

Character Development Results with High-Risk Students in a Georgia School Alternative Program

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Abstract

Students attending an alternative program serving high-risk students from two counties in rural Georgia during school year 2004-2005 were taught Social Responsibility Training (SRT®), a classroom cognitive behavioral character development curriculum. Intervention objectives were to a) decrease student risk of school failure, and b) increase social responsibility as reflected in attitudes and behavior in class. Program director rated student risk upon entry in the school program, at time of transition back to home school, or at the end of the school year for students who remained in the program. Teachers rated student attitudes and behavior before and after SRT intervention. Results showed student risk ratings decreased significantly during the school year, and student classroom attitudes and behavior increased significantly. Many students received in-school and out-of-school suspensions related to the behavior challenges in managing this student population with multiple risk factors.

Alternative Students at Risk

During school year 2000-2001, there were 10,900 public alternative schools and programs for at-risk students in the U.S. As of October of 2000, 612,900, or 1.3 percent of all public school students were enrolled in public alternative schools or programs for at risk students (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002).

Student enrollment in the nation's public alternative schools and programs is highly fluid. Students are removed from and returned to regular schools on an individual and daily basis, for a variety of reasons. Many public alternative schools and programs aim to return at-risk students to regular schools as soon as students are prepared to do so. Some students do return to regular schools less "at risk," but many are sent back to remain in (by choice or decree) an alternative school or program for the duration of their education (Kleiner et al, 2002, iii).

Lifetime Impacts for High-Risk Students

When a young person is suspended from school for behavioral problems, substance abuse or truancy, or chooses to drop out of school, this event frequently leads to long-term psychological adjustment problems, unemployment or underemployment, substance abuse or other risk taking behaviors, and frequently, involvement in either the criminal justice or the welfare systems. Long-term outcomes nationally for students referred to alternative schools or programs are not known.

Reasons for referral to alternative programs from mainstream schools suggest that this population of students is at particular risk for school failure and related life problems. Kleiner et al. (2002, v) reported that the five most common student-related reasons nationally for transfer to an alternative school or program are: 1) possession, distribution, or use of alcohol or drugs; 2)

physical attacks or fights; 3) chronic truancy; 4) possession or use of a weapon (other than a firearm); and 5) continual academic failure.

Asche (1993) reports findings from Wells and Bechard (1989), who identified four major categories of risk factors that may lead to school failure: a) school-related; b) student-related; c) community-related; and d) family-related. The present study was designed to evaluate the impact of a cognitive behavioral character development intervention targeting “student-related” risks for high-risk students in an alternative high school and middle school program serving two Georgia counties. Our objectives were to reduce student risk factors and increase prosocial behavior, skills and motivation.

Cognitive Behavioral Character Development Intervention

The SRT character education curriculum utilized in this study is designed to motivate each student to understand his/her choices and their impacts (Lasater, Robinson, Willis, Meyer, Jahns, Bush, Beckett, Bruck & Duffey, 2004). SRT was developed from the foundation of Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT®) (Little & Robinson, 1988), an evidence-based cognitive restructuring correctional curriculum used with over 800,000 offenders nationally since 1987, and recognized by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy as a cost efficient intervention that reduces criminal recidivism (Little, 2000). The intent of SRT is to provide school or community intervention for high-risk youth prior to significant criminal justice involvement.

SRT middle and high school one-semester workbook-driven and standardized curricula embody cognitive re-education, habit change skill building, emotional management and building decision making skills. The class curriculum requires each student to complete and present to the class 38 structured cognitive-behavioral exercises and testimonies related to his/her life choices, challenges, and decisions.

SRT curricula are delivered in open-ended classes. Students can enter the class during the semester, and each works at his/her individual pace to complete and present to class exercises and tasks sequentially. This procedure provides a flexible tool to school administrators for student referral, facilitates the learning process, and allows the school to maintain ongoing classes. Open-ended classes were a benefit in this project because of frequent entrances and exits for students referred to the alternative school program.

Method

Participants

Study participants were 93 students who attended 30 days or more of school during school year 2004-2005 at the CrossRoads Success Academy in Eastanollee, Georgia. During the school year studied, the CrossRoads program served high-risk middle and high school students from Franklin and Stephens Counties in Northeastern Georgia. CrossRoads falls into the State of Georgia educational program classification described as: “Disciplinary alternative education program serves students who have been excluded from the regular classroom/school due to disruptive and/or violent behaviors, or are returning from placement in a Department of Justice Program” (State of Georgia Alternative Education, 2004).

Students were sent to CrossRoads by either “referral” or “tribunal” from Franklin and Stephens County Schools. Students sent by “referral” (57.9 percent of the study group) were young people with disciplinary problems in a mainstream school setting whom it was hoped would benefit by the structure and accountability of the CrossRoads program, but who had not yet committed serious violations leading to a disciplinary “tribunal.” Some students referred to the program elected to remain at the CrossRoads program after their required period because they preferred the support and accountability of the program.

Students sent by “tribunal” (42.1 percent of the study group) were each mandated by a District disciplinary tribunal to CrossRoads, and were not permitted to return to their home schools until they had completed the following five minimum requirements: 1) attended one full semester at CrossRoads; 2) achieved at least 1201 “points” awarded based on class attendance and participation; 3) middle school students were required to pass all their classes at Crossroads, and high school students were required to achieve a minimum of two Carnegie Units; 4) successfully completed all SRT class requirements; and 5) participated in a transition meeting with their home district to plan for return to a mainstream school.

Procedure

All 18 professional staff members at CrossRoads including Director, Teachers, Counselors, and Aides received 21 hours of Social Responsibility Training (SRT) school “Coach” training during August of 2004. Coach training covered the theoretical and research foundation for the cognitive behavioral approach, class facilitation skills, and instruction in the structured process of the class. Each trainee was required to complete and share with peers during the training many of the SRT exercises in order that each staff member understand first hand what is asked of students during the class.

Overall school and community risk profile for CrossRoads was assessed utilizing results from the Bowen and Richman (2003) School Success Profile, a nationally standardized profile of school strengths and challenges. The School Success Profile (SSP) for students at Crossroads was assessed by the Jordan Institute for Families at the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill during the previous school year in December of 2003. That assessment provided an “Individual Adaptation” and “Social Environment” Profile for 47 of the 69 active students at the school that year who completed questionnaires during the survey.

Range and frequency of student discipline incidents that led to students' referral to CrossRoads were gathered from the school annual report (Beckett, 2005). During school year 2004-2005, the CrossRoads Program Director completed a data collection form for each of the 93 students who remained in the program for more than 30 school days. This form included the following demographic information for each student: a) age upon program entry; b) grade in school upon program entry; c) gender; d) whether or not the student was currently involved in the criminal justice system; e) whether or not the student was in Special Education.

Director Beckett also completed pre-risk ratings for each student upon program entry, and post-risk ratings for each student upon program exit (or end of school year if still active) on five risk statements (ratings were made utilizing the following scale: 1 = Low Risk; 2 = Some Risk; 3 = Moderate Risk; 4 = High Risk; 5 = Very High Risk) Risk statements were: a) attitude toward school authorities, b) degree to which student takes responsibility for self, c) degree to which the student is manipulative, d) level of academic effort, and e) depth of truancy problems.

The director also reported numbers of out-of-school and in-school suspension days during each school grading period and final disposition status for each student at the end of the school year. The director stated that in-school suspensions were a frequently used "time out" tool for students to allow them to contemplate their behavior and calm down prior to returning to the classroom.

Ten classroom teachers and aides who had received SRT Coach Training taught the one semester SRT cognitive behavioral class to all students attending CrossRoads during school year 2004-2005. Teachers and aides filled out class behavior and attitude rating scales to measure changes in social responsibility for each student when he/she entered the class, and when the student completed class requirements. A 10 point rating scale was utilized where 1 = Very Little and 10 = Very Much. Items rated for each student were: 1) student expresses motivation to

change; 2) student takes responsibility for his/her situation; 3) student takes constructive action to change; 4) student follows the rules of the school and society; 5) student maintains abstinence from alcohol/drug use; 6) student participates constructively in assigned activities; 7) student shows positive social attitudes; 8) student is developing a positive support system; 9) student displays regret for past negative choices; 10) student makes realistic plans for the future.

Results

School and Community Profile

Specific social environment and individual adaptation risks and assets for CrossRoads students were identified in the following areas surveyed during the School Success Profile conducted during school year 2003-2004 (Bowen & Richman, 2003): Social environment risks were a) Neighborhood youth behavior; b) School satisfaction; c) Teacher support; d) Friends support; e) Friend behavior; f) Home academic environment; and g) School behavior expectations. Individual adaptation profile risks were “school engagement” and “trouble avoidance.” Average age of the 47 students surveyed for the School Success Profile was 14, grades represented were six through 12, gender was 81 percent male, and those qualifying for free and reduced lunch were 70 percent. Forty-nine percent of the students were black, forty-three percent were white and eight percent were other races.

School Success Profile findings (Bowen & Richman, 2003) the previous school year showed that the cross section of students assessed at CrossRoads lived in challenged neighborhoods and families, were subject to potentially negative or unsupportive influences from both relatives and friends, were alienated from school and from authority figures, and were accustomed to being in conflict situations. Students characterized themselves as relatively happy, and as performing reasonably well academically.

Disciplinary Incidents Leading to CrossRoads Referral

Types of disciplinary incidents at their home schools that led to students being referred to CrossRoads were documented in the annual report for 83.2 percent of students who attended CrossRoads during the 2004-2005 school year. The frequency from highest to lowest number of incidents (many students had multiple incidents leading to referral) was as follows: 1) other; 2) fighting; 3) drugs except alcohol and tobacco; 4) weapons other than firearm; 5) larceny/theft; 6) tobacco; 7) threat/intimidation; 8) disorderly conduct; 9) battery; 10) vandalism; 11) sexual harassment or sexual offense; and 12) alcohol. These reasons for referral are consistent with national patterns of referral to alternative schools and programs reported above from Kleiner et. al. (2002).

Demographic Profile of the 2004-2005 Student Population Studied

The population studied at CrossRoads displayed significant risk factors associated with school failure and dropout, including high representation of students in the middle to high school transition years, a majority of males, a high percentage of African American students, and a significant number of students in Special Education, as well as students with criminal justice system involvement. Table 1 shows the demographic profile for the 93 students studied at CrossRoads during the 2004-2005 year.

Table 1: Student Characteristics for School Year 2004-2005	Value
Mean Age upon entering CrossRoads	14.9
School Grade upon entering CrossRoads	6th = 3.2%; 7th = 23.6%; 8th = 30.1%; 9th = 27.9%; 10th = 8.6%; 11th = 2.2%; 12th = 3.2%
Gender	Male = 82.8%
Race	White 57%; Black 42%; Mixed <1%
Criminal Justice System Involvement	Yes = 19%
In Special Education	Yes = 24%

Mean age for students attending CrossRoads for more than 30 days during school year 2004-2005 was 14.9 years. The majority (81.6 percent) of students were in grades 7-9, with fewer students in lower or higher grades. 82.8 percent were male, consistent with national findings from Helping America's Youth (n.d.), "Statistics show boys are at greater risk than girls for developing learning disabilities, illiteracy, dropping out of school, substance abuse problems, violence, juvenile arrest, and early death caused by violent behavior."

Forty-two percent of CrossRoads students were African American, whereas the African American percentage of Stephens and Franklin county populations in the 2000 Census were measured at 11.9 percent and 8.82 percent black, respectively (Ecanned, 2006 and Wikipedia, 2006). Kleiner et. al (2002, iv) found that 12 percent of all students in alternative schools and programs for at risk students were in special education, whereas 24 percent of CrossRoads students studied had Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The school thus served a remarkably high-risk population.

Year-End Status for CrossRoads Students Studied

Table 2: Year End Student Status	Percentage
Successfully Transitioned to Home School (n = 48)	51.6
Continued Enrollment at CrossRoads (n = 17)	18.3
Transferred to Another School (including home school) or Withdrew (n = 18)	19.4
Expelled or To Detention or Prison (n = 10)	10.8

Over half of CrossRoads students studied (51.6 percent) were successfully transitioned by year end back to their home schools. 18.3 percent of students at CrossRoads were expected to return to CrossRoads for the next school year, either because they had not met CrossRoads requirements to

transition back to their home schools, or because they elected to remain at CrossRoads because of the greater support and accountability this specialized setting provided.

Another 19.4 percent of students either moved to another school or district, including those who moved to home schooling, or withdrew from school. This high number of students transferring or withdrawing is another indicator of the highly fluid population of students and families served by the school. Ten point eight percent of students were expelled during the year through CrossRoads Disciplinary Tribunals or had gone to juvenile detention or prison.

Pre and Post Ratings of Individual Student Risk

Individual risk upon program entry (Pre-Risk), and post-risk ratings (Post-Risk) for each student upon program exit (or end of the school year if still active at CrossRoads) was rated on five student risk dimensions by the Crossroads Program Director for those students who remained in the program for more than 30 school days. Possible total risk ratings ranged between five and 25, with five representing “low risk,” 10 representing “some risk,” 15 representing “moderate risk,” 20 representing “high risk,” and 25 representing “very high risk.”

Table 3: CrossRoads Student Pre-Post Risk Ratings	Mean and (SD) for Total Pre- Risk Rating	Mean and (SD) for Total Post- Risk Rating
Overall Student Group (N = 93)	19.1 (3.0)	15.6 (3.9)
Successfully Transitioned to Home School (n = 48)	17.8 (3.0)	13.6 (3.2)
Continued Enrollment at CrossRoads (n = 17)	20.1 (2.2)	16.1 (3.3)
Transferred to Another School (including home schooling) or Withdrew (n = 18)	20.3 (2.6)	18.4 (3.0)
Expelled or to Detention or Prison (n = 10)	21.2 (2.4)	19.3 (2.6)

As is evident in Table 3, pre-risk ratings upon entry to CrossRoads for all students studied were in the moderate to high risk range. Post-ratings for all students upon program exit (or end of

the school year if still active at CrossRoads) were in the moderate risk range. For students overall, and for each subgroup shown in Table 3, One Way ANOVA for two correlated samples showed significant reductions in Pre-Post student risk ratings. Ps for pre-post risk rating differences were $< .0001$ for Overall Student Group, Successfully Transitioned to Home School Group, Continued Enrollment at CrossRoads Group, and Transferred to Another School Group. Ps for pre-post risk rating differences for students who were expelled, or sent to detention or prison were $< .01$. One Way ANOVAs for correlated samples for the overall group on each of the five pre-post risk factors rated for each student showed significant reductions in pre-post risks rated, $P < .0001$.

Classroom Teacher Pre-Post Ratings of Social Responsibility

Ten CrossRoads teachers and aides filled out class behavior and attitude rating scales for 82 of 93 students when each student entered SRT class, and when the student completed class requirements. Data was missing for six students who did not complete SRT and five 11th and 12th graders who did not participate in the class. Data for one rating dimension, “Student maintains abstinence from alcohol/drug use,” was eliminated from the analysis because most raters left this blank, commenting that they did not have any objective way of evaluating whether students were abstaining from alcohol/drug use. As a result, possible total rating scores for each student participating in SRT ranged between 9 and 90.

One-way ANOVAs were completed for pre-post teacher ratings of student social responsibility at the beginning of the SRT class and at the time students completed the class. Post social responsibility scores were significantly higher for the participating student group ($P < .0001$). Mean pre-post ratings for the overall student group increased from 44.98 to 58.12, suggesting a moderate overall increase in social responsibility as measured by the classroom social responsibility rating scale.

In order to better understand the significance of pre-post social responsibility ratings for the participating student group, additional one-way ANOVAs were conducted on results for three approximately equal subgroups of the 82 students for whom data was available, based upon initial high, medium, or low overall ratings of social responsibility as measured by teacher classroom ratings. ($n_s = 28, 27$ and 27). Means and SDs for these three subgroups appear in Table 4.

Table 4: CrossRoads Student Pre-Post Social Responsibility Ratings for Subgroups with High, Medium and Low Initial Ratings	Mean and (SD) for Total Pre-Social Responsibility Rating	Mean and (SD) for Total Post-Social Responsibility Rating
High: Students with the highest rank ordered Pre teacher ratings of Social Responsibility (n = 28)	66.0 (6.8)	71.4 (13.0)
Medium: Students with next highest rank ordered Pre teacher ratings of Social Responsibility (n = 27)	45.5 (6.1)	63.5 (16.1)
Low: Students with lowest rank ordered Pre teacher ratings of Social Responsibility (n = 27)	22.7 (8.8)	30.9 (16.0)

Examining subgroup results based upon overall Pre teacher ratings of Social Responsibility was useful in understanding the patterns of change in these ratings. ANOVAs for pre-post mean overall social responsibility ratings for high, medium and low initial social responsibility groups as shown in Table 4 resulted in Ps for pre-post changes for medium and low social responsibility groups $< .0001$. Differences for the pre-post mean overall social responsibility ratings for the high group were non-significant. Those students who were rated medium or low in overall social responsibility prior to completing the SRT class thus improved significantly as rated by their teachers.

Out of School and In School Suspensions for CrossRoads Students

62 of the 93 (66 percent) CrossRoads students for whom data was collected had at least one out of school suspension day during the school year studied. Mean number of out of school suspension days for students who were suspended at least one day during the school year was 3.27 days, and the number of days suspended per student ranged from 1-35 days. The program director reported that there were several major drug-related incidents at CrossRoads during the school year that contributed to the high number of out of school suspensions reported. The 20 students suspended from school for five or more days during the school year were not rated as significantly higher than the overall population on pre-risk ratings by the Director, and there were not significant pre-post risk changes for this group.

Seventy-nine of ninety-three (82.8 percent) of CrossRoads students received at least one in-school suspension during the school year 2004-2005. Mean number of in-school suspensions for these 79 students was 5.7, and the overall number of in school suspensions ranged from 1-26. The 45 students at CrossRoads who received five or more in-school suspensions during the school year had slightly higher mean pre and post total risk ratings (pre 19.7 vs. 19.1 and post 16.2 vs. 15.6) than the overall student population studied. One way ANOVA results for these 45 students who received five or more in-school suspensions during the school year showed a significant reduction in pre-post risk ratings ($P = <.0001$).

Discussion

Our objectives for high risk alternative program students at CrossRoads were to decrease student individual school risk and increase school social responsibility as measured by program director and classroom teachers rating before and after SRT intervention. We found significant pre-post decreases in student risk ratings during the school year, and significant positive changes in

rated student attitudes and behavior during and after SRT intervention. Positive engagement for students with a caring adult utilizing structured SRT cognitive behavioral curriculum delivered during the school day appears to be a promising school intervention associated with decreased student individual risk and increased socially responsible behavior at school.

Many students received in-school and out-of-school suspensions during the school year related to the considerable behavior challenges in managing this transient student population with multiple risk factors. Because of frequent student entrances and exits from CrossRoads during the school year, data collected during this study did not allow more refined analysis of the relationship between SRT participation and suspensions.

SRT was designed to increase social responsibility for high risk students. Previously reported SRT results (Lasater et. al. 2004) suggested that approximately 68 percent of students facing long-term suspension referred to the class in a Montana high school responded positively to the program and were able to remain in school. Among the CrossRoads students studied during this project, students with low or medium levels of social responsibility prior to the intervention showed significant increases in positive behaviors and attitudes as measured by classroom teacher ratings. This suggests that SRT may be fruitfully applied with students who are most in need of developing more socially responsible behavior and attitudes. Continuing formal research evaluation utilizing experimental or quasi-experimental design is planned in order to evaluate objectively measurable changes occur in student behavior, and academic performance during and after SRT participation vs. matched comparison groups not receiving this program.

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