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Cover Page Footnote

Research Abstracts (Refereed for presentation at Symposium)

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This study attempted to validate the challenge/adventure methodology as applied to sexually abused/exploited youth in a residential treatment placement by measuring personality and behavioral changes in those youth. The Fresh Start Program is a special living and learning placement for youth between the ages of 12-18. Youth in placement typically present a complex and variable assortment of educational, psychological, and behavioral problems. The youth live in foster family homes, which operate under the "Family Education Model" for behavioral management and behavioral improvement. There are two homes on the grounds of the large camp and retreat center facility in Northern Wisconsin, and the youth attend a special education school on the ground. Average length of stay in the placement is 12 months. The challenge/adventure program overlaps the academic curriculum, and the counseling program, as it is the teachers and therapist who facilitate the challenge/adventure sequence. In a typical school year of 180 days, the youth spend about 140 days in school, and about 40 days on special adventure trips. The whole program for psychological and educational intervention was complexly interwoven with the challenge/adventure program, and it is thus difficult to ascertain the influence of the various dimensions of the total system. It might be argued that is study would be better titled a an evaluation of a comprehensive placement and treatment program, not of the challenge/adventure methodology. However, the Fresh Start Program represents a unique model for residential treatment placement, in that the whole program was designed to follow challenge /adventure theory and practice. It can be argued, thus, that any study on the impact of the program can be viewed as quite relevant to the question of validating challenge/adventure programming. The data were collected from 13 youth including 7 males and 6 females. The age range was 12-18 with an average of 14.8. All of the youth had a comprehensive psychological and psychoeducational diagnostic evaluation prior to placement and multi-disciplinary staffing had assigned a primary psychoeducational diagnosis of "behavior disorder." The pre-placement psychological and psychoeducational evaluation provided data on academic achievement based on both the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT) and the Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PIAT). When the youth entered the program they were given the Tennessee Self-Concept Inventory. At the end of the first week of placement, four adults who had had interaction with the youth filled out the Jesness Behavior Checklist (JBC). All four tests were administered at the termination of placement. This study essentially involved comparison of the pre-program and early placement data to that at termination of placement. Because of the small number of subjects, there were no statistical analyses of the data. Instead, the results are shown as tabular and graphic summaries. Based on these data, it appeared that gains were great in academic achievement as measured by WRAT and PIAT. It was suggested that self-concept gains were the greatest in the areas of identity awareness, the concept of self as physical beings, and in "social concept." Many have criticized assessment of self-concept changes in any study attempting to validate challenge/adventure methodology, arguing that increases in self-concept may or may not be accompanied by actual behavior changes. In theory, increased self-concept should bring improved social behavior. The results of the JBC showed that there were a number of positive behavioral changes in the youth. The

results were discussed in terms of validation of the total challenge/adventure methodology. It was recognized that the complexity of the total living and learning program made it difficult to factor out specific dimensions of the program as causative in the improvements in self-concept, behavior, and academic achievement. However, because the total program was designed around the challenge/adventure methodology, the results do seem to offer some validation of the approach.

Selected Reference

Smith, T.E., Roland, C., Havens, M., & Hoyt, J. (1992). The theory and practice of challenge education. Cazenovia, Wisconsin: Raccoon Institute.

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