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Listening to Youth: An Outcome-Based Approach to Facilitating Violence Prevention in Schools

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Issues surrounding school violence demand a great deal of time and attention as the 21st century begins. National coverage of shootings, hostage situations, and the prevalence of weapons in schools have created an uneasiness in society that demands answers to the question, “Are schools safe?”— Many state and national organizations have worked to provide positive interventions to address this important question. Federal and state legislatures, as well as private institutions, have provided funding for research, responsive plans, and prevention strategies to discover etiology factors and/or intentions that will increase school safety.

Background of the Listening to Youth Project

Focus Groups

In 1999, the office of Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan designed and implemented focus groups of middle school students around the state to identify their concerns regarding violence in the schools. Many important ideas were shared in these groups, but the research also discovered an additional finding. Each time participants were asked, at the closing of a focus session, “What do you need from adults to feel safer in your school?” the students unanimously responded, “We need more groups like this!” That is, students universally recognized the power of being able to speak and interact with their peers in an open forum facilitated by adults who would listen rather than tell students what to do or think.

Partners for Peace

Based on this feedback, the Attorney General’s office recommended creating more opportunities for middle school students to participate in similar types of group experiences. To facilitate this project, the Attorney General’s office formed a Partners for Peace committee that included representatives from the Illinois School Counselors’ Academy, Illinois School Counselor Association, Illinois Counseling Association,

Mental Health Association in Illinois, Illinois Violence Prevention Authority, Roosevelt University, and Northern Illinois University.

Pilot Studies

Phase I

The Partners for Peace committee initiated five pilot listening groups in middle schools across Illinois. Counselors from each school attended a 1-day training. Following criteria designated by the committee, each school counselor assembled a cross-section of seventh-grade students representing a social microcosm of the school population to meet for five or six sessions. Written parental permission was obtained, and students met on a rotating schedule so that no single class was repeatedly missed. The goal for school counselors facilitating these groups was to listen to what their students had to say about school violence and its prevention, to help participants explore positive ways to communicate and build relationships. Groups were unstructured, and themes were student-generated. Facilitators helped students process feelings, fears, thoughts, and ideas. After each session, leaders summarized content themes and critical incidents regarding group process. After the final session, students completed surveys regarding how they had been affected by participating in the group.

Feedback from students and counselors was extremely positive. Results showed group members overwhelmingly appreciated the opportunity to share in this type of forum. School counselors used group facilitation skills in which they had been trained but had been previously unable to implement in their school counselor role. One facilitator noted that

This type of dialogue during the sessions is an excellent method for identifying student attitudes and beliefs relative to school climate and potential conflict. Trust is built between counselors and students, providing the link

needed should a conflict arise which would need to be reported to someone in authority.

Phase II

Design. Based on the first pilot's success, the committee decided to test methods for more formally assessing the impact of Listening to Youth groups with seventh graders while still addressing, promoting, and developing students' emotional safety. Regional offices of education identified interested school counselors, who, along with their administrators, were invited to attend a 1-day workshop. Three training events were held: downstate, midstate, and upstate. School counselors were trained on group facilitation procedures, organization of the groups, handbook use, and assessments to be given comparing student participants' pre- and postgroup experiences. Fifty-six school counselors and eight administrators attended the training. From this pool, 22 schools participated in the study, whereas many additional schools implemented groups but did not participate in the research.

As in Phase I, groups were intentionally designed to be heterogeneous representations of whole school demographics. A variety of techniques involving teachers, volunteers, and parents were used to recruit members. Groups ran between 12 and 14 weeks. Counselor feedback was received after each group. Group leaders also audiotaped an early, middle, and group session, so that leader and participant dynamics could be analyzed at different stages of group development.

Feedback. The purpose of assessing the group experience was to see if student ability to address violence prevention and school safety increased. Written counselor observations and reports submitted after each session indicated that students were open to the groups, identified relevant group issues, and developed action plans to address what sometimes were schoolwide concerns. Students reported feeling more connected to their schools and expressed feeling empowered. Counselors commented that they found value in the groups for themselves as well in at least three ways: (a) a positive effect rippling out to the entire school community as participants became ambassadors of their respective social subgroups, (b) administrators and teachers being able to more concretely recognize what a school counselor does, including the value of running groups, and (c) obtaining access to information regarding what is really happening in their schools that otherwise would not have been available to them and that no other adults had previously known.

Results.

Group leaders gave pre- and postgroup assessments on self-esteem, social skill behaviors, anxiety, and anger. All data were used in aggregate form to investigate changes in participants. Analysis and comparison of pre- and postgroup assessments showed statistically significant reduction in overall scores for anxiety and anger, as well as some subscales for each.

Nearly all anxiety subscale mean scores decreased following participation in a Listening to Youth group. A statistically significant difference between pre- and posttest scores occurred on the harm avoidance subscale, indicating significantly less anxiety about the school environment. All subscale mean scores on the anger inventory decreased after participation.

A significant reduction occurred on the physical aggression subscale, indicating students were more likely to consider consequences of fights and conflicts prior to engaging in aggressive behavior.

These findings provided statistical support for the committee's desired outcomes for middle school students: reduction of aggression and empowerment of young people to find alternative ways to handle conflict.

Phase III: The Study

Based upon results from the second pilot, Listening to Youth was expanded so that a larger study could be conducted. The target goal was to train 100 school counselors and involve high school populations by adding ninth-grade students. Groups again ran from 12 to 14 sessions, and students were asked to complete pre- and posttests measuring levels of anxiety, anger, depression, and belonging.

Method

Participants

Forty-three schools throughout Illinois participated in the research portion of the program. There were 9 high schools and 34 middle schools; 368 students took the pretests, and 317 took the posttests.

Rationale

Based on pilot study findings, it was hypothesized that groups in schools led by facilitative school counselors would decrease violence in schools by reducing anger, anxiety, and depression among participants while increasing feelings of belonging.

Instruments

The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM), Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), Children's Inventory of Anger (ChIA), and Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children (MASC) were used to measure pre- and postgroup differences within and among participants. Specifically, scores were analyzed using two-tailed tests in order to compare overall changes in pretest/posttest scores, gender differences, and seventh-grade vs. ninth-grade scores.

Results and Discussion

PSSM

No significant differences were identified on the belonging scale. Mean scores were pretest 3.7212 and posttest 3.7123 on a four-point Likert scale, demonstrating a strong relationship with no change. This indicated that participants in the group already felt connected to their school community and that there was a possible "ceiling effect" of the instrument.

CES-D

Pretest/posttest. There was no significance overall from pre- to posttest means on the depression scale; however, the overall depression score decreased from 14.1645 to 13.7918.

Gender. Pretest male and female scores were significantly different ($p = .012$) with the mean scores for males 12.8841 and for females 15.3382, signifying females were more depressed than males. However, after the group experience, posttest scores no longer indicated significant difference ($p = .068$), demonstrating the group helped reduce not only depression but also the gender gap in levels of depression.

Grade levels. Ninth graders were significantly more depressed than seventh graders on both pre- ($p = .000$) and posttests ($p = .046$).

ChIA

Pretest/posttest. Pretest/posttest differences of the total group revealed that participation had a significant effect ($p = .031$) in reducing overall anger as well as three of four anger subscales. Specifically, frustration ($p = .040$), physical aggression ($p = .041$), negative attitudes toward authority ($p = .010$) all decreased at a significant level. Although not statistically significant, the peer subscale decreased as well.

These results affirm that participation in a Listening to Youth group reduced adolescents' (a) frustration when they encounter obstacles, are interrupted in an activity, or are prevented from

gratifying a desire; (b) physical aggression, such as fighting and conflict without considering consequences; and (c) negative attitudes in reaction to situations that involve authority figures.

Gender. Although male mean scores for anger decreased, it was not at a statistically significant level. However, for girls there was a significant reduction in mean scores on the overall anger ($p = .022$) and authority ($p = .009$) scales. There was also a significant difference between genders. Males scored significantly higher on the frustration subscale in pre- ($p = .000$) and posttest ($p = .001$) comparisons between genders.

Grade levels. Seventh grade mean scores on the overall anger scale from pre- to posttest declined, but not at a significant level ($p = .056$). Authority scores, however, declined significantly ($p = .049$). Ninth grade participants also reduced anger levels; but not at a statistically significant level, likely due to the smaller sample size. Significantly higher scores for ninth graders were found on the physical ($p = .011$) and authority ($p = .049$) subscales.

MASC

Pretest/posttest. Overall anxiety scores among all participants were significantly reduced ($p = .010$) from pre- to posttest. Significance also was identified on 5 of 11 anxiety subscales: physical symptoms, perfectionism, harm avoidance, social anxiety, and performance fear. Note that despite the social microcosm makeup of the groups, anxiety had been reduced even for normal kids.

Gender. Both males ($p = .040$) and females ($p = .041$) showed significant reductions on overall anxiety scores. Additionally, female anxiety levels were significantly higher than males for not only overall anxiety scores but also every subscale on both pre- and posttest scores, making it easy to conclude girls are significantly more anxious than boys.

Grade level. No grade level differences were found in overall anxiety scores on pretest or posttest comparisons. On the subscales of physical symptoms for pretest scores ($p = .033$) and harm avoidance on the posttest ($p = .011$), ninth graders were found to be more anxious than seventh graders.

Discussion

As a result of participating in Listening to Youth groups, seventh- and ninth-grade students experienced significant reductions in their levels of anger, anxiety, and depression. Additionally, because each group represented a cross-section of the various subgroups within a school culture, these groups were reported to have a positive ripple effect on the whole school

environment and provided school counselors with a finger on the pulse of their schools to which no adults previously had access. Moreover, school counselors reported having their role better understood by administrative and teacher colleagues. All of these effects are believed to lead to an increase in school violence prevention, more cohesion and unity in school environments, and an even greater connection between school counselors and all students in a school.