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STUDENT-INITIATED ADULT-ROLE EXPERIENCE: ITS IMPACT ON CLASSROOM CLIMATE AND PERSONAL GROWTH

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Abstract

The effects of adolescents' active learning of adult-roles on classroom climate and self-esteem were examined. Three classes in a secondary school were randomly assigned to experimental, attention-control, and no-treatment control conditions. The experimental class actively participated in the adult-role experience of teaching third-grade children at a nearby elementary school. The attention-control class held conversation sessions for the same length of time as the experimental class. Results indicated a more positive perception of the classroom environment and an increased sense of self-esteem among the experimental class. The results are discussed in relation to the importance of active rather than passive participation in adult-role experiences.

Résumé

Objet de l'étude: les effets sur le climat en classe et l'estime de soi produits par le fait que des adolescents apprennent des rôles d'adultes sur une base de participation. De façon aléatoire, on assigne trois classes d'élèves d'une école secondaire à l'un ou l'autre des trois groupes suivants: expérimental, témoin actif, témoin. Les élèves du groupe expérimental vivent l'expérience du rôle d'adulte qui consiste à enseigner à des enfants de troisième année d'une école élémentaire avoisinante. Pendant la même période de temps, ceux du groupe témoin actif participent à des discussions. Les résultats dénotent, chez les sujets du groupe expérimental, une perception plus positive de l'environnement-classe de même qu'une estime de soi accrue. Ils sont interprétés à la lumière de l'importance, pour les adolescents, d'apprendre des rôles d'adultes de manière active plutôt que passive.

In an earlier study (Lee, Hallberg, & Hassard, 1979), the effect of assertiveness training on aggressive adolescents was examined. Rather than focusing on assertiveness as a target behavior, we examined whether training adolescents to be more assertive had any effect on their aggressive behavior. The results showed that the assertiveness training yielded significant improvement on the assertion scale, but it had little effect on peer-judged aggression. Two major problems emerged as factors hampering the treatment venture. The first problem was peer reinforcement. Although new, socially appropriate behavior was exhibited during the group session, old behavior appeared to be quickly reinforced by peers when the students returned to their home classroom. Hence, without changing the whole milieu, the generalized effect of our intervention seemed to be minimal. Second, like any other group intervention strategy, was the passivity of the program. Students known to exhibit a high frequency of aggressive behavior were selected and assertiveness training was *imposed* on them. In this sense, the students were expected to assume a passive, rather than an active role.

There is some evidence to indicate that

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active learning, with heavy personal responsibility, produces significantly greater learning among participants (Mosher & Sprinthall, 1971). These authors concluded that when secondary school students were given opportunities to learn adult-roles such as elementary school teaching or peer counselling, significant improvement in psychological maturity and self-confidence was evident.

The purpose of the present study was twofold: first, it examined whether student-initiated adult-role experiences are effective in reducing the aggressive behavior of adolescents. Second, it examined the effect of adult-role experiences on the classroom climate and on the self-esteem of participants. Specifically, do student-initiated adult-role experiences produce a positive classroom atmosphere and an increase in the self-esteem of participants?

Method

Participants

Three mixed gender 10th grade classes of a secondary school in London, Ontario, were randomly assigned to experimental, attention-control, and no-treatment control groups. The school is unique in that the students attend because of special academic and/or behavioral problems. Classes are usually small, ranging from 10 to 15 students.

The students in the experimental class (n = 10) were involved in teaching reading, vocabulary, and arithmetic to a group of third grade children at a nearby elementary school. Students in the attention-control class (n = 11) spent the same amount of time as the experimental class discussing general topics related to school and the world of work. Those in the no-treatment control class (n = 10) did not engage in any planned activity.

Student-initiated Adult-role Experience

The adult-role experiences of the experimental class were implemented in the following way. The experimental class was told that opportunities to "teach" younger children (grade 3) in a nearby elementary school was available, and that the whole class would participate. Furthermore, the students were direct to plan the entire procedure *together* as a group. They were to decide from a list of projects provided by the elementary school teacher, what they would like to teach, and how they would teach it. During the next six weeks, the group met with a "supervisor" (a second year student in the master's program in Counselling) once a week to plan the project. The planning phase involved: (a) on-site visits to the elementary school, (b) an invitation to the homeroom teacher in the elementary school in order to discuss mutual expectations, and (c) the planning and preparation of the actual teaching. During the planning phase, the supervisor actively assisted the group in all aspects of decision making and in finding relevant resource personnel and materials. Throughout the planning phase the importance of personal responsibility as a group member was emphasized. Toward the end of this phase, the manpower assignment for each week was determined, fears and anticipated frustrations were discussed, and all necessary materials were prepared and distributed. In order to cultivate an "adult-like" climate, soft drinks, pizza, or potato chips were provided during the several planning sessions.

During the actual teaching phase the participants, acting in the capacity of teacher's aids, instructed the younger children one session per week, for three weeks. Each student, assigned to one or two children, assisted them in their academic work which included story reading, vocabulary, and math.

The students in the attention-control condition held conversation sessions with the elementary school students for the same length of time as the experimental group. The group informally discussed general topics related to satisfaction and dissatisfaction in school, the world of work, and future careers. Throughout the sessions, the leader acted as a listener and a moderator.

Measuring Instruments

The following four criterion measures were obtained two weeks after the termination of the teaching phase: perceived aggressiveness, perceived classroom climate, self-esteem, and perception of peers. Aggressiveness was not the target variable in this study. However, it was examined as a tangential dimension because high frequency of such behavior was reported in this school.

Perceived aggressiveness. Peer rating, similar to the one used by Lee, Hallberg, and Hassard (1979) was used. Students judged all other students in the class as to how often they showed the following behavior during

the past month on a 5-point scale (5 for "very often" and 1 for "never"): (a) swearing, name-calling, and threatening; (b) getting angry easily and throwing objects; and (c) starting fights and hitting others back. For each student the total nomination score was obtained by summing the nominations received from all children across the three areas (i.e., swearing, getting angry easily, and starting fights).

Perceived classroom climate. It was anticipated that student-initiated adult-role experiences would increase the students' perception of the learning environment in a more positive direction. Positive learning environment referred to such student-teacher or student-student interactions as students challenging teacher's opinion, students learning from one another, students caring about one another in class, and teacher understanding the students. The perceived classroom climate was measured by the Class Atmosphere Scale (CAS) developed by Silbergeld, Koenig, and Manderscheid (1976). The CAS consists of 12 subscales; each subscale includes 10 true-false items concerning specific behaviors in the classroom, and assesses quantitatively the perceptions held by the teacher and students about their common class milieu. The following 6 subscales were used because of their relevance to this study: autonomy, affiliation, spontaneity, support, involvement, and aggression. The total score (score range =0 - 60) was used.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was assessed by the Self-Esteem Scale (SE) developed by Rosenberg (1965). The SE measures the self-acceptance dimension of self-esteem. The 10 items were answered on a 6-point agree-disagree continuum, yielding possible scores of 10 (low) to 60 (high). An example of an item is: "I feel I don't have much to be proud of." Although the scale is brief, high reliability and satisfactory validity have been reported (Rosenberg, 1965).

Perception of peers. In order to assess peer relationships among class members, fifteen semantic differential types of adjective-pairs were presented in a 6-point rating continuum. The stimulus words "kids in my class" (abbreviated as KIDS) were stated on the top, with the polarity of each pair randomized. Examples of the pairs are: likable-not likable, honest-dishonest, tolerant of others - critical of others. The scores could range from 15 (negative) to 90 (positive).

Results

The four dependent variables (i.e., aggression, CAS, SE, and peer perception) were treated as a multivariate dependent set, and were compared among the experimental, attention-control, and no-treatment control groups by multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA; Morrison, 1967).

Hotelling's value indicating overall MANOVA was significant, $F(8, 48) = 2.29$, $p < .05$, in concordance with Hummel and Sligo's (1971) suggestion to use a combination of univariate and multivariate analysis of variance, each group mean was compared by univariate analysis of variance. As can be seen from Table 1, significant mean differences were obtained only in the CAS, $F(2,28)=4.07$, $p < .01$, and the SE, $F(2,28) = 3.19$, $p < .06$.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for the Four Criterion Variables

		Criterion Variables							
		Aggression		CAS		SE		Peer Perception	
Group	n	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Experimental	10	1.67	0.40	36.10	5.84	43.60	5.27	70.10	10.30
Attention-control	11	1.94	0.78	28.91	4.81	35.73	9.11	61.45	14.67
No-treatment	10	1.89	0.43	31.10	5.32	37.80	6.91	58.80	12.22

Note. For equality of dispersions, MANOVA $F(20, 2762) = 0.93$, $p > .10$.
For equality of centroids, MANOVA $F(8, 48) = 2.29$, $p < .05$.

In each case the experimental group revealed higher mean scores than the attention-control and no-treatment control groups, with no significant differences between the latter two groups.

Discussion

Are student-initiated adult-role experiences effective in enhancing positive classroom climate and a sense of personal worth? The above data supports an affirmative answer. The experimental group, in contrast to the attention-control and no-treatment control groups, appeared to perceive the classroom atmosphere more favorably, and also appeared to have an enhanced sense of self-esteem. As to the question of whether the adult-role experience is effective in reducing aggressive behavior, the data were disappointing. There was no significant differences among the three groups in perceived level of aggression. Significant improvements in self-report aggressiveness without accompanying concomitant change in peer rating were reported by Lee, Hallberg, and Hassard (1979).

Several points need to be mentioned.

First, the number of sessions was the same between the experimental and attention-control, and yet the contact time with significant adults was greater for the experimental than the attention-control subjects. Although this raises some question about the internal validity of the study, controlling the time for contact with adult trainers would have weakened the external validity. Second, it should be noted that, with the exception of perceived aggressiveness, there was no pretest data in the present study. Although the classes were randomly assigned to experimental conditions, there was no guarantee that the groups were equivalent. The result of analysis of variance on the pretest data available (i.e., perceived aggressiveness) suggested that there was no significant differences among the three groups, F (2,28) = 1.33, $p > .05$. Third, the unique nature of the sample in this study should be reiterated. The subjects in the study were adolescents who are referred to this school because of their special academic and/or behavioral problems.

The design of this study does not allow us to claim that an adult-role experience is more effective than other approaches in improving classroom atmosphere and self-esteem. Perhaps equally effective outcomes could have been achieved using a traditional group counselling approach. However, the idea of emphasizing an adult-role experience initiated by the students seems to have considerable merit. Our approach is novel in the sense that the whole class was given an opportunity to learn adult-role behavior, and participated throughout the study in an active rather than passive way. The participants actively tested new attitudes and skills in real situations where opportunities for more satisfying relationships or keener appreciation can occur naturally. As has been suggested by Blocher (1977), active learning may be a crucial factor in any learning situation. The results of this study, taken together with many favorable anecdotal reports (not reported here), seem to suggest that counsellors need to design more student-centered, active intervention strategies designed to change the interpersonal environment.

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