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Implications for the use of peer counselor/facilitators with at-risk students of secondary school age

Abstract

Theorists of human personality have stated the importance of environment in the development of one's self-concept beginning at the earliest age. Mosak (Corsini, 1984) stated, in describing a basic assumption of Adlerian Psychotherapy, that all human behavior happens within a social context which has been established at birth and which requires reciprocal relationships of the individual. By necessity, adults must serve as the significant humans caring for the physical and emotional needs of a child. Adults influence the initial development of a child's personality. In describing Jung's concept of psychic propensities, or archetypes, Kaufmann (Corsini, 1984) related that these potentialities in human personality are determined by the individual's particular culture, family, and environment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE USE OF PEER COUNSELOR/FACILITATORS
WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS OF SECONDARY SCHOOL AGE

A Research Paper
Presented to
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University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Andrew Joseph Doyle

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Theorists of human personality have stated the importance of environment in the development of one's self-concept beginning at the earliest age. Mosak (Corsini, 1984) stated, in describing a basic assumption of Adlerian Psychotherapy, that all human behavior happens within a social context which has been established at birth and which requires reciprocal relationships of the individual. By necessity, adults must serve as the significant humans caring for the physical and emotional needs of a child. Adults influence the initial development of a child's personality. In describing Jung's concept of psychic propensities, or archetypes, Kaufmann (Corsini, 1984) related that these potentialities in human personality are determined by the individual's particular culture, family, and environment.

In referring to the emotional development of humans, Strain (1984) cited studies which indicated that with increasing age the individual depended more on peer-group pressure and affiliation than upon the family as significant others in his/her environment. Carr (1981) reported studies which indicated that the shift in recognition of peers over adult/family members as significant others begins at about the sixth grade level. The influence of peer-groups intensifies until, according to studies cited by Friedrich (1985), it becomes the primary determiner of social values and behavior during adolescent years. The increasing strength of peer ties seems to weaken the parental/adult bonds as the child establishes some form of self-identity. In relating to formation of adolescent self-identity,

Carr (1981) stated that the daily interactions, or lack of interactions, with fellow students was the most critical aspect in shaping the self-image of this age group. The degree to which an adolescent embraces peer values would seem to have a relationship to the degree he/she may distance him or herself from adult values.

It may be that adolescents have influence over their peers that adults cannot equal. This could place adult counselors at some disadvantage in working with adolescents "at risk." The "at risk" population refers to students involved with drugs and/or alcohol, juvenile delinquency, school phobia, potentially dropping out, potential suicides, or maltreatment.

The purpose of this review will be to examine the literature to determine possible implications for adult school counselors regarding the significant number of "at risk" adolescents in our education system.

There may be strong implications for secondary school counselors attempting to work with students who wish to distance themselves from adult society. Effective adult individual counseling may not be realistically possible with some adolescents. Carl Rogers (Corsini, 1984) believed that a counselee had to perceive genuineness, accurate empathetic understanding, and unconditional positive regard from the counselor as a basis for any productive therapeutic relationship. In describing the first step to be taken in the practice of Reality Therapy, William Glasser (Corsini, 1984) suggested that the counselor attempts to establish a rapport or

make friends with the client in order to be able to proceed effectively. If a counselee rejected the establishment of a positive counseling relationship because of age differences, effectiveness could be undermined.

Limits of Adult Counseling

Adolescents may not perceive adult counselors and school personnel as being the people to whom to turn when they are troubled (Gottlieb, 1983). In her study, Varenhorst (1974) reported that one-third of the students surveyed in the Palo Alto, California school district believed that no school personnel knew them or would notice if they were absent. In reporting the findings of three studies done in North American high schools, Gottlieb (1983) stated that results showed only 10-15% of the adolescents involved in the surveys would feel comfortable about contacting a counselor about a personal problem, and that a smaller percentage would actually make such a contact. If such findings are at all accurate, then even extremely able counselors may not be getting the opportunity to intercede in problems experienced by teenagers.

In a study he conducted at a Canadian high school, Gottlieb (1983) identified 4 groups of male students he labeled as, "Elites, Loners, Outsiders and Deviants." Only the "Elite" group reported an inclination to seek adult aid with a problem; the other groups, which may have a greater need for assistance, preferred to disassociate themselves from adult school personnel.

The literature does not offer a great deal of empirically significant rationale for the disassociation of some adolescents from adult personnel. Reports suggested that some adolescents may view peers as being more capable of an empathetic relationship than adults (Carr, 1981; Gottlieb, 1983; Schweisheimer & Walberg, 1976). In her study of 108 students from three suburban school districts in San Francisco, Lewis (1981) reported differences in factors affecting the decision-making of three age-level groups composed of 7th and 8th graders, 10th graders, and 12 graders. Her study indicated that 35% of the 7th/8th grade group, 48% of the 10th grade group, and 74% of the 12th grade group subjects mentioned the vested interest of adult professionals in considering what decisions they would make. The study further indicated that 42% of the 7th/8th graders, 58% of the 10th graders, and 83% of the 12th graders cautioned their peers against following the advice of adult professionals in their decision making. Apparently, some adolescents question the motives behind the advice given by adults as being in the adult's interest rather than in their own. An excellent school counselor would be at a distinct disadvantage if perceived as being incapable of empathy or acting out of a posture concerned with his or her vested interest rather than that of the adolescent.

The literature suggested that some "at risk" adolescent groups have specific reasons to devalue adult counselor assistance. Huey's (1983) study suggested that juvenile delinquent groups may conspicuously reject adult values as a requisite for group membership.

School phobic students may need the acceptance of peers, rather than adults, to overcome their problems (Diamond, 1985). Maltreated youth may have experienced reasons to be mistrustful of adults (Garbino & Jacobson, 1978). With the possible exception of Lewis' study, most of the rationale for limitations of adult counselors working at the secondary level are more hypothetical than empirical in nature. If such limitations do exist, the literature offers no statistical evidence establishing some degree to which secondary counseling programs are negatively affected.

Advantages of Peer Counseling

The literature on peer counseling strongly suggests, for a number of reasons, possible advantages of these programs. Adolescents may perceive their contemporaries as being the genuine, empathic others in their lives who are capable of understanding their problems (Schweisheimer & Walberg, 1976). It may be possible that teens relate more easily to their peers through a particular vernacular (Leibowitz & Rhoads, 1974). Certainly teens are sharing a particular time in their lives which adults cannot recapture. Many adolescents may proceed fairly well through these years because of informal help from peer friends. Varenhorst (1974) suggested that school counselors could know students as friends, but could not share in the daily interactions which make up the experiences of their lives. McManus (1984) believed that a strength of peer programs was that they capitalized on the adolescent's natural use of their contemporaries as a transitional reference group between

childhood and adulthood. This possible ability for adolescents to relate to, and communicate empathically with, each other is the basic assumption a number of peer programs espouse (Schweisheimer & Walberg, 1976; Leibowitz & Rhoads, 1974; Varenhorst, 1974; McManus, 1984).

Another possible advantage of peer programs in schools may be an increase in contacts made concerning personal problems for students. In their study of counseling services delivered, Fink, Grandjean, Martin and Bertolini (1978) reported that formal referrals to the peer counseling program were primarily of an academic nature compared to informal contacts, which focused on more personal issues. The study indicated that only 7% of the informal referrals to peer counselors came from adult professional staff.

Some students with personal problems may not be coming into contact with counseling services. In reporting on studies of informal contacts made in schools where peer programs existed, Carr (1981) suggested that informal contacts were a bridge between referred professional counseling and students who would not voluntarily see school counselors. It remains statistically unclear as to how many informal referrals may result from any specific peer counseling program, and how serious in nature such informal contacts are. There is little empirical evidence suggesting that "at risk" adolescents with serious problems have made informal contacts to peer counselors in schools where programs do exist.

Sussman (1981) expressed concern about the extremely positive reports coming from experiments with peer intervention programs as possibly being due to positive effects encountered because of the novelty of the program. He criticized peer intervention program designs as often failing to be even quasi-experimental in form, and as almost universally lacking in careful empirical consideration on which to base an evaluation of usefulness. In investigating advantages of peer counseling, this paper discovered many proposed positive results of temporary programs, but negligible long-term empirical evidence to substantiate such positive claims.

Peer Counselor Training

The literature suggests that basic helping skills can be taught (Carr, 1981). In reporting the results of training peer counselors, Leibowitz and Rhoads (1974) claimed statistically significant evidence that 12 high school students did learn to differentiate high levels of understanding with short-term training. In their study of peer counselors trained in aspects of empathy, respect, genuineness, and confrontation, Gray and Tindall (1974) reported positive results indicating the capabilities of a trained student group to discriminate and communicate responses more effectively when compared to control and group counseling groups. Kloba and Zimpfer (1976) reported results of their research in the training of adolescent helpers which indicated that students identified as having independent characteristics performed skills better than did dependent trainees, and learned skills better from a high-status model.

In reporting the results of 42 programs which compared the evaluation of professional and non-professional counseling intervention, Sussman (1981) noted only 1 program in which professionals were rated higher by clients than were non-professionals. Thirty programs reported no difference in client ratings, and 11 programs rated para-professionals as being more effective. Some adolescents may be able to learn basic helping skills; but, the reports of their effectiveness by clients was unspecific as to what was meant or measured by those ratings.

Adult school counselors may play an important role in the training of adolescent counselors (Gray & Tindall, 1974). Adult counselors, according to Frank, Ferdinand and Bailey (1975), Gray and Tindall (1974), Huey (1983), Leibowitz and Rhoads (1974) and Lynn (1986), are largely responsible for screening prospective peer counselors, conducting their training, and monitoring the ongoing program. Although it is not specified in the literature, most programs designed for peer counseling appear to assume the professionalism of the school counselor in his or her capacity as the program director and peer counselor trainer/supervisor.

Basic peer-counseling training aimed at teaching skills concerned with attending, listening, non-judgemental support and empathic communication as reported by Carr (1981), Gidden and Austin (1982), Leibowitz and Rhoads (1974), Lynn (1986) and Varenhorst (1984) may form a solid foundation for peer counseling of adolescents at risk. However, these adolescents may be more

effectively served by training which takes into account their specific environmental circumstances and needs. Training in any specific area may focus on the skills most necessary in that area (McManus, 1984; Carr, 1981; Huey, 1983). Research suggests that specific training programs for peer counselors have met with more effective results than have more global programs (Varenhorst, 1974; Sussman, 1981).

Selected "At Risk" Groups

Drug/Alcohol Abuse

For students "at risk" because of drug/alcohol abuse, a lack of personal self-esteem coupled with a resultant need for peer acceptance may cause social pressure from peers to use drugs (Seegrist, 1982). The national campaign to "just say no" to drugs ignores the possible social reinforcement to do just the opposite. Sincere teaching/counseling on the dangers of drug use often may not outweigh the adolescent need to be accepted by the peer group (Seegrist, 1982).

Gidden and Austin's (1982) research showed that some drug abusers wanted to be left alone since they had discovered the means to treat whatever bad feelings they experienced. Referral to an adult counselor could be perceived as an unnecessary hassle. On the other hand, Friedrich (1985) cited studies which have shown the effectiveness of peer intervention in the field of drug rehabilitation. Gidden and Austin (1982) reported a study which indicated that even peer counselors must emphasize a non-threatening, non-judgemental

attitude in order to establish the friendly relationship necessary for the client to arrive at a negative evaluation of their behavior. An adult counselor could experience more difficulty in establishing such a relationship.

Juvenile Delinquency

The "at risk" adolescent identified by the label "juvenile delinquent" is often a member of a peer subculture. Rhodes, Duncan and Hall's (1987) research indicated that members of such a subculture viewed adults and "average" peers as adversaries whose values they challenged and rejected. Huey (1983) suggested that some counselors may avoid this group because they feel inadequately prepared to help them. In their study, Rhodes, Duncan and Hall (1987) found that individual peer counseling of delinquents ended in a lack of success similar to the results of adult counseling with delinquents.

The literature supported the use of specifically balanced peer group counseling for delinquents. In reporting on studies of group counseling, Cooper and Walker (1980) found that establishing an environment free from confrontation, harassment and rejection decreased destructive behavior as a means of gaining recognition. In order to create this type of peer group environment, Johnson, Miskel and Crawford (1978), Huey (1983), and Kottman (1982) concluded from their studies that groups should include a cross section of good students and delinquents, leaders and followers, and racial balance. Further, they concluded that groups should be separated

by sex in order to avoid embarrassment of members in discussing personal types of problems and to prevent "macho" males showing off (Huey, 1983; Kottman, 1982).

These precautions were seen as necessary because the peer groups were attempting the challenging task of altering the delinquent subculture (Kottman, 1982). Johnson, Miskel and Crawford (1978) reported a 22% decrease in physical attacks and a 25.2% decrease in vandalism costs possibly resulting from their one-year high school peer group program.

The overall implication for individual adult counselors is that it would be difficult to effect change in delinquent behavior for an adolescent supported by a subculture which rejects adult values.

School Phobic

Diamond's (1985) study of school phobic students found that the emotional problems of such students were characterized by an overwhelming anxiety caused by feelings of being unworthy of peer support. The anxiety felt at school was not present at home. Sussman (1981) cited a study which found that students in dire need of approval may not risk seeking it, but rather might avoid the situation where the need for such approval has not been previously fulfilled.

The school counselor cannot provide the peer relationships and support that are the sources of anxiety for the school phobic student. Carr (1981) stated that adolescent self-identity is shaped through

peer interaction, not with self-reflection or intellectual exploration with an adult counselor. The counselor is not capable of giving the adolescent the peer support necessary to alleviate the cause of their anxiety. Peer counseling groups can give this support according to Carr (1981). Diamond (1985) reported that such groups allowed for a sharing of fears, feelings, and methods used to fight the sense of entrapment in schools; and eventually, a sense of support and security in knowing that other peers were aware of, and sympathetic to, the anxieties the school phobic student has experienced. Kaplan (1978) supported the possibility of peer groups lowering student anxieties through a study in which group members related that they felt comfortable enough to open up and express their feelings to other members. Carr (1981), Diamond (1985), and Gottlieb (1983) all reported cases in which peer groups initiated informal contacts which continued to develop outside the group. The growth of an informal contact into a supportive relationship could be of special assistance to a school phobic teen.

School Drop-Outs

A study by Lewis (1981) provided statistical evidence that adolescents increased in awareness of risks their decisions entailed and in future consequences of those decisions as they progressed from seventh through twelfth grade. The risk for the potential school dropout is the discrepancy between the perception of what their life will be like in the future and the reality of what it becomes. If an adult counselor can effectively communicate the

discrepancy between expectations and probable realities to a potential dropout, they may be effective in assisting the adolescent.

Studies of potential dropouts involved in peer counseling did not show any extremely positive results. Johnson, Miskel and Crawford (1978) reported an 8.6% decrease in the dropout rate for high school students involved in peer group counseling. Schweisheimer and Walberg's (1976) research found that potential dropouts undergoing peer counseling did improve in attendance and in ratings of decisiveness over a control group, but did not show statistically significant improvement in the dropout rate over a one-year period of time. Kottman (1982) described a strength of peer counseling as the sharing of experienced solutions to a problem. The absence of an experienced solution may limit peer counseling effectiveness with potential school dropouts.

Potential Suicides

The existence of peer counseling programs in schools may improve the chances of contact with potentially suicidal teens in two ways. Peer counselors have been effectively trained to identify signals of potential suicide (Friedrich, 1985), and have referred such potential cases to the adult counseling staff (Lynn, 1986). The study done by Gottlieb (1983) also reported the establishment of an informal network of contacts in schools with peer counseling programs. These networks could serve as a contact point for suicidal adolescents. Fink, Grandjean, Martin and Bertolini's (1978) study indicated that publishing the names of peer helpers increased the

informal contact troubled adolescents made with peer counselors. By increasing the number of people sensitive to clues of potential suicide, and by making an informal peer network available, peer programs may increase the chances of contact and recognition of potentially suicidal youth (Friedrich, 1985; Lynn, 1986). This contact may be a key factor for this type of teen "at risk."

Maltreatment

Garbino and Jacobson (1978) reported on studies which showed that maltreated youth isolate themselves from prosocial support systems as part of the emotional dynamics of their condition. The lack of adult support in the home, coupled with feelings of fear and shame, causes the adolescent to disassociate her or himself from those adults who could be of service (Garbino & Jacobson, 1978). Those personnel who exist in the schools to aid such adolescents may never come in contact with them. If the contact does occur, the counselor-client relationship may be strained by the mistrust the young person has for adults because of the home situation.

The existence of peer programs may increase the opportunity and willingness of maltreated youth to make a bid for assistance (Garbino & Jacobson, 1978). In reporting on their research, and of others, Garbino and Jacobson (1978) stated their results showed an increase of contact made by adolescents concerning their maltreatment and that of younger siblings, when a peer program was established. They further suggested that maltreated youth may often choose to run away or engage in other delinquent behavior when they

receive no assistance in dealing with conditions in their homes. Peer programs may help, but it cannot be determined how many of these "at risk" adolescents attempt to struggle along on their own when no such programs are in place.

Summary

The purpose of this paper was to examine implications for secondary school counselors concerning the use of peer counselors with "at risk" adolescents. A review of the literature supported the concept that some "at risk" groups may be more significantly estranged from viewing adult personnel as empathically capable of remedying personal problems than are typical adolescents. It was reported that juvenile delinquents may view adult school personnel in an adversarial role. Students with problems concerning drugs and/or alcohol may reject counselor contact as unnecessary interference in their lives. School phobics may need peer support to alleviate their fears. Suicidal and maltreated youth may not desire, or have the opportunity for, contact with adult assistance personnel. Reportedly, peer counseling programs can more effectively serve the various needs of such "at risk" groups, especially when their training is focused on the particular circumstances of the specific "at risk" group.

In this paper, very little empirical evidence of any long-term nature was included to support these proposals because such studies are absent from the literature. In summarizing his study of peer intervention programs, Sussman (1981) stated that the uniform claims

of success of peer programs are promising, but the general lack of program control and design are disquieting, and the paucity of clear empirical base permits little significant evaluation of their usefulness. Peer counseling programs may be of service to "at risk" youth, but there is a need for empirical data to substantiate the positive reports that have been made.

If in the future empirical studies do support the use of peer programs as an effective counseling modality, most programs will require the professional capabilities of the adult counselor. Adult counselors will specify the needs to be met, design the program, coordinate and/or provide appropriate training, and determine the program value. But at present, this paper found very little significant evidence to support a call for counselors to rush into a peer program in the expectation of providing services to adolescents "at risk."

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