

The Club as a Non-threatening Group in Adolescent Counseling: Three Years of Success

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As a school counselor who assists students in educational and career decision making, I became aware of significant student interest in the field of psychology. However, this small rural high school did not offer a psychology course. Due to the demands of my counseling position, I turned down many students' requests to teach a psychology course. Then one day, on a return trip from a college fair at the state university, an idea was conceived by which the students' needs could be met without compromising my counseling role. Gail, a Junior, approached me to discuss her interest in majoring in psychology in college and in order to become a counseling or clinical psychologist. In discussing the lack of opportunity for her to explore this interest through our high school program, and my reluctance to modify my counseling role to include academic instruction, we conceived the idea of an after hours activity to become known as The Behavioral Sciences Club.

The Organization

Plans were made; a proposal drawn up, submitted to the principal and approved; posters were hung; announcements were made; I addressed social studies classes; the sign-up sheet was posted; and the first meeting was called. I told the eight or ten students who showed up for the organizational meeting that this was to be their club; that they would decide the nature of the activities. I envisioned after school meetings with rats and mazes. That is not what they wanted! Overwhelming student interest was for (1) understanding why people behave the way they do, (2) discussing personal and social problems, and (3) discussing problems of the club members. Interestingly, few of these students had sought me out for personal counseling. Indeed, they did not think they needed counseling: they just wanted to discuss their problems with me, with the support of the group.

The students decided on Wednesday evening meetings, from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. (when many of their parents were attending their meetings), instead of

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afternoon meetings. A total of fifteen students ended up forming the group for the club's first year of existence.

The Activities

The club activities started with each member giving their mini-biography and an expression of their hopes for the future. I volunteered to give mine first (self-disclosure) to encourage the students to present theirs. I presented mini-lectures on personality theories to promote discussion, with particular emphasis on Adler's concepts of life style (Adler, 1964; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964), life style convictions (Mosak & Dreikurs, 1973), and inferiority feelings (Mosak & Dreikurs, 1973). The club went on four field trips that first year, but the main attraction was the Wednesday evening discussion meetings. I can not count the number of times a student said "This isn't really a problem, but what would you do if . . ." One student remarked, during a group discussion. "Boy, this is really going to help me get what I want more often."

The second year ten of the first year members continued with the club (three had graduated). This permitted me to build on the concepts presented the first year by formally introducing cooperation and encouragement (Dreikurs, 1968), having the "veteran" members welcome and help along the new members. My ears still ring to the sound of Sandy saying "Mr. Rich, that wasn't a very encouraging thing to say." Because several members were interested in being student aides in the elementary school, I introduced them to the four goals of misbehavior (Dreikurs, 1968). There were four field trips the second year, including one to the state prison, but the Wednesday evening discussion meetings remained the focal point of the group. Enthusiasm abounded.

The third year eight members were in the club for their third year and three were in the club for their second year (six had graduated the second year). This club make-up promoted advanced concepts of emotion as the result of ideation (Mosak & Dreikurs, 1973; Ellis, 1973), cognitive restructuring (Ellis, 1973; Lazarus & Fay, 1975), and having the courage to be imperfect (Mosak & Dreikurs, 1973). In fact, a few members bought tee shirts in support of NASAP 78. Social Interest (Mosak & Dreikurs, 1973; Adler, 1964) was promoted further through the helpful interactions of three membership groups (first, second, and third year members). Indeed, it was impossible to distinguish some second from third year members in terms of their integration into, and functioning within, the group. There were only two field trips this third year. The Wednesday evening discussion meetings flourished, with the overall attendance record the best of the three years.

Who Joined

First Year

Girls 14, Boys 1; Seniors 3, Juniors 3, Sophomores 9.

Second Year

Girls 17, Boys 1; Seniors 6, Juniors 11, Sophomores 1.

Third Year

Girls 12, Boys 4; Seniors 13, Juniors 2, Sophomores 1. Note: Membership was restricted to Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors by group vote. There were no organized membership drives the second and third years.

Frequently, when discussing the club with other counselors and educators (including many "Adlerians"), they have expressed the concern that this type of group would attract only the top level, intellectually curious students. This has not been my experience! I have had a broad range of students, both in intellectual ability and in academic and career interest, join the club. The intellectual ability and academic interest has ranged from a Presidential Scholar (a two year member), to students who would have to take a fifth year to finish high school or who have left high school without graduating (one and two year members). Career interests have included Psychologists, Social Workers, Nurses, Secretaries, Models, a Biologist, a Translator, an Animal Trainer, and a "Housewife" and Mother, certainly a broad range of interests. I have not noticed any particular problems with this heterogeneous group make-up, especially when "Social Interest" and "Encouragement" are part of the subject at hand.

Adoption

Since starting the club I have met several school counselors who have expressed an interest in starting group work, but who have said, "My administration doesn't approve of it," or "It's scary, I might blow it," or "I tried a sensitivity group, but the kids lost interest after only a few weeks," or "I just don't know how to start." I have told these counselors about my successful experiences with the club, and encouraged them to try something similar. After all, it is non-threatening. . . to the kids, to counselors, and even to wary administrators. Want to try it? The proposal that got our "therapeutic" club started is presented below.

Proposal for Behavioral Sciences* Club

A Behavioral Sciences Club at Inter-Lakes High School will benefit the students and the community through promoting career awareness of, and exploration of interests and community activities in, the Behavioral Sciences.

CAREER AWARENESS

The first phase of the club's activities will be to acquaint students with the many career opportunities in the Behavioral Sciences, such as: the different types of social workers, psychologists, and counselors; personnel workers; social scientists; intellectual assessment specialists; vocational rehabilitation workers; probation workers; and many more.

EXPLORATION OF INTERESTS

The second phase, which overlaps the first in content and time span, is designed to give the student an opportunity to explore his/her interests in the Behavioral Sciences to help determine whether he/she would really enjoy working in this field. This exploration will include suggested readings, discussion of topics, and experiments in Sociology and Psychology. Field trips may add to the exploration process.

COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

The Behavioral Sciences Club will contribute to the community through volunteer work and by supporting the work of organizations like the New Hampshire Youth Association for Retarded Citizens (NHYARC) through fund raising, active participation, and/or public awareness projects. The Behavioral Sciences Club may wish to take on a major project such as a Behavioral Sciences Fair as a public awareness project.

*Behavioral Sciences here refers to Sociology, Psychology, and Anthropology.

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