghardt (1979) describes three stages of task-oriented group development that community organizers need to be aware of: orientation, evaluation, and control. The first stage, orientation, is the fact-finding stage when the group attempts to discover what the problem really is. It is during this stage that a group begins to define itself. Basic questions must be answered: Who will belong to the group? What problems will it confront? How will it function?

> During the second stage, the evaluation stage, The group has proceeded from limited understanding of the problem . . . to an intermediate stage where people see the group as having potential value to resolve its problems but disagree on what the problem is and (more likely) on how to correct it. It is not an easy

time. (Burghardt, 1979, p. 117).

Socioemotional issues, such as group leadership, power, control, the value or potential of the group itself, and individual and group commitment, often underlie and interfere with task-oriented discussions during the evaluation stage.

In the final control stage, the group moves into decision-making, goal-setting, and task-implementation. It is only after the socio-emotional issues are brought to the surface and dealt with that the tasks of this stage can be accomplished effectively.

Rubin and Rubin (1986) describe four roles of the community organizer: catalyst, teacher, facilitator, and linker. As the school-court teams worked their way through the stages of team development, project staff assisted them by playing each of these roles. As catalysts during the orientation stage, project staff offered an opportunity for local school and court systems to work together in a way they had never even thought of before. In this sense, to use the words of Rubin and Rubin, the project enlarged "people's vision of what is possible" (1986, p. 45). A primary role during this stage was the linking role, since establishment of the teams created a linkage between schools and courts which, in some cases, had not existed at all before and, in other cases, had existed only informally. For example, in one county, there was open hostility between school and court personnel. Court staff were concerned that students were not being referred to court for criminal offenses which occurred on campus. School staff were afraid to refer students for fear of adverse publicity about the schools and because they believed the judge would "send kids off" to the Youth Development Center for first offenses. The project gave school and court staff an opportunity to talk about these issues and eventually to agree upon a procedure for handling them.

As facilitators, staff enabled the teams to begin one of the tasks of the orientation stage, needs assessment, in order to find out what problems really existed. Project staff designed an open-ended questionnaire for team members to use in interviewing key personnel in each system. The issues identified in this way were used by the teams in setting goals in their first workshop. Project staff served as teachers during the orientation stage by providing information to help teams assess the quality of their school-court relations, by educating them about how to organize interagency councils, and by exposing them to concepts related to primary prevention. Staff also served as teachers by creating a structure within which tens could learn to identify problems and work together cooperatively to resolve them. This was done primarily in the first two workshops and through telephone and on-site consultation.

As differences of opinion emerged over which problems should be targeted and what approaches should be used, the teams moved into the evaluation stage. The locality development model assumes that although various groups may have different perceptions, they have common interests and that differences which exist are reconcilable. Within the teams, both school and court staff were concerned about the welfare of young people; however, they had somewhat different perspectives. Members were concerned about the roles of their respective institutions, which had often worked at cross purposes in dealing with the same youth. During the evaluation stage, differences of perspective and priorities between the two systems were brought out as teams tried to develop procedures for consistent school-court cooperation. For example, school personnel tended to be concerned with maintaining order and discipline in schools and frequently found it in their best interest to suspend chronic troublemakers from school. Court staff, on the other hand, pushed hard to keep these children in school because they realized that they could get into serious trouble while they were suspended.

Variations in personalities, personal values, and interpersonal dynamics were another source of differences among team members. During the evaluation phase, the very existence of one of the teams was threatened as personality conflicts, differences in perspectives, and power struggles dominated the meetings. Project staff took on the roles of facilitator and teacher as they helped team members elucidate and resolve conflicts and modeled ways for them to resolve future differences. One session of the third workshop was devoted to the issue of conflict resolution.

During the final control stage, staff served as linkers and facilitators. Since project staff did not have expertise in the target areas of the teams' specific prevention plans, such as alcohol and drug abuse prevention and school climate improvement, they located resource persons to work individually with the teams on their prevention projects. As facilitators, project staff provided structure for the planning process in which teams became engaged. It was the teams themselves which identified specific tasks, responsible persons, and deadlines for task accomplishment. Although setting goals and developing plans at workshops was hard work, carrying out the plans back in the local communities was the most difficult task. Staff served as facilitators by providing technical assistance and encouragement to help teams follow through on their tasks. The most successful example of project staff assistance with a team in the control stage occurred in County A where the team wanted to apply for a grant to fund a school climate program. Since team members had never written a grant before, project staff helped them conceptualize their goals, decide how they planned to meet those goals, and develop a budget and work plan. Staff also gave feedback on draft proposals and linked the team up with staff from the funding agency for additional assistance.

The progression of the school-court teams through the three stages was not always linear. It was necessary to accomplish as much project intervention as possible during workshops, even when it was clear that some goals and plans were established prematurely and would have to be modified later. Throughout the project, teams were encouraged to re-evaluate their goals and plans. Consequently, they moved back from the control stage to the orientation and evaluation stages from time to time.

Outcomes

Evaluation of this project focused on two types of outcomes: the extent to which goals set by the individual teams were met and the overall increase in cooperation between schools and courts. Outcomes related to specific, unique activities undertaken by the five teams were not evaluated by project staff. Results of the project evaluation are summarized briefly here and are reported in detail elsewhere (Lindsey & Kurtz, 1987).

Team Achievements

Each team developed its own goals and plans for the three project goal areas: school-court relations, interagency councils, and delinquency prevention. The goals and plans differed according to level of need, aspiration, and difficulty. The teams themselves differed according to the competence and commitment of their members and the level of support they received from their school systems and juvenile courts. Naturally, they also differed according to the level of success they achieved. Of the five counties, two were very successful in achieving their goals and in sustaining a high measure of change once the project ended. The other three counties achieved more limited success, and it is unclear how long the changes will last. Table 1 summarizes the achievements of all five teams in each goal area.

Probably the most successful team was Team A which achieved each of its three goals. Originally both school and court staff reported good working relations, but felt there was a need for more consistent and predictable cooperation. They developed a manual to educate school personnel about the nature, function, procedures, and programs of the juvenile court (Dalton/Whitfield School-Juvenile Court Team, 1985). To prevent students from becoming involved with the juvenile court for a status offense, the manual listed specific procedures school personnel would follow prior to referring students to court for truancy. Procedures were also outlined which court staff would follow when dealing with truants who were referred to the court. The manual was sanctioned by the two school superintendents and the juvenile court judge and has been in use for two years.

Team As community already had an interagency council which staffed cases of troubled youth and their families; however, it was not operating very effectively. Four of the five team members became active, office-holding participants and helped to revitalize the council which has since expanded and continues to staff cases.

The most exciting achievement of this team was the successful implementation of a school climate improvement program. The team wrote a grant to secure funding for the program which was first piloted in two middle schools and then expanded to other middle and elementary schools. This is the only school climate program in

Georgia based on the Colorado model (Howard, 1982) and serves as a model for other school systems throughout the state. This team was also successful in securing funding for an in-school probation officer program in one of its middle schools.

Team B was also very successful in achieving its goals. Prior to the project, school and court staff in County B rarely talked with each other, and collaboration between the two systems was even more of a rarity. In addition, the general climate in the community seemed to be one of apathy toward troubled youth. There was little cooperation among various local agencies. The court worker expressed serious doubts that either local service providers or the community at large could be mobilized to prevent youth-related problems or to deal with them more effectively.

In view of such negative conditions at the beginning, Team B created tremendous changes in its community. Rather than developing formal written procedures, Team B focused on repairing the relationship between the schools and the courts. The school felt a need for assistance with some students who were not delinquent, but who were beginning to get into trouble and who might become delinquent in the future. Team B developed a procedure whereby the school personnel could refer these pre-delinquent students and their families informally to the court worker for counseling. No petition was filed, and no official court record was kept. Since this small, rural community had very few counseling resources, the willingness of the court worker to take on this preventive role was especially valuable. By the end of the first year, none of the students referred for counseling had become officially involved with the court. Team B also worked out an agreement whereby the school system would refer students to court when they committed delinquent acts on campus.

Table 1
Outcomes

County	Goal #1 School-Court Coordination	Goal #2 Interagency Case Staffing	Goal #3 Prevention Program
A	School-Court manual developed; regular case conferencing begun.	Revived ailing Troubled Children's Council.	School climate program and in-school probation officer programs begun.
B	Court service worker began handling informal referrals for counseling from school; new procedures developed to aid transition of students returning from Youth Development Center.	Established a new interagency case staffing council.	Plan to begin substance abuse prevention program in-school never funded.
C	New procedures developed but not followed.	Case staffing group organized but never began staffing cases.	Securing recreation opportunities too ambitious a goal; minor success with one program.
D	School social worker to coordinate all referrals to court.	Interagency council already existed; team members not involved.	A "Peer Pal" Program to aid transition to high school was planned, but not implemented.
E	No changes in policy or procedures re school-court cooperation.	Team helped establish 4-county case staffing council.	Law-related education (LRE) class piloted; team members offered LRE course for teachers; LRE never integrated into regular curriculum.

Team B was extremely successful in achieving its interagency council goal. There had been no case staffing group in the county, and cooperation among agencies was poor. The court worker took major responsibility for establishing an interagency council which is now composed of more than six local agencies. The court worker

served as the group's first president, and another team member was the first vice-president. The council is actively staffing cases at the present time and is branching out to take on community projects in conjunction with local church and civic groups.

Team B has not yet succeeded in achieving its prevention goal, which was to introduce an alcohol and drug abuse prevention program into the school system. A program which had been empirically validated was located,[1] but no funds were available to put the program into action. The team is continuing to work toward this goal, but thus far has not been successful in securing funding.

The other three teams achieved mixed results in meeting their goals (See Table 1). Certain factors mitigated against a high level of success in these three counties. These factors need to be taken into consideration if future similar projects are planned. In two communities a lack of support from judges and superintendents undermined the teams' capacity to create meaningful change. Also important was the commitment of team members. Some team members' job responsibilities and personal situations became so burdensome that they did not have time or energy to bring about change. Furthermore, some team members were not in positions within their organizations that allowed them to bring about changes. Others seemed unable or unwilling to offer the leadership necessary to create the type of changes they envisioned.

Prevention planning posed a particular difficulty for all of the teams. Members were generally unfamiliar with concepts and strategies related to primary prevention. Like most direct service workers, they were oriented toward working with people who already had problems. It was a new and unfamiliar approach for them to look at broad problems and devise preventive approaches directed toward youth who were not yet in trouble. In general, the teams were not as successful in implementing their prevention plans as they were in implementing plans in the other two areas. Mitigating factors included lack of available funds, lack of support from school systems in implementing the programs, unfamiliarity of team members with prevention concepts, changes in school administration, and, in one county, selection of a goal which was too lofty.

School-Court Cooperation

Data on school-court cooperation were collected prior to project intervention and at the end of the second year of the project. The areas assessed were coordination of services, communication, and type of actions or services used to assist youth. The data came from surveys of the perceptions of key staff from the school and the court and from sample cases referred to the court by the school and other sources. Overall, in the five counties, the following significant differences were identified:

- contacts between school and court staff increased;
- school staff reported that the flow of information from the court to the school improved;
- there was an increase in coordinated service planning for students involved with the juvenile court;
- the higher levels of service coordination were associated with higher levels of school and court actions and services directed toward the students involved with the court;
- during the project, court staff seemed to become more actively involved in counseling students referred to the court by the schools;
- by the end of the project, a larger number of school actions and services were directed toward students involved with the court whether or not the school had originally referred the student;
- there was an increase in the frequency with which both school and court staff referred students involved with the court to other agencies for services;
- the percentage of the school population which was referred by the school to the juvenile court remained about the same from the beginning to the end of the project (Lindsey & Kurtz, 1987).

The above information indicates that overall the project was successful in improving the frequency with which school and court staff communicated about students involved with the court. Increased collaboration and cooperation were evidenced by the higher level of coordinated service planning.

Conclusion

Rubin and Rubin define community development as "local empowerment through organized groups of people acting collectively to control decisions, projects, programs, and policies that affect them as a community" (1986, p. 20). Empowerment is achieved "by building individual capacity through mobilizing resources" (p. 23). The School-Juvenile Court Liaison Project mobilized the limited resources of the local community to build the capacity of school-court teams to create change in their rural communities. Project staff capitalized on available local resources by leaving control and responsibility for goal implementation with the teams and their local systems. Although staff provided assistance and suggestions, they avoided imposing their ideas on the teams. Thus, instead of being seen as experts, a role which could easily have robbed the teams of the initiative, project staff were perceived as partners with the teams. Staff sought to develop personal commitment and expertise among members and taught them a problem-solving process which can be transferred to other community or organizational problems they face in the future.

This project is currently being replicated with a new group of teams; this time several things are being done differently. First, the interest and commitment of judges and superintendents have been assessed more carefully. In the original project, the judge in County E never signed a participation agreement. As it turned out, this was not an oversight, but an indicator of his negative attitude toward the project. During the replication project, counties were not accepted without the visible sanction of both judge and superintendent as indicated by the participation agreement. Second, in the replication project, more care was taken to assure that on each team the school and court systems were both represented by members with power, influence, and access to the judge or superintendent. For school systems, this has meant fewer school social workers as team members and more administrative staff. Nevertheless, even though these changes have been made, teams continue to have difficulty in conceptualizing and implementing prevention plans. Replication project teams are still experiencing difficulty obtaining system support and funding for prevention programs. Given all the other responsibilities of schools and courts, it may be unrealistic to expect much success in this area. Perhaps prevention efforts should focus more on ways school staff can identify students with problems in early stages and offer services to them and their families prior to a need for court referral for truancy or delinquent offenses.

The true test of the project's worth as a locality development effort can be measured by the extent to which the teams have remained a viable link between schools and juvenile courts and have continued to identify and solve problems which arise. A year after the project ended, the counties in which Teams A and B were established have continued to reap the benefits of changes they brought about, especially in problem cases and interagency council work. In addition, Team As school climate improvement program is viable and expanding. However, in counties C, D, and E, the teams do not operate actively any more and participation in the project has had fewer lasting benefits than in counties A and B. In general, the teams which were truly empowered by their school and court systems, by the personal commitment of members, and by the assistance they received from project staff are the ones which developed the capacity to continue working together for the benefit of troubled youth.

Note:

1 Replication of an Alcohol Model Program. This program was based on two NIAAA-selected model programs: "Here's Looking at You, Two," and "Caspar." Additional information about these programs appears in Prevention Plus: Involving Schools, Parents, and the Community in Alcohol and Drug Education by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (See reference list.)

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