

Challenges Faced By Peer Counselors in Their Effort to Effect Behavior Change in Secondary Schools in Maara District, Kenya

Pamela Gacheri Marangu

Teacher Chogoria Boys High School
Maara, Kenya

Dr. David N. Bururia

Lecturer
Department of Arts & Humanities
Chuka University College
Kenya

Dr. Sr. Teresia Njonge

Lecturer
Department of Psychology
Egerton University
Kenya

Abstract

Peer counseling has popularly been accepted as an important contributor of behavior change among learners in learning institutions. Peer counseling utilizes role- playing and modeling to change behavior. The study assessed the contribution of peer counseling skills like mentoring, role modeling and academic tutoring in student behavior change in Maara District Kenya. The study established that peer counselors are important in mentoring other students as they address issues related to the youth. Most peer counselors are academically above average making them effective academic tutors. Peers counselors are further more established in many schools giving them the opportunity to model good behavior. The study recommends that peer counselors require adequate orientation on their roles like basic counseling skills.

Key words: Peer, Peer Counseling, Students behavior

Introduction

To empower the youth for a healthy lifestyle, the ministry of Gender, Sports and Youth Affairs in Kenya, trained young people in life skills management, and peer counseling. Young people are required to respond positively to acute problems like juvenile delinquency, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, threats of HIV infections and psychological problems which young people face (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2008).

The peer education concept in Kenyan schools, though a recent phenomenon, is rapidly gaining momentum. In schools where peer education programmes have been established and peer educators equipped with relevant knowledge and skills, there has been significant degree of success in positive behaviour (Kenya Institute of Education, 2004). A Ministry of Education (2009) document explains that, owing to the large student population in schools and low number of teacher counselors, there is need to adopt other strategies that would be of benefit in helping the student who need counseling. One such strategy is peer counseling. Ndirangu (2000) suggests that, usually the teacher- counselor is also a classroom teacher with a work load like any other teacher, even though effective counseling needs considerable time. Dagdag(2003) on the other hand suggests that peer counseling is both a philosophy and methodology based on the principle that people are capable of solving most of their problems if given a chance. Peer counseling is a process of sharing, that enables two people, the counselor and the counselee to enter into a relationship that makes possible the clarification of a problem, an issue or a situation at hand through good listening.

The study targeted secondary school students who are in the adolescent stage of life. In adolescence, individuals establish a sense of personal identity and avoid the dangers of role diffusion and identity confusion. Identity achievement implies that the individual assesses their strengths and weaknesses and determines how they deal with them. To achieve this, the adolescent must find an identity or senses of sameness and continuity. Path (2006) adds that during this time young people are deciding who they are, what they do well, and what they wish to be after school. As they begin to evaluate their strengths, skills and abilities, the peer group influences them significantly.

In Maara District, peer counseling programmes have been set up but their reliability and effectiveness can be doubted because in the year 2008 when there was a wave of school strikes, many schools in the district were affected. The academic performance also dropped. It implies that students' needs are not being addressed in schools adequately. Peer counseling has significant influence on identifying the needs of secondary school students. Students are likely to respond positively to messages from their peers, approach them often, and influence them more.

Kamanja(2008) has done studies on this area and states that peer education aims at reducing irresponsible behavior, sexual responsibilities, unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS and drug abuse. Arudo (2008) on the other hand adds that with the current socio-technological changes and educational demands, counseling is becoming a major area of concern for youths in schools. The large number of students, limited number of teacher counselors, heavy workloads, and social economic and technological changes all put pressure on the teacher, students, parents and society.

The purpose of peer counseling programmes therefore is meant to promote health, well-being and safety of young people through peer education and referral. The programme trains a selected cross-section of students to act as helpers and active listeners for their fellow students. The core of peer counselling programme is a curriculum which addresses skill building in communication, problem solving and decision making. It also addresses social, individual school and family concerns. Through careful selection and training, peer counselors increase the likelihood that appropriate help can be reached by requesting other persons. A variety of intervention strategies are employed. The results are more positive and safer school climate, healthier students and staff with lower stress levels, and a better utilization of school and community resource (Stephen 2006).

According to Frenza (1985) a successful peer counselor programme is built on a solid foundation which includes: systematic needs assessment, support, and roles clearly defined. Peer counseling operates on the premise that the peer counselor provides a role model. It is based on the fact that students will be more likely to accept and feel at home with counseling information validated and dispensed to them by their peers than they would receive from trained professionals whom they may often consider as out of tune with the needs of the younger generations (Mugo, 2005)

The study was informed by the social learning theory originally developed by Bandura in the late 1970s. The basis of social learning is the observation and modeling of behavior, attitude, and emotional reactions to others. The social learning theory suggests that most human behavior is learned observationally from others (Stewart, 2009). Students will observe peer counselors achievement behavior and emulate them. Social skills and personal development are influenced by the observed model.

Statement of the Problem

Peer counseling is based on the fact that students are more likely to accept and feel at home with counseling information validated and dispensed to them by their peers than they would receive the same from trained professionals whom they often consider as out of tune with needs of younger generation (Mugo, 2005). In spite of the facts that peer counseling is established in many secondary schools in Kenya, its contribution to behavior change in secondary schools has not been documented through research. This study therefore sought to find out the contribution of peer counseling to student behavior change in Maara district, Kenya.

Objective of the Study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- i) To find out the contribution of mentoring skills as an aspect of peer counseling to students' behavior change in Maara district.
- ii) To determine the contribution of academic tutoring as an aspect of peer counseling to student' behavior change in Maara district.
- iii) To establish the contribution of role modeling as an aspect of peer counseling to students' behavior change in Maara district.
- iv) To identify measures that can be taken to improve peer counseling to students' behavior change in Maara District.

Methodology

The study used descriptive survey research design. This is appropriate for the study because it enabled the researcher to gather data from a wide range of respondents on the contribution of peer counseling on students behavior in Maara District. The district was chosen because there is existence of peer counseling and therefore the need to find out the contribution of peer counselling to student behavior change. The target and accessible population was 27 guidance and counseling heads of departments and 1700 form three students in 27 secondary school in Maara district. Out of these, 7 girls' school with 583 students, 4 boys' schools with 434 students and 16 mixed secondary school, with 683 students formed the study. The study used form three students because they are in the mid-adolescent stage of life and they are more used in the school routine. Forms threes are also senior members of the school. Being mature, they were able to understand the questionnaire items and respond to them appropriately. The form four students were not chosen to participate because they were busy preparing for examination. Table 1 summarizes the target population.

Table 1: Summary of Target Population

Type of School	No. of School	No. of Students
Girls	7	583
Boys	4	434
Mixed	16	683
Total	27	1700

According to Kathiuri and pals (1993), for a population of 1700, a sample size of 313 is recommended. However to cater for any non respondent, a sample size of 330 was selected. The study used 235 form three students who comprised 71.2% of the selected sample size. The peers counselors used were all the 17 sampled and 15 guidance and counseling teachers. Stratified random sampling was used to calculate the sample size for each category (each school type acted as a stratum). Fifteen secondary schools were used which included 3 girls schools with 113 students, 2 boys schools with 84 students and 8 mixed secondary schools with were used which included 3 girls schools with 113 students, 2 boys schools with 84 students and 8 mixed secondary schools with 132 students. Purposive sampling was used to capture 15 guidance and counseling Head of Departments. Due to the diversity in the population in the different schools, the researcher employed proportional sapling using the formula.

$$\text{Sample per population} = \frac{\text{No of students in the School} \times \text{sample size}}{\text{Total population}}$$

The resulting sample for stratified random sampling proportional to size is presented in table 2

Table 2: Sampling matrix

Type of school	No of Schools	No of Students
Girls	5	113
Boys	4	84
Mixed	6	132
Total	115	330

The main tools of data collection for this study were questionnaire. The questionnaires elicited information of the contribution of peer counseling in terms of mentoring, academic tutoring, role modeling skills and recommendation on how to improve peer counseling. The validity and reliability of the instruments was achieved through a pilot study. Pre-testing of the instrument was done to ensure face validity. Experts in the field of psychology at Chuka University College were consulted for this purpose.

According to Mungeda and Mugenda, (1999); & Borg and Gall (1989), validity of research instruments is important because one is assured of accuracy, correctness and true data. Secondly, some questions in the questionnaire may be misunderstood or misinterpreted; therefore validity may help to iron out ambiguity. Kasombo (2006) recommends a test of reliability of instruments in order to ensure dependability.

The coefficients of the reliability were computed at 0.8499 for form three students, peer counselor and guidance and counseling teachers. Since Mugenda & Mugenda (1999) recommends a reliability of at least 0.8, the instruments were reliable. Data collected was coded and then entered into the computer via statistical package for Social Sciences (SPSS 11.5). Descriptive statistics in form of percentages and frequencies were used to analyze the data obtained. Thematic analysis was derived from the open ended questions while percentages, frequencies and cross tabulation was used to report the analyzed data.

Results of the Study

The preliminary analysis involved the analysis of the demographics of this sample. Three categories of respondents were studied, that is peer counselors, form three students and teacher counselors. These were categorized according to gender as shown in table 3

Table 3: Distribution of Students by Gender

Category	frequency	Percentages
Male	114	47.5
Female	126	52.5
Total	240	100.00

Table 3 shows that out of 240 students who took part in the study, 52.51 were females while 47.5 were male. The study sought to find out the contribution of mentoring skills in improving student behaviour change. To achieve this objective, a Likert Scale with the choices of strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree was used. The main aspects of mentoring skills that were analyzed included peer counselors sharing information, leading talks and supporting other students in school, brainstorming ideas and being practical role models. Table 4 summarizes the responses.

Table 4: Peer counselors as mentors

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	2	16.7
Disagree	0	0
Undecided	0	0
Agree	5	41.7
Strongly Agree	5	41.7
Total	12	100.0

From table 4, 83.4% of the teachers felt that peer counselor act as mentors to the other students in their schools. This indicates that peer counselors help other student in a mentoring role.

The study sought information on peer counselor sharing information and leading in tasks. Out of the 17 peer counselors, 94% accepted that they normally share information, lead other students in talks and gave them support in school. Table 5 gives a summary of students' view on peer counselors support.

Table 5: Students’ views on peer counselors support

Peer counselors like sharing information, leading tasks and supporting other students in school						
	SD	D	UN	A	SA	Total
Male	14 12.4%	8 7.1%	7 6.2%	56 49.6%	28 24.8%	113 100%
Female 5	8 4.6%	5 6.5%	59 4.0%	47 47.6%	124 37.9%	100%
Total	19 8.0%	16 6.8%	12 5.1%	115 48.5%	75 31.6%	237 100%

Key: SD – Strongly Disagree D – Disagree UN- Undecided A – Agree SA – Strongly Agree

Table 5 indicates that the majority of the students, 74.4 agreed that the peer counselors were involved in sharing information, leading tasks an supporting other students I school. Only 25.6 disagreed. This confirms that peer counselors are important in mentoring other students in regards to sharing of information, leading in task and support.

The study sought information on the positive role of peer counselor. 88.2% agreed that they have learnt positively from the peer counselors. Another 63.6% of the students believe that peer counselors are vital in showing positive behavior that hey emulated while 26% of the students disagreed that peer counselors helped them learn positive ways of taking good care of themselves.

The second objective of the study was the role of academic tutoring as an aspect of peer counseling to student behavior change. Items for this question followed a likert scale with options of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree. The findings were that 52% of the respondent felt that peer counselor do not perform well in their academics so as to be able to assist others in academics while 48% accepted that good performance of peer counselors assisted them in their academics. This indicates that some peer counselor do not have good academic performance to be able to assist other students, so care must be taken while selecting them.

Peer Counsellor Help in Behaviour Change

The study sought to find out how peer counseling empowers adolescents to deal substance abuse, suicide, loneliness, and low self esteem. A contingency table 5 represents the results for the analysis.

Table 5: Peer Counselling Improvement on Students Behaviour

Peer counseling helps the general students behavior						
	SD	D	UN	A	SA	TOTAL
Male	30 26.3%	7 6.1%	10 8.8%	29 25.4%	38 33.3%	114 100.0%
Female	15 12.2%	11 8.9%	5 4.1%	52 42.3%	40 32.5%	123 100.0%
Total	45 19.6%	18 7.6%	15 6.3%	81 34.29	78 32.9%	237 100.0

As shown in the table 5, most of the students 67.1% felt that peer counseling had helped to improve the general behavior including school attendance, reduced drug and alcohol abuse, created a positive school climate, increased academic success and positive responsible behavior. The rest 32.9% did not agree that peer counselors are of any help. It can be concluded that peer counseling has helped to improve school attendance, reduced drug and alcohol abuse, created a positive school climate increased academic success and positive responsible behavior.

Measures to Improve Peer Counselling

The other objective of the study was to identify the measures that should be taken to improve peer counseling. 86% of the respondents agreed that peer counseling should be set up as a school club while 18% disagreed. Majority of the students felt that peer counseling should be set as one of the school clubs. An item sought to find out whether peer counselors should be elected by classes. 17% did not want peer counselors to be elected in the classes while 80% did not want teachers to appoint them. Only 20% wanted teachers to appoint peer counselors. Peer counselors were asked to give the criteria on how they were to be appointed. 71% of the peer counselors wanted them selected by their fellow students while 17% wanted them appointed by teachers and 12% appoint themselves. It can be concluded that students would like to be involved in the selection criteria and in choosing their peer counselors in their respective classes.

Areas of Training for Peer Counsellors

Table 6 gives the analysis of the counseling training areas.

Table 6: Areas of Training for Peer Counsellors

STATEMENT	YES	NO
I. Basic communication skills	9 (56.3%)	7(43.7%)
ii. Basic counseling skills	9 (60%)	6(40%)
iii. Adolescence puberty development including bodily changes	12(71%)	2(12%)
vi. Sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDs	12(71%)	5(29%)
v. Youth sexuality	12(75%)	4(25%)
vi. Decision making skills	13(81.2%)	3(18.8)

On basic communication skills only 56% of the peer counselors had been trained, the other 44 were not. Peer counselors had been trained in basic counselors (60%) while 40% had. Most of the peer counselors (88%) had been trained on adolescence puberty development, while the rest (12%) had not. On youth sexuality training, 75% of the of the peer counselors accepted that they had been trained in that area while 25% had been trained. On decision making 81% had received training while 19% had not been given training in that area. Therefore it can be concluded that there some counselors who require counseling training in areas that include: basic counseling skills, communication skills, adolescence puberty development, youth sexuality and decision making skills so that they can become more effective peer counselors.

Conclusions

The study established that peer counselors are important in mentoring other students, sharing of information, leading in tasks and supporting other students in school. Peer counselors also mentor other students through positive behaviour. They are able to address issues related to health, growing up and youth sexuality. They are able to hold discussions that lead students to discuss their concerns.

In relation to academic tutoring the study established that even though peer counselors are above average in academics there are some students who perform much better than them. It is necessary to evaluate the academic performance of the peer counselors so that the best in academics are selected. However, peer counselors have the ability to give academic skills support, test taking skills and organized study groups that assist student in improving their academic work. The study concludes that peer counselors model good behavior that influences other students towards appropriate behavior. Although the teacher counselor and peer counselors feel that students respect peer counselor, others disagree. This indicates that peer counselors are valued and respected by their peers. Peer counselors are instrumented in assisting their peers in making responsible decision about their behavior in order to reduce unwanted teenage pregnancies, subsistence abuse, school dropout, gang membership and other destructive behavior. Consequently, peer counselors have significant contribution to student behavior change insecurity school.

Recommendation of the Study

Based on the findings of the current study the following recommendations were made:

The ministry of education should ensure that the peer counseling programme is established in all secondary schools. The ministry should develop a peer counseling curriculum that will be used to train the peer counselors. Refresher courses should be given to the peer counselors.

The school administration should ensure the appointed guidance and counseling teachers are friendly and interact well with the other students. Guidance and counseling teacher should appoint peer counselors who are academically above average and students who are respected by the other students. The best in character are to be appointed as peer counselors.

Peer counselors are supposed to be given basic counseling skills and life skills. They are also supposed to be shown their responsibilities, students also need to be sensitized on the role and responsibilities of peer counselors. Proper recording system should be developed so that work done by peer counselors can be recorded. In addition the process should take the form of social club in the school.

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