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Advisories Led by Trained Facilitators: Their Impact on Middle School Students

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of advisories led by staff trained in group facilitation. Data from 44 youngsters who participated in advisory groups (advisory) and 27 who did not (control) were examined. Participants were administered surveys measuring social support, school environment, and school performance. The data suggest a trend for youngsters in advisories to be more likely to share their feelings with a teacher, seek out help from persons in their community, and perceive improvement in their school behavior, relative to the control group. Conversely, advisory youngsters, compared to the control group, were less likely to report sharing with other students. Results are discussed with regard to the stage of group development and advisor training.

Introduction

The national middle school reform movement is based on the belief that young adolescents must be viewed holistically by educators intent on understanding not only their academic needs, but their affective needs as well. To this end, schools have modified their structures to include a number of initiatives including team teaching, cooperative learning, and the creation of smaller "caring communities" designed to provide greater support for students (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996).

There appears to be little question that students' health, self-esteem and academic performance are affected by both classroom and overall school environments (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Pierce, 1994; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Factors such as teacher affiliation (Pryor, Sarri, Bombyk, & Nikolovska, 1999; Tarter, Sabo, & Hoy, 1995), students' attachment to school and its teachers (Adams & Singh, 1998; Anson, 1995), students' perceptions of teacher caring (Wentzel, 1997), the possible mismatch of young ado-

lescents' needs and opportunities provided them by schools (Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, MacIver, & Feldlaufer, 1993), and age of transition from elementary school to middle, junior or high school (Simmons & Carlton-Ford, 1983) have all been found to either promote or limit student comfort and achievement.

Several researchers have focused on different types of interventions which can increase students' perceptions of social support. Among these are Fast (1999) who contends that group approaches are most effective, and Weist (1997), who believes school mental health services must be expanded to allow clinical workers to collaborate more with teaching staff. The success of approaches such as social problem-solving (Elias & Branden-Muller, 1994) and life skills training (Botvin, Dusenbury, Baker, James-Ortiz, & Kerner, 1989) in increasing students' skills and perceptions of support, parallel the potential of another possible intervention called the advisory program, now an integral component in nearly half of all middle schools in America (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996).

Advisories are support groups for students. Comprised usually of 10-12 students each, and led by school staff members, these psychoeducational groups meet regularly and provide members with the opportunities to build their skills in self-assessment, interpersonal communication, problem-solving, and decision-making. They are intended to help students address "normal" developmental issues as they manifest themselves in school, friendship, and family relationships. Advisories differ from counseling groups in that they are not problem-oriented, nor are they reserved for students who are experiencing specific difficulties. Rather, they allow the staff members who facilitate them the opportunity to better know students, to troubleshoot for them, and if necessary, to identify students who may need intensive one-to-one counseling. Indeed, key to their success is their facilitation by staff members willing and able to assume the role of "designated caring adults," who are able to recognize the needs of individual students and meet them while simultaneously addressing those of the group as a whole.

Advisory programs are presumed to provide social support which encourages student engagement and academic success (Kern, 1999; Killin & Williams, 1995; Sardo-Brown & Shetlar, 1994; Ziegler & Mulhall, 1994; MacIver & Epstein, 1991; Putbrese, 1989). They vary widely in their quality, however, and may not necessarily be perceived by students as being that helpful. Indeed, of all components of middle school reform, none is more difficult to implement or sustain than advisories (Ayres, 1994).

Allen (1997) suggests that advisor facilitational skill appears to be a key determinant of students' perceptions of advisory effectiveness. Like Totten and Nielson (1994), she interviewed middle school students and learned that many advisory groups did not deliver the content or support they claimed. When questioned, teacher-advisors admitted to often feeling ill-prepared to address the social and emotional issues which can easily emerge in group discussions.

Many proponents of advisories (MacLaury, 2002; Henderson & LaForge, 1989; White & Greenwood, 1991; George, 1999; Fibkins, 1999; Graham, Updegraff, Tomascik, & McHale, 1997) believe that staff development is necessary to provide teachers the facilitational skills needed to maximize advisories' supportive potential. Nevertheless, there has been little written about potential training programs for teacher-advisors (Roland & Neitzschman, 1996; Tamminen, Gum, Smaby, & Peterson, 1976).

This study tested the hypothesis that advisories led by staff trained in group facilitation would increase students' perceptions of social support and a positive school environment, as well as their self-reported academic achievement. Subjects were fifth and sixth grade students in a Newark, New Jersey middle school.

Advisory Teacher Training

Two groups of teachers were trained, the first in the Spring 1999 semester, and the second group during the following spring of 2000. Staff participation in the advisory program was voluntary. Prospective teacher-advisors agreed to participate in an initial 30 hour course in group facilitation offered weekly in two hour sessions over a 15 week semester. Additionally, by the fourth week of training, they began facilitating their own advi-

sory groups of approximately 10 students apiece. This activity afforded the teachers the opportunity to practice the theories and techniques as they learned them. The staff also committed to meeting with the instructor once monthly for follow-up group supervision.

The content of the training program included: Defining advisories; young adolescent developmental issues; qualities essential in a facilitator; stages of group development; understanding the distinction between process and content; knowing what to look for in groups (atmosphere, participation, decision-making, feelings, expression); practice of basic facilitational techniques (active listening, reflecting content, feelings and meaning, paraphrasing, questioning, summarizing, giving constructive feedback, maintaining group focus); problem-solving techniques (reframing and partializing)—conflict resolution skills; leadership self-assessment; recognizing and understanding different member behaviors/roles; anticipating and troubleshooting prospective group problems; and identifying and referring seriously at-risk students. Each week, part of the training sessions was devoted to sharing of their own group experiences and feedback from the instructor and other teachers about them. Teacher-advisors received three graduate credits for their participation for which their school district paid for the tuition.

Participating teachers engaged in a number of different activities designed to enhance their facilitational skills.

- They engaged in emotional recall exercises designed to help them identify characteristics of skilled group leaders and to increase their understanding of adolescent concerns;
- They practiced active listening and reflecting content, feelings and meanings, assertiveness and conflict resolution skills and how these might be modeled to advisory group members;
- They examined their responses to different possible member behaviors, and also assessed their own leadership styles and their attendant strengths and liabilities; and
- They viewed a video of a group bonding to analyze the stages of group development and discussed their leadership roles and most appropriate interventions at each stage.

The training sessions also always included a theoretical presentation of different aspects of group dynamics. Equally important, the prospective teacher-advisors participated in a 45-minute advisory session facilitated by the trainer in every session. The rationale for this component was that it would be beneficial for prospective advisors to experience the group from a member's perspective. Teacher-advisors were able to see firsthand how their group developed through specific stages and how its dynamics altered accordingly. They could identify the qualities essential in an advisor at every point, and why these were so. They stepped back and analyzed how intragroup relationships also evolved. This advisory activity also allowed the trainer to model specific facilitational skills for the staff, which they then practiced in their own student advisories.

Method

Participants

Participants were from a large inner city middle school which predominantly serves low income, minority youngsters. The subject pool consisted of 139 fifth and sixth graders. Because some sixth graders had participated in advisories in the spring of 1999, only those who had never done so were included in the control group. In contrast, youngsters who participated in an advisory during the current school year were included in the advisory group. This distinction was based on both teacher and student reports of advisory participation. Thus, targeted in this research were data from 44 youngsters who participated in advisory groups (advisory) and 27 who did not (control). Because teacher participation was voluntary across the two years of training, great care was taken to use data from youngsters who never had an advisory experience (control), and those who were in advisory during the current school year (advisory). This accounts for the difference between the number in the initial subject and those eventually considered control or advisory participants.

Materials

Social support. To assess students' perceptions of social support, the social support survey used by Wenz-Gross and Sipperstein (1997) was modified. In particular, the original scale was expanded to include six

items, three involving emotional support (talk about feelings, felt really happy, and felt really bad) and three involving problem solving support (didn't understand something, needed help, and didn't know too much). For each item, the extent to which a youngster would go to an identified resource (adult they live with, another student, friend in the neighborhood, and teacher/advisor in school) was assessed. Response choices ranged from No Never coded 1 through Yes Often coded 5. Based on a sample of 134 fifth and sixth graders, Chronbach's alpha estimate of reliability was .87.

School environment. The School Environment Scale (SES) (Elias, Urbiaco, Reese, Gara, Rothbaum, & Haviland, 1992) was used to assess student perceptions of their school environment. The SES is comprised of seven adjective pairs in semantic differential format. Items included good/bad, interesting/boring, uncomfortable/comfortable, unfair/fair, dangerous/safe, friendly/unfriendly, and exciting/dull. Items were coded in such a way that the more positive the opinion, the higher the rating. Based on a sample of 139 fifth and sixth graders, Chronbach's alpha estimate of reliability was .68.

Academic performance. Four questions were devised to determine participants' perceptions as to their progress in school. In particular, youngsters were asked if over the last six months their grades, homework, behavior, and attitude toward school had changed. Items were scored in such a way that the higher the score, the more improvement noted.

Procedure

In June 2000, all fifth and sixth grade youngsters completed surveys in their homeroom class. Surveys were presorted and placed in envelopes in such a way that one copy of each survey was placed in each envelope. Homeroom was extended and teachers distributed one envelope to each youngster. Youngsters were told not to write their names on the envelopes or surveys. Once completed, sealed envelopes were delivered to the researcher.

Results

Table 1 presents the support scale results for advisory and control students. As shown in Table 1, a number of trends appear. Within Emotional Support, advisory students were more likely to talk to a teacher/advisor, relative to the control group with regard to "talking about feelings" ($t=1.72, p<.10$) and "feeling happy" ($t=1.94, p<.10$). Thus a trend may be developing for youngsters in advisories to experience a greater comfort level in sharing their feelings with a teacher relative to the control group. It may be that more time in an advisory is necessary for this result to fully develop.

It is interesting to note that within Emotional Support, advisory youngsters were less likely to share with kids in school. As seen in Table 1, advisory youngsters were less likely to talk with kids in school about their "feelings" ($t=2.49, p\leq.05$) and share when they "feel really bad" ($t=3.64, p\leq.01$). Conversely, advisory youngsters were more likely to share with a friend in the neighborhood when they "feel really happy" ($t=3.64, p\leq.01$).

Within Problem Solving Support, advisory youngsters were more likely to share with youngsters in their neighborhood relative to those in the control group. Conversely, control group youngsters reported higher levels of sharing with youngsters in school, relative to those in the advisory group. In particular, advisory youngsters were more likely than those in the control group to seek out a friend in the neighborhood when they "needed help" ($t=2.77, p\leq.01$) and when they "didn't know too much" ($t=2.32, p\leq.05$). Control youngsters were more likely than those in advisories to seek out kids in school when they did "not understand something" ($t=3.02, p\leq.01$), "needed help" ($t=1.78, p\leq.10$), and "didn't know too much" ($t=2.28, p\leq.01$).

As shown in Table 2, no significant difference ($t=0.12, p\geq.05$) appears between advisory and control in mean SES scores. Across student perceptions of their school performance, a significant mean difference ($t=2.47, p\geq.05$) is noted between the advisory (3.70) and control groups (3.15) with regard to their school behavior. This is unlike the data reported for grades ($t=0.38, p\geq.05$), homework ($t=0.41, p\geq.05$), and looking forward to going to school ($t=1.36, p\geq.05$). That is, youngsters in advisories were more likely to perceive an improve-

ment in their behavior, relative to that of the control group. This may be considered to support advisories effect on youngsters' perceptions of their behavior.

Discussion

The data suggest advisories were successful in offering youngsters support as well as enhancing their perceptions of their own school behavior. In particular, advisory youngsters were more likely to report sharing with their advisor relative to the control group. This is particularly important given the work of Allen (1997), which detailed the importance of the advisor in making the advisory group experience a successful one for students.

Additional evidence of the efficacy of the intervention was that advisory youngsters were more likely to report improved behavior than that of the control group students. Youngsters' perceptions of improved behavior are likely not only to reflect their actual behavior but help to establish future expectations. This finding is consistent with Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen's (1998) findings that teachers provide two types of support to students: emotional and personal assistance. Emotional support is correlated with greater student self-efficacy and satisfaction with school, while personal assistance was correlated with student reports of engaging in more social behaviors.

On the other hand, advisories appear not to have positively impacted group interaction. Advisory youngsters were less likely to report garnering support from their classmates than those in the control group. These findings appear to be similar to those of Goldsmith and Albrecht (1993), who found that students perceived supportive communication from individuals other than classmates within their classes to be important and helpful. It is very possible that this effect was temporally determined, however, and would have changed over time. The students participating in advisory groups met together weekly from late March through mid-May, for a total of six to eight sessions. It is likely that youngsters had not yet developed sufficient comfort with each other to begin talking personally.

Many group theorists (Ballou, Fetter, Litwack, & Litwack, 1992; Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Tuckman, 1965; Garland, Jones, & Kolodney, 1965; Berman-Rossi, 1993; and Berman & Weinberg, 1998) discuss the fact that groups move through predictable stages. Initially students are very reserved with one another, even when they begin to develop a bond with the advisor. Then, as they start to identify with the group, they enter a stage during which their desire to belong encourages competition among members and testing of the facilitator's ability to protect the group's members. It is not until a group reaches the stage of "intimacy," which can take weeks, or even months, for adolescent groups to achieve, that students will feel open to personal sharing.

Feedback from teachers undergoing facilitation training about their student advisory sessions suggested that their group members were, for the most part, still in the pre-intimacy stage. As such, they were likely still testing the safety of the group for personal sharing and challenging of both the leader and one another. The advisory groups in this study terminated after 10 weeks, before most had the opportunity to develop the level of intimacy and comfort that would have encouraged greater sharing.

Gitterman & Shulman (1994) speak to this possibility when they observe: "(Group) members learning to trust each other is as important as, and often more difficult, than their learning to trust the worker." The trust issues for young adolescents are enormous and can be time consuming to surface and work through. It is not at all uncommon that students will indicate greater comfort with their advisor than their peers in the initial group stages.

Thus, there are several plausible explanations for advisory students' reduced experience of peer support. The concept of "parallel process" suggests that students testing out the safety of the advisory group might also generalize their group experiences to the larger school social group. During this stage youngsters might be particularly loathe to share anything that might affect their peer acceptance. It is also possible that students participating in advisory groups took the group norm of confidentiality seriously and did not reveal what was said in their groups of a personal nature to other students.

It is equally possible, however, that the intervention was either not strong, or lengthy enough to have achieved the hypothesized effect on perceptions of social support. A similar psychoeducational intervention tested by Dore, Nelson-Zlupko, and Kaufmann (1999), which ran for eight weeks, found no significant differences between group participants and controls for most dependent measures although group leaders' observations told a very different story about their group members' behaviors. The authors concluded that their intervention was too brief to achieve statistical significance, but that the intervention itself was clearly helpful.

Given the fact that teachers were being trained as advisory facilitators (a role new to them and at variance with that of "teacher as expert," which they had practiced for some period of time), they may have permitted, even encouraged, one-to-one exchanges between themselves and individual students, rather than done more to facilitate students' interaction with one another. The staff certainly struggled with this dynamic in training, and had to be reminded continually to direct their comments to one another and not exclusively to the staff developer. The combined effects of the early stage of development attained by these advisories with the newness of the facilitator role may have created an enhanced effect that negatively impacted students' perceptions that they could seek support from their peers at school.

This study highlights the challenges involved in assisting teachers to assume the facilitative, rather than "expert" role required of advisories. The difficulties teachers experience in establishing group, rather than student/advisor, interactions were evident in training and require not only their theoretical understanding of the value of facilitating versus instructing, but sufficient time to practice these skills over the course of several months. From the students' perspective, the possibility that advisor admonitions to respect and not make fun of each other's comments, coupled with those related to the need for confidentiality within the advisory group, translated into limited student-to-student interaction should be explored.

Despite the limitations of this study, intriguing preliminary findings were revealed. Additional study is needed both to gauge the impact of year-long advisories on students' perceptions of social support, school environment, and their own behaviors compared with non-participants', and on the effects of advisories led by trained facilitators versus those led by staff who are untrained.

TABLE 1

Support Related Perceptions

Item	Mean		t-statistic
	Advisory (n=44)	Control (n=27)	
SES	25.28	25.12	0.12
Improvement in			
Grades	4.00	3.93	0.38
Homework	3.70	3.59	0.41
Behavior	3.70	3.15	2.47*
Looking forward to school	4.20	3.88	1.36

*p<.05

TABLE 2

Support Related Perceptions

Item	Mean	
	Advisory (n=44)	Control (n=27)
SES	25.28	25.12
Improvement in		
Grades	4.00	3.93
Homework	3.70	3.59
Behavior	3.70	3.15
Looking forward to school	4.20	3.88

*p<.05

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