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A Study of the Impact of Professional Development on Middle Level Advisors

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Abstract

Middle level advisors are faculty members whose role is to develop meaningful relationships and to facilitate conversations with a group of 10 to 12 students on a regular basis regarding the students' academic, personal, and social concerns. This study examines the impact of professional development on middle level advisors' knowledge, skills, and practices in five New England middle level schools. Thirty-four advisors representing these five diverse schools were randomly assigned to three groups. Group One received professional development after the study was completed. Group Two participated in a three-credit course in advisor knowledge and skills. Group three participated in the course, and each advisor was coached individually for one hour a week for 24 weeks. Results showed improvements in (1) advisor knowledge and skills for both groups who received the course and (2) in practice for advisors who received both the course and the coaching. Mean score differences in the *Advisor Knowledge Assessment* pre- and post-test, used as a supportive measure, were revealed between the two groups receiving the training and the one which did not. The primary conclusion is that coursework plus coaching may represent a promising quality investment in the preparation of middle level advisors.

Objectives and Purpose

Strong calls for the creation of effective middle level advisories—meaning regular, frequent meetings in which an adult facilitates a group of 10 to 12 students—are being heard nationally. These calls have risen in response to well-circulated research citing the positive impact of a personalized learning environment on student performance (Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2006; Osofsky, Sinner, & Wolk, 2003; Videro, 2007).

A recent report indicates that national advisory numbers are slowly growing (McEwin & Greene, 2011), and educational leaders in at least one New England state, Rhode Island, have mandated that advisories be a part of each middle level school's program (Rhode Island State Regulations, 2008). Approximately 50 of the 55 Rhode Island public middle level schools have devised and implemented advisory programs in the past five years. According to the evaluation reports of the Rhode Island State Commissioner's Review Teams, consistent with my observations of advisory programs in that state, some programs are faring well while others are in a fledging state of development and need assistance. One concern that has emerged is that teachers

have not felt well-prepared for their role as teacher-advisors. A recent comment from a teacher-advisor at an urban school undergoing an evaluative process reflects this concern: "We are trained as teachers, and being an advisor requires using other skills. We do not have experience in facilitating or understanding the development of small groups, who quite often cite very personal issues" (Personal comments, May, 2009). Results of a national study involving students graduating from universities providing more than half of all the middle level teacher preparation programs in the United States support this comment (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996). Nearly three-fourths of the graduates felt they were not trained or prepared to become effective advisors (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996).

In response to this concern, I conducted a qualitative study of an intervention designed to help teachers become better prepared for their advisor role. I started with three tentative presuppositions: (a) specific professional development in group content knowledge and skill development helps advisors to feel more effective in their role; (b) teacher-advisors who participate in professional development on advisory are more effective in working with their advisees than those who receive no professional development; and (c) coaching, in addition to professional development, yields advisors still more effective. These suppositions raise numerous questions, the most important of which has to do with the precise differences that result from these three different levels of intervention. Specifically: What observable differences can we see between the teaching and advisory practices of the three groups? And, what differences do we find between the reflections of each group?

Accordingly, the purposes of this study are to confirm and/or refute these three presuppositions and, more importantly, to begin to explore the actual changes in practice that result from professional development and ongoing interventions in the preparation of middle level teacher-advisors.

Perspectives or Theoretical Framework

This study stems from research findings on advisory's benefits and programmatic challenges, reports on the preparation of advisors, and recent views of professional development that emphasize the application of knowledge in practice. Combined, this literature highlights key assumptions that underlie this research project. These assumptions include the following: (a) quality advisory programs take time and effort to plan and implement, but they provide a key role in a young adolescent's development; (b) being an effective advisor requires knowledge of group development and familiarity with certain skills and practices; and (c) professional development that contains both content and skills may best support the ability of advisors to apply knowledge to practice.

Well-Developed Advisory Programs Matter

While research findings highlight the positive results of student advisory programs (Viadero, 2007), these programs remain some of the most difficult of middle level curriculum to implement (Anfara & Brown, 2001; Fenwick, 1992; Hunt, Wiseman, & Bowden, 1998; Mac Iver, 1990). Many advisory programs nationwide are not operating as they were initially intended and have simply taken the place of homeroom. Advisory programs vary widely in their quality and may not necessarily be perceived by students as helpful.

Successful programs illustrate that the development of advisory programs should be led by a design team composed of a representative of each of the constituent groups in the school (i.e., administrators, counselors, and teachers). The design team should gather information from the staff to help the members make key decisions. For example, the focus for the program, the organizational structure of the program, the activities to use, and the assessments to determine the program's success are all tied together and should stem from input gathered from the whole school (Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox, 1997; Niska & Thompson, 2007; Osofsky, Sinner, & Wolk, 2003).

Many proponents of advisories (Cole, 1992; Fibkins, 1999; MacLaury, 2002; Myrick, 2002) also believe that staff development, based on the program focus, is necessary to provide teachers with the skills needed to maximize advisories' supportive potential. Nevertheless, there is little literature about potential professional development programs for teacher-advisors (Roland & Neitzschman, 1996). The only relevant study of which I am aware was one led by MacLaury and Gratz (2002), in which the impact of advisories on students led by staff educated in group facilitation was examined. This experimental study, in which some staff members participated in professional development in a 30-hour course, reported that advisees were more likely to share personal concerns with their advisor.

Group Process Knowledge and Skill Development Matter

Myrick, Highland, and Highland (1996) emphasize that advisors should be skilled facilitators, and that, to become adept, they need help in understanding group dynamics and facilitation and in how to help students think about and solve personal problems. They believe that what helps advisors develop these skills is the modeling of behaviors that enhance students' communication in a group. These behaviors include concreteness, appropriate self-disclosure, immediacy, giving and receiving feedback non-defensively, and remaining focused on the here and now.

Allen (1997) also suggests that, for the advisor, group developmental-stage awareness and facilitation skills appear to be key determinants of both students' and advisors' perceptions of advisory effectiveness. Allen interviewed middle level students and found that advisory groups did not implement the content or support they claimed. When questioned, teacher advisors admitted to often feeling ill-prepared to address the social and emotional issues that can easily emerge during group discussions.

Embedding Knowledge and Skills in Practice

A study by Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, and Pianta (2008) cautions policymakers that content knowledge alone may not be sufficient to enhance the development of skills. Rather, there is a growing body of research findings that indicates the importance of connecting content and context in professional development. Ball and Cohen (1999) contend that since the work of effective teaching occurs in practice, professional development needs to occur in the learning context of teachers' practice.

As a practice-based professional developmental approach, coaching has generated tremendous interest among educators (Blachowicz, Obrochta, & Fogelberg, 2005). Although coaching has been used in athletic training and leadership programs (Nettles, 1993), its application to advisor training is virtually non-existent. The consensus appears to be that coaching is a form of professional development that involves continual classroom modeling, supportive critiques of practice, and focused observations (Shanklin, 2006). Similar to teacher mentoring, in which a beginning teacher is paired with an experienced teacher or team of teachers, coaching involves a collaborative relationship between an expert and a less-experienced practitioner.

Methodology

The nature of the study is primarily exploratory because the primary purpose is to begin to examine the actual changes in practice that result from three different levels of intervention. As such, it calls for a qualitative methodology. However, to help with the confirmation of its three starting suppositions and to triangulate the data, one quantitative tool was employed. The methods thus include observer field notes, participant weekly journals, observation and interviews by third-party observers, plus a pre- post-intervention survey for triangulation purposes. The goal was not so much to test a hypothesis as to explore the question of what happens when demographically similar groups of middle level teachers experience three different levels of intervention.

Sample

The study's participants included 34 advisors selected from five middle level schools across one New England state. Participants were randomly placed into three groups. Group One continued business as usual, Group Two experienced professional development through coursework, and Group Three participated in coursework and coaching. Participants were selected from schools that were either in the beginning stages of their advisory programs or were involved in programs that were being revamped, and advisory awareness sessions were the only previous professional development they had received. The five middle level school principals were consulted about the study and the criteria needed in order to be eligible: (a) advisors were to be made aware they would be randomly assigned to one of the three groups mentioned above; (b) advisors were to meet a new group of advisees in September 2010; (c) advisory had to be scheduled to meet the equivalent of at least 25 minutes twice a week; and (d) if they were placed in either of the two groups that experienced professional development, study participants were to agree to work with the rest of their staff following the completion of the study.

The participants came from five middle level schools. Three of the schools were urban, one was suburban, and one was rural. Three of the five schools had no previous experience with advisory. The participant sample included 29 women and five men, with only one of the 34 participants being Latina; the rest were non-Latino whites. As shown in Table 1, the remaining basic demographic characteristics of age, years of experience in education, and level of education were similar across the three groups.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Advisor Characteristics	Group One No treatment (*n* = 11)	Group Two PD (*n* = 14)	Group Three PD plus coaching (*n* = 9)
Ethnicity			
Latino	0	0	1
White	11	14	8
Gender			
Female	10	12	7
Male	1	2	2
Age			
20–30	2	3	3
31–40	5	7	3
Over 40	4	4	3
Years of experience in education			
Less than 5 years	1	3	2
6–10 years	5	5	3
11–20 years	5	4	3
Over 20 years	0	2	1
Level of Education			
Bachelor's degree	6	9	3
Master's degree	5	5	6
Previous experience with advisory			
Some	5	8	5
None	6	6	4

Intervention

As previously mentioned, the study examined three levels of intervention: none, the course, and the course plus coaching. The mid-level intervention consisted of a 42-hour three-credit college course, *Preparing for the Middle Level Advisory/Advocacy Role*, offered gratis to participants and sponsored through the office of the state's middle level professional association. Of the two-thirds total participants taking the course, one-half was randomly selected to receive an additional semester of coaching intervention, which occurred during and immediately following the professional development course.

Each group and its corresponding intervention is described below:

- *Group One:* All members in this group had received at least advisory awareness session offered by their school districts or the school itself. The principal and assistant principal of the participating suburban school sponsored professional development several years ago in the use of collaborative talk and encouraged teachers to use it in their classroom instruction. All participating schools also provided binders composed of possible activities they might conduct with their student advisees.
- *Group Two:* Members of this group received the 42-hour advisory course offered August through February.
- *Group Three:* Members were also part of the group taking the advisory course, were observed, and then participated in 20 to 24 sessions with the advisory coach. The coaching component began in September and continued into the middle of March.

Advisor Skills Course

Three years ago, I developed a three-credit course on advisory skills and taught it to three separate groups over the next two years. I gathered my original ideas from my work with teacher advisors in many Rhode Island schools and integrated work by Susan MacLaury (2002) as I determined what knowledge and skills advisors needed. In the fall of 2010, with input from the previous course participants, the course was refined.

The new professional development experience began with two whole-day sessions in August and was followed by 11 three-hour sessions ending in February. The course was designed to help advisors develop content knowledge and skills considered by national experts to be essential for quality advisor practice. Course content was designed on a set of advisor characteristics and competencies developed by Hunt, Wiseman, and Bowden (1998) and examined by members of the Guidance Committee of the Department of Education Office of Middle and High School Reform (see Figure 1).

The course syllabus was reviewed by two national advisory experts who agreed to serve as observers upon the study's completion. A research grant and professional support from both my college and the state's middle level professional association helped fund this endeavor. Interest in my study was elevated due to the 2008 regulation that required all middle level schools in the state to have advisory as part of their personalization program.

Course experiences and assignments aligned with the target competencies focused on developing advisors' knowledge in the following areas: the role of the advisor tied to the determined purpose of the school's program, establishing a safe environment for advisees, learning the stages of group development, addressing group process issues, practicing facilitation techniques, assessing leadership styles, examining different roles group members play, and the handling of sensitive issues such as privacy, appropriateness, and personal disagreements. Each class included an initial lecture followed by a simulation and hands-on activities designed to link theory to practice. Videotapes and vignettes from the CD produced as part of the professional development kit, *Launching a Successful Advisory Program* (Niska & Thompson, 2007), provided examples to augment instruction and to demonstrate examples of quality practice. All participants were given a copy of Linda Crawford's *The Advisory Book* (2008), asked to keep a weekly journal reflecting on what they were learning in the class and its application to their own advisory, and required to develop a plan of action and case study for two advisees who needed special attention.

The Effective Teacher-Advisor

- Sincerely cares about all students.
- Demonstrates enthusiasm toward all students.
- Listens to and values student opinions.
- Models respect and effective communication skills.
- Guides student self-reflection and group cooperation.
- Plans developmentally appropriate advisory activities.
- Identifies students needing more intensive guidance and support.
- Assesses the progress of the advisory program.
- Understands the teacher advisor's role and responsibilities.
- Participates in training to improve advisor skills.

From *The Middle Level Teacher's Handbook* by G. Hunt, D. Wiseman, & S. Bowden.

Figure 1. Characteristics of an Effective Teacher-Advisor

The participants were divided into three simulated advisory groups, and interaction with their group was a major part of each training session. The rationale for placing the participants into groups was based on the assumption that it is beneficial for advisors to experience the group from a member's perspective.

Coaching Intervention

For the nine study participants who received coaching, a diagnostic or prescriptive model of coaching that focused on helping participants apply research-based strategies, such as developing a plan of action collaboratively for implementation of a new practice for the next week, to improve advisor skills was employed. Members of this group received coaching for approximately one hour per week for a total of 24 hours over the course of the study. Coaching sessions, which began in September and concluded in the middle of March, were aligned with the professional development course. For example, one session early in the course focused on providing an appropriate advisory environment for an activity used and one later session focused on the use of correct stem words to facilitate group discussions.

Instrumentation

Based on an evolving model of advisor development, it was assumed that content-knowledge expertise in group development and processing aligned with professional development might provide the most powerful approach for transforming advisors' knowledge, skills, and practices. To my knowledge, only one previous research study, entitled *Advisories Led by Trained Facilitators: Their Impact on Middle*

Level Students, had been conducted to explore the impact of professional development on advisors' effectiveness (MacLaury & Gratz, 2002); however, none has examined the impact of coaching on advisors' knowledge and performance. To better understand these relationships, therefore, in addition to my field notes, it was necessary to construct processes and instruments to use as data sources, which I detail below.

Advisor Group Observation and Advisor Interview
A field-tested measure, *Advisor Group Observation* (Schurr, 2002), was used to assess the quality of practices in the advisories, followed by Schurr's *Advisor Interview* to determine the advisors' skills and content knowledge. The *Advisor Group Observation* instrument, originating at the University of South Florida, was specifically developed and field-tested to measure what transpires in an advisory session (Schurr, 2002). It is based on the theoretical assumption that, when certain dimensions are prevalent, they lead to physical and instructional supports. The dimensions are clustered into three sections: physical environment for learning, support for group members, and strategies used by the advisor.

As stated earlier, two national advisory experts, both with extensive backgrounds in advisory implementation and practice, agreed to observe and then assess the practices of 18 participants, randomly selected from each of the three groups, at the end of the project. The experts had no prior knowledge of which participants were assigned to which group, and both they and the interviewers were restricted from discussing the information. The experts were familiar with both parts of the assessment and used a checklist of nine items in the observation with yes or no responses followed by comments. In the interview they also used an eight-question survey.

Participants' Journals
Participants were required to record at least one journal entry, using a semi-structured format, every week. Entries were to reflect learning from their practice and issues with which they were dealing in their advisory group. All participants recorded their overall learning and intentions for making their advisory group stronger at the completion of the study.

Advisor Knowledge Assessment
Although this was a qualitative study, and participant numbers were small, the decision was to include a sample quantitative instrument to test the objectivity of findings. For this purpose, using MacLaury's (2002) assessment items as a starting framework, a true-false and multiple-choice assessment was developed to assist in examining the participants' growth (1) in knowledge of the developmental stages and (2) in using this knowledge to solve typical critical situations. This *Advisor Knowledge Assessment* served to support, confirm, or refute the qualitative data of the study. Recognizing that high-quality leadership of an advisory program rests on an awareness of stages through which a group passes and how an advisory assists the group during this time, 30 of the 42 items emphasized the knowledge of the group process and necessary advisor competencies; the remaining 12 items gauged pertinent decisions an advisor might make. Two forms of the assessment were developed, for pre- and post-test purposes, with an estimated completion time of 45 minutes each.

The focus was on identifying the knowledge and skills that advisors use in practice. For example, suppose one student has tended to dominate group discussions for several sessions, and the other students have tolerated it yet have gradually become quieter and less engaged. The advisor needs to consider two items before she/he proceeds. First, determine the stage of group development. Second, select an intervention based on the stage of group development.

The version of the *Advisor Knowledge Assessment* used in this study was reviewed by the participating national advisory experts to ensure that the content was accurate and research-based. The pre-test was administered prior to the study's beginning in early August, and the final assessment was completed in March of the following year.

Procedures

Prior to the Intervention
Prior to the start of the intervention, the participants in all three randomly assigned groups were administered the *Advisor Knowledge Assessment*. The assessment information was immediately collected, scored, and coded in a database.

During the Intervention
Starting in August, participants in Groups Two and Three participated in the middle level professional development, which entailed attending the advisor skill course that began with two all-day sessions. Eleven evening sessions, which were each three hours in length, were held every two weeks from September through early February. Twenty-four participants completed the coursework; only one participant, who

delivered her baby in January, was unable to complete the training. Two weeks after the course began, I started to observe and coach the nine advisors in Group Three for an hour each week, for a total of 20–24 sessions. Alignment between course topics and the coaching activity for each week was supported with related research-based practices. Reflection sheets were kept to monitor the progress of each advisor. These sheets included what each advisor had learned and what areas needed to be addressed, as agreed to by the coach and the advisor in the follow-up conference.

Following the Intervention

At the completion of the two interventions (course and coaching), the participants in all three groups took an equivalent form of the *Advisor Knowledge Assessment* in order to assess the differences in the post scores of the three groups. The outside observers, who had no knowledge of which advisors were members of the three different groups, used the *Advisory Group Observation* form as they observed 18 of the 34 advisories. They followed up the visits with the *Advisor Interview*, once again with no information on which advisors were in which group. Twenty of the 34 participants (six from Group One and seven from both Groups Two and Three) were interviewed in an eight-question, recorded half-hour interview.

Limitations

This study provides evidence that course-based professional development improved the quality of advisory knowledge and that participation in professional development in addition to coaching further improved practice across a sample of teachers drawn from five New England middle level schools representing a fairly wide demographic. But there are five noteworthy limitations to this study. First, the extent to which the findings relate to advisors in other middle level schools is unknown, and the results should not be generalized to advisories in other settings. Second, all the advisors volunteered to participate in the study, and showed an interest in professional development. Those randomly selected to receive coaching were willing to be observed on a regular basis, and to commit time to follow-up discussions. Third, with the use of a random assignment within the school settings, there is a possibility of treatment diffusion from treatment to non-treatment groups. Participants in the coursework, including those being coached, were told not to discuss their development or to share the activities with each other or with other staff members in their schools. The exact nature and extent of disclosure amongst and between participants was unable to be determined despite these directives. Fourth, even though they were just beginning to lead new advisory groups, the advisors had varying degrees of prior experience with advisory, with about half of the sample having had some prior experience. The number of times advisory was held weekly also differed at the schools, ranging from the equivalent of two times a week at two schools to four times at the other three. Finally, since I designed and taught the course, and also conducted the coaching, there was a tendency on my part to report positive results. Nonetheless, the two outside observers and interviewers helped to validate the research results.

Data Analysis and Results

As discussed, multiple data sources—field notes, participant journals, third-party observations, third-party interviews, and the pre- and post- Advisor Knowledge Assessment—were used as data sources. Throughout the process I wrote analytical memos (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), in which I began to explore emerging themes. After observing Group Three (those being coached), I recorded my reflections about what I observed in my field notes.

Building on these observations and following the method of Miles and Huberman (1994), I transcribed and examined the interviews conducted by the two outside observers, drawing upon the comments of the observers and the journal entries of the participants. I developed an initial coding scheme to align with the research questions and the advisory model that guided the study. For instance, I had broad categories and codes to denote what participants might be learning, such as understanding the developmental stages of the group process, the physical environment, and the use of group processing skills. In addition, several themes identified through writing analytical memos and examining the participants' journals emerged into codes, such as whether advisors felt confident and felt they were using effective practice. Given that this resulted in a sizeable body of data, a matrix listing the three groups in the left-hand column with the themes listed across the top was designed. The means of the differences of the three groups' *Advisor Knowledge Assessment* pre- and post-tests were examined, as a supportive measure, after coding the data and placing the comments in the matrix.

Analysis of the data revealed five themes to explain the preparation of advisors: (1) knowledge of the group development process, (2) opportunity for student voice, (3) a supportive physical and emotional

environment, (4) use of processing skills, and (5) advisor confidence. While these themes are not surprising, they reinforce research and conventional wisdom on what makes an effective advisor.

Knowledge of the Group Developmental Process

Understanding the stages of the group process—preaffiliation, power and control, intimacy, differentiation, and termination (Garland, Jones, & Kolodney, 1965; MacLaury, 2002)—is important to a successful advisory. In each stage, students, as a group, exhibit certain behaviors, and these behaviors need to be noted and understood by the advisor. During *preaffiliation* members need to spend time getting to know each other and building trust. The *power and control* stage is when they establish a hierarchical relationship and must learn to express disagreement in a positive manner. During the typically brief stage of *intimacy* they became interested in their similarities. The *differentiation* stage, the most productive group work stage, is when groups exhibit skills that show they are capable of tackling difficult projects together. The last stage, *termination*, is when a group must evaluate the experience, and complete any unfinished business. An advisor's cognizance of each of these stages allows him/her to select activities that are appropriate to each unique stage and to become more aware of the behaviors that typify the various stages through which groups experience.

The recommendations of MacLaury (2002) and Poliner and Miller-Lieber (2004) on selecting appropriate activities were supported by the participants in the coursework (Groups Two and Three). Without exception, all the course participants who were interviewed commented on the value of the course and how much they learned about the stages of group development. They added that this knowledge of the stage characteristics helped them to make better decisions on which activities to use in their advisory. They also said this knowledge helped them to better understand student behaviors typically displayed during the various stages and to predict how they might react to these behaviors. For example, one course participant summarized her understanding by stating:

> Now I know not to take it personally when my advisees seem to turn on each other and sometimes on me. It is due to the fact that they trust each other and me, too, to express their feelings more openly. I just need to work with them on expressing it in a healthier manner. (Class Comment, October 27, 2010)

Another participant shared her understanding of the importance of selecting relevant advisory experiences that meet the needs of students. She shared that "Our district binder of activities was created with good intentions, but its organization often pointed us in a different direction, and its organizers had probably not thought about the value of aligning suggested activities with the stages of group development" (Interview, March 16, 2011).

Mean score improvement on the *Advisor Knowledge Assessment* measured the participants' knowledge of the group developmental stages and participants' application of that knowledge in hypothetical situations supports this finding. As Table 2 illustrates, the mean score improvement for Group One, the non-treatment group, was 2.4 points. For Groups Two and Three, who took the course, it was 8.7 and 8.4, respectively.

The research findings thus suggest that both the coursework and coursework/coached groups showed a significant difference in participants' knowledge of the stages of group development. The two groups also understood the relevance in understanding typical behaviors of each group development stage and the importance of group development stages when choosing activities.

Opportunity for Student Voice

Writing about middle level student voice, Cushman and Rogers (2008) cite a growing body of knowledge on the importance of engaging students in the decisions that impact them. The use of student voice has no less importance in an advisory group and may be even more important given the fact the group is about them. As an advisory group begins to form and mature, student voice becomes even more important for two reasons. First, students voice is essential in helping the group develop and operate as a cohesive unit. Second, student voice is crucial to enlisting ideas that provide the group with a sense of ownership.

Participants in all three groups wrote in their journals and talked in their interviews about the importance of student voice. However, the coached and course-educated groups, as a whole, shared more in their journals and with the outside observers regarding the importance of involving their students in the decision-making process. An especially interesting finding was that what participants had to say about student voice appeared in their last journal entries, written in February. This would be approximately the time the group would be moving into the developmental

Table 2
Mean Score Differences between Pretest and Posttest Scores on the Advisory Knowledge Assessment

	Pre-test			Post-test			Score Differences
	Test items reflecting advisor knowledge of the Stages of Development (30 possible)	**Test items reflecting an advisory solving problem situations (12 possible)**	**Total**	**Test items reflecting advisor knowledge of the Stages of Development (30 possible)**	**Test items reflecting an advisor solving problem situations (12 possible)**	**Total**	
Group I Non-Trained *N* = 11	20.0	8.1	29.0	21.8	9.5	31.3	+2.3
Group II Trained *N* = 14	20.2	7.5	27.7	26.3	10.1	36.4	+8.7
Group III Trained and Coached *N* = 9	20.3	8.4	28.7	27.3	9.8	37.1	+8.4

stage of differentiation, when the group is able to work together to plan activities and the advisor is increasingly soliciting more student input.

Student involvement in selecting activities and topics increased with each group, especially during the differentiation stage. In the interviews, a number of advisors in the non-treatment group indicated that they used the district-provided activities in the binders, while those who participated in professional development group and the coached group more often mentioned the involvement of students. Several in the professional development and coached groups believed their binders had been constructed without any thought given to the developmental stages; whereas they said they could only make appropriate decisions knowing more about the developmental stages and the personalities of their group members. A seventh grade special education teacher told an outside observer;

> I have learned to include more student voice in the selection of our activities. Not only have I learned this through the course I took, but now I understand this is extremely important as my group matures and it becomes *our* group, not mine. An activity that has a voice is so important. (Interview, March 14, 2011)

The research study findings suggest that a significant difference in participants' understanding of student voice in advisory experiences was demonstrated by those in Groups Two and Three. Participants in these groups realized the importance of the inclusion of student voice, especially as the group matures in its development.

Supportive Physical and Emotional Environment

An effective advisory requires a space designed to help students feel physically and emotionally safe. Crawford (2008), a national authority on advisory, contends that students prosper when they are able to relate to each other, have control over what they do, experience continual growth, feel confident, and enjoy what they are doing. She adds that one of the best ways to ensure that students experience this sense of prosperity is to develop a consistent and supportive structure so their safety does not feel jeopardized. This means that the environment should support students' participation and that there is effective use of time, space, and resources.

The importance of a safe and protective physical and emotional environment was a larger concern for the two groups participating in the professional development, but the outside observers reported that the coached group had the most effective room arrangements. One observer reported seeing students

arriving early and placing the desks into a circle for the discussion to be held that morning. With an advisory session often being just over 20 minutes, those advisees who arrive first can quickly rearrange the room. Another observer noticed an advisor having an individual conference with a student using low voices while the rest of the group was working on an activity out of hearing range. Another example included processing activities with students seated in a circle, allowing all to feel involved with less chance of side conversations.

Once in a great while, however, my advice, as coach, was met with resistance. Following my observations I tried to encourage one of my coached advisors to move his students closer together into one circle instead of two (a larger group with a smaller one in the middle) to keep the students more focused. He had trouble understanding its importance and didn't follow my advice on this particular point. During a subsequent visit, an observer noticed this and commented in his observation notes that, "The double circle and wide spacing between advisees allowed some side-barring, especially between two females students seated in the second circle."

An incident that was not a formal part of this study provided additional confirmation of the effects of coaching on advisors' attention to the physical and emotional environments. During a summer session with a larger group of advisors, we began discussing the importance of establishing a safe structure for an advisory group. A participant shared insights regarding her daughter's experiences with advisory. The participant commented that the advisory group created norms to help establish a trustworthy, inviting environment. In addition, the students created a "Daily News" section to share important events and to communicate information about the day's advisory session. The participant then shared the name the advisor who was a member of the coached group.

Additional compelling evidence highlights how another participant in the coached group developed a deep understanding and appreciation of the importance of creating and sustaining a safe physical and emotional environment for meaningful advisory sessions. A partial entry of her journal reads:

> I have always known that it is so important for students to feel safe physically and psychologically in my classes. But, not until I learned more about the environment needed for advisory requiring the sharing of the more personal side of their lives, did I realize how important it was to be direct and to establish that safe environment, especially at the beginning of the year. I even had to deal with the rolling of the eyes when one of my less influential advisees spoke, but once students learned [appropriate] behavior and to accept each other, they became very open and somewhat protective of each other. I was so pleased. (Journal Entry, February 15, 2011)

These research findings suggest that the coached advisors were the most cognizant of the importance of a safe physical and emotional environment. Their knowledge of space, time, and resources was also reflected in their practice.

Use of Process Skills

The fourth theme that emerged from this study was the use of process skills. Each and every student in an advisory group needs to be heard, not just those who are more outgoing or vocal. Young adolescents need to know how to proceed in a group conversation, and be confident about participating. The effective use of process skills includes entering a conversation with the use of "stem words" (e.g., " I agree" or "I respectfully disagree"), and can greatly assist students with interjecting their points of view into a conversation without disrupting the flow or losing coherence. Students should be able to build upon what has been previously stated, and to agree and disagree in a cordial manner. This practice clearly goes beyond simple listening.

The outside observers commented that those who had received the coaching were the most effective in using these process skills with their advisories. Observers commented that the students knew what to do, were comfortable in responding, and no one student controlled the session. They added that these advisors appeared relaxed, and were part of the group. The only noted exceptions were the Group Two advisors from the participating suburban school, where all teachers had received process skill professional development provided by the school's principal and assistant principal, and used the skill well. The observers were able, however, to detect those from this school who had been coached.

Many of the study's participants commented in their journals, and five of the seven coached participants told the interviewers that being observed and then given suggestions in group process instruction was extremely helpful. In February, a principal walked into a sixth grade teacher's advisory session that I

was observing and coaching. The principal watched and listened as students continued their conversation, following each other with the use of stems. The principal later shared with me his analysis of his observations. He commented, "She really has them engaged, doesn't she? I was impressed by how the students were so involved, and making pertinent comments relating to the discussion."

These research findings provide additional evidence to the claim that the coached advisors were most effective in using and scaffolding the process skills in their advisory sessions. Their students were more focused while engaged in the group conversations than students in the advisories of the participants of the other two groups.

Advisor Confidence

All seven of the coached advisors who were interviewed reported that they had gained confidence from their participation in the study, while several in the coursework group indicated they had also. The interviewers reported that over half of those interviewed in the non-treatment group indicated they needed more assistance, and two in this non-treatment group told the observers that they might benefit from professional development. One specifically commented, "I do not know what I am doing; I need guidance. We were given materials in a binder this past fall, but without assistance, it is not enough to just be given binders" (Interview, March 17, 2011).

The only Latina teacher in the study told the interviewer she has become more confident as a result of being in the course and having been coached:

> I had to be talked into taking the course, and am so glad I did. … Having the coach in my room helped so much. Together we talked about what I could do to improve, and my students grew comfortable with him being there. They would ask, "Where is that blond-haired man?" (Interview, March 17, 2011)

A second coached advisor also expressed an increase in self-confidence as a result of her coaching experience. One particular journal entry compared the advisory coaching experiences with her experiences as a student teacher. Her experiences as a student teacher were beneficial because of the continual feedback she received from her host teacher and her college supervisor. The continual feedback she received from her coach was also instrumental in her development in an advisory role. While she stated she was initially a bit nervous having someone observe her during advisory sessions, "In time I found it to be so helpful to talk about the situation with my coach, and I knew he was there to help me improve my practice and my craft. This has helped my confidence so much" (Journal Entry, February 10, 2011).

These research findings support the assertion that the coached advisors had gained the most confidence from their involvement in the study. Their interaction with a coach, coupled with the coursework, appeared to validate they were performing well in their advisor role.

Discussion

This research study examined how different types of professional development influenced middle level advisors' content knowledge and process practices. Using coaching as the model of embedding practice in professional development (Joyce & Showers, 1983), I contrasted how coursework alone and coursework plus coaching compared with a non-treatment condition in effecting improvements in advisor knowledge and advisory practices.

The results of the study provide strong evidence that a practice-based model of professional development improved the quality of the structural and process features of the advisory environment. Although coursework alone can add to the knowledge base of advisors, professional development plus coaching led to demonstrably higher quality practices than course-based professional development alone. This finding by itself comes as no surprise, but it does raise at least two questions. First, what precisely are the superior practices that coursework plus coaching produce? Second, how did these higher-order interventions accomplish these superior outcomes?

The Group Two participants, who participated in the course, and those in Group Three, who participated in the course plus experienced coaching—both (1) demonstrated knowledge of the stages of development through which advisory groups pass and (2) included student voice in sharing feelings, determining activities, and obtaining feedback in general, while the non-treatment group did neither. The group with no coaching seemed to have understood these materials as well as the coached group, and, in fact, their composite average score on the stages of group development was a bit higher on the post-*Advisor Knowledge Assessment* (8.7 to 8.4). A reasonable explanation for this result might be that a considerable amount of course time was spent focused on the stages of development. Following theory with application,

in the course and again in the advisories, assisted the participants in internalizing and applying their knowledge in actual practice. Time was also spent in each class describing and analyzing typical behaviors of each stage. For example, the participants were given various situations corresponding to each of the developmental stages then asked to identify the stage and indicate how an advisor might deal with each one. The fact that advisors from several schools often traveled together to the course, were excited about the course, and talked with each other about their new learning afterwards may have provided reinforcement that enabled them to internalize their knowledge and its application. Several principals joked about how those in Group Two, in an effort to protect the study's validity, had covered their books with plain brown paper and would not utter a word on what they were learning to other teacher-advisors. Yet there was no restriction on what the members of Groups Two and Three might informally discuss among themselves.

As mentioned earlier, the second theme, where the results for those in Groups Two and Three were similar, was in the value and importance of using student voice. Although several participants in Group One mentioned asking for input from their advisees on various issues, their references to this practice were scattered throughout the study, and they were inclined to use activities that had been developed by their school district and distributed to all the advisors in binders. By contrast, I noticed that participants from Groups Two and Three were more deliberate when they listened to their students' voices. In addition to making it a regular practice to listen to each advisee's thoughts on a regular basis through check-ins, several participants from the Groups Two and Three specifically referenced listening to their advisees when they developed their norms and when they began to plan a group project. Their journals also reflected the fact that they, as a group, became more comfortable in using other activities they felt would work best with their individual advisory group.

It is quite possible these educated advisors learned in class about the value of a regular check-in (when each advisee has a limited time to share what is happening in his/her life) and saw it as becoming an important part of the group process in building both trust and group solidarity. They also learned the value of students developing group norms fairly early in the school year; whereas none of the Group One advisors ever mentioned norm development. As I read their journals, I noticed that the participants in both Groups Two and Three wrote about encouraging student voice in late February and early March. This would be approximately the time of year their advisories would be entering the differentiation stage, an ideal time for asking for students' ideas in choosing and designing a group project.

Although the growth in developmental knowledge and use of student voice resulting from the coursework and coursework with coaching were very similar, the change in practice for both implementing a safe emotional and physical environment and using effective processing skills was greatest in the coached group. By contrast, none of the participants in Group One mentioned either theme in their journals or when interviewed.

When examining the environments of the coached participants, as a coach following an observation, I was able to point out some minor agreed-upon improvements to make their advisory environments safer. Some suggestions made during my visits included: sit with the students while being part of a discussion group; move students closer together so there is less chance for side conversations; and provide more direction for advisory by posting a daily advisory agenda or asking students entering the room to respond to a short survey or whiteboard question. Also, each class member was given a copy of Linda Crawford's *The Advisory Book*, in which she shares ideas on how to structure an advisory at the beginning of the year, and my coaching included specific applications of this material. These findings on the coached group's physical and emotional environment practices were further validated by the observations of the outside evaluators.

In addition to the environmental practice being the strongest with the coached group, findings from this study revealed that the coached group used processing skills, called "collaborative talk," most effectively. It can be difficult to teach process skills because it requires modeling, practice, and specific feedback (MacLaury, 2002). Yet it is so important for the advisor to implement a model or to use stems to help students to know how to proceed in a group conversation and not just listen to those most vocal.

Beginning with the effective use of the statements "I agree" and "I respectfully disagree," coursework participants learned to use the collaborative talk model in the discussions they led in their advisories. By contrast, with some encouragement and concrete suggestions, participants in the coached group were able to improve the quality of the actual conversations

they led. As mentioned earlier, all the participants from the suburban school had been previously educated in the process, were required by their building leadership to use it as a strategy, and as a group were proficient at implementing collaborative talk. However, the outside evaluator was still able to determine which of the two advisors in that school had been coached.

In addition, the coached group expressed the strongest sense of confidence. Other than receiving an awareness session of an advisory's purpose and some binders with possible activities to use in their advisories, none of the participants in the study had ever received any prior professional development on the knowledge and skills required of effective advisors. However, several of those with previous advisory experience indicated that they had learned some things "on the job" through leading an advisory group, but they related that much of the content of the coursework was new to them. None of them ever had any supervisor observe them facilitating an advisory session in the manner they had experienced during student teaching. Although several participants from the coached group were initially nervous about the coach's presence, they wrote in their journals and told the outside interviewers that they really appreciated receiving feedback, getting concrete suggestions, and modeling of strategies because these experiences enhanced their practice. As one coached sixth grade social studies teacher said, "I have become much more confident as an advisor and now feel so much more capable in helping my advisees grow" (Interview, March 18, 2011).

These overall results are preliminary, but they are among the first to provide evidence that coursework plus coaching may have an impact upon the knowledge base and practice of an advisor. These research findings suggest that future education programs for middle level advisors might benefit by integrating learning experiences about group development, and types of activities that work well during various stages. This content background should also include opportunities for involving student voice. Coaching could then be employed to help advisors put those more difficult elements (e.g., use of processing skills, setting up environmental conditions) into practice. Regarding the coaching, it is important to enlist a knowledgeable coach who can relate to the advisor and one with whom the students are comfortable. Topics in advisory can be very personal, so demeanor is very important for the coach to help advance the group.

Policy Implications

School district policy makers may see relevance in the findings from this study as they develop initiatives for improving professional development opportunities for middle level teacher-advisors. Colleges with middle level teacher preparation programs may want to integrate advisory content into their curriculum to better prepare preservice teachers for their important future role. The new teacher evaluation systems being developed in many states include preparation for expanded professional roles, and more teacher-advisors are beginning to ask for additional help in becoming effective advisors.

Although professional development aimed at improving knowledge of the group process and needed skills was helpful, the findings from this study strongly suggest that an added coaching component, in addition to coursework, is essential to effective professional development. Furthermore, it confirms the benefits of an intensive professional development program that emphasizes knowledge and skills in practice. Evidence from this study suggests that coaching in addition to coursework may be a promising quality investment for teacher-advisors, and the young adolescents with whom they work, in middle level education.

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