The Career Development of Peer Counsellors in a Vocational Counselling Program

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Résumé

Dix étudiants d'école secondaire qui ont joué le rôle de conseiller de carrière ont été comparés avec un group égal au près de leurs paires de contrôl sur le dévelopment de la carrière. On a trouvé que les conseillers au près de les paires s'améliorent d'une manière significative par rapport au group de contrôl sur le Career Development Inventory (Super, Forrest, Jordaan, Lindeman, Myers, & Thompson, 1979).

Abstract

Ten secondary students who served as peer vocational counsellors were compared with a matched control group on career development. It was found that peer counsellors improved significantly more than controls on the Career Development Inventory (Super, Forrest, Jordaan, Lindeman, Myers, & Thompson, 1979).

During the past twenty years, there has been remarkable growth in the number and diversity of developmental counselling programs. Originating in the work of Mosher and Sprinthall (1971), one of the most innovative program designs is the experience-reflection format. In a supportive atmosphere, students first engage in some form of challenging practice such as learning communication skills. Next, they put their practice to use in a challenging activity such as teaching, tutoring, peer counselling, or interviewing. Cyclically, over weeks or months, direct experience is complemented by a seminar that gives students an opportunity to reflect on their experiences.

While various developmental principles might be stressed in experience-reflection programs, the most important basis involves the Piagetian concepts of accommodation and assimilation. Practice is intended to stretch one's capabilities and conceptions to require accommodation. In practice and in try-out experiences, a person is presented with problems, issues, confusions, contradictions, and discrepancies that cannot presumably be assimilated within one's current level of conceptualization and functioning, yet if the person is involved and responsible, these difficulties cannot be avoided. To help one build new schemas and to extend old schemas, students practice advanced levels of functioning, receive support and feedback, and are given ample opportunity to reflect on their experiences and to consolidate them. Over time as schemas are refined and extended, experience and reflection become

more like tests of their new theories, allowing them to begin assimilating divergent information into a workable frame of reference. Blocher (1977) has admirably summarized these core conditions of development as involvement, challenge, support, structure (one has models of advanced functioning), feedback, application, and integration.

Programs that follow an experience-reflection design (Erickson & Whiteley, 1980) have been shown to promote gains in ego development (Loevinger, 1976) and moral development (Kohlberg, 1976). However, there apparently has been no demonstration that this type of developmental program can also foster career development. While there have been several experience-reflection programs intended to stimulate career development, (Knefelkamp & Slepitza, 1976; Miller-Tiedman, 1980; Touchton, Wertheimer, Cornfield, & Harrison, 1980), each has employed a novel form of measurement that lacks the breadth and empirical support of more established measures. Using peer vocational counselling as a focus for challenging practice and try-out experiences, the aim of this research was to evaluate effectiveness in facilitating career development more broadly.

METHOD

Subjects

Twelve 11th and 12th grade students from a large urban school in Burnaby, British Columbia, were selected as peer counsellors, using the following procedure. A peer vocational counselling program was offered as a credit course for students and advertised through posters and announcements in classes. The course was directed toward students who were interested in human service careers. Students volunteered or were recommended by teachers. Over thirty students indicated an interest. Each student was interviewed jointly by two school counsellors to appraise humanistic qualities such as warmth. During this interview, students self-rated themselves on a list of desirable qualities such as maturity, caring, ability to relate to others, and so on. Next, school records were consulted to exclude students on the basis of attendance and marks. From this shortened list, students were selected on the basis of the quality of recommendations, marks, self-ratings, counsellor appraisal, and tolerance for divergent value systems. Also, care was taken to include representatives from large ethnic groups in the school and to include males (most of the volunteers were female). A final list of twelve names was distributed to teachers for their comments on suitability. Of this group (ten females, two males), ten were available for testing.

From the student body, a sample of ten students was selected to serve as a control group. These students were matched to the experimental group on the variables of sex, academic performance, grade level, and socio-economic level. Teachers were also consulted to assure a reasonable

similarity in the maturity of the two groups. The students, however, were not selected on the basis of humanistic qualities, since this criterion is relevant to peer counselling and is not thought to be a determinant of career development.

Training

During October and November of 1983, the experimental group undertook a weekend workshop and 21 two-hour classes (three per week) to prepare them to function as peer vocational counsellors. With the inclusion of some material from Egan (1975), the workshop and the first twelve classes involved training in communication and counselling skills, following the modular training program of Gray and Tindall (1978). The final nine classes were devoted to basic topics of career counselling. Two classes surveyed the subject of career counselling. One class focused upon available tests of interest and aptitude. One class demonstrated the use of a career grid (Cochran, 1983) to help organize decision-making, and this was followed by a class on practical issues. The last four classes concentrated upon how to help students benefit from CHOICES. During training, instruction followed an experience-reflection design as much as possible. Students were first taught a new behaviour. The behaviour was then demonstrated. Students practiced the behaviour with one another and received feedback from the instructor and other students. Then the experience was discussed and reflected upon in a personal journal students were required to keep. De Charms' (1976) concept of personal causation was encouraged throughout training. A fuller description of the program can be found in MacCulloch (1984).

Peer Counselling

From December 1983 to June 1984, peer counsellors staffed a Career Resource Centre (adjacent to the counselling centre), which consisted of one office for the CHOICES micro-computer, a second office for counselling and testing, and a large room for groups and for informal assistance in career exploration with several cabinets and shelves of career material. Students were required to staff the Career Resource Centre for eight hours each school day, with one peer counsellor on duty each hour. However, they were also frequently found working with clients at other times.

The major duties of the peer counsellors were to provide vocational counselling and to assist students in using the facilities (e.g., CHOICES). They also helped to teach career guidance classes. As there was less demand for vocational services at certain times (e.g., examinations), they were provided with opportunities to participate in other activities such as tutoring. The counselling experiences of students were plentiful.

Aside from walk-in contacts, for instance, the peer counsellors logged 372 individual counselling sessions between January and early March. The problems ranged from personal difficulties to a variety of vocational issues. Throughout the year, peer counsellors attended a seminar that concentrated upon further training, discussion of issues arising in their work, and practical issues regarding such things as referral and limitations. They also kept personal journals.

Measures

The Career Development Inventory (Super, Forrest, Jordaan, Lindeman, Myers, & Thompson, 1979) was selected due to the rigour of its construction, satisfactory reliability and validity, breadth of coverage, and extensive use. The CDI yields a Career Orientation Total (COT) which is an overall measure of career development, made up of four sub-tests. The first sub-test is a 20-item attitudinal scale that assesses planfulness. The second sub-test is a 20-item scale that assesses the quality of exploratory attitudes. The third sub-test is a 20-item scale that assesses the ability of a person to apply sound principles of decision-making. The last sub-test is a 20-item scale that assesses career awareness and occupational knowledge. The COT and each of its sub-tests are expressed in standard scores with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 20.

Procedure

In June, 1983, peer counsellors were selected from a group of volunteers. This group and a control group then completed the Career Development Inventory. In October and November, the volunteers received training in peer vocational counselling. From December to June, they were involved in the Career Resource Centre. The controls were informed of the project but participated only in the ordinary guidance activities of the school. In early June, both groups completed the CDI once more.

RESULTS

Over the year, the peer counselling group changed from an average COT score of 114.3 to an average of 130.6, with respective standard deviations of 6.40 and 7.06. The control group changed from 116.5 to 117.5, with respective standard deviations of 4.99 and 5.46. The difference on pre-test scores was not statistically significant. Using an analysis of covariance, with pre-test scores serving as the covariate, the adjusted difference between post-test scores was significant, $F(1,17) = 19.03$, $p < .01$. Examination of the sub-tests that make up the COT indicated that the peer counselling group improved most in career planning (112 to 135), decision-making (112 to 123) and career exploration (104 to

113). Respectively, the averages for the control group were 102 to 109, 122 to 120, and 108 to 106. The peer counselling group improved very little in occupational knowledge (113 to 116), which is quite similar to the control group (116 to 115).

Peer counsellors were also asked to directly evaluate their own career development, as a result of the program. One peer counsellor felt confused, but thought some progress had been made. Another believed there had been no substantial change. The remainder were very emphatic in their statements of progress. The statement below is representative of most of the evaluations. "I have a much higher degree of career maturity than I did before. I have a better understanding of all the factors that affect a person's choice of career... I think that I have learned a lot from listening to what other people look for in a career, how they see certain careers, etc. I have picked up things about careers such as the positive and negative advantages of a career I had not previously thought of. I think my increased awareness of the factors that should be considered have helped me to re-assess what I really want from life..." Many students mentioned increases in confidence, personal responsibility, caring for and understanding of others, ability to help others and oneself, motivation, and identity. Confusion was often a part of the experience of growth. "I see myself as a more helpful person, but I have found that I'm more confused in the way of my own career. I think this course opened my eyes very wide to the needs and problems people experience in reality." In the personal journals and the final self-evaluation, comments suggest that students experienced to some extent the conditions for personal growth (Blocher, 1977) and had benefitted.

DISCUSSION

Due to sample size, the quality of the volunteers, non-random selection, and the difficulty of employing a more comparative control group in a field setting, the results of this study should be taken as promising and encouraging rather than demonstrative. However, given these limitations, the peer counsellors made quite impressive gains in career development, as measured by the CDI. For instance, the average percentile score for peer counsellors on the post test was 87 (SD = 7.7), compared to 66 (SD = 11.0) for the control group.

As a practical evaluation of a program, this study did not focus upon theory. However, counsellor observations, student discussion, journal entries, and written and verbal evaluations at the end support the principles of development summarized by Blocher (1977) and described more fully in Erickson and Whiteley (1980). Within a structure involving personal support, teaching, modeling, feedback, and reflection, students experienced a stretching of their abilities and conceptions. Anxiety typically transformed into confidence. The requirement to be

sensitive to and understand other points of view, or to be open, seemed particularly illuminating, as was the challenge of being responsible for helping others. The experience certainly involved confusion, but with supports, most students emerged feeling more mature, reliable, and trustworthy. Speculatively, there seems to be considerable personal development that stands behind or accompanies the career development reflected in the CDI scales.

Peer counsellors have been used in counselling programs for quite some time. Often, the controversy surrounding this practice concerns the effectiveness and general soundness of such a service. However, this study was concerned with the contrasting question of whether it benefits students to serve as peer counsellors. In showing that peer counsellors did make impressive gains, the study supports the possibility of more active involvement generally. For example, students might be more systematically involved in activities that require them to help one another. The difficulty with the present program is that it is restricted to but a small number of students, but there is no reason why programs cannot be designed for much broader yet limited student participation. While the evidence is not strong enough to ground such a shift in practice, it does support further exploration.

Perhaps the most important area for further work is the confirmation of effective ingredients of a program. For example, in this research, it is not possible to attribute change to any specific interventions, nor will future studies in field settings be likely to make specific attributions. The reason why is that an isolated part might be detrimental in isolation. Without support, for example, the anxiety and confusion of a challenging activity might lead to deterioration rather than development. If so, it is not any one activity that promotes development, but a proper combination. For broad application, the importance of future research will be to identify basic rather than optimal combinations. That is, do we need extensive and lengthy programs to promote career development? Or is it possible to design more manageable experience-reflection programs for a large number of students?

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