Two Studies of Positive Peer Culture: A Response

Larry K. Brendtro
Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Several years ago I was guiding Dr. John Cooper, a colleague of mine at Ohio State University, on a tour of a positive peer culture treatment center. Dr. Cooper is well-known to behaviorists for his outstanding contributions on behavioral assessment, but this was his first opportunity to view a peer culture program. At the end of several hours of observation and conversation with scores of youth, he expressed amazement at the positive impression made by these troubled youngsters and surprise that this apparently obvious transformation of behavior and attitudes had not been documented in the research literature. I explained that the PPC model developed out of practice rather than from an academic theory, which might explain why the research was so long overdue. I am most pleased to see this need being addressed as the current research studies make a significant contribution to the emerging literature on the effectiveness of positive peer culture.

In recent years we have seen a proliferation of peer group methods of various ilk leading to much confusion about what the goals of a program like PPC might be. Is PPC a “peer pressure” strategy that substitutes youth confrontation for adult coercion? Is it amateur group therapy by irresponsible delinquents and undertrained adult professionals? Some might even lump PPC with what Greelong (1987) has called the peer-oriented “cult and charisma models.” Is PPC the same as guided group interaction (GGI)? If so, one might wonder why some GGI investigators (e.g., Petrock, 1976) argue that the goal is not to change values and self-concept, a position totally contradicted by the two articles under consideration.

The authors of both studies accept the goal definition that PPC programs seek to develop caring values and a positive self-concept. The

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article by Davis and colleagues provides further evidence that PPC can in fact engender such changes in children. I found it particularly interesting that the most dramatic pre-post test gains on the Tennessee Self-Concept scale were on the moral-ethical subtest. This is a critical issue in a program that purports to teach caring to narcissistic young people.

While the authors note that further research must deal with issues of generalization and transfer, it appears that PPC is preparing to take its place among other methodologies with empirical documentation of effectiveness. Even if we do not yet know what the long-term outcome will be for youth leaving PPC programs, one could easily defend the importance of an experience that enhances self-concept and prosocial values.

The two studies raise the interesting question of what might be the relative effectiveness of PPC methodology in different settings and in contrast to other specific methods of treatment. Further, we might ask what program elements actually produce the change. For example, would group meetings alone achieve these results if the young people were not involved in a range of volunteer service-learning activities which are common to PPC programs? (Brendtro, 1985).

The field is particularly indebted to William Wasmund for taking the initiative in producing PPC research at a time when others were content to defend their programs with testimonials. His leadership in the National Association of Peer Group Agencies has also been important in establishing a forum where practitioners of this methodology can exchange viewpoints and data in the quest for more effective services to troubled young people. The methodology in his current study is particularly fitting to the PPC philosophy of youth empowerment, since he is asking the consumers as well as the providers to evaluate the treatment environment. The results are intriguing, particularly the dichotomy between adult and youth perspectives in the non-PPC programs. The data suggest that where adult-dominated strategies of control are in vogue, we see the creation of two opposing cultures: controlling adults and counter-controlling youth. As Wasmund argues, control becomes self-justifying. The controlling adults view surface behavior and believe they are creating an orderly and organized environment; youth in these non-peer agencies perceive a very different subculture, perhaps marked more by chaos and disorganization.

References