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## A Peer Helping Program for the Middle School

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### Abstract

A peer helping program was implemented at Central Middle School in Dawson Creek in the school year 1989-1990 following a school evaluation. This article describes the implementation of the program and its evaluation. The evaluation of the program included pre- and post-training surveys of the trainees and an untrained comparison group on the acquisition of helping skills, personal development, and changes in self-concept, as well as surveys of parents, of the teaching staff, and the student body. Program evaluation methods and results are presented, and recommendations are made based on the evaluation.

### Résumé

Un programme de counseling par les pairs a été implanté à Central Middle School à Dawson Creek au cours de l'année 1989-1990 suivant une évaluation de l'école. Cet article décrit l'implantation du programme et son évaluation. L'évaluation de ce programme comprenait un examen pré et post-entraînement, des participants déjà entraînés en comparaison avec un groupe contrôle de participants n'ayant jamais été entraînés, sur l'acquisition des habiletés d'aide, le développement personnel, les changements du concept de soi, en plus d'enquêtes comprenant les parents, l'équipe d'enseignants et le corps étudiant. Les méthodes et les résultats de l'évaluation du programme sont présentés et des recommandations sont faites basées sur cette évaluation.

In recent years, the idea of peers helping peers with interpersonal problem-solving began to be applied in education in the United States and Canada. Early projects were developed in Palo Alto, California, by Barbara Varenhorst (Varenhorst, 1974). Rey Carr, of the Peer Counseling Project at the University of Victoria, has led the way in this movement in Canada. Programs of "peer counsellors," "peer facilitators," or "peer helpers" have become a significant component of school counselling services in the past ten years (Carr, 1989), with over 2000 programs in place in 1987 (Carr, 1988b).

Research has shown that, especially in adolescence, friends often are the first source of guidance for personal problem-solving (Carr, 1988a; Edge, 1984; Tindall & Gray, 1985). It makes sense to train young people in basic helping skills to utilize more effectively the influence which is already there.

### *Background for Peer Helping at Central Middle School*

School re-organization in School District #59, Peace River South, resulted in the creation of Central Middle School in Dawson Creek in 1988. As a middle school with grades seven to nine, there is emphasis on developing strategies to address the social, emotional, physical and academic needs of this age group in a balanced way. An evaluation of the first

year recommended that a teacher advisor system (TAG) be developed to provide the support and guidance of a caring adult in a systematic program. A peer helping program was suggested by staff as an adjunct to TAG to promote a positive school environment.

#### IMPLEMENTATION

##### *Program Support and Selection Process*

A proposal for peer helping developed in consultation with the principal was presented to parents at an open meeting in May, 1989, and then to the staff. Gaining their support, plans went forward to offer "Peer Helping" as a semester option for grade nine students. Counsellors explained the program to grade eight students, and teachers were asked to complete a short evaluation form for students they thought would be effective helpers. One class was approved for the fall semester. A class of 24 was formed from 32 students who signed up, using their total score on teacher- and self-evaluations to make the selections. All students were informed of the decision in writing and in a meeting with the trainer. The class enrolment was 22 in September, 1989, after two students moved away; there were 18 girls and 4 boys.

##### *Program Goals*

The goals developed for the peer helping program at Central Middle School were: 1) to train selected students in basic helping skills; 2) to promote the personal development of students in the helping program, including self-confidence, communication skills with adults and peers, problem-solving and decision-making abilities; 3) to utilize student helpers throughout the school in a role of caring support for peers; 4) to influence the development of a positive and supportive environment in the school; 5) to provide an outreach of counselling services to a larger number of students than are presently served by professional counselling staff; and 6) to provide a bridge between troubled friends in their peer group and professional counselling resources.

##### *Training and Helping Activities*

An informal meeting of peer helpers and their parents was held during the first week of school to provide understanding about peer helping, to explain the expectations of the students, and to answer questions. A day-long retreat at a local recreation site was also held to begin group building and to explore the nature of a helping relationship.

Implementation of the program occurred mainly during the class period, which met for 47 minutes, three days out of every four. Training activities from Carr and Saunders' *Peer Counselling Starter Kit* (1980) were used as the basis of instruction and practice for seven weeks. Each student

was provided with the *Student Workbook*, by Gail Roberts (1988), to use in class, as well as for personal reflection on a homework basis. Additional activities were taken from Rossler's *Human Behaviours 11/12* (1987), a curriculum for peer tutoring.

The students were encouraged to apply the skills they were learning in their everyday interactions with friends, classmates and family members. They helped to orient new students to Central, organized a career information library, and also helped students with the *Choices, Junior* career program in the computer lab at lunch time during career week. A few times, the trainer asked peer helpers to "buddy" with younger students who had been referred by teachers. They also put up a bulletin board displaying their pictures and a short autobiography to advertise their willingness to help.

At the end of October, the staff was surveyed to find out how helpers could work in their classes, and soon all but two students were placed in helping roles in classrooms during two out of every three peer helping class periods. The entire class met for the third period for feedback, organizing tutoring placements and skill practice. Helping tasks included tutoring individuals, working with special needs students, making instructional materials for a learning assistant, and providing help as directed by classroom teachers. Helping roles were rotated every three weeks, and students not tutoring completed other school tasks as needed. In mid-November, the class decided to place a "Peer Helpers' Mailbox" on a bright bulletin board in the main hallway and invited students to write out troubles for the peer helpers to answer on the bulletin board; they attempted to promote problem-solving in their answers.

The organized peer helping activities continued until the third week in January, 1990. The last three classes were spent in self-evaluation and feedback from program evaluation surveys. A final lunch and afternoon together were held to present certificates, and for discussion, feedback and closure.

#### EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

Throughout the literature about peer counselling, a great deal of attention has been given to evaluation of programs (Carr & Saunders, 1980; Myrick & Erney, 1979; Tindall & Gray, 1985). David de Rosenroll (1988) defines peer counselling implementation, maintenance and research issues and contends that the receptive climate that now exists for peer counselling may wane if research issues surrounding peer counselling are not addressed with appropriate and effective research methods.

An evaluation of the peer helping program at Central Middle School focused on two aspects of the program. The first aspect was the effect on

the peer helpers, and the second was the impact of the program on the school.

### *Effect on the Peer Helpers*

Three evaluation instruments were given to the peer helping students pre- and post-training, and to a selected comparison group. The comparison group consisted of 4 boys and 18 girls selected randomly from the grade nine class of 240 students, by-passing students who had below average achievement, who were special needs students, or who had known emotional difficulties. A letter of permission for their participation was sent to the parents of these students.

A “Questionnaire for Helpful Responses” was developed by the trainer to test the subject’s ability to choose the most empathic response pre- and post-training. To provide information about the personal growth of the trainees in terms of communication skills, handling one’s feelings, getting along with others, and the ability to help others, a “Peer Helper Questionnaire” similar to one developed by Edge (1984) was used. The “Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale” was used to determine whether there was a significant increase in self-concept in the training group.

Additional information about the effect of the program on the peer helpers was obtained from a questionnaire given to their parents pre- and post-training, on which they rated their children’s personal development. The helpers also completed an informal evaluation to obtain their opinions about how the program affected them and the school.

### *Impact on the School*

A student questionnaire was given to three TAG home rooms at each grade level near the end of the peer helping program to find out the level of awareness of the program and how students who had contact with a peer helper evaluated the help given. A staff survey was given at the same time to learn about the teachers’ level of understanding of the program, their experiences with the peer helpers, and their opinions about its effects in the school.

## RESULTS

### *Effect on the Peer Helpers*

A t-test was used to evaluate pre- and post-test score differences within each group. A two-tailed t-test for independent means was used to evaluate pre- to post-test score differences between the peer helping class and the comparison group.

Scores on the “Questionnaire for Helpful Responses” increased significantly from pre-test to post-test for the peer helpers ( $t=7.25$ ,

$p < .001$ ). In addition, a significant difference in the expected direction occurred between the training and comparison groups on this measure ( $F = 2.95, p < .02$ ). All of the students but two were successful in learning the helping skill of empathic responding as measured by this questionnaire.

An analysis of results for the training group post-training showed a significant difference in a positive direction for the "Peer Helper Questionnaire" ( $t = 2.61, p < .02$ ). Although the difference between the training and comparison groups on this instrument was not significant, the comparison group was initially stronger on the qualities in this survey, having substantially higher pre-test scores. Post-test, the mean score for the training group showed a gain of +5.14 while the mean for the comparison group went up by only +.41. The training and field experiences of the peer helpers resulted in personal growth which brought them, essentially, to the same point as the comparison group by the end of training.

Statistical analysis of the "Piers-Harris Scale" showed no significant difference between the training and comparison group. Although the post-test difference in means was not significant for the peer helpers, there was an increase in mean scores in a positive direction of +1.73; for the comparison group the increase in means was +2.18. It is difficult to interpret the results accurately. Saunders (1982) suggested that attempts to measure self-esteem after short-term training programs in interpersonal skills may actually measure changes in self-awareness, and that changes in self-esteem may occur over a longer period of time as skills are applied and confidence grows. It is possible that the peer helpers became more self-aware and were, therefore, more self-critical than the students in the comparison group.

There was only a slight increase in mean scores for the peer helpers pre- and post-training on the "Parent Questionnaire," although all parents expressed support for the program and its goals.

The peer helpers' self- and course evaluation provided useful information for program change. Eighty-two percent said that the class helped them know themselves better, and 91% indicated that it helped them understand others better. Ninety-one percent believed that the skills learned would benefit them throughout their lives, and 73% said it has given them more confidence in decision-making. They were uncertain as to what degree the peer helping program has made Central a better place to be, with 46% agreeing and 50% undecided about it. Regarding changes to the program, most of the helpers wanted more opportunities to do "counselling type" help. They suggested more advertising, having counsellors refer students with less serious problems to them, making regular visits to TAG classes or being assigned as the helper for a grade seven or eight TAG class, and being able to meet with students during

class time. Most of the students thought the class should be smaller. The helpers thought that the selection process should ensure that those chosen would have qualities of caring, a willingness to work, and a positive attitude. Five of the helpers gave up a second semester option to continue tutoring activities.

Comments of the peer helpers about their experience were very positive . . . “I loved it!” “It’s sad to leave it.” “It’s totally changed the way I respond to my friends; I use the skills *all* the time!”

### *Impact of the Program on the School*

About 230 students took the student survey. In just over two months of activity, 13% of respondents had talked with a peer helper. Of these, 65% found it to be “helpful,” 32% rated it “satisfactory,” and one person found it “not helpful.” Their comments included, “It solved my whole problem.” “I actually passed a French test!” “She was very caring.” The level of awareness of the program among the general school population was reflected in the fact that 56% of those surveyed knew how to contact a peer helper, and over one-fourth of the students expressed an interest in taking the class. Almost half said they would see a peer helper about a problem, and 41% said they would recommend it to a friend. There was some uncertainty about the training of the helpers, with 39% rating it favourably, and 47% uncertain about it. Two students expressed their reluctance to trust another young person with a problem. These concerns must be addressed, and the statements can be used in future training sessions to emphasize the importance of confidentiality.

Information gathered from a survey of the teaching staff provides strong support for continuing and expanding the program. Thirty-one out of 36 staff members responded. Of these, over 90% stated they had a good understanding of the objectives of the peer helping program and the way it functions in the school. Ninety percent knew a peer helper and believed that students could learn and apply helping skills with peers. Fifty-nine percent thought that the peer helpers were influencing the school in a positive way. Ratings by teachers who had helpers in their classrooms averaged 75% positively on such criteria as co-operation, meeting commitments, setting a good example for student behaviour, and relating to students in a positive manner. There were many encouraging comments, such as, “They have been courteous, helpful, good examples.” Some teachers expressed concern that the helpers were not available at convenient times and were not sure how the helpers could be used in their classrooms. If teachers are given some direction about how to better utilize peer helpers in their classrooms and if more flexibility regarding times of availability are provided, the benefits of the peer helping program will broaden.

## CONCLUSION

Measurement of the effects on the peer helpers as compared with a similar group of students and teachers at Central, surveys of students and teachers, and surveys of the parents of the peer helpers show that the stated goals of the program were met.

The evaluation provides further documentation to the literature in support of peer counselling. It is essential that programs are designed to meet the needs of the population served; that the implementation and maintenance of programs is undertaken with clear goals, with the support of parents and school staffs, and with responsible supervision; and that ongoing evaluation is conducted to ensure the effectiveness of programs.

The program at Central Middle School will be continued and expanded, in order to promote the personal development of future participants, and to expand the resources for counselling services.

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