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ABSTRACT

Counseling skills can be taught to high school students who enter inner-city peer counselor training programs with few of the interpersonal communication skills that are essential to effective counseling, by using an incremental approach that includes intensive practice. The following skills can be introduced and demonstrated incrementally by the teacher: (1) interested-behavior skills, including eye contact and body language; (2) questioning skills, including the use of open-ended questions to retrieve and develop basic information, and avoidance of an interview approach; (3) feedback skills, including reflective listening; (4) appropriate communication skills for use with adults, peers, and young children; and (5) general counseling skills, including giving feedback, clarifying problems, identifying and selecting options, and teaching problem resolution. Each new skill can then be practiced in role playing sessions in which a student takes the part of the counselor and the instructor takes the part of the counselee. As student proficiency increases, the skills can be practiced in a "fish bowl" session in which students assume the parts of counselor and counselee and the rest of the class observes and assists the counselor in dealing with a real-life concern of the counselee. A list of 10 references is appended. (FMW)

Sequencing Skill Training for Peer Counseling in Inner-City High Schools

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Running head: SEQUENCING PEER COUNSELING SKILLS

Abstract

Skills which appear helpful in high school peer counseling situations were discussed and compared to skills exhibited by students in the writer's inner-city high school peer counselor training program. A step-by-step sequence of skills was presented and explained, followed by a discussion of the subsequent use of role-play and "fish bowl" training situations as vehicles through which students could both practice counseling skills in a low-risk setting and attempt to resolve real problems of group members.

Sequencing Skill Training for Peer Counseling in Inner-City High Schools

Interest in peer counseling has risen over the past five years in a variety of settings including elementary schools, junior high schools, high schools, churches, and convalescent homes. Evidence for this can be found in the increased attendance at state and national peer counseling conferences. For example, attendance at the annual conference in California sponsored by the California Peer Counseling Association nearly doubled between the first conference in 1984 and the third in 1986. High schools having a peer counseling program in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD, Los Angeles, California) increased from 5 in 1986 to well over 50 in 1988. To care for the rising need in LAUSD, training has been made available for adult leaders of peer counseling groups, and a lengthy curriculum guide was written to assist the leaders in the classroom.

Although the question as to how well peer counseling programs actually work has yet to be concretely answered, much anecdotal information exists about their benefits (Morrill et al., 1986). Peer counseling is used in telephone crisis services (Kalafat and Schulman, 1982), within the gay community (Schwartz, 1982), and in

academic settings (Gerber & Kauffman, 1981). Downe et al. (1986) found peer counseling beneficial in providing support to existing counseling services and helping to increase self-esteem among the peer counselors themselves. Many curriculum guides and information manuals currently are on the market for those who are starting a new program or need help in continuing an existing one, e.g., Myrick & Bowman (1981), Myrick & Erney (1979), Sturkie (1987), Varenhorst (1981), and Varenhorst, (1983).

Little has been written detailing the instructional skills which appear to be efficacious in students' progressive acquisition of counseling skills. Questions rarely addressed include: What sequence of skills has proven to be profitable in the high school peer counseling classroom, and what is the rationale behind such a sequence? These questions are the focus of the following discussion.

Program Description

The information contained in this report originated from my peer counseling program at an inner-city high school, a program in its third year at the writing of this paper. The program started with 19 students in 1986 and grew to 115 students who had enrolled in the course

through the second year. By the second year, two beginning courses and one advanced course were in place, and the number of possible activities for the peer counselors once they were trained had grown exponentially. By the third year, an English as a Second Language (ESL) Peer Counseling course had been added, bringing the number of courses being offered to four beginning and one advanced. Of the program participants the second year, 24% were male and 76% female.

During the second year, the training was modified to include training in communication, listening, observation, basic social interaction, and counseling skills. Further, the training included such topics as drug and alcohol abuse, family problems, peer relationships, peer pressure, confidentiality, gangs, sex and teen pregnancy, violence, death and dying, assertiveness, and trust. The students were introduced to methods for working with and talking to adults and small children and the standard rules for being involved with children (e.g., reporting of child abuse, being careful of physical contact, etc.).

Upon completion of the training, the students became peer counselors, were given their peer counseling identification badges, and chose their activities from

among the following: working at one of two elementary schools, working with high school students in Special Education, working on a "Welcome Committee" to orient new students to the school, counseling students referred by either teacher-generated or self-generated referral, helping on an on-call basis with students who had been referred to the Dean's office, aiding at the Health Clinic, making lunches for the homeless each week, being involved in mediation training, participating in group counseling sessions, participating in a monthly drive to raise funds to help pay for meals for the elderly, being involved in stress management training, and writing letters to heads of state on behalf of political prisoners as part of an Amnesty Internation Freedom Writers group.

Population Description

The school at which the program was administered is a four year inner-city high school attended by nearly 1,800 students and located in the middle of government housing projects. Fifty-seven percent of the students were Hispanic, and 41.9% were Black. Fourteen percent were considered Limited English Proficient (LEP), and 85% of the students' families received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The attrition rate at the

school hovered betwen 40 to 45% over the past five year period. Between 20 and 25 street gangs were represented on the campus, with 10% of the total student body considered at risk for involvement in a gang. No data on the number of women students who were mothers were available. However, teen pregnancy and parenthood were a large enough problem to warrant an Infant Care Center on campus, and pregnancy carried status rather than stigma.

Skills of Incoming Students

An analysis of students' perceptions when they enrolled in the program showed that they were not aware of the skills necessary for adequate counselor/counselee communication. Each skill detailed in the previous section will be compared to the skill students possessed upon entry to the course.

One of the first activities in the peer counseling class provided students with an opportunity to introduce themselves to the group. All students either looked directly at the instructor or stared at the floor as they introduced themselves. When they separated into dyads for introductory experience, they fidgeted, avoided eye contact, turned their bodies entirely away from the person to whom they were speaking, and were unable to

carry on a conversation, except in the cases of the most gregarious and self-confident youths.

Once they were shown appropriate body language which would reflect their interest in their partner, they were able to maintain a conversation and demonstrated a much higher degree of engaged behavior than they had previously exhibited. Modeling provided by the instructor for both the non-interested and the new behaviors proved to be an effective educational tool. The desired behaviors were in a large degree not a part of the students' repertoire because of their social backgrounds. Such skills generally were not observed at home, and opportunities during which such skills could be practiced did not abound in the inner-city.

Initially, the trainees thought that if they met someone who had an interest about which they knew nothing, they should either hope that the person continued to talk so that the trainee's ignorance did not show, or they should simply not converse with the person.

Students invariably asked closed-ended questions, , and sessions in which they attempted to get acquainted sounded more like interviews than conversations. Closed-ended questions shut down conversations and did not provide information as to how the person was feeling, nor

did they tend to invite the respondent to "open up". When students were taught appropriate questioning skills coupled with their interested-behavior skills, conversations began to take place, and it became difficult to end an activity once it had begun.

Students' perception of feedback was to respond, "You're kidding!" or "Really?" or other inappropriate comments. Such a lack of reflective listening skills, when added to poor body language and non-existent questioning skills, frequently spelled disaster for any attempt at constructive communication among adolescents in the program. Furnishing appropriate responses, perhaps the most difficult skill in the program to learn, changed practice counseling sessions from interviews in which little useful information was obtained to meaningful counseling in which real problems were brought out, feelings clarified, and solutions sought.

According to a pre-test, students perceived that the way to help someone in trouble was either to tell him about a similar problem they had had or to give him advice. During the training, they expressed surprise when told that they were not to give advice at all and not to dwell upon similar problems of their own past. Once they understood the proposed counseling rationale,

they were able to help counselees generate options for solving their problems and help them to clarify which option had the greatest chance of succeeding.

A Rationale for Skill Development

Basic tenets of the program have included the conviction that all learning takes place incrementally and that counseling knowledge is not a different kind of learning; it, too, must follow an incremental pattern. Too often in counseling curricula, emphasis seems placed on attempting to cover many areas of adolescent concern, and not enough attention is paid to teaching actual measurable skills. Through three years of instructing peer counselors, I developed a core of basic skills which are relatively easy to teach, can be taught quickly, and can then be used in role-playing and "fish-bowl" counseling sessions across the entire spectrum of adolescent concerns. The skills taught are used repeatedly so they become automatic. Thus, the following pattern of skills acquisition is presented as being incremental and constantly usable in practice and real counseling sessions.

Table I

I. Interested-behavior skills

A. Eye contact

B. Interested body language

1. Directly face person

2. Lean forward slightly

3. Nod occasionally

4. Use verbal encouragers such as "uh-huh"

5. Occasionally reach out and touch person on the arm or shoulder

6. Maintain an interested facial expression

II. Questioning skills

A. Use closed-ended questions to retrieve basic information

B. Build on that information by using open-ended questions, particularly ones that focus on people's feelings, e.g., "How did you feel about...?"

C. Avoid an interview approach

III. Feedback skills

A. Orally reflect the content of what the person says to insure that the counselor understands the problems

B. Reflect the feelings the counselor perceives

C. Reflective listening skills show counselee that the counselor is really listening

IV. Communication skills

A. Communicating with adults

1. Focus on feelings

2. Avoid judgments

3. Give feedback

4. Avoid accusatory statements such as "You always..."

B. Communicating with peers

1. Same as above

C. Communicating with children

1. Show respect and interest

2. Give child full attention

V. Counseling skills

A. Use body language that communicates counselor's interest in the counselee

B. Ask open-ended questions

C. Give feedback on both content and emotion

D. Help counselee clarify problem

E. Help counselee generate options

F. Help counselee select best option

G. Teach counselee any effective skills that would be useful in problem-resolution

H. Do not give advice

I. Do not talk about one's own experiences in detail

J. Do not express a judgment

Role Playing

Once these skills are presented and demonstrated by the instructor, the role-playing component begins. Several instructional problems typically are met at this phase of the learning pattern. Students assigned to roles often have a difficult staying in the role or truly assuming their part. The instructor can then take the role of counselee. (When the instructor needs to re-assume the role of instructor, she can hold up a pen or wear a cap which she takes off to show that she is no longer playing the counselee. This makes the transition between role-player and instructor more distinct.) For example, the instructor can assume the role of a pregnant fifteen-year-old girl. Class members begin by finding out the problem, then probing the girl's feelings. They proceed to attempt to brainstorm the options with the girl, helping her to clarify how she feels about adoption, abortion, or active parenthood. The instructor can stop the group at any point that she feels the questioning is not productive or that advice or a judgment is offered. Thus, issues in real life are

explored, actual instruction continues to take place, and students are able to practice counseling in a low-risk setting. As mentioned previously, it has been easier for the adult to maintain the role than it has for students.

Fish Bowl

The second type of practice situation which has proved extremely effective is the "fish-bowl" technique, so named because the counselee and counselor are seated within the circle of the group with the group members observing the pair and assisting the counselor as necessary.

In this situation, a variety of adolescent issues can be explored. First, an introduction to the topic is pursued with all group members talking about the issue in terms of their own lives. Next, one member volunteers (or is asked to volunteer) to be the counselee and another to be the counselor. They then conduct a counseling session using an actual life concern of the counselee.

Thus, skills initially are practiced in a role-play situation in which the instructor enacts a counselee's role and is able to guide the students towards a more effective counseling mode. Students are thus able to practice without fear of "making it worse" or "saying the

wrong thing" because the instructor has been acting the counselee's part. By the time they begin counseling within the fish-bowl, they are ready to counsel someone who has a real problem, but they are still provided with the support of the group.

Conclusion

Students in inner-city high schools usually enter the peer counselor training program with low skills in areas of communication which are essential to effective peer counseling. A step-by-step approach was presented in which such skills were taught incrementally. Once acquired, the skills were practiced in a low-risk role-play situation in which the instructor enacted the part of an adolescent in distress. Later, as skills develop, a fish-bowl technique was employed in which two students sat in the center of the group and worked (as counselor and counselee) on a problem the counselee faced. Thus, students were able to explore many areas of concern to adolescents, dealing with their own problems and practicing their skills until they were able to use them with a large degree of automaticity.

Such use of incremental skill development and constant role-playing and practice counseling have been found to be an effective way to teach peer counseling

skills in the inner-city high school setting in which this study was conducted.

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