ON TARGET
ADVISORY

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ABSTRACT

Relationships are the essence of advisories (Van Hoose, 1991). Because of the potential of middle school concepts to contribute to the improvement of schools, it is important to investigate the current status of advisory programs. This case study examines advisory programs and presents data regarding attitudes and beliefs of participants toward such programs. Semi-structured student and teacher interviews were conducted with 36 participants in six middle schools. Data analyses led to the development of two themes. The first theme, Student Mingling or Teacher Meddling ?, emphasizes the fine line between addressing the needs of young adolescents to be nurtured and supported, while simultaneously respecting their ever growing desire for independence and autonomy. The second theme, From Attention Provider to Detention Giver, reveals the dichotomy that exists between positive reinforcements and negative behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

Reports calling for reform of middle level schooling first appeared in the mid-1970s (see ASCD, 1975; NMSA, 1977). While it is commonsense to assume that schools would respond to the needs of their students and create developmentally appropriate learning environments, it is evident from the history of middle-level reform that schools are slow to change. In their 1989 report, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, the Carnegie Task Force claimed that "a volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grade schools and the intellectual and emotional needs of young adolescents. Caught in a vortex of changing demands, the engagement of many youth in learning diminishes, and their rates of alienation, substance abuse, absenteeism, and dropping out of school begin to rise" (pp. 8-9). Jackson (1990), Project Director for *Turning Points* also notes that "recent studies show that few of the recommended actions, though frequently proposed, are actually practiced in schools" (p. 1).[1] These middle-level reform efforts include teaming, block/flexible scheduling, exploratory programs, transition programs, and advisory programs. Specifically, this article focuses on one component of middle level reform, the advisor-advisee program. Beane and Lipka (1987) present the following description of advisory programs:

> Advisory programs are designed to deal directly with the affective needs of transescents. Activities may range from non-formal interactions to use of systematically developed units whose organizing center are drawn from the common problems, needs, interests, or concerns of transescents, such as "getting along with peers," "living in the school," or "developing self-concept." In the best of these programs, transescents have an opportunity to get to know one adult really well, to find a point of security in the Institution, and to learn about what it means to be a healthy human being, (p. 40).

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

It is important to note that while recent research points to positive results of advisory programs (Connors, 1991; Mac Iver, 1990; Putbrese, 1989; Vars, 1989), advisory remains one of the most difficult of the middle level concepts to implement (Fenwick, 1992; Lounsbury & Clark, 1990). Many advisory programs are not functioning as they were initially intended and have simply taken the place of homeroom. Because of the tremendous potential of the middle school concept to contribute to the improvement of schools, we feel it most important to investigate the current status, strengths as well as shortcomings, of advisory programs—to look more closely at advisory programs and to present the reader with empirical data concerning the attitudes and beliefs of teachers and students toward such programs. What has been missing from the discussion on advisory programs are the voices of both teachers and students. As acknowledged by Sardo-Brown and Shetlar (1994), "more investigations of both teacher and student perceptions of the advisor-advisee period need to be done in a variety of different types of schools" (p. 23).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In an effort to facilitate advocacy and a continuity of care for all students, middle level schools use a variety of organizational arrangements, including advisor-advisee programs (NMSA, 1995). While there is still a need for considerably more research about the effectiveness of such programs (Clark & Clark, 1994), some of the most frequently mentioned purposes of advisories include:

1. Promoting opportunities for social development,
2. Assisting students with academic problems,
3. Facilitating positive involvement between teachers and administrators and students,
4. Providing an adult advocate for each student in the school,
5. Promoting positive school climate. (Clark & Clark, 1994, pp. 135-136)

Regarding the effectiveness of such programs, Mac Iver (1990) found that when teacher advisories focused on social and academic support activities that a strong relationship developed that contributed to the reduction of dropouts. Connors (1986) found evidence that advisory programs helped students grow emotionally and socially, contributed to a positive school climate, helped students learn about school and get along with their classmates, and enhanced teacher-student relationships. George and Oldaker (1985) suggest that when advisory programs are combined with other components of the middle school concept that student self-concept improves, dropout rates decrease, and school climate becomes more positive.

Although these studies all point to the possible positive effects of advisory programs, research indicates that schools have a very difficult time both implementing and sustaining this component of middle school reform (Fenwick, 1992; Lounsbury & Clark, 1990). A number of studies (Batsell, 1995; Bunte, 1995; Dale, 1993; Lee, 1995; Mosidi, 1994) addressed the issue of implementation of advisory programs. Findings from these research projects reveal that successful implementation must address issues related to staff capacity, technical/ administrative support, limiting the number of students (15-20) in each advisory, differing expectations on the part of teachers and administrators, the allotment of time to advisory periods as well as to teacher planning, a well-defined advisory curriculum, a feedback/maintenance loop for program review and revision, the transformation of the school's cultural norms, and the management of organizational politics.

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

Table 1

Components of Successful Advisor-Advisee Programs: Rationale, Design & Emphasis

Rationale for Advisor-Advisee Programs
- Promote small, caring communities of learners
- Promote mutually respectful and meaningful relationships
- Promote individual attention to students
- Provide each student with an opportunity to "belong"
- Allow teachers to be actively involved in the affective development of students
- Emphasize the social and emotional development of every young adolescent
- Assist students with interpersonal communication skills development

Design for Advisor-Advisee Programs
- Need careful organizing, planning, preparing, implementing and monitoring
- Need guidance department, administration, and district level support
- Need teacher, parent, student input and active involvement
- Need teachers/advisors trained and committed to teaching young adolescents
- Need relevant, ongoing professional development opportunities
- Number of Meetings per Week-scheduled daily, regularly
- Length of Advisory Meetings—20 to 40 minutes, uninterrupted
- Time of Day Advisories Scheduled-morning, flexible
- Number of Students Assigned to Advisory Groups—10 to 20 students
- Assigning Students—see advisor during the course of the day

Emphasis for Advisor-Advisee Programs
- Based on teacher and student input
- Based on the affective domain
- Address needs of specific school and community
- Social/Communication/Positive Interpersonal Relationships
- Respect for Self and Others/Good Citizen
- Accepting Responsibility for Education and Actions
- Develop Group, team, and School Spirit
- Academic Monitoring/Assistance/Motivation
- Study, Test-taking, and Note-taking Skills Instruction
- Self-Esteem Activities/Self-Awareness Growth
- Appreciating Talents, Health, and Potential
- Understanding and Making Commitments
- Decision Making/Coping Skills/Problem Solving
- Career Education/Guidance/Future Planning
- Setting and Obtaining Goals/Organizing Time
- Intramural Activities/Community Service Projects
- School Issues and Concerns/Adjustments
- Substance Abuse/Current Adolescent Issues

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

Some researchers provide their readers with sample program development timelines (Ayres, 1994) or a listing of the "Ten Steps to a Successful Advisory Program" (Hertzog, 1992). Others suggest what the critical program features are (see Table 1) and how best to prepare teachers for their role in the program (Gill & Read, 1990; James, 1986).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

According to Van Hoose (1991) relationships are the essence of advisory programs. These relationships connect teachers and students, as well as students and students, in a "warm, caring, friendly environment" (Carnegie Task Force, 1989). We are reminded by the scholarship of both Mayeroff (1971) and Gaylin (1976) that we as human beings are ontologically relational and that caring interactions are a natural expression of that fact. Communities are created around these relationships. Buber (1958) acknowledges that we can experience what it means "to be" only through our participation in caring relationships. With this understanding, we turn, then, to the conceptual framework that guides this research, the concepts of community and caring.

Community

According to Sergiovanni (1996), communities "create social structure that bond people together in a oneness, and that bind them to a set of shared values and ideas" (p. 47). Sergiovanni continues by arguing that this bonding and binding is tight enough to transform them from a collection of "I's" into a collective "we." Communities are characterized by qualities such as purpose, trust, respect, commitment, unconditional acceptance and belonging, safe-haven, and shared responsibility.

Exploring the conditions and qualities of communities, Tonnies (1887/ 1957) made the distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. While these are two "ideal forms" that do not exist in the real world, the distinction between them is important for our discussion. *Gemeinschaft* refers to community while *gesellschaft* translates to society. As we moved away from a traditional community concept to a societal ideal, community qualities were replaced with contractual ones. Relationships became very formal with job descriptions and role expectations. The qualities of a community (mentioned above) were lost. Sergiovanni (1994), following the work of Tonnies, notes that "gemeinschaft enterprises ... strive to go beyond calculated to committed involvement" (p. 50).

In his discussion of community, Mitchell (1990) suggests that modern culture has disabled virtually everyone due to "rapid and repeated episodes of loss" (p. 22). Loss includes disrupted families, poverty, as well as other experiences that destroy one's sense of security and well being. To regain this sense of security, we seek membership in groups or communities that support "consistent and continuous nurturance of belonging" (p. 39). Mitchell challenges educational leaders to create such communities in our schools.

Caring

Beck (1994) recognizes that "young people in our schools speak poignantly of their longing to be cared for and the perceived lack of care that characterizes not only our schools but society at large" (p. ix) (see also Anfara & Miron, 1996). Braddock and McPartland (1992) acknowledge that "students must also be attached to their schools in human terms and on a personal level, with the perception that their teachers care about them ..." (p. 160).

Caring has been explored from the perspective of many fields—social policy (Watson, 1980), social work (Imre, 1982), and family studies (Hobbs, Dokecki, Hoover-Dempsey, Moroney, Shayne, & Weeks, 1984) to name only a few. Hobbs et al. call on scholars and practitioners to move toward "the creation and support of a competent and caring society" (p. 4). In the field of education Gilligan (1982), Barth (1990), Noddings (1992), Sergiovanni (1992, 1994) and Beck (1994) have all called upon us to practice a caring ethic. Beck (1994) is so strong in her conviction that she writes:

> Furthermore, I believe that a conceptual framework that emphasizes personal development, the cultivation of community, and an ethic of caring, offers the **only** valid starting point from which academicians and practitioners can hammer out organizational and instructional theories and methodologies that can adequately meet the challenges facing education in the 1990s and beyond. (p. 2) (emphasis added)

Noddings (1984) acknowledges that the term "caring" does not easily lend itself to an operational definition. Echoing the ideas of Buber, Noddings writes that "the relational mode seems to be essential to living fully as a person" (p. 35). But she also emphasizes that "vulnerability is potentially increased when I care, for I can be hurt through the other as well as through myself (p. 33).

In *On Caring* (1971) Mayeroff acknowledges that "to care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself (p. 1). For Gaylin (1976), true caring happens when people relate to each other in ways that promote the healthy unfolding of all types of development. In short, people are relational and caring acts are an appropriate expression of this human quality. Communities, then, become the context in which care can be exhibited. Hobbs et al. (1984) propose that community is essential to the creation of caring relationships.

In her discussion of caring, Beck (1994) notes that caring involves three activities: (1) receiving another person's perspective, (2) responding appropriately to the other's perception, and (3) remaining committed to the relationship. She writes:

> Caring is.. .distinguished by the fact that there is commitment between peoplewho care. This commitment shifts caring from being a conditional act dependent on merit or whim, and moves it toward being an unconditional act marked by acceptance, nurturance, and grace. (p. 20)

In conclusion, as Beck purports, " A caring educational ethic would support the idea that schools should promote maximum individual and community growth and development..." (p. 65).

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

Why this discussion of community and caring? Basically because the link between caring and learning is very strong. Students, according to Noddings (1992) will "do things for people they like and trust ... They listen to people who matter to them, and to whom they matter." As we are reminded by Palmer (1983), "But what scholars now say—and what good teachers have always known—is that real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject. We cannot learn deeply and well until a community of learning is created in the classroom" (p. xvi).

DESIGN

All empirical studies have an implicit, if not explicit, research design. Yin (1994) discusses design as "an action plan for getting from here to there" (p. 19). This study was designed to understand and describe the nature of advisory programs as they contribute to a sense of community and caring in the context of middle school reform. This study is theoretically driven and descriptive, stressing the importance of context, setting, and the subject's frame of reference.

The major questions to be answered by this research are: (1) How do advisory programs help or hinder the creation of a sense of community and care for students and teachers?; (2) How do the structural/procedural components of an advisory program help or hinder the creation of this sense of community?; and (3) What do teachers and students say is the most important effect of advisory programs on school?

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology (Merriam, 1988) to gain a richer understanding of the unit of analysis. Specifically, a multiple-case (holistic) design is employed (Yin, 1994). As noted by Herriott and Firestone (1983), the evidence from multiple cases is often more compelling and the overall study can be regarded as more robust. Without sacrificing within-site understanding, a multiple case holistic design increases the potential for generalizing findings beyond a particular case (see Merriam, 1988).

Sites

Data for this study were collected from six middle schools located in two large metropolitan areas—the Greater Philadelphia Region and the Greater New Orleans Area. The three schools in the Greater New Orleans Area adopted the middle school concept and started their advisory programs approximately four years ago as part of a Goals 2000 subgrant awarded by the State of Louisiana. These schools are part of a school district that services approximately 54,576 students in 83 schools. Approximately 65% of the students in this school district receive free or reduced-priced lunch.

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

Dwight Middle School: Dwight Middle School is located on the West Bank of Madison Parish, Louisiana in a suburban setting. A large, two-story brown-brick building built in the early 1980s, the school is clean and decorated with art work done by one of the teachers. The suburban setting is deceptive. The Parish is divided by the Mississippi River, and the river separates a predominately minority population (West Bank) from a predominantly White population (East Bank). Dwight Middle serves a student population from grades 6-8 that is 67.1% African-American, 23.8% White, 4.2% Hispanic, 4.6% Asian American, and .3% American Indian. Approximately 80% of the students come from low-income families. Many of the problems faced by students and faculty are similar to those found in urban schools. Most of the parents work in semi-skilled or unskilled jobs and receive some form of government assistance. For most parents a high school education is the extent of their schooling. The school has a population of 1,140 students who are taught by approximately 60 teachers who are predominantly White and travel from the East Bank to teach. The advisory program was started three years ago through funding that came from a Goals 2000 sub-grant. A change in administration has proven detrimental to the implementation of the middle school concept at this school.

Eisenhower Junior High School: Also located on the West Bank of Madison Parish, this school services 728 students in grades 7-9. Approximately 50.3% of the students are African-American, 37.9% White, 2.5% Hispanic, 9% Asian American, and .3% American Indian. Forty-three percent of the students receive free or educed lunch. The school, three single-story blond-brick buildings (built in the 1970s), is located in a suburban setting with a high fence surrounding the property. The subdivisions that surround the school are racially segregated. The school is in the midst of an African American neighborhood, but there are White and Asian American subdivisions that are in close proximity. Many of the classrooms have murals that were painted by one of the teachers. The school is clean and orderly. Students move around the halls according to established "traffic" pattern, but tend to be quite loud. Hall monitors check for tardy and disruptive students. Most of the 50 faculty members travel from the East bank to teach at this school. The advisory program began three years ago as part of a Goals 2000 grant.

Franklin Middle School: Located on the East bank of the Mississippi River, Franklin Middle School is located in buildings that once housed the vocational school for this school system. The wooden buildings have been painted blue and red, the school's colors. The facility is well kept, but clearly not of the quality of other school facilities in the school system. Of the 533 students in grades 6-8 approximately 89.1% are African American, 8.1% White, 2% Hispanic, .1% Asian American, and .3% American Indian. Seventy-six percent of the students come from low-income families. This school is the only school on the East Bank with such a high percentage of minority students. Most of the teachers live on the East Bank and are White. The advisory program was started three years ago as part of a Goals 2000 sub-grant.

Schools implementing advisory programs were harder to locate in the Greater Philadelphia Region. The Philadelphia School District, the sixth largest in the nation, services approximately 213,000 students in 257 schools. A wide variety of programs exist that are labeled advisory programs—from exemplary programs that are a central part of the school day to those that are informally conducted with a limited number of teachers and students. Because of this problem, we looked to neighboring counties. Finally, one middle school was selected from the Philadelphia School District and two were selected from a northwestern county bordering Philadelphia.

**ON TARGET
ADVISORY**

Adams Middle School: Adams is located in Jefferson Township, Grant County that is on the Northwest border of Philadelphia. It is a diverse multi-cultural community that values a high quality education. Recognized in 1996 by *Money* magazine as one of the nation's top school districts, Jefferson Township School District consists of seven schools serving approximately 4,700 students. Adams is the district's only middle school (grades 7 and 8). Of the 850 students, 30% are African-American, 60% are White, 8% are Asian, and 2% Hispanic. Only 4% of the students at this middle school qualify as part of low-income families. A staff of 75 teachers seek to "nurture young adolescents at a time when they are trying to make sense of themselves and the world around them" (interview with the vice-principal, October 15, 1997). The advisory program is known by the acronym SWAP—Students with Academic Potential. Participation is voluntary and approximately 15 teachers out of 60 participate. Teachers typically have one or two advisees. There is no formally scheduled time for students and teachers to meet within the daily schedule. Many participants report that they meet after school or at lunch.

Buchanan Middle School: Buchanan Middle serves Hoover Township, Grant County, which has a total student population of 2,050. The school district is comprised of four schools—two elementary, one middle school, and one high school which are all located within walking distance of each other. The surrounding neighborhood is typical suburbia with large, single-family homes, sidewalks, and plenty of trees. Ethnically, the student population is 96% White, 2% African-American, 1% Asian and 1% Hispanic. Approximately 7% of the students qualify as low-income. The middle school houses grades 5-7 and has received acclaim for its exemplary advisory program, team teaching, and emphasis on technology in the classroom. While the exterior is large, three story brick building sprawled over a massive campus of playing fields, athletic courts, and open ground, the interior is very warm and cozy. Numerous displays of student artwork and academic achievement decorate the halls and corridors. The students move about comfortably and seem to be very much "at home' in their environment. The advisory program was instituted by the principal who is very much an advocate of the middle school concept. For the 1997-98 school year the school is divided into 38 authors (last year it was tribes) around which activities are planned. In a typical 6 day rotation schedule of 9 periods a day, students and faculty meet in advisories for 2 periods. Each of these periods last for 41 minutes. The Advisor-Advisee ratio is approximately 1 to 14.

Calhoun Middle School: Calhoun Middle School is a racially balanced magnet school nestled in the Port Richmond section of Philadelphia. It houses 900 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th graders pooled from the surrounding Jackson area. Located at the corner of Lincoln and Johnson, Calhoun structurally is a large four-story brick building defaced with graffiti. The school encompasses a city-wide block with a fenced yard in the rear. The surrounding homes are inner city row houses where a predominately lower socioeconomic working class lives. The neighborhood is ethnically mixed. The streets are somewhat safe during daylight hours but are plagued with drugs and violence after dark. Security guards man the only unlocked entrance to the school. Most of the students who attend Calhoun walk to school, attend regularly, behave properly, and work hard on their studies. They are academically gifted but economically deprived. The administration and staff are warm, welcoming, and caring. Small learning communities have been formed and team teaching occurs. There is a nice "feel" to Calhoun—the students move about freely and seem very much at ease. They view education as important and see it as their vehicle to advance in life. All of the students and teachers at Calhoun participate in the Advisory Program; the Advisor-Advisee ratio is 1 to 33. The program is scheduled for the first 22 minutes of every day. In connection with this, one additional "Guidance" period, another 22 minutes, is conducted during the course of the week.

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

Procedures

At each of these six schools, a minimum of three teachers and three students were interviewed (see Appendix A for interview protocols). The names of the schools as well as the names of teachers and students have been changed and a number code has been used (see Appendix B). Using a type of nonprobability sampling or purposive sampling, principals, assistant principals, or counselors were asked to select teachers and students for these interviews. Even though no criteria were required for selection of informants other than the teachers or students had to be officially involved in an advisory program for at least one school year, it is believed that a representative sample of diverse opinions and experiences was found. The 36 semi-structured interviews were recorded and later transcribed for purposes of analysis. To enhance design validity participant language or verbatim accounts are presented in the analysis of this paper. Observations were conducted at the 6 sites and documents (i.e., examples of advisory activities, agendas from planning sessions, newsletters to parents) were collected to help in the triangulation of the data. Additionally, a questionnaire concerning procedural matters was designed and administered to the teachers in Louisiana. It was thought that interview time would be limited because of the necessity to travel to the site from Philadelphia and that time could best be spent talking about more substantive (relational) than procedural issues.

The two researchers involved in this project equally divided responsibilities regarding interviews and observations. Using multiple researchers also helped in establishing design validity. Analysis began with the reading and re-reading of the transcripts and the development of initial codes and themes. At this point in the analysis, the two researchers met to debate the interpretation that has been presented in this research. Wasser and Bresler (1996) refer to this as the "interpretive zone"—"the place where multiple viewpoints are held in dynamic tension" (p. 6). The results of these procedures lead to the presentation of a cross-case analysis (Yin, 1994).

To help establish the trustworthiness of this research, the "debated" interpretation was presented to some of the initial informants for participant review (member checking). To help in minimizing researcher bias, a field log was maintained in which decisions were recorded relative to the emerging design and data validity. Additionally, all dates, times, places, persons, and activities employed to obtain access to informants, as well as researcher impressions, were recorded (audit trail).

ANALYSIS

The purpose of analysis is to bring meaning, structure, and order to data. Through the analytical process of interpreting the findings, two salient themes emerged with regard to advisories, care and community. The first theme—Student Mingling or Teacher Meddling?—emphasizes the fine line between addressing the needs of young adolescents to be nurtured and supported, while simultaneously respecting their ever growing desire for independence and autonomy. The second theme—From Attention Provider to Detention Giver—reveals the dichotomy that exists between positive reinforcements and negative behaviors. The voices of students and teachers provide the depth and detail of the experiences of those directly involved with the day-to-day implementation of advisory programs.

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

Student Mingling or Teacher Meddling?

The transition to middle school, when students leave established and familiar environments at a particularly vulnerable developmental stage, has been identified as a stressful period for young adolescents. Young adolescents need a place where they "fit in" and are important to a group (Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, Mac Iver, & Feldlaufer, 1993). To combat the social and physical anonymity that can result when students move from the security of the elementary school classroom where they came to know both their teacher and peers well, to the larger middle school, faculty and staff attempt to build relationships within small peer groups. As one middle-level educator said, "The best thing about an advisory program is having a small group and being able to get to know each of them. Its also a great way of the kids getting to know each other, learning positive things about each other—we stress that a lot" (5T-FW5-05ES).

The role of the advisor in this case is one of fostering a sense of belonging to a "school family." "Emphasis focuses on building a group identity through such activities as selecting an AA name and song, creating a motto or logo, engaging in friendly competition with other advisory groups, completing a community service project, and engaging in intramural games" (Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox, 1998, p. 22). Observations conducted and documents collected at each of the six sites verified that a number of such activities were utilized to nurture a sense of care and community. Typical responses from the students confirmed this: "We sort of play games to get to know each other better. It's sort of like a working together game" (4S19-FH8).

Relationships are the essence of advisories (Van Hoose, 1991). These relationships connect students to teachers, students to students, and teachers to teachers. They create a controlled, structured group in a warm, caring, friendly environment where teachers relate to students on a variety of levels (Carnegie Task Force, 1989). These groups offer students safe harbors in the sea of adolescent confusion (Campbell, 1991; James, 1986). They provide every student with a stable, supportive advocate who will listen to the student's concerns and help the student seek answers. The advisor links the student with the rest of the school and the school with the family (James, 1986). Simmons and Kiarich (1989), in writing about a successful advisory program and its influence on school climate, add that "Students who have learned to cooperate with and care about others help create a pleasant school atmosphere in which everyone feels a sense of security and belonging. The results are increased concern, trust, and better communication among the entire school community" (p. 13). Similar results are noted in the following accounts. The findings demonstrate that many of the students love the ability and opportunity to "mingle" first with other students, and then with their teachers.

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

S: "I get to know them [fellow advisees], I get to know how they feel, I really get to know what they're like and how they interact—so I can work with them better." (5S-MW6)

S: "There are some girls in my class and I had no idea who they were and I was never friends with them. But once I was in their advisory, I got to know them better and I got to know that they were really cool and everything." (6S-FH7)

S: "I've always liked school, but this has been more exciting. Having the advisory, you get to know everybody better." (1S-MB6)

S: "Ah, we should meet a little more often. We should meet almost everyday cause then you get to meet more and you get to know people better. I like talking to other kids and getting to know them better, yeah." (4S-MW8)

S: "I like that everybody get together and we talk about everything. I would like more time to meet and more time for everyone to meet together. I like it when we meet with other students." (4S-FB8)

S: "Yeah, I mean, advisory makes me feel better about coming to school. I just like to know that I always have someone to talk to if I need to." (5S-FW7)

S: "Yeah, I can talk to my advisor pretty much and she won't tell anybody. She's pretty trustworthy. She's respecting us a lot this year." (2S-MH7)

A number of the teachers interviewed enjoy the "mingling" as well. They derive great pleasure from their interactions and connections and value "the importance of acting in nurturing ways that promote a sense of security and belonging in students" (Noddings, 1992, p. 61). Beck (1994) emphasizes the need to create such opportunities in school buildings for the creation of "close, caring relationships between students and the adults they see on a regular basis" (p. 32). When asked what they see as the most positive aspect of the advisory program (see Appendix A for Interview Protocol), typical responses from the informants include this notion of mingling:

T: "I think the advisory program helps me know some students a little better. I enjoy the interaction and it helps the kids get along better too. It gives them a place to bring up concerns." (2T-FH6-20E)

T: "She was very open telling me what was going on. Very, um, easy to talk to and I think she was relieved that she had somebody she could safely let it out with. I was glad I could be there for her." (4T-FW8-22E)

T: "Some students look at it as a chance to get to know other people better, even another faculty member better." (5T-FW5-05ES)

T: "I think the majority of the students like it [advisory]. And I know I hear from the eighth graders who leave that they miss it and when they go to high school and they don't have it, they wish they did." (3T-FB5-33E)

T: "They generally do come to me. I have had students in the past that have started their day before school in here just for support. They were having difficulty, you know. They were in my advisory." (2T-FH6-20E)

T: "Sometimes things like family and social problems come up. Not on a formal basis, but like we're sitting around the table doing the banner and the kids start to talk about things. Not formally, but you're still dealing with issues and they'll tell you a lot of things off the cuff in an informal manner about their families, etc. in that way." (3T-FB5-33E)

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

Student-teacher relationships should be nurtured through a carefully designed program of activities developed around the characteristics and needs of adolescents. "There must be common experiences, understandings, and causes that build community and allow students to identify with things bigger than themselves. At the same time, students need to identify their unique selves and develop their individual talents to the fullest" (Erb, 1998, p. 2). Ayres (1994) believes that these activities should challenge students to think, stretch and grow, but still provide adequate time to relax and reflect. Advisories should offer students ample time and opportunities for vital social interaction. According to Mac Iver (1990), "As young adolescents strive for autonomy, as they grapple with learning how to regulate their own behavior and make responsible choices, their need for close, caring adult supervision and guidance is paramount" (p. 458).

Given this information, questions remain unanswered. Where does the line of student mingling end and teacher meddling begin? When does teacher prodding violate a student's right to privacy? What if students are uncomfortable with sharing and feel as though their personal lives are being invaded? How do teachers know where to draw the line between being interested and supportive and being nosy and interfering? Capelluti and Stokes (1991) remind us that even though "early adolescents are searching for independence, they also still need the security of adult approval and direction" (p. 7). How do teachers strike a balance between the two? Listen to some of their frustrations:

> T: "The most negative aspect of the program was that students were reluctant to share." (6T-FW7-19E)
>
> T: "Some faculty complained about students being committed to not sharing their thoughts and feelings on different issues discussed." (6T-MW5-09E)
>
> T: "Their advisory groups were not interested in the list of subjects requested to be discussed and some of them maintained that there was a lack of student interest in the advisory group." (1T-FW7-19E)
>
> T: "I was on him all the time about school and I think that may have been a turn off to him. He never approached me about anything and as I say, we never really got a chance to develop our relationship." (4T-MB8-07S)
>
> T: "One child did not want to work with me. So, right off the bat, I was rejected. This was hard situation. This was rough kid that really needed somebody, but was very unreceptive to this whole advising idea. I think if it's not a good match to begin with, it could be a trauma for the child and possibly for the teacher as well." (4T-FW7-25S)
>
> T: "I think she (the student) was a little bewildered by the whole process. She wasn't quite sure where I fit in. Um! And that's the piece that I'm not sure she still under-stands. I try to draw her out as much as possible." (2T-FW8-22E)

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

Everhart (1983) points out in his research that students like teachers who respect and listen to them and who do not treat them as if they were "third graders." Indeed, a young adolescent is neither a dependent child nor a fully independent adult. Some of the teachers observed and interviewed for this study acknowledged that within their students they see an emergent sense of self that incorporates an adult-like sophistication and child-like sense of emotional spontaneity. They understand that students at this age naturally want a sense of ownership in their programs, they want more student-centered activities, and they want more control of their learning. Teachers and administrators who relate to students in terms of greater mutuality and reciprocity, recognize this growing sense of autonomy. In addition to this, Corbett and Wilson's (1997) remind their readers that "...an important population of people with a significant stake in how middle schools should operate has only been tangential participants in the debate-students" (p. 3). Given these facts, listen to the voices of the students themselves as they describe "teacher meddling."

> S: "Like some things I like about it [the advisory program] and some things I dislike—like having to tell them what I'm thinking or feeling about things—that's my business, not theirs. It's just okay." (5S-MW7)
>
> S: "Not really because I never really used to get along with them [advisors] anyway, its just... not really. Because there's people I just don't like." (4S-FH6)
>
> S: "I liked my advisor from last year better. I feel more comfortable talking to Mrs. H than Mrs. C. Mrs. C. asks too many questions." (1S-FW7)
>
> S: "We talk some, but not really cause that don't concern us. We don't want to talk about our problems with her. That's like taking time away from us. We want to be by ourselves." (6S-FH7)
>
> S: "So we don't really communicate with our teachers in guidance or advisory. They try to ask us personal questions like stuff about our families and stuff. I don't want them knowing any of that. Why they got to keep at it?" (2S-MB7)
>
> S: "Yeah, they'll [advisors] talk to us about drugs and not to do it but we mainly learn that in health class. Its not really like that teachers job to do it in advisory. They like to snoop and ask kids stuff all the time. I don't like it." (6S-FH7)
>
> S: Well, in advisory we go over like what high schools we want to go to and she [advisor] tells us what's the benefits of the stuff, what high schools we're going to. Sometimes she tries to talk us to go where we don't want—it's a lot of pressure." (3S-MH8)

One of the key recommendations in *Turning Points* (Carnegie Task Force, 1989) is the need to establish "small communities for learning, where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are considered fundamental..." (p. 9). An important word that seems to have gotten misplaced in some advisory programs is "respectful." One teacher interviewed was well aware of this. "I think for every grade, the advisory has a different purpose too. Now I've had an 8th grade advisory, 7th and 6th. And each year the kids and their needs are just completely different. We have to be aware of this because what they get out of it is just completely different too" (5T-FB5-31E). In Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson and Schaps' (1995) view, "students experience the school community when their needs for belonging, autonomy, and competence are met within that setting. Students in such a community feel that they are respected, valued and cared about by the other community members, and that they make meaningful contributions to the group's plans and activities" (p. 629). They also believe that students are more likely to feel committed to the group's goals when the above needs are met.

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

From the data collected for this study it has become clearer that teachers need to be sensitive to students' needs (Manning, 1993) and must respect their students' right to privacy (Cole, 1992). In fact, when this theme of student mingling or teacher meddling was taken back to some of the informants for verification of data analysis (member checking), one teacher reported:

> T: "This theme brought some lively discussions. While the faculty got into some heated debate about the fine line, it did give us an opportunity to confront some issues and discuss the real purpose of the advisory program at our school. All I can say is that the research is right on, it hit the nail on the head." (6T-MW6-24S)

According to Killion and Hirsh (1998), "The mortar that can fill the crack in the middle is competent and caring teachers—teachers who understand the needs of young adolescents, who establish safe, nurturing learning environments, and who elicit a high level of performance through their own strong instructional practices" (p. 44). These elements are necessary if trust is to be developed between teacher and student—an essential component to the educational process (Anfara & Miron, 1996).

From Attention Provider to Detention Giver

The Carnegie Task Force (1989) cites as one of the key elements of learning communities the fact that "small group advisories ... ensure that every student is known well by at least one adult" (p. 9). The desire is that this individual attention will result in improved student attitudes toward school, increased academic achievement, increased self-esteem, and a reduction in behavioral problems (Andrews & Stern, 1992). While the analysis of the data collected for this study does support these aspirations, it also highlights a number of discipline problems as well. Observations, interviews and discipline referrals substantiated the problems that can surface when students choose to act up during the non-academic, less structured setting of advisories.

For the past fifteen years, Eccles and her colleagues (1991; 1993) have been studying the effects of different school environments and middle level students' declines in motivation, competency beliefs, and general self-esteem after the transition to middle school. Eccles, Lord, and Midgley (1991) conclude that the decline in motivation appears to be linked to specific classroom characteristics, such as declines in the quality of the student-teacher relationships and in opportunities for participation in classroom decision making, and in an increase in classroom ability grouping. They recommend that "serious efforts be made to improve, and expand, the nature of student-teacher relationships in schools that serve early adolescents" (p. 539). Arhar and Kromrey (1993) also emphasize the importance of social bonding for potential dropouts and other students who have few quality relationships elsewhere.

**ON TARGET
ADVISORY**

The attention teachers give and the approaches they use to establishing quality advisor-advisee relationships vary from person to person. "Community, or connectedness, is the principle behind good teaching, but different teachers with different gifts create community is surprisingly diverse ways, using widely divergent methods" (Palmer, 1998, p. 115). Regardless of program emphasis, Bushnell and George (1993) label five desirable characteristics of effective advisors: (1) They care about the students in their advisory group and demonstrate that care in a variety of ways; (2) they are able to relate to the individuality of various advisees; (3) they are available to their advisees; (4) they have a positive attitude toward advisement; and (5) they have their own unique styles of advisement. Many of the students are keenly aware and appreciative of the attention given to them by their teachers. The following sample of accounts support this idea:

> S: "I like the advisory program, its good. Yeah, every time I would tell him I needed help, he would help me." (4S-MW8)
>
> S: "I know my teacher, the advisor, help me. He'll talk to me about lots of things. I can go to him about lots of stuff. Stuff I don't know to do and things like that." (4S-FB8)
>
> S: "I like that she [advisor] spends time talking to me. I think she's great and I think she has really helped me." (3S-FB6)
>
> S: "I know that the advisors care about everybody and how everybody is doing." (5S-MW6)
>
> S: "She [advisor] is always open and willing to help kids." (1S-FH7)

As earlier stated, students' needs for personal/social guidance through adult and peer relationships may be addressed through A/A programs. Activities that invoke the social and emotional learning needs of young adolescents and respond to the affective as well as the cognitive aspects of schooling may also be employed. A number of the students recognize this and the fact that increased adult attention may also lead to some degree of improvement in academics and/or behavior as well.

> S: "Like if I am in trouble, he'll [advisor] talk with me about it so that I can control what I do. Yeah! I've gotten in a lot less trouble. I used to get suspended a lot." (2S-MB8)
>
> S: "I like it cause she [advisor] would talk to me about doing better. I got better in, like my behavior and um ... yeah, I am much better now." (1S-FH7)
>
> S: "Like, um, cause last year I had a bad year and like Mr. M. was my adopted buddy, or advisor, and if I got problems, I go to him." (6S-MB7)
>
> S: "My advisor teaches me how to stay focused, how to stay patient." (5S-MW6)
>
> S: "Mr. J., cause like, he's helped me...I'm calming down and learning more stuff, like how to keep up with my work and everything." (3S-MB7)
>
> S: "Well, like she's [my advisor] the main one who always puts pressure on me so I could do better and stuff. So, it's like, she's my main teacher who gives me the most attention." (6S-MB7)
>
> S: "Well, its like if there is a big test on for tomorrow, you know, and I need help with my studies, cause I know I'm going to do bad, he [advisor] helps me study. He helps me with my homework. I'm not good with homework." (4S-MW8)
>
> S: "Well, on the upsides, since you're in a smaller group, you get to have more attention in each class. And in our class I believe there's 26 to 27 kids this year. So, that's a lot of kids to pay attention to. When there's 13 to 14 kids, you can be more alert and you can have more attention." (2S-MH7)

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

Teachers also reap the benefits of the increased attention. They grow in an increased sensitivity and/or consciousness raising about the needs of the advisees. Their observed emphasis on nurturing bolsters Beane's (1990) claim that a supportive atmosphere with sustained attention and positive, interpersonal relationships is linked to both teacher commitment and student achievement in school. According to Palmer (1998), "Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves ... The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts—meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self (p. 11).

> T: "I found that with the kids there was always a feeling like the kids in school were kind of out of control and now it seems like the energy is really generated towards this program and the kids seem to be more focused all around, academically and socially. I think the advisory program made a big difference." (5T-FW5-05ES)
>
> T: "She was disruptive in class and in my homeroom. I was able to talk to her advisor about some issues and I've seen a big change. I've also seen some changes with a couple of kids I had problems with." (4T-FW8-22E)
>
> T: "It was a way for me to connect with her [my advisee]. I sat on her a little bit and she told me she felt it made a big difference. She became more organized because there was somebody watching over her shoulder, checking up to see that things were being done." (3T-FW6-12E)
>
> T: "These are kids we want to be with. These are people who want to be with the kids." (6T-FW7-19E)
>
> T: "It gives you a different feeling about your relationships that you should have. In a big city like this, students could get lost. It's a big system too." (6T-MW6-24S)
>
> T: "I like the individual attention that we can give them. One boy I was working with, um, he was basically failing when we started. We continually worked, and worked, and worked ... his attitude has been definitely positive and he is doing his homework and he's made a 100% turn around. I'm just keeping my fingers crossed that it continues." (2T-FH7-07E)
>
> T: "You make time! You make time to be with your advisees. If you don't have some-body willing to do that then its not going to work." (4T-FW7-25S)
>
> T: "A bad day here is better than a good day at most places as far as discipline...Some children you get to just kinda take under your wing."(lT-MW5-HE)

In contrast to these statements, some teachers experienced student disciplinary problems that added to a sense of uneasiness relative to participation in advisory activities. Even though "ways of avoiding discipline problems and family/social issues were discussed to an extent" (6T-FW7-19E), negative, disruptive, unacceptable behaviors still surfaced. The following remarks explain why.

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

T: "When I'm helping one half, you have to keep your eye on the other half who are off task and vice versa." (5T-FW5-05ES)

T: "The administration gave no support to advisors on the handling of disruptive students. Advisors had to make-do as best they could, which frequently meant that the time spent in the activity was unproductive because of one or more disruptive students. Advisors would have to give additional time to hold detentions, give written work, call parents, or whatever needed to be done." (5T-MW7-05S)

T: "It's a much looser situation than the regular classroom and some students use that time to act out and show off to their friends, have a hard time getting on task because it is a looser situation. I deal with it like any other class procedure where you can give warnings but if it's not getting any better you can use a time out, demerit, detention, phone the parents." (2T-FH7-07E)

T: "Kids don't take it seriously." (1T-FW7-19E)

T: "In one case this child was just somebody who needed help. She was always speaking out during advisory, I could just tell that she needed to talk about other issues. Maybe a private forum would be good because she was demanding everybody's attention all of the time." (3T-FW7-25S)

Even though Sardo-Brown and Shetlar (1994) discuss the removal of disruptive students from the advisory period, this was not an issue that was anticipated. So much of the literature dealing with the effects of advisory is focused on the improvement of student satisfaction with school, the establishment of relationships, and the reduction of behavioral problems. The data from this study point to the necessity of dealing with the issue of disruptive students in a straightforward manner. As previously mentioned, the rationale for middle school advisory programs is multifaceted. While there are disciplinary problems that need to be addressed, the mutual benefits to both teachers and students, not to mention school climate, are great. This notion of mutual benefit is supported by the scholarship of Stevenson (1992) as well as the findings reported here. In summary, Alexander and George (1981) offer some important thoughts to ponder:

> Teachers need this type of involvement no less than students do. Since most teachers really do seem to have a deep felt need to make a significantly positive difference in the lives of their students, and the daily demands of the classroom often seem to make this difficult or impossible, the advisor-advisee program provides the teacher with an opportunity to get to know some manageable number of students in a meaningful way. (p. 90)

CONCLUSION

Good teachers struggle day-in and day-out to reach their students and to build an authentic, caring learning community. They muster all of their management, interpersonal, and technological skills to enable their students to commence forth from their classrooms and schools as more mature and fully functioning human beings. But, more to the point, excellent educators also communicate what the school values, conveying to their students and one another what membership in this special community entails. They communicate moral and intellectual values and mediate the school's culture. They utilize advisories to help in this process. "Their students turn to them for guidance in increasing increments under circumstances fed by an effective advisor-advisee program. Because the students' needs for guidance are often immediate and situation specific, such needs must be dealt with at the time they occur" (Alexander & George, 1981, p. 91). The results from this study demonstrate that many teachers can and do provide this on-the-spot assistance.

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

If advisory programs are so effective in meeting middle level students' emotional and relational needs, why then does the available research indicate a significant gap between the main tenets of the theoretical middle school concept proposed by leading middle school authorities (National Middle School Association, Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, Association for Childhood Education International) and actual education practices in most middle schools? In a comprehensive analysis of research and writing in middle level education involving nearly 1800 articles and books recently conducted by Totten, Sills-Briegal, Barta, Nielsen, and Digby (1996), fewer than 20 were found related to advisor-advisee programs. Of those, only five articles involved research projects that either analyzed or evaluated advisory programs. It is also interesting to note that the 1997 volume, *What Current Research Says to the Middle Level Practitioner* edited by Irvin, contains no specific article outlining the research dedicated to advisory programs. The information that is printed dealing with advisory programs has a tendency to emphasize their importance and then begin to recite a litany of problems which accompany proper implementation. Cole (1994) asks, "If so many agree on the benefits of an advisory program, why, then does it cause such consternation for so many teachers" (p. 3)?

Perhaps the answer to that question lies in the findings of this study. Just as young adolescents have unique characteristics that distinguish them from others, so too do successful teacher advisory programs. As evidenced from the data reported, the rationale behind such programs is to promote small learning communities of learners, mutually respectful and meaningful, whereby students mingle and teachers don't meddle. They provide positive, individual attention to students in an effort to decrease negative, disruptive behaviors. In order for this to occur, the design of advisor-advisee programs needs careful organizing, planning, preparing, implementing and monitoring. Guidance department, administration, and district level support is as vital to effective programs as is teacher, parent, and student input and active involvement. Teachers/advisors trained and committed to teaching young adolescents, as well as relevant, ongoing professional development opportunities are paramount for ongoing success.

Notes
[1] For research supporting this conclusion see also: Alexander & McEwin (1989); Cawelti (1988); Erb (2000); and Mac Iver (1990).

ON TARGET
ADVISORY

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ADVISORY

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