



Middle School Advisory: Students' Perceptions of Its Effectiveness

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if an advisory program that is being implemented in a Central Illinois Junior High School is beneficial in meeting the needs of a school's student population. Studies have shown that advisory programs help students socially and academically, and are critical in the development of adolescents. Literature supports advisory time in that it gives students an adult to connect to and creates a sense of belongingness. A mixed method survey consisting of Likert scale questions, open-ended questions, and multiple choice questions was electronically distributed to the student population after advisory lessons. Data was analyzed by specifically exploring the descriptive statistics. The findings in this study showed students reported the advisory program as effective, necessary, and often provide topics they could relate to.

Keywords: Middle School, Advisory Programs, Adolescents development, perception of effectiveness, social and academic development

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1. Introduction

“The most critical need for any person is to find meaning, purpose, and significance. In order to do this, that person must feel understood, accepted, and affirmed” (Rubinstein, 1994). In middle school, when students are experiencing a variety of changes in their bodies, developing new interests and peer groups, and taking the first steps towards maturity, it is more important than ever to offer support and help them navigate through this period of adolescent development. To this end, advisory programs are designed to address the needs of students making their way through this often unsettled time.

Advisory programs were developed with the belief in mind that all adolescent students should have at least one adult at school acting as the student’s advocate. According to the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989), “students should be able to rely on that adult to help learn from their experiences, comprehend physical changes and changing relations with family and peers, act on their behalf to marshal every school and community resource needed for the student to succeed, and help to fashion a vision of the future”. Last year, at a central Illinois Junior High School, an advisory program was started in order to better meet these types of needs within the student population. The program has been expanded and future lessons for this year are currently being planned. As members of the advisory planning committee we are interested in identifying what problems the students feel need to be discussed and how to best implement these lessons so that they are the most engaging and useful for the students. As well, the lessons will also be based on feedback from a school-climate survey the students took at the end of the last school year. One of the goals for the school is to see an improvement in how the students view school and their feelings of safety and respect within the school.

Research has shown that an advisory program, carried out properly, can be a very effective tool in helping schools create an environment in which student learning, relationships, and personal growth are positively enhanced. It has also been found that “advisory programs helped students grow emotionally and socially, contributed to a positive school-climate, helped students learn about school and getting along with their classmates, and enhanced teacher-student relationships.” (Brown, 2001). Surveys and reviews of advisory programs have also shown that academic achievement can increase as well (Shulkind, 2007; McClure, 2010; Johnson, 2013). When students know that their teachers and other adults within their school community genuinely care for them, they are likely to behaviorally and academically perform better in school. While many studies (McClure, 2010; Shulkind, 2009; Makkonen, 2004) have been conducted on the benefits of advisory and how it can meet the unique needs of middle school students, not all advisory programs are effective at meeting the specific needs of their target student population however. Therefore, our study focused on the use of the “Owning Up” curriculum, with the use of other advisory curriculums, and its effects on our students. Participants of this study included sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students.

The purpose of this study was to determine if an advisory program, using the “Owning Up Curriculum,” coupled with other social-emotional curriculums, was beneficial in meeting the needs of a central Illinois Junior High School’s student population. A mixed method survey consisting of Likert scale questions, open-ended questions, and multiple choice questions was electronically distributed to the student population after advisory lessons.

The results of this study revealed that the students felt the lessons used in this advisory program were beneficial in meeting their needs. Teachers, administrators, and most importantly, the students will continue to benefit from this study in that the program can be amended to more precisely help the students while improving the overall climate of the school at the same time.

2. Literature Review

This section examines the literature relevant to the purposes of this study. The section is divided into four sections: definition of advisory, benefits with advisory, challenges faced in advisory, and gaps in research.

2.1 Definition of Advisory

According to Shulkind and Foote (2009), "Advisory programs are configurations in which an adult advisor meets regularly during the school day with a group of students to provide academic and social-emotional mentorship and support, to create personalization within the school, and to facilitate a small peer community of learners," (p. 2, paragraph 2). The idea of advisory programs in middle schools came about to address one simple concept: each child should be known well by at least one caring adult in the school (Wilson, 1998). Research has shown that students learn best in an environment that is supportive and where no child can unintentionally fall through the cracks (Lipsitz, 1980; Van Hoose, 1991; MacIver, 1990). Middle school philosophy focuses on a school being a place where adolescents not only learn and thrive academically, but emotionally as well. Advisory programs can be a way to help students and teachers achieve this goal.

While advisory is a time for students to meet with a teacher or staff member, specific advisory programs might look different at each school. The school being used for this study meets fourteen times a year for twenty-five minute time blocks. The students are organized by grade level, in groups of fifteen to eighteen students, including both boys and girls. Each teacher is given the lesson plans in advance. Most lessons are derived from the "Owning Up" Curriculum written by Rosalind Wiseman. It states on the author's website, "The Owning Up Curriculum presents a unique and comprehensive approach to preventing youth violence by targeting the root causes of bullying and other forms of social cruelty. It exposes the cultural expectations that teach young people to humiliate and dehumanize others as the way to achieve power and respect, then challenges them to transform this dynamic" (Wiseman, 2009).

2.2 Benefits of Advisory

Research has shown that an advisory program, carried out properly, can be a very effective tool in helping schools create an environment in which student learning, relationships, and personal growth are positively enhanced. D'Amore (2013) reported "The results of our advisory program include higher overall GPAs, increased attendance rates, and fewer behavior referrals." Numerous surveys and reviews of advisory programs have also shown that academic achievement can increase as well (Shulkind & Foote 2009; Espe 1993; Poliner 2003). When students know that their teachers and other adults within their school community genuinely care for them, they are likely to behaviorally and academically perform better in school. "If teachers expect students to be engaged learners, they must communicate to those students that they are cared for, respected, welcomed, and appreciated. Young adolescents need affirmation. They need support. They need to know that those who are charged with educating them are also concerned with them," (Burkhardt, 2005). Advisory programs provide each student with an adult mentor and a community to be a member of. It is through these relationships that students succeed academically and developmentally (Shulkind & Foote, 2009).

During the focus groups, students reported that teachers cared about them as a whole student, and noticed them. They also stated that they trusted and felt close to their peers and teachers. Some students even went on to say that their groups were emotional and vulnerable together through the sharing of personal experiences (Shulkind & Foote, 2009).

Research (D'Amore, 2013; Shulkind & Foote, 2009; Poliner, 2003) continues to show that all students at every grade level will be more invested in school, avoid risky behavior, and be more academically successful if their school creates a "safe, supportive, respectful learning

environment, personalize young people's learning experiences, helps them develop social and emotional competencies, and provide opportunities to practice these skills," (Poliner, 2003). Advisory programs can help meet these goals.

2.3 Challenges Faced in Advisory

Advisory programs are not a magic solution however. The idea of advisory makes a great deal of sense, but simply creating a small group of students, assigning a teacher to lead this group, and calling it "advisory" is not nearly enough. Often times there are concerns from teachers that they will not know how to address their students' needs. They should be assured that they are not expected to act as guidance counselors, but as they get to know their advisees they could refer them to the guidance counselors or speak to a counselor about a student they feel needs more help than advisory can offer. Boorstein (1997) stated that teachers need to be trained and given professional development on advisory for it to be most successful. It was also suggested that advisory leaders have specific characteristics such as good listeners and are charismatic towards students and their differences.

As well, parents worry about academic time being lost and that their child may not feel comfortable sharing personal information. Parents should be made aware that advisory is a part of their child's academic day and informed on what advisory is and the role it is to serve for the students. It is simply a way to ensure that all students have an extra adult watching out for them and to ensure that each child is succeeding academically and socially.

While the data shows that all involved understand why advisory exists it is difficult for them to overcome many of the challenges to make it effective. Some of these challenges reported were: loss of curriculum time, lack of training, no collaboration or planning time for advisory, too many students in advisory, and advisory being held at an ineffective time of day (Weiss 2006). In most states it is not mandatory to include advisory; however many schools wanting to be considered middle schools have included advisory as part of the school day. If this is done without the proper support, training, and time the programs are usually not successful in achieving the goal of advisory. Time is needed for the planning and developing of the program with a clear vision on what the program is about and how it will be carried out. It should focus on the needs of adolescents, but more importantly on the unique needs of the students within a particular school.

Training for all staff is another key factor when trying to implement an effective advisory program. This should be an ongoing process, not a one-time activity that is not addressed further. If not properly educated the teachers may feel comfortable in their role and advisory may become a burden to them. Further, if not provided training and/or well-planned lessons teachers may simply not use advisory time as intended. Then it does just become a loss of academic time and an unfortunate missed opportunity for the students within that advisory group. Thus, it is crucial to have administrative support with a deep understanding of advisory to help ensure this is a priority for the staff (Wilson, 1998).

While there is research favoring advisory, and studies conducted that evaluate the programs, there are many gaps within the research. Each advisory is instructed by a different teacher, hence not taught in the same ways. Observations or teacher surveys of advisory design and implementation are not conducted or included in most of the research (McClure, Yonezawa & Jones, 2010). The variations in teaching and lessons play a vital role in the success of the programs. Similarly, the range in time frames of implementation contribute to the influence the program has on students and staff. For instance, some schools spent time in advisory every day while others only had it once a week and some met for as little as eleven minutes, others met for twenty five minutes at a time. There were also a variety of activities reported when asked how advisory time was spent (Weiss, 2006). Therefore, with this in mind, there is a need to identify if the specific needs of the students at this school are being met by the lessons included in the advisory program.

3. Methods

This research study used a survey method to examine sixth through eighth grade students' feelings on the effectiveness of a newly implemented advisory program. It mainly focused on a comparative view of students' view of themselves and the school atmosphere before the program and their view on the same topics towards the end of the program. As well, shorter surveys were used after each advisory lesson pertaining to students' level of interest in the topic that was covered and if they felt it was an effective way of approaching that topic. Electronic surveys were available for students to complete during the school day to easily access the targeted population.

3.1 Research Questions

1. What is an advisory program?
2. Do students feel the advisory program is effective at improving the problems they see within the school?
3. What topics do the students report as more engaging and interesting?

3.2 Definition of Terms

According to Shulkind and Foote (2009), "Advisory programs are configurations in which an adult advisor meets regularly during the school day with a group of students to provide academic and social-emotional mentorship and support, to create personalization within the school, and to facilitate a small peer community of learners" (pg 2). Pre-test, as it is used in this context, can be defined as an initial survey to determine a baseline of students' feelings towards specific topics. The post-test is then a measure of students' emotional growth throughout the year given at the conclusion of the curriculum.

3.3 Participants and Research Setting

The participants included in this study are sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students enrolled in a middle school in central Illinois. Each grade is made up of approximately 250 students. In 2013, the *Illinois Interactive Report Card* stated that of the 666 students in the school, 69.2% are white, 9.8% are black, 8.9% Hispanic, 6.3% Asian, 0.6% American Indian, and 5.0% multiracial. As well, 33% of the students are low income and there is a 21.1% mobility rate. The participants represented a convenient sample that was selected to participate in the survey. Participants were guided to a link on the school website in order to access the both surveys that they voluntarily completed during advisory time, or on their own time for two days after each advisory session.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The study included the use of children, which are considered a protected population. However, all participants were able to skip any questions included in the survey if they did not feel comfortable answering them. Their participation in this survey was voluntary and confidential. The data was presented only in aggregated form and was not used to personally identify any of the respondents.

4. Instrumentation

The survey was created using Google forms, an online survey application. The survey after each advisory lesson consisted of four Likert scale questions which measured the level of interest in the topic covered and feelings of effectiveness addressing the topic covered. They were scored on a five level scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” The curriculum survey given at the beginning of the advisory program and again at the end of the year, included seventeen Likert scale questions. The open-ended questions sought to understand the respondents’ approaches towards specific situations. There were also identifying questions to determine gender and grade level for organization purposes. The survey was checked for content and validity by the class instructor and peers in class. Thus, the survey fairly assessed the effectiveness of the newly implemented advisory program of a middle school in Central Illinois.

4.1 Data Collection Procedures

The survey was electronically accessible to the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students after each advisory lesson taught at a specific school in Central Illinois throughout the 2013-2014 school year. (Appendix B) Reminders were sent out to teachers before each advisory lesson to remind them to have their students complete the survey. The survey was open for two days after each advisory session for the participants to respond. The initial pre-test (Appendix A) was given at the start of the curriculum and during a concluding lesson second semester.

4.2 Limitations

The study surveyed only students in one middle school within Central Illinois; therefore was a threat to external validity causing generalizability to be limited. Additionally, by asking teachers to complete the surveys with no mandatory requirement to do so by building administrators, limited the number of students that received and responded to the survey, causing responses to be limited and result in a small sample.

The comfort, experience, and willingness of the advisory teacher to follow the planned advisory lessons they are supposed to teach may affect the students’ perceptions of the lessons, their interest in it, and its effectiveness in addressing the topic as intended and hence, a threat to internal validity. The respondents’ relationships with their advisory teacher may also influenced the way they perceived their own level of interest or effectiveness due to the nature of advisory and its reliance on the need to develop relationships with others. As a result, a threat to internal validity might exist.

4.3 Data Analysis Procedures

The survey results were analyzed through Google Forms. Descriptive Statistics, like mode, were used to analyze responses to the Likert questions. Data tables and graphs were included in the report to organize and display the results of the surveys. Responses with the highest frequency were noted and explored. The statistical analysis was used to describe the effectiveness of the advisory program at a middle school in Central Illinois. Responses to the open-ended questions were coded and analyzed for patterns and themes.

The first research question defined advisory through our literature review. The second question that explores students’ perceptions of advisory was answered through an analysis of the Likert scale questions coupled with the findings in the paired T-test. The final question, reflecting on specific topics, was determined with an investigation of the Likert scale answers and determining the mode in responses.

5. Results

The purpose of this study was to determine if students find advisory effective and what specific topics students found engaging. Students in grades sixth through eighth participated in a four question survey using a Likert scale. The questions remained the same every week, and students were able to take the survey immediately following the advisory lesson. On average, forty-one percent of the student population took the survey each week.

The research questions we are looking to answer are as follows:

1. Do students feel the advisory program is effective at improving the problems they see within the school?
2. What topics do the students report as more engaging and interesting?

The overall findings concluded that students felt most of the topics students could relate to and were things that applied to students at the Central Illinois Junior High School. Students reported that the topics were presented in an engaging way for the most part. Majority of the survey results showed that students took the middle ground on their interest level in in the topics.

The findings in Figure 1 show that students at the Central Illinois Junior High School could relate to the topic and felt the topic were engaging. While most students may have only been slightly interested in the topic, the majority felt understanding male and female roles was a topic that applied to the students at this Central Illinois Junior High School (Figure 1). During this first lesson of the advisory curriculum, students analyzed and discussed expectations that society places on males and females. Students were given a handout that showed stereotypical rules of anger for both genders.

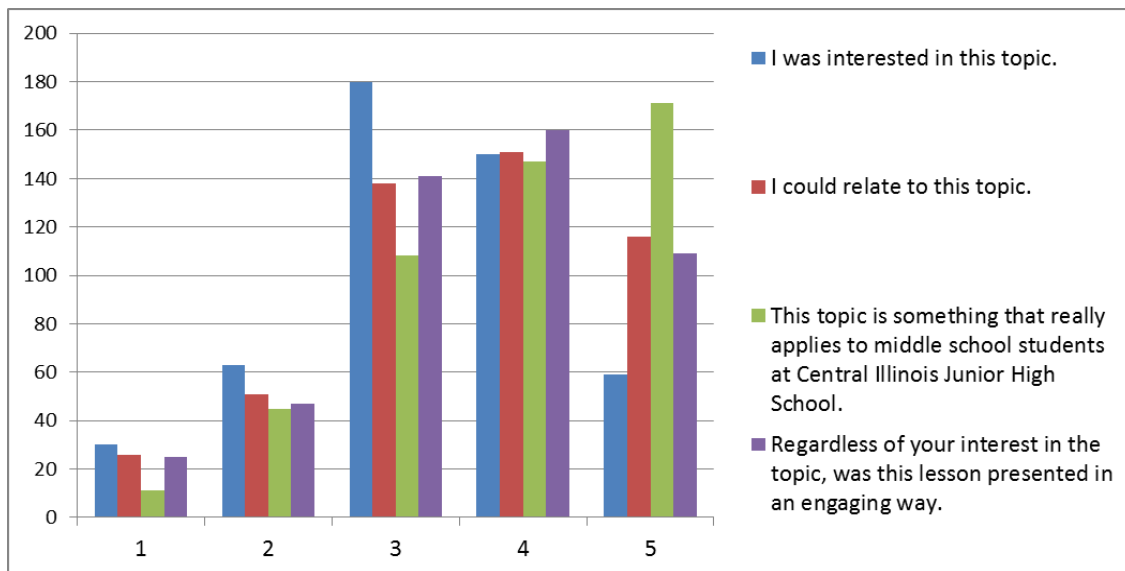


Figure 1: Lesson 1: "Understanding Boy/Girl World" Results

The data in Fig. 2 shows that students were not engaged or interested in the topic, but felt it was something that applied to the Central Illinois Junior High and a topic they could relate to. From this, we can assume that students felt the strategy was needed to face conflicts more efficiently. The second lesson provided students with a strategy to handle situations with their peers. It gave them steps to use when they are facing a confrontation.

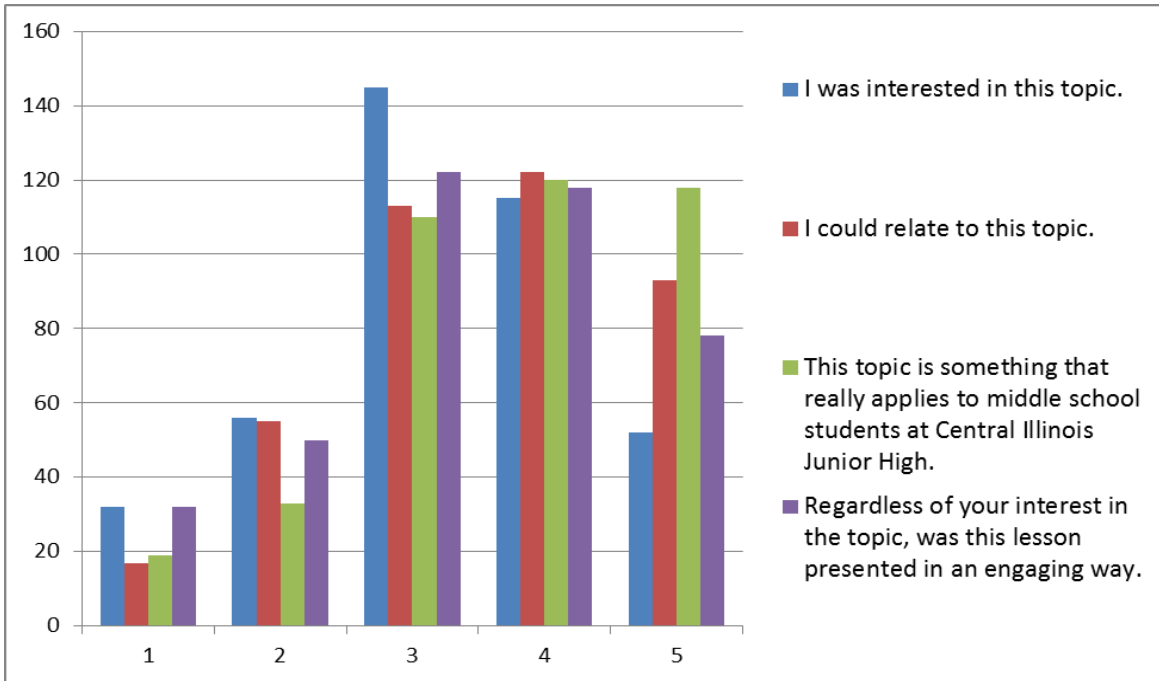


Figure 2: Lesson 2: "Understanding SEAL" Results

The data in figure three shows that students reported that not only could relate to the topic and were engaged in the topic, but that it was something that applied to the students at the Central Illinois Junior High School. Lesson three consisted of the students looking into gender specific roles and how they impact relationships with females and other males. Students were given a handout that described the type of roles society places on boys.

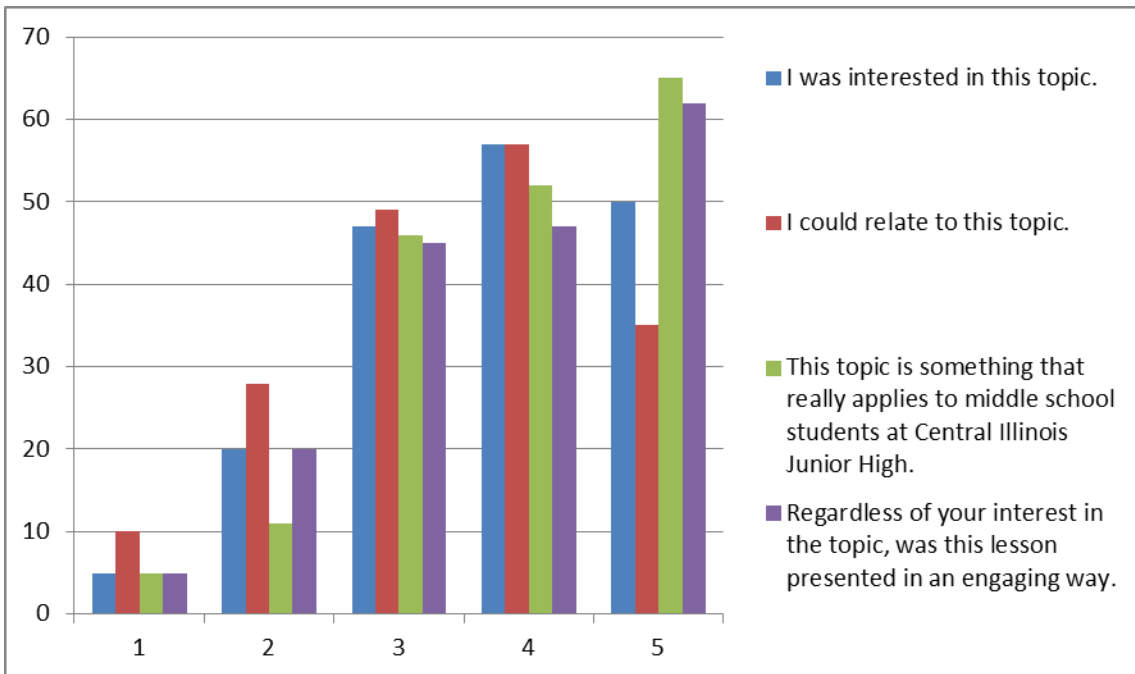


Figure 3: Lesson 3: "Boy World" Results

Lesson four was similar to lesson three in that it discussed roles of females and how they impacted relationships and society. Handouts were also given to students that described female stereotypes. Similar to lesson three, students answered the survey in favor of the topic by stating that it was something that applied to the school population and that it was presented in an engaging way. However, students also reported that they were non-committal in that they could relate to this topic or if they were interested in it.

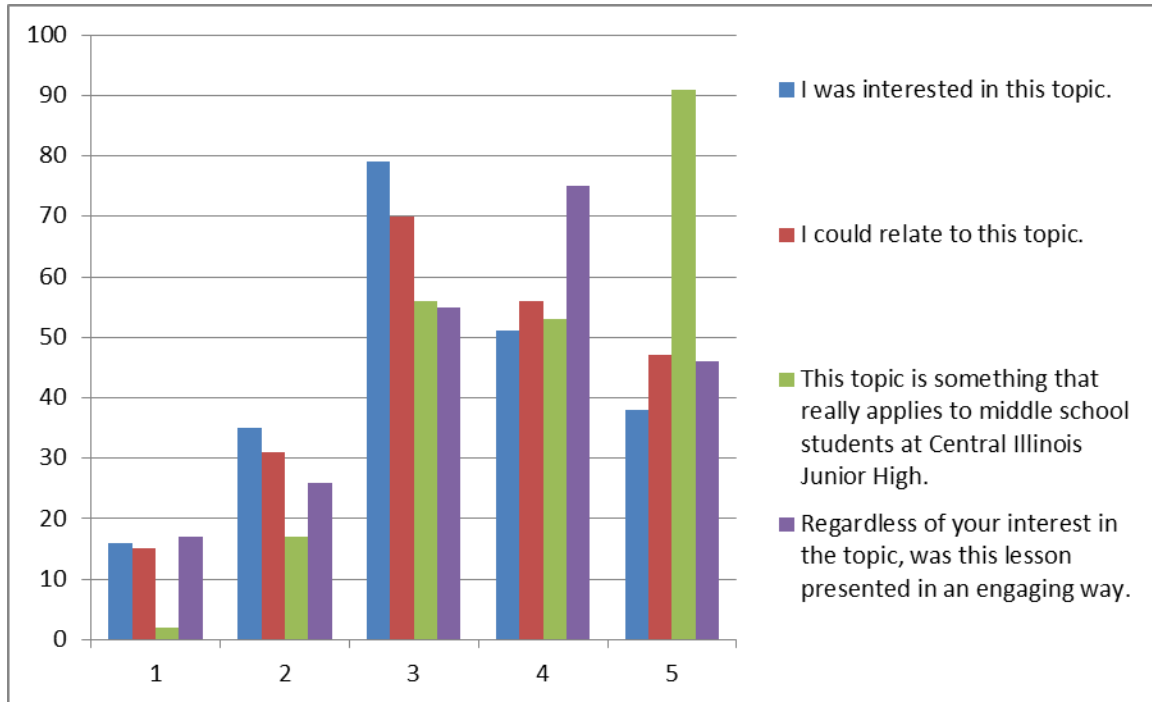


Figure 4: Lesson 4: "Girl World" Results

This data was gathered after a lesson about friendships. Students reflected on their own friendships and analyzed their relationships. They filled out a handout about what relationships are worth keeping and what ones need improvement. While students were uncertain if they could relate this topic or if they were interested, they reported that it was a topic that applied to the students at this Central Illinois Junior High School and felt it was presented in an engaging way.

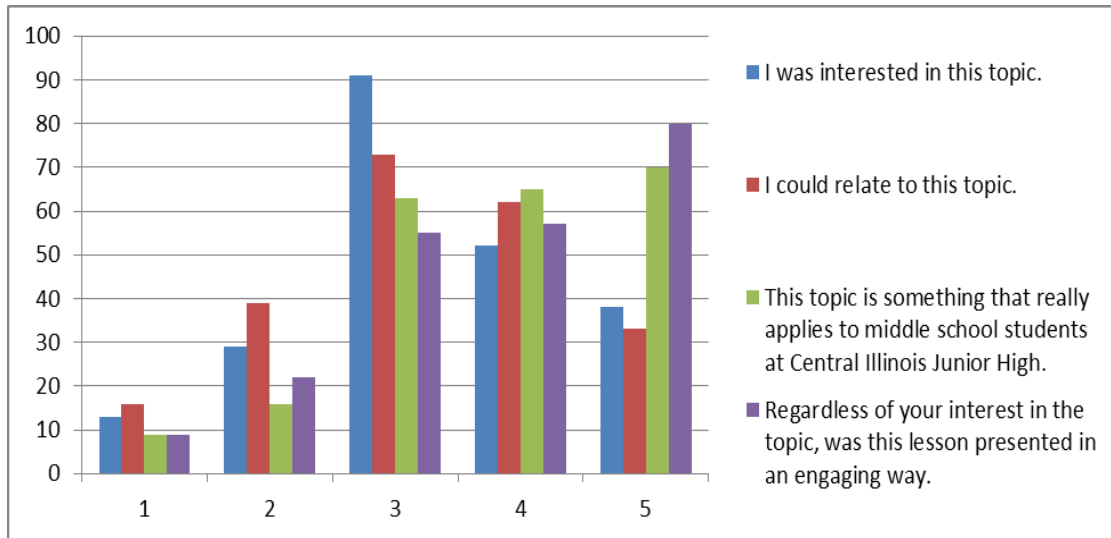


Figure 5: Lesson 5: "Friendships" Results

The data in figures six and seven shows growth in student perceptions. This leads one to believe that the advisory curriculum helps students understand relationships and personality types more thoroughly.

When students were asked, "What would you do if someone you don't really like said that you did something that upset them or made them angry?" a few common themes were identified in their responses. In the pre-survey the most common answers included: ignore them, deny it, or do nothing; talk to the person and try to fix the problem; or to apologize and ask what they had done to make them mad. Other frequent responses were to tell a parent or teacher, or to fight that student with words or even physically. When students were asked the same question again in the post-survey many of the responses were similar, such as: apologize regardless of whether you like them or not; talk to the other person and ask how to make it better; try to work it out between them, if that doesn't work ask an adult to help; and try to keep calm when talking to the other person. Some responses still included verbal or physical confrontations.

The overall trends in the responses show that there were positive gains in the way students would handle this type of situation. In the post-survey, there were more responses that included showing respect to everyone no matter who it was, trying to remain calm in the situation, and to talk to directly to the person rather than talk about them. These were some of the ideas covered in the advisory lessons and support the positive growth seen in the quantitative data. Students are benefiting from the advisory program and learning to interact with other in a more constructive manner.

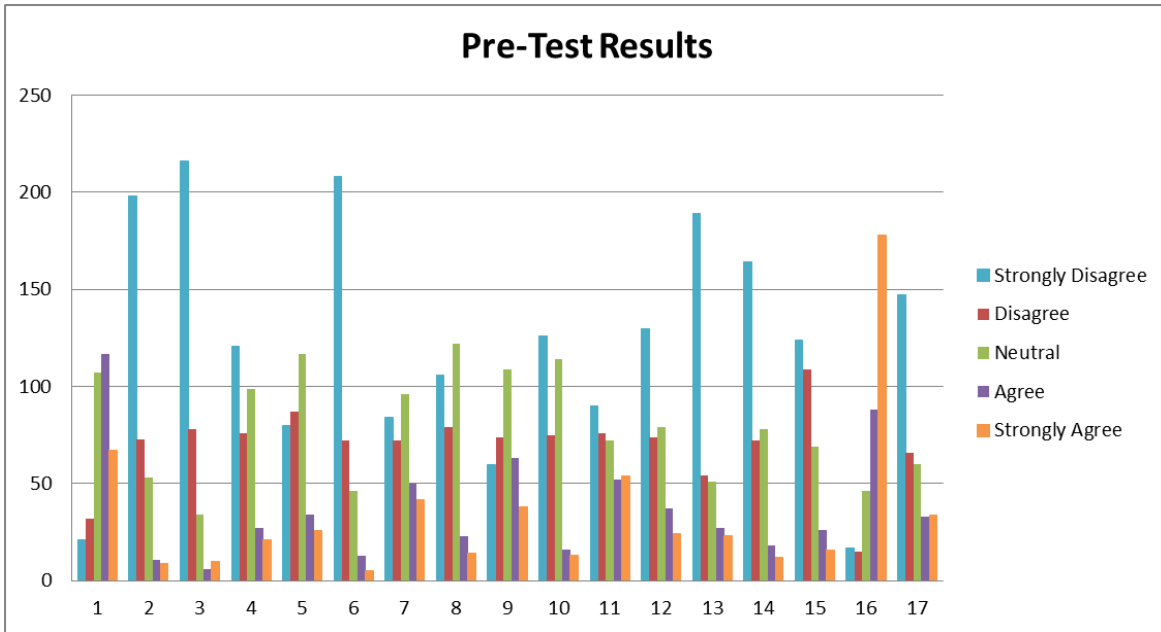


Figure 6: Pre-test results

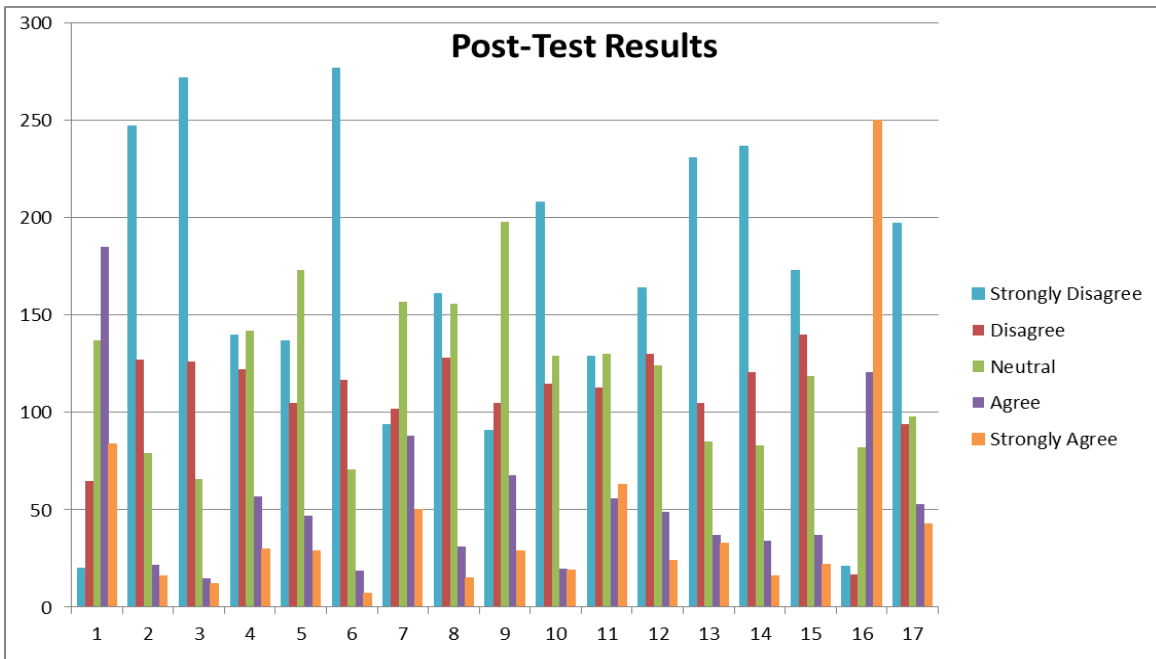


Figure 7: Post-test survey results

6. Discussion

Based upon the research findings in this study, students at Central Illinois Junior High School feel that the advisory program recently implemented, is effective. The following is a discussion of the results and the findings of the research questions.

6.1. Do students feel the advisory program is effective at improving the problems they see within the school?

When comparing the data for the pre- and post-survey one can see growth in student perceptions. The survey consisted of mostly Likert scale questions and one open ended

question. A response of “Strongly Disagree” or “Disagree” is the expected response to show positive growth. While comparing the two sets of data, it can be seen that students answered the questions with “Strongly Disagree” or “Disagree” more frequently in the post-survey results. This leads one to believe that the advisory curriculum helps students understand relationships and personality types more thoroughly. When students know that their teachers and other adults within their school community genuinely care for them, they are likely to behaviorally and academically perform better in school. “If teachers expect students to be engaged learners, they must communicate to those students that they are cared for, respected, welcomed, and appreciated. Young adolescents need affirmation. They need support. They need to know that those who are charged with educating them are also concerned with them,” (Burkhardt, 2005). Advisory is an opportunity to do all of these things and to provide students with other types of lessons that will also help them be successful in life, not just academically. This not only helps individual students, but the school as a whole. Middle school philosophy focuses on a school being a place where adolescents not only learn and thrive academically, but emotionally as well.

6.2. What topics do the students report as more engaging and interesting?

At the start of the school year, members of the advisory planning committee asked students to complete a survey in which they selected topics they felt should be discussed or covered in advisory lessons throughout the year. It was felt that if students had some voice in what topics were covered they would take a more personal interest in the topics. Research (D’Amore, 2013; Shulkind & Foote, 2009; Poliner 2003) continues to show that all students at every grade level will be more invested in school, avoid risky behavior, and be more academically successful if their school creates a “safe, supportive, respectful learning environment, personalize young people’s learning experiences, helps them develop social and emotional competencies, and provide opportunities to practice these skills,” (Poliner, 2003). Based on the results from the initial student survey, the following lessons were planned and the feedback from the students is as follows:

During the first lesson of the advisory curriculum, students analyzed and discussed expectations that society places on males and females. Students were given a handout that showed stereotypical rules of anger for both genders. While most students may have only been slightly interested in the topic, the majority felt understanding male and female roles was a topic that applied to the students at this Central Illinois Junior High School.

If carried out properly, advisory can be a very effective tool in helping schools create an environment in which student learning, relationships, and personal growth are positively enhanced. It has also been found that “advisory programs helped students grow emotionally and socially, contributed to a positive school-climate, helped students learn about school and getting along with their classmates, and enhanced teacher-student relationships” (Brown, 2001). The second lesson provided students with a strategy to handle situations with their peers; it gave them steps to use when they are facing a confrontation. The data shows that students were not engaged or interested in the topic, but felt it was something that applied to the Central Illinois Junior High and a topic they could relate to. From this, we can assume that students felt the strategy was needed to face conflicts more efficiently.

Lesson three consisted of the students looking into gender specific roles and how they impact relationships with females and other males. Students were given a handout that described the type of roles society places on boys. The students reported that not only could they relate to the topic and were engaged in the topic, but that it was something that applied to the students at the Central Illinois Junior High School.

Similar to the previous lesson, in lesson four students indicated on the survey that they were in favor of the topic by stating that it was something that applied to the school population and that it was presented in an engaging way. However, students also reported that they were non-committal on whether they could relate to this topic or if they were interested in it.

Lesson four was similar to lesson three in that it discussed roles of females and how they impacted relationships and society. Handouts were also given to students that described female stereotypes.

The final lesson that data was collected on was about friendships; students reflected on their own friendships and analyzed their relationships. They filled out a handout about what relationships are worth keeping and what ones need improvement. While students were uncertain if they could relate this topic or if they were interested, they reported that it was a topic that applied to the students at this Central Illinois Junior High School and felt it was presented in an engaging way.

Through these findings, it was concluded that students felt most topics were easy to relate to and were topics that applied to students at the Central Illinois Junior High School. Another pattern that existed was that students felt the information was presented in an engaging way. Majority of the survey results showed that students took the middle ground on their interest level in the topics. These results allow one to understand students' positive perceptions on the effectiveness of the advisory program. This coincides with research that was founded by Shulkind and Foote (2009). Their study found that students felt a sense of closeness with their peers and teachers which helped them academically and developmentally.

Limitations might include students being exposed to varying types of advisory lessons. While teachers were provided with the same lessons, each teacher instructed the material in their own fashion or might have changed the topic completely. Teachers' comfort level of the material may have impacted the overall effectiveness of the lesson. Boorstein (1997) stated that teachers need to be trained and given professional development on advisory for it to be most successful. It was also suggested that advisory leaders have specific characteristics such as good listeners and are charismatic towards students and their differences. Depending on the population in the class, students with differing backgrounds might have led the discussion in a different direction. Therefore, no two advisories were taught the same.

In conclusion, this research examined students' perceptions of the effectiveness of a newly implemented advisory program. After each advisory lesson, students were given a survey evaluating their feelings about the lesson. Questions included measuring the engagement level, interest level, relevance, and applicability to the student population. To start the advisory curriculum, students were given a pre-survey to gain a baseline measuring their attitudes and experiences on conflict situations. The same survey was given at the conclusion of the advisory curriculum.

Through an analysis of these tools, researchers concluded that students felt positive towards the lesson and that it was effective at improving their school. Therefore, researchers recommend that advisory be continued. Advisory, when implemented fully, can have a positive impact on students' academic and developmental success, as well as improve the school climate. Even though this research was done at only one junior high for a portion of the school year, it would be recommended that all junior highs in the district implement advisory for all sixth, seventh, and eighth graders.

With additional training, teachers would be more equipped to teach advisory lessons that contained sensitive topics and effectively carry out the responsibilities of an advisory leader. Time is needed to develop lessons that are tailored to the student population and consistent meeting times are essential in developing a strong advisory program. Proper training and time for teachers will positively impact the success of junior high students. Thus, advisory is a vital component of a successful middle school.

The researchers recommend that advisory be continued with more frequent meeting times, training for teachers to ensure consistency within the lessons being taught, and additional student feedback after each lesson. It is also recommended, that at the beginning of each academic school year, students take a survey to determine what topics they feel are essential to cover during the advisory program for that year. This would ensure the curriculum meets the needs of the ever changing student population.

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