
Evaluation of Peer Counselling in the Elementary School

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Résumé

Récemment, des conseillers de différents établissements ont commencé à utiliser le nouveau concept reconnu comme "peer facilitation" ou "peer counselling." Les auteurs ont identifiés des instruments ainsi que des aspects essentiels à évaluer les programmes de "peer counselling" dans notre système d'éducation. Les besoins d'évaluation et de recherche sont indiqués.

Abstract

Recently, counsellors in a variety of settings have begun to make use of a relatively new concept known as "peer facilitation" or "peer counselling." The authors identify some of the evaluation instruments being used in peer counselling programs in the school systems along with some essential aspects of evaluation. The need for evaluation and research is indicated.

Peer counselling has recently gained the attention of practitioners and researchers in a variety of settings including hospitals, correctional institutions, drug rehabilitation centres, and schools. Carkhuff (1969) established that paraprofessionals can be trained in helping skills to a minimally facilitative level in a relatively short time. Since then a number of peer counselling programs have been developed for use in school systems. Most of these programs have been at the university level, but recently many have been developed for use in the secondary and elementary schools (Gumaer, 1976; Mastroianni & Dinkmeyer, 1980; Myrick & Erney, 1978). In British Columbia, peer programs in elementary schools have been developed following the lead of Carr and Saunders (1980). It is estimated (Saunders, 1983, personal communication) that there are a minimum of a dozen elementary schools in the province with peer counselling programs including schools in Vancouver, Victoria, Kamloops, Cranbrook, Ft. St. John, and Quesnel.

The purpose of this article is to identify some of the evaluation instruments that are being used in peer counselling programs, to identify essential aspects of evaluation, and to emphasize the need for both evaluation of programs and further research. The economic restraints currently experienced in North America are making the field of guidance and

counselling a vulnerable target. Validation of programs through evaluation may be the link to survival in this era of fiscal conservatism.

Peer counselling can be defined as a process in which a trained and supervised group member helps facilitate growth and development of others in the same group by "listening, supporting and offering alternatives, but gives little or no advice" (Carr & Saunders, 1980). A review of articles in *Psychological Abstracts*, Vol. 63-71 covering the period January 1980 to April 1985, reveals a great variety of strategies being referred to as peer counselling. Often the authors of articles classified any strategy in which non-professionals attempted to help one another as peer counselling. The term peer counselling was used to identify any peer support or interaction such as offering feedback when a specific behaviour was observed, self-help groups, networking, or role playing. In 25% of the articles received, peer support was evident but there was little evidence of counselling. The authors of this article consider a trained and supervised peer who listens, supports, and offers an alternative frame of reference for consideration, as being integral to the concept of peer counselling.

When a new strategy is introduced, it is not uncommon for some practitioners to jump on the bandwagon without assessing the effectiveness of the intervention to meet an identified need. Peer counselling has been no exception. Programs have been started in some schools simply because peer counselling is currently an "in" thing. While no published research is available to document the claim, some school counsellors have experienced ineffective and short lived peer counselling programs in instances where the program is put into operation before a need for it is identified. Peer counselling has been considered effective in certain remedial programs such as vandalism and absenteeism, and in preventive programs such as transfer of students to a new school (Bogat, Jones, & Jason, 1980). It should be noted that peer counselling is not an approach to meet all needs in a guidance program. It is one strategy which can be helpful in meeting specific needs.

Before deciding that peer counselling is the strategy to be used, it is important to assess the need, identify the goal, and then plan the program in which this particular technique may be useful. Effective programs are developed as a need looking for a strategy, rather than a strategy looking for a need.

Program planning begins with needs assessment which allows program developers to understand the types of problems or concerns which students are experiencing and the magnitude and pervasiveness of their concerns. Goals are then set to address identified needs. These goals are the basis for planning a program in which particular experiences are provided which are likely to help attain the expressed goals. Evaluation is planned into the program as a means of assessing progress toward the goal. Evaluation provides a feedback loop for change or improvement of the program.

Evaluating peer counselling is also important as a way of validating that it works. Yet practitioners sometimes avoid evaluation. Frith and Clark (1982) note that evaluation is often viewed as time consuming, boring, expensive, and as requiring not only a large sampling but also extensive statistical analysis and sophisticated skills to design. Research may be costly, require a large sample, extensive statistical analysis, and sophisticated skills to design. These constraints need not apply to evaluation. The purpose of evaluation is to provide information for use in sound decision-making and to modify practices which do not contribute to desired outcomes. Evaluation instruments can provide useful information and still be simple and straightforward. Evaluation of programs developed at a local level to meet specific needs should include three aspects: assessment of the helper, assessment of knowledge and skills used in the helping process, and assessment of outcome.

1. *Assessment of the helper*

Peer counsellors can be involved in a helping relationship in several roles. They can be co-leaders in counsellor-led groups serving as role models, be helper/friends of other students, act as tutors focusing on the students' assets, be drop-in centre facilitators or orientation aids (Mastroianni & Dinkmeyer, 1980). The way in which one student relates to another in any of these roles is affected by his/her self-concept, values, goals, and beliefs. To heighten self-awareness and to enhance self-development, the peer counsellor can use various methods such as listing strengths and weaknesses or asking others how one is perceived, and can use devices such as values checklists, personality inventories, and self-appraisal inventories. Many programs and evaluation techniques are available for training professional helpers (Brammer, 1979; Carkhuff, 1969; Egan, 1975; Truax & Carkhuff, 1967). Myrick and Erney (1978) have led the way in developing a self-appraisal inventory specifically for the elementary peer counsellor.

2. *Assessment of knowledge and skills used in the helping process*

A second area to be assessed is the facilitative skills used in the helping process. Some methods used to help counsellors focus on the process that is occurring include a review of audiotapes, videotapes, or use of a facilitative-skills checklist. Again, a great deal of material is available for evaluating skills of adult counsellors. On the elementary school scene, Myrick and Erney (1978) have developed a program with evaluation as a built-in component. As counsellors examine the helping process, they can identify behaviours of themselves and others and discover "cause and effect" relationships.

3. *Assessment of outcome*

As well as assessing what is being done in a helping relationship, it is important to know if the intervention is making a difference, that is, if

the specified goals are being reached. Before any evaluation can take place, goals must not only be identified but they must also be stated in specific terms, preferably as observable, measurable behaviours. When goals are thus stated, it is possible to measure attainment. Evaluation should be a planned and continuous part of the program.

To evaluate the effectiveness of peer counselling from the point of view of consumers, various instruments have been developed for use at the secondary school level. Examples include instruments developed by McIntyre, Thomas, and Borgen (1982): one to be administered to students who worked with peer counsellors in a one-to-one situation, The Peer Counsellors Effectiveness Inventory for Individuals (PCEII), and a second for small groups of students led or co-led by peer counsellors, The Peer Counsellor Group Effectiveness Inventory (PCGEI).

The PCEII and the PCGEI consider two aspects of evaluation of peer counselling: the process and the outcome. In the PCEII, items 1-7 deal with process while items 8-14 evaluate outcome. Similar instruments have been developed for use in the elementary school. One instrument geared for the elementary school level is Myrick and Erney's (1978) Peer Facilitator Effectiveness-Inventory. The first ten items report on ideas and feelings relating to what happened in the session and items 11-20 focus on what happened as a result of the process.

Besides the students counselled by peers, another source of feedback includes teachers who refer students to peer counsellors. McIntyre, Thomas, and Borgen (1982) have developed a form, The Teacher Peer Counsellor Effectiveness Form (TPCEF), to get teachers' ideas and opinions. Viewpoints of parents might also be valuable and could be tapped by adapting Wilson's (1982) evaluation strategy.

Standardized instruments are often appropriate for evaluation. However, goals set to meet identified needs in a specific setting will be more effectively evaluated by instruments developed specifically for that program. Effective evaluation of peer counselling is not an overwhelming task. In fact, evaluation can be simple and straightforward.

Evaluation of peer counselling may be conducted from the viewpoint of the peer counsellor, the student, the classroom teacher and parents as well as school administrators. The effectiveness of any program, especially preventive programs, over a period of time is difficult to assess. Saunders (1983) has observed that school climate (how people experience the school—valued, appreciated, respected) may be a good indicator of the long term effect. The problem is in determining if it was peer counselling that made the difference. Other factors also may have had a significant impact. Evaluation of the effects of peer counselling on the school climate to date has been approached by practitioners in a variety of ways but results have been inconclusive and unpublished.

Evaluation is important to determine "when" and "where" peer counselling works. Research is needed to understand "how" and "why"

it works. Aubrey (1982) differentiates between evaluation and research. He states,

Evaluation is quite different from research in that evaluation is “the systematic process of judging the worth, desirability, effectiveness, or adequacy of something according to definite criteria and purposes” (Sauber, 1979). In contrast to evaluation, “research is an activity designed to advance scientific knowledge” (p. 89).

Research on peer counselling has not kept pace with the development and implementation of peer counselling programs. Research shows that adolescents can learn facilitative skills (Cooker & Cherchia, 1976; Danish, D’Augelli, & Brock, 1976; Gray & Tindall, 1974; Haynes & Avery, 1979; Leibowitz & Rhoads, 1974; Sussman, 1973; Tuff, 1977). Studies also indicate that students benefit from peer facilitation (Anderson, 1976; Bogat, Jones, & Jason, 1980; Carkhuff, 1969; Hamburg & Varenhorst, 1972; Kosonen, 1980) and that peer counsellors benefit from their helping role (Frank, Ferdinand, & Bailey, 1975; Hamburg & Varenhorst, 1972; Kudlaty, 1979; Woudenburg & Payne, 1978). However, there is a lack of documentation of the nature and pattern of affective and social relationships that develop in the peer counselling process. The “how” and “why” questions about the process remain unanswered (Fogarty & Wang, 1982).

Both research and evaluation increase knowledge. Even after researchers have determined “how” and “why” peer counselling works, it will still be necessary for practitioners to continuously evaluate their programs to judge “where” and “when” peer counselling furthers their goals and purposes.

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