

A Peer Counselling Model: Social Outreach

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Résumé

Présentation d'un modèle de counseling par ses pairs à l'intention des adolescents et qui met l'accent sur des activités ayant pour but l'échange social et la liaison entre l'école et la communauté. Présentation de l'évaluation de ce modèle selon (1) l'auto-évaluation des conseillers, et (2) l'évaluation des élèves-clients. L'auto-évaluation des pairs-conseillers indique un développement personnel accru. Les résultats de l'évaluation des élèves indiquent que les pairs-conseillers sont perçus comme étant hautement efficaces dans (1) le leadership social, (2) les discussions en groupe, et (3) les rôles particuliers du counseling. En outre, plus de 60 pourcent des élèves-clients reconnaissent avoir eu recours à l'aide d'un conseiller dont 42 pourcent recherchèrent de multiples contacts.

Abstract

A peer counselling model emphasizing outreach social activities and school community liaison for adolescents is presented. Evaluation of this model according to (1) counsellors' self reports, and (2) student clients' evaluations indicate that peer counsellors are perceived as highly effective in (1) social leadership, (2) group discussion, and (3) individual counselling roles. In addition, over 60 per cent of student clients indicated they sought counselling with 42 per cent seeking multiple contacts.

Within the past two decades, the services of peer and paraprofessional counsellors have dramatically increased. A number of these programs have included peer counsellor training programs for high school students. Some have served as models in psychological education programs (Mosher & Sprinthall, 1971); study skill programs (Vriend, 1969); information services (Koch, 1973; Lobitz, 1970); and peer counselling (Carr, 1981; Myrick & Erney, 1978; Varenhorst, 1974). More recently, various programs have served as outreach and support counselling services (McIntyre, Thomas, & Borgen, 1982; Carr, 1981; Rockwell & Dustin, 1979; Buck, 1977). Research suggests that these programs have been successful in reducing school related problems such as absenteeism, drop out rates, and vandalism (Johnson, 1978); in developing more favourable attitudes toward school work (Rapp, 1978); and in helping students deal with contemporary adolescent problems such as loneliness, dating, sexuality, family, friendships, and work (Carr, McDowell, & McKee, 1981; Varenhorst, 1974).

Today peer counselling programs hold vast potential for increasing counselling services. This is especially important for our secondary

schools where increasingly counselling services are cut back. Varenhorst (1974) indicates that peer counselling is an important alternative model in extending counselling services in the schools. She found that adolescents could not only learn to counsel but they could also extend personal friendship or teach social skills while counselling. Other research studies by Sparks (1977) and Carr and Saunders (1980) confirm these findings; they found that adolescents are more likely to disclose personal concerns to friends and peers rather than to school counsellors.

Literature on the definition of peer counsellors (Carr, 1981) indicates that they have the potential to include many roles. Carr (1981) defines peer counsellors as students who help other students think through problems and reflect on the concerns under supervision. He further states that they are in no way professional counsellors or therapists. Rather, they are adolescents who can be helpful in helping students meet concerns in the area of their social needs, i.e., loneliness, dating, and friendship. McIntyre, et al. (1982) state that peer counsellors fulfill many roles such as tutoring, orientation, and big brother's/big sister's roles. They also discuss the potential of using high school students in outreach and extracurricular activities.

There is a special need in our secondary schools for outreach activities which help students meet new friends and provide them with appropriate social activities and social supports. Peer counselling programs which utilize an outreach model are appropriate ways to meet these needs. Moreover, these programs can be easily established in the school or community as activities of a student organization. This paper describes such a peer counselling model; it provides outreach social activities for students as well as liaison services between school and community activities.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PEER COUNSELLING PROGRAM

The peer counselling program is a part of a community student organization, Community Challenge, which is affiliated with Laurier MacDonald Secondary School in Montreal, Quebec. This student organization is a social religious group. It was organized to meet the social and religious needs of students by the chaplain of the school who also functions as the school counsellor; he serves as the director of the youth group and director of the peer counselling program. Membership is open to all students in the high school and community. Approximately 100-150 students take an active role. The weekly evening meetings provide students with (1) social, (2) religious, and (3) counselling activities. The value of this organizational model is described by one of the student members. "The atmosphere in the youth group is very friendly and everyone is welcome. This along with the counselling groups, creates a harmonious balance. The students at the meetings are

reaching out and meeting new people while coping with their own problems.”

The peer counselling program was developed as the leadership and social service arm of Community Challenge by the director of the program. In the leadership function, the peer counsellors provide the organizational manpower. They organize the weekly meetings, conduct group discussion sessions, provide a warm social atmosphere, organize the social events and recruit new members. In the social service function, they provide counselling services, social support, and follow-up services. They also provide informational and referral services between the youth group and the school. Some of the major reasons for the program's attractiveness are its ability to develop the multiple talents of adolescents plus its ability to utilize both the counselling services of the school and the peer program. For example, in areas where either service does not fit the needs of a particular student, the school or peer counsellor is able to cross-refer to their counterpart. Furthermore, the school counsellor in his dual relationships to both services is able to offer a wider range of social supports and counselling services.

PEER COUNSELLING TRAINING PROGRAM

The peer counselling training program includes three phases: (1) selection, (2) the training course, and (3) supervision period. Peer counsellors are selected from the membership of the youth group. Selected criteria include (a) interest in counselling, (b) ability to relate to other students, (c) social leadership potential, (d) active membership in the youth group, and (e) willingness to undertake counsellor training and assignments. Normally in a typical year, twelve to fifteen peer counsellors are selected. Some are continuing, and some are recruits from previous years.

The counselling training course is a nine-month course which meets weekly for three hours. The training program includes three major areas: (1) communication skills, (2) counselling skills, and (3) group dynamics and leadership skills. In the first part, the peer counsellors receive training in the development of communication skills which they can use in both individual and group settings. In the second part, trainees are instructed in counselling skills through microcounselling techniques and role playing. In this endeavor, they receive training in the following skills: (a) attentive listening, (b) attending verbal and non-verbal behaviour, (c) expression and reflection of feelings, (d) open and closed-ended questions, (e) self-disclosure statements, and (f) problem solving (Ivey, 1971). In addition, trainees receive instruction in counselling strategies and decision making. In the third part, peer counsellors are trained in group discussion and leadership skills. They begin in a didactic approach where they learn (a) group discussion skills, (b) group

processes, and (c) group problem solving skills. Following this, they move to practicum work where they participate in group counselling at the weekly meetings of the youth group. As their group counselling skills develop, they are encouraged to take a co-leadership and later a full leadership role in their groups. The instructor and supervisor of the program is the director of the youth group. He is assisted by peer counsellors who have previously completed their training. This process allows the experienced peer trainees an opportunity to assist new recruits in the teaching of counselling skills. Trainees work in small groups, listening and reviewing their work. As trainees master their counselling skills, they are encouraged to develop counselling relationships with fellow students of the youth group.

Supervision is an ongoing part of the training program. Part of each week's training session includes discussion of individual and group counselling activities. For example, in group counselling, peer counsellors discuss their leadership behaviour, monitor their group's processes, and examine alternative strategies for facilitating their groups. In individual counselling, similar issues are discussed and ongoing contacts with student clients are monitored. From these, several counselling cases are chosen for group discussion and supervision. The trainer of the group is available for individual consultation and supervision. Peer counsellors are trained to consult or refer their client to their supervisor if the client continues to experience difficulties. The following is a peer counsellor's statement on the training process. It reveals a high level of personal awareness in counsellor training.

We do a lot of role-playing in the class when difficulties arise about a certain situation: It helps us to comprehend the situation better. When we role-play a certain problem it is put on tape so we can study the things we should say and what we should not say . . . Analyzing tapes of real situations of ourselves in groups makes us more aware of what we are doing. There is a great deal of trust among our counsellors, and we are not afraid to judge our own tapes amongst ourselves. We are very frank and honest.

PEER COUNSELLING ASSIGNMENTS

Peer counsellors are formally assigned to conduct group discussions at the weekly meetings of the youth group. These discussions follow the format of group counselling with the peer counsellors helping students to identify personal concerns, recognize emotional feelings, and develop problem solving abilities. Students have labelled these sessions as self-discovery groups. These discussions are ongoing weekly. Discussions cover such topics as religion, adolescent development, personal problems, and pertinent adolescent issues.

In regard to assignments relating to counselling individuals, peer counsellors are not formally assigned these tasks. However, they are instructed to insure that the general social needs of the students in their

discussion groups are being met. In addition, they are trained to recognize and seek out potential clients. For example, peer counsellors are encouraged to engage students in individual talks or “raps” following group discussion periods.

EVALUATION

Evaluation of the peer counselling project was conducted by the youth group according to two criteria: (1) self reports of the peer counsellors as to their intrapersonal growth, and (2) evaluations of student clients. At the time of the research, twelve peer counsellors, ten males and two females, had completed a year of training. Peer counsellors range in age from 14 years to 18 years of age. Four had been counsellors for the program for two years; eight were new trainees.

In regard to the first criteria, the peer counsellors were asked to evaluate the effect of the training program on their intrapersonal growth. Written statements were gathered on each of the twelve counsellors at the end of the nine month training period. Examination of self statements of the peer counsellors indicates a significant change had occurred in their intrapersonal growth. The majority indicated that the training program gave them greater self confidence, self esteem, interpersonal skills, and communication skills. In many instances, the program helped them cope with personal adolescent problems such as school achievement, alcohol, or drugs. A sample of peer counsellors' statements are presented below as an indicator of the significant intrapersonal growth trainees achieved.

John (age 18-Grade 11): “I was formerly a school trouble male. I had no interest in school, always wanted to be alone. Now I realize I like helping people and leading groups. I like myself better. I plan to go to junior college and hopefully to university.”

Joe (age 18-Grade 11): “I formerly was an outstanding student—but a bit of a loner and needed social contacts. Now I see I can help others and have a more fulfilling personal life.”

Mary (age 18-Grade 11): “Formerly, I was indecisive, uncertain of myself; I had difficulty in home adjustments. Now I'm gaining leadership and counselling skills, and ability to help others.”

The second method of evaluation included a questionnaire on the subject of the peer counsellors' contribution to the youth group. The questionnaire was constructed by the peer counsellors. This instrument is a short form questionnaire that includes three topics. It contains ten questions mainly in the form of yes and no answers. On the first topic, students were asked to indicate (yes or no) whether peer counsellors contributed favorably in the areas of (1) social leadership, (2) general counselling helpfulness, and helpfulness in group discussions. On the second topic, students were asked to indicate to what extent they sought personal counselling, were willing to recommend peer counsellors to

Table 1
Students' Perceptions of Peer Counsellor Competencies

<i>Peer Counsellors' Competencies</i>	<i>% of Students' Replies</i>	
	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
Demonstrated social leadership	100%	
Demonstrated general helpfulness	100%	
Demonstrated specific helpfulness in group discussions	70%	30%

Table 2
*Percentage Figures of Students Utilizing
Peer Counselling Services*

<i>Peer Counselling Services</i>	<i>Percentage Figures</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Number who sought personal counselling	60%	40%
Number who sought multiple counselling contacts	42%	58%
Number who received social assistance	88%	12%

Table 3
Students' Recommendations of Peer Counsellors

<i>Specific Recommendation</i>	<i>% of Students</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Number who recommended peer counsellors to other clients	88%	12%
Number who prefer peer counsellors to adult counsellors	55%	45%

other clients, and preferred peer counsellors to adult counsellors. The final topic asked students to identify specific peer counsellors who were particularly helpful, not helpful, and socially supportive.

The results of this questionnaire are summarized in Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3.

Table 1 indicates the percentage of student members who perceive that peer counsellors demonstrated specific competencies in their contribution to the student organization. On the question of social leadership, one hundred per cent of the students indicated that peer counsellors exercised positions of social leadership. In other words, all of the students unanimously agreed that the peer counsellors had been effective student organizational leaders. On the question of perceived general helpfulness of the peer counsellors in social support activities, once again, one hundred per cent of the students evaluated the counsellors as being generally helpful. In particular, four peer counsellors were singled out by more than fifty per cent of the students as being extremely helpful. These were the more experienced and highly trained counsellors. On the question of perceived general helpfulness in group discussion, seventy per cent of the students evaluated the peer counsellors as helpful; thirty per cent evaluated them less positively. When queried further on the issue, students indicated that their evaluations were more a statement of their personal dislike for an individual peer counsellor rather than a specific evaluation of a peer's group counselling skill. Though this issue was not systematically investigated in this study, it would appear that high interpersonal attraction (personal liking) may be a major factor in ascertaining whether or not a peer counsellor is perceived as helpful by another adolescent.

Table 2 examines the percentage of students who received specific counselling assistance from peer counsellors. On this question, the vast majority of students, sixty per cent, stated that they sought out individual "raps" with peer counsellors. Of those, seventy per cent (42 per cent of all students) stated they had one to five individual counselling sessions with at least one of the peer counsellors. Twenty-one per cent reported having over five sessions and nine per cent reported they had continuous ongoing sessions (ten or more). On the topic of social assistance, over eighty per cent indicated they had received some assistance from the peer counsellors in engaging in one or more of the social activities of the group or had received some form of social support.

Table 3 examines the topic of student recommendations regarding peer counsellors. In a reply to a question on whether students would recommend peer counsellors to their friends, the vast majority, eighty-eight per cent reported that they would. Only twelve per cent indicated their unwillingness. In reply to the question of a comparative preference between peer and professional counsellors, fifty-five per cent of students stated a preference for a peer counsellor and forty-five per cent stated a

preference for an adult counsellor. When queried further on this topic, the majority indicated that their choice would be somewhat determined by the topic of the counselling concern.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this paper reaffirm earlier research (McIntyre, et al., 1982; Carr, 1981; Varenhorst, 1974) in supporting the continued training and utilization of adolescents as peer counsellors. Unlike previous research which supports a more limited utilization of peer counsellors, this model demonstrates that peer counsellors can be effectively engaged in roles of organizational development, outreach, coordination, and social support as well as group and individual counselling activities. The reaffirmation of these roles is important since they confirm the peer counsellors' unique ability to provide a social network for adolescents. In regard to the group counselling role, the results suggest that peer counsellors can learn to extend their interpersonal communication skills to group situations. This finding is important since it suggests that peers can play a leadership and educational role as well as a supportive role.

The clients' evaluations further extend the importance of this research in that they reveal that the peer counsellors are perceived as effective social leaders as well as effective group and individual counsellors. The most interesting data of this research are the extent to which student clients sought out peer counsellors for assistance. Over sixty per cent sought out at least one counselling contact with a peer counsellor. Moreover, a large percentage of these clients developed a long term ongoing counselling relationship. In addition, the overwhelming numbers who indicated their willingness to recommend peer counsellors to other student clients confirm the very high regard students hold for peer counsellors. This esteem suggests that peer counsellors may be able to augment the school counselling services by attracting to them clients that might not otherwise be served. Lastly, the results demonstrate the importance of the social and educational value of the training and personal development the peers receive. The fact that this project did radically change many troubled adolescents into caring, supportive, effective counsellors and student organizers is an important achievement.

The implications of this research suggest that peer counsellors can bring an additional dimension to the role of counsellor. Unlike professional adult counsellors, peer counsellors can perform dual roles; they can be both friend and counsellor to the student. In these dual roles, they can socialize with the student client, recruit them for activities, provide a social support and if need be, provide an "around the clock" crisis support service. High attendance data at Community Challenge meetings suggest that students are attracted to organizations that provide peer counselling and social outreach programs.

This project demonstrates important alternative roles school counsellors can perform in teaching counselling skills and developing student leadership ability. For too long, counsellors have been relegated to almost exclusive roles of service and administration in the schools. Peer counselling projects allow them an opportunity to return to the more traditional roles of teaching and advising. Moreover, these projects give them an opportunity to extend their knowledge and counselling skills to other interested and motivated individuals.

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