GROUP METHODS AND PERSONAL GROWTH OF FRESHMAN NURSING STUDENTS

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In a world of rapid change when educationists are becoming increasingly aware of prevailing forces affecting students' attitudes, a question which has arisen in nursing education is whether the growth of democratic attitudes can be facilitated through group participation. Although the researchers' findings in the study of group methods are frequently inconclusive, sometimes doubtful, and often contradictory, the professional educator should continue searching for means of applying the group methods which promote personal growth as well as acquisition of skills and knowledge.

The faculty of the University of Saskatchewan School of Nursing, interested in designing a program which would enhance the student's personal growth, focused attention on the freshman nursing students. This came about primarily because of the observation having previously been made that in the large freshman classes many of the students experienced loneliness and discomfort in the large impersonal setting where even getting acquainted with one's peer group was a problem particularly for the quieter person. Although nursing instructors interviewed freshman students, this procedure seemed inadequate. Another method was tried. An instructor, acting as group leader, met weekly with a small group of students. Students' needs were anticipated and the sessions were planned to focus attention on those needs. Another question was then raised as to whether student needs could be more effectively met in group situations where the students, rather than the group leader, took responsibility for discussions. If a group-centered approach would be used, the anticipated change was that the students' attitudes would become more democratic than if the leader-centered approach were used.

PERSONAL GROWTH AS AN OBJECTIVE

The educational objective of personal growth is more ambiguous than the objectives of intellectual and professional development; therefore less certainty seems to exist about what the objective means and about how it would be met. Generally it is related to developing the ability of accepting responsibility for others as well as for oneself(1).

Creative behavior, a characteristic of someone who has met this objective, is also difficult to define, yet its relevance to nursing education is necessary when considering the complexity of encounters with colleagues and patients in establishing healing relationships. Definitions of creativity frequently imply an active process in which the result is in some way meaningful and useful. It is seen as being good and having a social worth(2).

DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES IN GROUP LEADERSHIP

The concept of group-centered leadership is based on a set of attitudes dissimilar to leader-centered attitudes. Traditionally leadership is seen as a function carried out by one person, whereas in group-centered leadership the functions of leadership are the responsibility of all members of a group and the goals are democratic; hence greater member participation and responsibility is encouraged.

Reseach findings reported in the literature on the effectiveness of the group-centered approach in developing democratic attitudes and promoting personal growth were inconsistent and indicated the need for more investigation of the factors involved.

ATTITUDES AND NEEDS OF FRESHMAN NURSING STUDENTS

The needs of the adolescent are those which, if fulfilled, lead to her maturity. Erikson saw the basic needs of the adolescent as acquiring a sense of identity, the knowledge of who one is, what one is, and where one belongs(3). Considering that the entering student is in late adolescence struggling with these needs and recognizing that the freshman tends to have authoritarian attitudes, it becomes important to appreciate that the behavior of the beginning student may be designed to avoid disturbing a rather precarious balance.

The individual may have learned groups of attitudes which were appropriate to her earlier life situation and stage of development. In the new environment these attitudes may no longer fit. The group in contact with the student may facilitate the acquisition of an approach to living which makes for a more fully functioning student.

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THE GROUP APPROACH IN MEETING NEEDS

A group of interacting individuals may function in such a way as to meet the needs of its individuals and consequently to promote their personal growth(4). In a group of effectively functioning members individuals can test others' responses to their behavior: thereby providing opportunity for growth as each person utilizes skills already learned and gains confidence in experimenting with new approaches.

As mentioned earlier, the faculty of the School of Nursing wished to consider ways of meeting the needs of first year students more satisfactorily than had been accomplished previously. Since the group-centered method had the potential for doing this, a plan was put into action to see whether, in the given setting, this could be accomplished.

GROUPS WERE ESTABLISHED

On the basis of scores from pre-testing, the eighty-three freshman students were divided into six matched groups. The six teachers who took part were selected on the basis of ability in teaching methods, availability for the project, and interest in experimentation. Three teachers agreed to use the group-centered approach while the other three, in order to provide a control group, used the leader-centered approach. While the teachers were aware that the results of these approaches would be tested, this had not been explained to the students.

Each group met for a total of sixteen fifty-minute sessions held once a week. They met in seminar rooms with chairs in a circular arrangement.

HYPOTHESES AND MEASUREMENT SCALES

Three hypotheses were to be tested with appropriate scales.

Hypothesis 1: The attitudes of student nurses exposed to group-centered leadership will become significantly less authoritarian than the attitudes of student nurses exposed to the leader-centered approach.

The scale used to test this hypothesis was the California F Scale(5), which is considered to a measure of authoritarian attitudes.

Hypothesis 2: The security level of student nurses exposed to group-centered leadership will become significantly greater than the security level of student nurses exposed to the leader-centered approach.

The Security-Insecurity Inventory developed by Maslow(6) was

used to measure the conscious feeling of security experienced by the subjects.

Hypothesis 3: The student nurses exposed to the group-centered approach will favor group-centered attitudes more so than will the students exposed to the leader-centered approach.

This hypothesis was tested by using Dimock's Y Opinion Questionnaire(7) to measure group-centered attitudes.

LEADER-CENTERED GROUP DESIGN

Using Maslow's theory of a hierarchy of needs as the conceptual model, the leader-centered sessions were planned according to the anticipated levels of needs the students would experience during the year. Also used as guidelines were responses from first year students who, in the preceding year, were asked periodically the nature of their greatest concerns. Basically, the leaders of these groups were authority figures who planned how the sessions would develop. Their role was to direct and control subject matter and discussions.

GROUP-CENTERED APPROACH

The plan for the group-centered approach was that the leader would not take the traditional role but would function in such a way that the students would accept responsibility for the sessions. The leader was to be accepting of the students' contributions and encouraging in a non-directive manner. The leaders were to encourage the group members to express feelings and to examine their behavior in the group.

FINAL TESTING AND RESULTS

At the conclusion of the sessions the students were retested and scores were calculated for individual students by finding the difference between their before and after scores. Then a mean difference score was calculated for each of the six groups. A one-way analysis of variance was used to determine whether the differences among the six means were statistically significant. This method of calculation was done for all three scales. The findings did not support any of the three hypotheses. There were no significant differences in authoritarian attitudes, security levels, nor in group-leadership attitudes as a result of the two different leadership methods.

FACTORS AFFECTING FRESHMAN BEHAVIOR IN GROUPS

Affecting the freshman nursing students may be a number of influences which account for the results of this study.

As indicated above, the freshman who is basically authoritarian understands his role in relation to an authoritarian structure. It may be then that when confronted with a group-centered leader whose role he does not understand, he feels insecure about his own position and so, rather than trying new behavior to meet the challenge, he repeats behavior which worked before. His need for security may best be met by giving some structure rather than by taking it away.

To illustrate how differently the student saw the leader from themselves, one of the leaders reported that when the students had the opportunity to decide on how they would address each other, the students wished to be called by their first names; however they did not feel comfortable enough to call the group leader by her first name.

Another factor to consider when trying to understand the results is that the sessions may have been too short and too few in number to have a significant impact on students. These limitations may have hindered the development of enough security to function democratically.

With regard to the effect of the total milieu on the student and consequently on her response to the group discussion, attention should be drawn to the fact that the university, if not most of society, functions on largely authoritarian terms. The student no doubt is aware that the teacher is also bound by the limits of the organization. As a result of the teachers' willing or unwilling lack of freedom, the student is under an authoritarian influence which allows her no say in her educational plans but expects that she conform to "the regulations". The obedient student is rewarded with high grades and eventually with a degree. It appears that the leader-centered values are the ones which will guide her to the successful accomplishment of her academic goal.

Even though the results did not support the hypotheses there were a number of positive outcomes for both teachers and students of both kinds of groups. Each, teacher and students, came to know the other better than they might have otherwise. While not getting to know all members of the class, at least knowing the members of the group and sharing similar concerns helped to lessen feelings of aloneness. Fortunately, another positive outcome was observed. Increased interest in the use of group-centered leadership became evident as more teachers began preparing themselves through credit and noncredit programs for this kind of role. Other designs varying the combinations of members and the amount of structure have been tried.

The use of the group-centered approach holds potential for actualizing the student's creativity through personal growth, and brings

challenges to the teacher's courage and professional development. For the innovator in nursing education the question of how this can happen still seeks an answer.

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