The Impact of a Group-Based Intervention on the Social and Emotional Competencies of Young People in Early Secondary Education: A Pilot Study

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Background & rationale
- Poor social skills in adolescence are related to a range of negative outcomes including lack of school adjustment, poor academic performance and mental health issues (Segrin and Flora, 2000; Marchant, 2015).
- Research suggests pupils with good socio-emotional skills are more accepted by their peers, less anxious and more likely to perform well in school (Bijstra, 2008; Caprara et al., 2000).
- Previous studies have demonstrated the impact of a group-based socio-emotional intervention (Pyramid club) in primary schools, improving vulnerable children's social and emotional well-being (Ohl et al., 2008; Ohl et al., 2012).
- Pyramid clubs provide an experiential model of learning in a supportive group environment.

Aims of the study
- To evaluate the impact of Pyramid club on a cohort of pupils in early secondary education.
- To explore the theory underpinning Pyramid and identify how interventions bring about change.

Method
- **Design:** Mixed methods.
- **Participants:** 7 Pupils (5 boys, 2 girls) were in the intervention group (mean age 12.1 years).

- **Measures:** Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) Informant version (Goodman, 1997); SDQ Self-rated version (Goodman, 1998).

- **Procedure:** Baseline SDQ data was collected prior to the first Pyramid club from the intervention group and a matched comparison group. After the 10-week programme the same measures were repeated. Quantitative data was statistically analysed.

The researcher facilitated 2 focus groups (1 with Pyramid club attendees; 1 with group leaders). Data was transcribed and a deductive, thematic analysis was undertaken.

Results
- Teacher assessment (TA) SDQ results from pre to post club indicated an improvement in socio-emotional wellbeing (SEWB).
- Self-report SDQ scores demonstrated lower identified needs pre-clubs and less change post-clubs.
- Data collected from both focus groups supported the findings from the TA SDQs which indicated improvements in SEWB.
- Two of the main themes to emerge from the thematic analysis were ‘facilitators and barriers’ and ‘Pyramid legacy.’
- Factors which facilitated the success of Pyramid club included: a relaxed, ‘safe’ environment; a structured but flexible programme; small group size and high adult to child ratio.
- Legacy sub-themes included: attendees’ sense of achievement and self-development and group leaders’ learning experiences.

Preliminary findings & Implications for further research
- Early indicators suggest the positive impact of Pyramid club on vulnerable young people's socio-emotional well-being (SEWB) and the appropriateness of the Pyramid model for pupils in early secondary education.
- The discrepancies in cross-informant SDQ results may be due to a number of factors (including individual and situational factors) but warrant further attention.
- A thematic analysis of the qualitative data enabled a preliminary exploration of the Pyramid model's underlying mechanisms which bring about change.
- Further analysis is needed to extrapolate how these mechanisms are embedded in the psychological theory which underpins the Pyramid model of change.
- Longer-term follow up (12-months post-club) is required to assess the sustainability of the improvements demonstrated in SEWB.
- This pilot supports extending the research to a larger cohort and examining the impact on academic performance.
- Findings from this pilot study will contribute to the main research project and will help to refine and guide the research process.

Table 1: Teacher Assessment SDQ group mean scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key: ‘Caseness’ bands</th>
<th>Baseline Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Post-Club Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Difference: Baseline to post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>7.67 (.98)</td>
<td>7.67 (.98)</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borderline</td>
<td>5.67 (3.78)</td>
<td>3.83 (2.48)</td>
<td>-1.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abnormal</td>
<td>2.83 (.82)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-2.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Emotional difficulties</th>
<th>Peer difficulties</th>
<th>Conduct difficulties</th>
<th>Hyperactivity difficulties</th>
<th>Total Difficulties</th>
<th>Pro-social (strength)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>4.17 (1.94)</td>
<td>2.83 (2.48)</td>
<td>0.67 (.82)</td>
<td>3.67 (2.58)</td>
<td>11.33 (5.26)</td>
<td>6.5 (2.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Club</td>
<td>4.17 (1.94)</td>
<td>2.83 (2.48)</td>
<td>0.67 (.82)</td>
<td>3.67 (2.58)</td>
<td>11.33 (5.26)</td>
<td>6.5 (2.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>-1.84</td>
<td>-2.83</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>-6.5</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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References: