The Human Relations Project: a Social Psychological Approach to Adolescent Interaction and Development

Jennie Laishley

Introduction

Adolescence is a time of great physiological and psychological change. Individuals have to progress from the dependence of childhood to the independence and maturity of the adult state whilst they are still regarded by many adults as predominantly children. Adolescents have to cope with the central problem of identity and of motivation and ambitions. They have to come to terms with the perceptions and judgements of other people on them and often experience stress in situations where they feel they are unable to reach the ideals of themselves or of others. Relationships with the opposite sex and acceptance by friends become crucial since they are the only means of judging one’s self-value until the individual has achieved a reasonable degree of confidence and self-integration. This dependence on the opinions of others or on perhaps inappropriate ideals can lead to strong feelings of insecurity or inadequacy in adolescents. Adults obviously face similar problems but the myriad of physical and physiological changes which adolescents experience serve to heighten their emotional
sensitivity. As a consequence of these adjustment problems, adolescence is often a period of unrest, of questioning and sometimes of outright rebellion and hostility.

A sensitive teacher may be aware of the experiences which adolescent pupils are undergoing. Yet there has been limited curriculum development which might enable teachers to help their pupils understand and cope with these experiences. The context of psychology in British schools is usually clinical. The educational psychologist is largely concerned with behaviour and assessment problems of the atypical pupil and psychology as a discipline has tended to be used as a diagnostic tool, as a means of identifying and treating disturbed, abnormal or under-achieving pupils. The possibilities of psychology as a source of information and insights for the pupils in the course of normal development have rarely been entertained. The Human Relations Project\(^1\) was an attempt to develop and evaluate such a programme.

**The Development of the Course**

The aim of the Human Relations Project was to produce a course content and trial materials which would help adolescents towards a better understanding of themselves as individuals, of their relationships with other people, and of their experiences in adolescence – the problems and possible ways of coping with those problems. The success of the project depended on a certain receptivity in the pupils concerned, on teachers skill and flexibility in the classroom and on careful consideration of content and methods for the course.

The content progressed from areas relevant to 'people in general' to more personally relevant subjects. The course content was drawn from theory and research in social and developmental psychology and was finalised through comprehensive discussions with all those involved in the project.

The first set of lessons concentrated on *behaviour of individuals in groups*. Amongst other issues, this included discussion of why people form groups and the range of related human needs, with special emphasis on the needs of group identity and belongingness. The concept of expectations of the group problems of conformity and deviance from group norms and the related problem of irresponsible or violent behaviour by people in groups were also considered.