

Chapter 8: Program Evaluation: Relationships as Key to Students' Development

Tina Malti, Sarah E.O. Schwartz, Cindy H. Liu, and Gil G. Noam

The definitive version is available at [www3.interscience.wiley.com](http://www3.interscience.wiley.com). This is the pre-peer reviewed version of the following article:

Malti, T., Schwartz, S., Liu, C. H. J., & Noam, G. G. (2008). Program evaluation: Relationships as key to students' development. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 120, 151-177.

This article has been published in final form at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/yd.290/abstract>

*This chapter will describe general steps in RALLY evaluations as well as the implementation and selected outcomes of a school that implemented RALLY during the 2007-2008 school year: How did the RALLY team in this school address the diverse needs of the students? What were the strategies of success?*

In this chapter, we describe the general purposes of the evaluation component of RALLY programming. Then, through a pilot study in a U.S. urban middle school, we investigate (a) how the RALLY program services affect students' resiliency, learning potential, and risks and (b) the implementation of RALLY services and program satisfaction among various constituents, including students, practitioners, and teachers. This information will contribute to a deeper understanding of how investments in RALLY can facilitate development and resilience in students, promote academic success, and reduce mental health risks. With these goals, we also aim to contribute more broadly to a way to evaluate the conditions necessary to allow students to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically.

### *RALLY Evaluations*

Evaluation is an important program component of RALLY and helps to define the progress of the RALLY program. In general, scientific evidence that a preventive program is effective is a prerequisite for success (European Health Report, 2005). Reaching the program goals (see Chapter 2) requires first and foremost an understanding of the needs of the population and of the specific individuals that a program serves. The purposes of the RALLY evaluations are to improve program design by helping to identify the needs and resources of the students, school and community; to provide early detection for students in urgent need of services and to continually assess the program's effectiveness in meeting these needs (see previous Chapter); to highlight strengths and weaknesses of the program so that success can be replicated and areas of improvement can be addressed; and to offer evidence of program effectiveness for current and potential funders. We share this work in order to provide ideas to all those who are implementing evaluation on a tight budget and want to connect student assessment to program evaluation.

RALLY has developed a six-phase plan that will help to implement evaluations effectively in a school.

## RALLY's Six-Phase Plan

Step 1: Conducting a Program Needs Assessment: This phase begins long before the start of the program and is necessary to help understand the youth population whom the program aims to serve, as well as the existing school and community resources.

Step 2: Creating an Evaluation Plan & Related Systems: This plan includes systems for collecting, tracking, and analyzing data.

Step 3: Administering Individual Student Needs Assessments to Gather Baseline Data: Unlike the Program Needs Assessment, this step takes place at the beginning of the school year to assess the needs of the individual needs of the students served.

Step 4: Gathering Participant Feedback and Program Quality at Checkpoints Throughout the Year: This step consists of administering surveys, interviews, and observations assessing quality of program services and participant satisfaction throughout the year.

Step 5: Administering Post-Tests and Analyzing Data to Assess Program Impact and Progress Toward Program Goals: Data from the post-test administered at the end of the year is compared to baseline data from beginning of the year.

Step 6: Comparing Results with a Control Group: Ideally, the outcomes of a group that has benefited from RALLY services is compared to a group that has not received these services. This approach is called quasi-experimental in that it shares rigor with the design used in experiments (i.e., randomizing those who receive and intervention and those who do not). Given the fact that we are working with natural settings and cannot easily assign students to classrooms or schools by the luck of a draw, however, the quasi-experimental design is the most realistic. What we can do in the future is randomly assign schools and interventions to whole classrooms, but that is different than assigning individual kids randomly to classrooms.

RALLY evaluations do not focus exclusively on students' academic outcomes. Rather, our developmental and relational perspective requires a holistic view of development and resiliencies, risks, and supportive relationships (see previous Chapter). We have also made recommendations for a holistic measurement rationale in the previous chapter.<sup>1</sup>

While RALLY evaluations are usually conducted by researchers, with adequate training provided, it is possible for these evaluations to also be conducted by internal staff such as teachers, practitioners, or the student support team within a school. This option is important to mention, as many schools may not have sufficient funding to allow researchers to implement a formal evaluation of RALLY programming.

## An Empirical Pilot Study

### *Purpose:*

We will now describe the findings of a pilot study investigating implementation quality and student changes in resiliency, learning interest, and risks in classes where RALLY was implemented. This pilot study aims to provide evidence that the RALLY program can enhance resiliency, improve academic functioning and decrease antisocial behavior. In sum, in this evaluation, we investigate the following evaluation questions:

- 1) Student Outcomes: How were students' resiliencies, development, learning potential, and risks affected by the RALLY program?
- 2) Program Implementation and Satisfaction: How were various program components implemented? How satisfied were program participants and providers with the services implemented?

### *Design*

Our evaluation took place within a RALLY program that was implemented in a U.S. urban middle school during the 2007-2008 school year. The design is based upon mixed qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods for an integrated approach, including data from pre-/post-assessments administered to students at the start and the end of the school year, focus groups and observational process data during the program year, written surveys with practitioners, students, and teachers, and interviews with program leaders at the end of the school year. This multi-informant, mixed qualitative and quantitative approach is well suited to investigating strategies of success in implementation, program satisfaction, and student outcomes. A researcher not involved in any part of the intervention conducted the evaluation. In this study, since we piloted several interventions in the implementation of this program, we did not include a control group. Although the RALLY program has conducted evaluations from the beginning, we wanted to integrate the assessment component with the evaluation

component, and for that reason we conducted a new pilot that we are reporting here. This integration appeared useful, because the assessments are simple yet describe well the students' issues and needs (see previous Chapter). This makes the evaluation data useful for students and staff.

### *Participants*

Ninety-two students in grades 7 and 8 in the 2007-2008 school year participated in the RALLY program that was implemented in a U.S. urban middle school. There were 44 girls (48%) and 48 boys (52%) with a mean age of 13.7 years ( $SD = 0.78$ ). The demographics of the student population at the school is as follows: Hispanic (65%), Black (27%), White (5%), Asian (2%), and Unspecified (1%). The average test scores of students in grades 6 through 8 at this school are significantly below state averages.

Approximately 83% of all students are eligible for the free lunch program. The students from our sample came from diverse neighborhoods, and many of them live in neighborhoods with primarily Latino and Black families. Many of the students live in housing projects situated within the poorer areas of the neighborhood where an increase in crime has been observed and documented by several newspaper articles. However, several community organizations established in the neighborhood provide activities before and after school.

The RALLY team consisted of six classroom teachers, six practitioners, the School Program Director and the Clinical Coordinator of RALLY, as well as two professional researchers and several student research assistants. Written informed parental consent was obtained for both the assessments as well as participation in the different intervention components.

### *Measures*

Due to space constraints, we will give only a short overview of the measures.

*Student Interviews (pre-assessment).* Interviews with the adolescents administered by the practitioners included open-ended questions on the adolescent's resiliencies and needs regarding mental health as well as interests for afterschool activities (see Appendix).

*Student Questionnaires (Pre-Post-Assessment).* The measures included indicators of (a) development, (b) resiliencies, (c) symptoms, (d) relationships and (e) program evaluation (only post).

*Social-cognitive Development.* The Sociomoral Reflection Measure – Short Form (SRM-SF)<sup>2</sup> is a group administered, paper-and-pencil instrument designed to assess the developmental levels of cognitive-moral skills.

*Resiliency.* A scale was developed by the authors to assess resiliency. The items were designed to measure selected basic resiliency factors such as empathy, trust in others, relationship skills, emotion regulation skills, as well as academic skills such as interest in learning and caring about school.

*Symptoms.* The Youth Self Report (YSR) was administered to assess the behavioral and emotional functioning of adolescents.<sup>3</sup>

*Supportive Relationships.* Self-created items measured perceived support by parents, peers, and teachers.

*Program Evaluation.* Students evaluated various components of the RALLY program such as academic support, program satisfaction, and gains from the program in terms of facilitating resiliencies and learning potential.

*Focus Groups (process assessments).* Student focus groups were conducted with 26 students over the course of the year, including students from all six homerooms that worked with RALLY.

*Observations (process assessments).* RALLY researchers observed the work of the practitioners over the course of the year by following them in classrooms and in selected interventions (participant observation).

*Practitioner and Teacher Questionnaires (post assessments).* The practitioner questionnaire included questions exploring their role, as well as evaluating their perception of their effectiveness in supporting students academically, socially, and emotionally. In addition, both the practitioners and teachers rated the quality of teacher and staff collaborations, the impact of activities on RALLY students and of the overall program.

*Interviews with RALLY Director and Clinical Coordinator (post assessments).* The Program Director and the Coordinator of Clinical and Group Services were interviewed about their evaluation of implementation quality and program effects on student outcomes.

#### *Procedure*

The pre-assessments (student questionnaires and interviews) were conducted at the beginning of the school year, and the post-assessments (student, practitioner and teacher questionnaires, interviews with program leaders) at the end of the school year. Focus groups and observations took place during program implementation.

### RALLY Outcomes

#### *Effects on Students' Resiliencies, Learning Potential, and Risks*

The first evaluation question focuses on effects of the RALLY program services on students' resiliencies, academic skills, and risks. At the beginning of the program year, a holistic assessment was implemented to help the RALLY team understand adolescents' social-cognitive development and resiliencies, risks, and relationships (see Chapters 2 & 8). Eight percent of the students were at the subjective-physical

developmental level, which indicates thinking in egocentric and impulsive terms. Two-thirds of the students were at the reciprocal-instrumental developmental level, which is described by thinking in individualistic terms (67%). Twenty-five percent of the students were at the mutual-inclusive developmental level, which includes the ability to take others' perspectives. According to a recent international study, the mutual-inclusive level is prominent among early adolescents,<sup>4</sup> whereas the reciprocal instrumental developmental level is the most prominent in 9- to 11-year-olds. Students also reported on several resiliencies, showing medium-to-high levels of learning motivation and caring about school, low trust in others, and medium levels of empathy and relationship skills. A significant number of students showed symptoms on the YSR: 15% of the students reported clinical levels of internalizing symptoms (i.e., affective, anxiety, and somatic problems) and 16% reported clinical levels of externalizing symptoms (i.e., ADHD; oppositional defiant, and conduct problems). Furthermore, an additional 25% showed internalizing problems or externalizing problems at a borderline clinical level. These numbers indicate that our students have elevated risks (see Chapter 1). Regarding supportive relationships, students reported on high family support ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ), but lower relationship quality with teachers ( $M = 1.74$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) and support by peers ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ). It is also important to note that 30% of students reported having experienced a negative life event during the last year such as a death or interpersonal or family problems, thus indicating the high level of trauma in this sample.

As expected, we found various relations between risks and resiliencies as well as academic interests at the beginning of the program year: For example, measures of resiliency such as caring about school and emotion regulation skills were negatively related to both internalizing and externalizing behavior (care about school:  $r(70) = -.36$ ,  $p < .01$  and  $r(70) = -.41$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively, emotion regulation:  $r(72) = -.33$ ,  $p < .01$ , and  $r(72) = -.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ).



In other words, the more students cared about school and felt they could control their emotions the less symptoms they had. This confirms the view that mental health, resiliencies, and academic outcomes are linked (see Chapter 1), which calls for an integrated strategy to promote students' growth.

In the following, we describe student outcomes at the end of the program year. We first present academic outcomes, and then data on development, resiliency, and risks.

### *Academic Outcomes*

*"I learned from my RALLY prevention practitioner to try hard and never give up no matter how hard it is."*

#### *RALLY student*

Eighty percent of students agreed or sometimes agreed that practitioners helped them do their schoolwork, and 93% agreed or sometimes agreed that practitioners helped them to think more about their life and their future. However, no changes in interest in learning and caring about school were observed from the pre-to posttest, as perceived by students. We have found similar findings in the past. Normatively, the rates of attachment and caring about school go down in this age, so if they just don't change that is potentially an indicator for success. Moreover, 92% of students reported that they agreed with the statement, "RALLY people help keep me on track." In focus groups, students explained how practitioners "make you do your work," but that they ask you to do it "in a way like [they are] asking you for a favor, not like a teacher just telling you to do it." As a result, they said, students are more likely to do their work if asked by a practitioner. A few students described how practitioners would meet individually with them to go over their report cards and make a plan for how to improve their grades in the following quarter, which they felt was very useful. The practitioners confirmed this view: All of them agreed that they had helped students with their schoolwork and to think more about their life and their future. Practitioners felt less successful in facilitating learning interest, which resonates with the students' perception. Learning is a complex process and frequently needs collaboration with teachers

and parents, which may explain this lower evaluation. It is also a reason why afterschool is so important as it can support learning that is more self-chosen. The RALLY designated classroom teachers all agreed or strongly agreed that the RALLY program specifically helped to improve students' academic performance, as well as increased students' interest and motivation to learn. In sum, the RALLY program had selected positive effects on academic outcomes such as doing schoolwork and thinking about the life and future as perceived by students, practitioners, and teachers.

*Changes in Resiliency, Development, and Risks*

We also compared the self-reported resiliencies from the pretest with the resiliencies from the posttest (Figure 1)<sup>1</sup> using repeated-measure analyses of covariance (ANCOVAS) with developmental level as covariate and the corresponding resiliency as within subject factor.

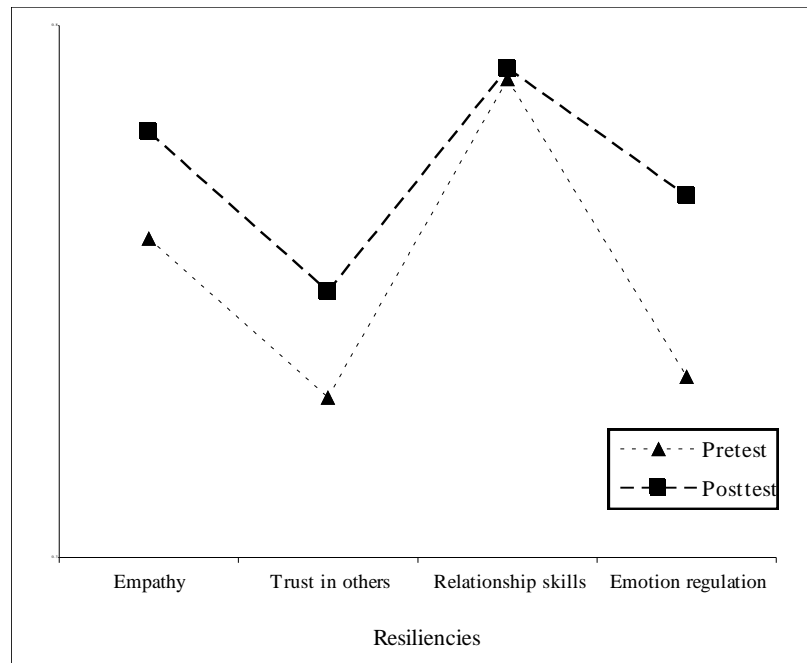


Figure 1. Mean values of resiliency scales in pre- and posttest

The findings indicate that students reported more empathy after having received RALLY program services than at the start of the program,  $F(1, 68) = 11.21, p < .01, \eta^2 = .15$ . Furthermore, there was an increase in trust by the end of program,  $F(1, 66) = 4.76, p < .05, \eta^2 = .07$ . Relationship skills with peers remained at a high level throughout program year. Nevertheless, eighty-two% of students agreed that RALLY people help them get along better with others at the school. RALLY staff also successfully facilitated mediations between students. The RALLY clinical director described how some students who originally felt disconnected from other students in the school met each other in the RALLY space and created their own support for each other. These students eventually began sharing with each other even when adults were not present. The students also showed increased emotion regulation skills,  $F(1, 68) = 34.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .34$ .

Overall, 83% of the practitioners agreed that RALLY had positive impacts on students' resiliency. The RALLY designated classroom teachers all agreed or strongly agreed that the RALLY program helped to increase students' relationship skills and resiliency. Thus, the RALLY program had an impact on adolescents' social-emotional competencies, as perceived by students, practitioners, and teachers. This is an important finding, as most studies indicate that it is hard to get high levels of consistency across different reporter groups.

#### A Case Vignette: Promotion of a Student's Empathy and Prosociality

Lindsay Amper, RALLY Practitioner

Nobody was really A.s friend, but everybody followed his lead. He was known for a trend that he started in which one student slaps another student's neck so hard that it leaves a red spot. His intimidating behavior often went unnoticed by adults in school, but so did his low self-esteem. My position as a RALLY Practitioner allowed me to observe and work with students in a variety of settings. Thus it was not before long that I was able to pick up on the powerful and negative influence he had on others.

During our initial conversations, A. identified himself as being a bad kid, and feeling like he had no skills. Subsequently, our interventions focused on relationship building and empathy, bolstering his self-esteem, and helping him to envision and work towards a future. Sessions were also used as a place of empowerment – he taught me how to play checkers and to talk using slang. His lessons for me were a great

source of pride for him. Discussions led to how he could use his power in a positive way. And then it happened; A. stood up for the girl that he once teased relentlessly and demanded that his classmates leave her alone. Amazingly, they did. An excerpt from a conversation that followed after he stood up for the girl in class illustrates the beginning of his prosocial leadership:

*A.: I don't want you to think that I just did that thing with Susie because you were there.*

*Practitioner: Do you think that is what I thought?*

*A.: Yeah, cuz like you don't normally see me do things like that.*

*P: It made me very happy to see that. What made you do it?*

*A.: Cuz like it wasn't nice or nothing. And like it looked like she was going to cry. They torture her every day and that must feel really bad to have people making fun of you like that all the time in school. School isn't where that is supposed to be happening...Yeah, well it just wasn't right. I wish that other people noticed though.*

*P: I think they did A.. Didn't you hear what they said? When they said something to you, you said, "Hey man, I'm not laughing". And you weren't. I saw you and you had a very straight face. I think that they noticed. I certainly did.*

Throughout the rest of the year, A. continued to demonstrate acts of kindness in the classroom. Shifting from a position of aggressive dominance to a position of leadership, A. was able to influence others with his prosocial values and empathic sensibility.

By the end of the school year, A. applied for a summer job, considered running for student council president, and agreed to do a public speaking job for RALLY the following year. Other students no longer feared him; they befriended him. Teachers no longer ignored him; they mentored and nurtured him.

Both practitioner and student are able to benefit from their relationship. One of the many lessons that I learned from A. was the need to nurture the positives in people and believe in them even when they do not believe in themselves.

In regard to students' development, pre- and posttesting showed no changes in social-cognitive development as indicated by the sociomoral measures. This finding could be related to the fact that the post-assessment took place during a time when students were somewhat burnt out with testing (having just finished district academic testing), thus, it is possible that the developmental test at the post assessment underestimated the actual development of the students. This test requires a great deal of concentration and writing and is sensitive to motivational test taking factors. It could however also

mean that we need to be even more focused on bringing about this change, which we anticipate to occur based on the relationships without training the skills that go into it. However, socio-emotional resiliencies at the post-assessment significantly predicted social-cognitive development at the post-assessment after controlling for social-cognitive development at the pre-assessment,  $F(4, 26) = 3.07, p < .05$ . This finding indicates that socio-emotional resiliencies such as emotion regulation skills increased from the beginning to the end of the program year, after controlling for social-cognitive development. This is important, as it shows that development is linked to socio-emotional resiliencies, the latter being increased by the program. Furthermore, 83% of the practitioners reported that RALLY had positively influenced students' development. They also reported that they helped students to better understand others' point of view. In sum, findings on this student outcome were mixed: Although there was not an overall increase in development demonstrated in pre-/posttesting, practitioners perceived an increase.

In regard to risks, both teachers and practitioners reported decreases of problem behavior at the end of the program year. Sixty-seven percent of the practitioners agreed that RALLY had helped to decrease behavioral problems, and all three teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the RALLY program specifically helped to reduce students' behavior problems. There was a consensus among the teachers that the program was most successful in supporting at-risk students. Thus, behavioral problems decreased from the perspectives of practitioners and teachers, but not from the students' self report. In contrast, we found no decrease in self-reported symptoms from pre- to posttest. However, 35% of the children reported to have experienced a negative life event during the program year such as a death, family problems, or interpersonal problems. Furthermore, one of the students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade was shot and killed on the street outside his home during the school year, thus leading to a school atmosphere, which presumably aggravated the risks evident in some of the children. Thus, those students who are getting better in terms of symptoms are balanced by those students who join the ranks of more symptoms in reaction to new problems. In a high-risk environment, it might be important to stabilize

symptoms and to increase the positive issues, such as resilience. That is, indeed, part of our practice, to focus greatly on the increase of socio-emotional resilience and relationships to support students as a counterbalance to the many stresses and risks the students are facing. Remember, a practitioner works with a student two days a week, sometimes quite informally and briefly, the family, the community and the school environments shape the students day-to-day experience 7 days a week. This is not to say that more progress is needed, but it a way of saying that we cannot expect any program to reduce all symptoms of a child irrespective of their sometimes desperate situation.

Future studies are needed that include larger samples, as this would help to consider subgroups of children and their qualitative change profiles in risk factors. This would help to detect the more specific changes in children with different risk factors, developmental organization, and in dependence of specific life events and program services. Also, we need to figure out what students reduce symptoms and what students become more aware of their symptoms, thus increasing the numbers on the test as a response to better self awareness and more openness to report them.

#### *Relationships as Key to Students' Development*

In regard to perceived relationship quality, students reported higher peer support,  $t(71) = -2.03$ ,  $p < .05$ , but lower family support,  $t(68) = 2.95$ ,  $p < .01$  after program end compared to program start. As RALLY aims to promote interpersonal relationships, it is promising that peer support was perceived as higher than before by the students. It is not surprising that perceived family support did not improve overall, as this RALLY site did not target family interventions. However, RALLY did show success in initiatives directed toward the larger school community. Based on interviews with students and with program leaders, RALLY facilitated community-school partnerships that had a significant impact on the whole school community, in the words of the RALLY Director, leading to “a greater sense of caring for each other, belonging, and contribution.”

Practitioners' also reported success in relationship building. They strongly agreed that they established strong relationships with students ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = .52$ , on a 4-point-scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). On average, most practitioners reported knowing more than half of their classroom well. Practitioners achieved this objective by working to ensure that students felt that they were noticed, heard, and valued. This was also supported by student survey data, with 87% reporting that they missed RALLY staff when they were not around. Even more importantly, 85% of students reported that they felt comfortable talking about their feelings with RALLY practitioners and 97% of students agreed with the statement, "RALLY people care how I'm doing." At an age where new life transitions and community stressors present frequent emotional challenges, having an early outlet to process feelings can be a strong prevention method to keep these emotions from being either bottled up or exploded.

When asked in interviews about the strengths of the program, both the Program Director and the Clinical Coordinator described the relationships practitioners developed with students. The Clinical Coordinator emphasized the impact on students of "having an adult that listens to them and they can go to; whether it's a bad day from a love drama or violence, they can talk to somebody about that." The relationships RALLY staff built with students made the RALLY office a safe space into which students could come and know they would be supported and cared for. In agreement with this view, the teachers felt that the overall impact of the program on the students and on the school as a whole was positive.

#### *RALLY Program Implementation and Satisfaction*

The second evaluation question focused on the way in which the RALLY program was implemented and levels of satisfaction among various program constituents including students, practitioners, and teachers. We will briefly describe the implementation of RALLY services, and then elaborate on attitudes toward specific interventions as well as overall satisfaction with the program.

### *Implementation of RALLY Services*

RALLY offerings included classroom support, informal RALLY groups (such as Lunch Bunches, tutoring, a student advisory board, an arts groups etc.), formal RALLY groups (including afterschool groups), one-on-one mentoring (or support) or counseling with the RALLY clinician, and referrals to external agencies. While some aspects of RALLY were directed at the whole class (such as classroom support and Lunch Bunches), students were referred to other services (such as formal RALLY groups or counseling) based on the assessment findings (see previous chapter) and conjoint RALLY team discussions.

As part of RALLY's whole classroom and prevention strategies, almost all students participated in one or more informal RALLY group (such as Lunch Bunches or tutoring). Thirty percent were referred to external agencies such as community afterschool programs or a daylong workshop on community-building and reducing community violence. Another thirty percent received one-on-one support from the RALLY clinician, outside therapy, and/or practitioners. Additionally, 13% of the students participated in formal groups such as a clinical group focusing on loss, an empowerment group, and a sports-based group. Thus, informal group referrals were made for all students, while additional referrals were made for Tier Two or Tier One students who needed higher levels of support. There was also a group of students, however, who was referred to specific interventions, but was not able to successfully connect to resources due to various obstacles, such as transportation, student or family motivation, scheduling, or insurance. This was particularly true for the one-on-one support and counseling (15% of RALLY participants were referred to such services but did not actually attend, in contrast to the 30% who did receive those services). In addition, eight percent of RALLY participants were referred to formal group activities, but did not actually attend (in contrast to 13% of RALLY participants who did participate in formal groups). The number of unsuccessful referrals for informal groups was much smaller, at only four



%, possibly since informal groups required less paperwork and in many cases occurred during the schoolday, minimizing logistical obstacles. These findings led us to increase the in-school counseling services.

### *Evaluation of RALLY Services and Quality of Collaboration*

In the following, we first elaborate the students' attitudes toward different intervention components of the program, before presenting the practitioners' and teachers' attitudes.

#### *Student Perceptions*

*In-class Support.* While more than half of the students held very positive attitudes toward the in-class support provided by practitioners, a significant percentage also held more neutral attitudes toward it, marking "it's okay." This could be due to the fact that some practitioners found it most effective to work primarily with a smaller number of students who needed extra support in class, and as a result may not have had a significant impact on the other students in the class. It is a tribute to the relationships that practitioners held with students that only 4% of students reported that they did not like it when practitioners were in class, since most practitioners, as another adult presence in the classroom, at times played a disciplinary role, checking behavior and redirecting students' attention.

*Informal groups.* Students' attitudes toward informal groups (i.e. Lunch Bunches) were quite positive, with 72% of students reporting that they were "great." Students appreciated that Lunch Bunches were a place where you could "express your feelings." One student stated, "We get to hang out and talk—we get to talk about feelings." For many, Lunch Bunches were a place where students reported to could express themselves and talk about their feelings without feeling stigmatized.

*One-on-one Sessions with Practitioners.* Overall, students' attitudes toward one-on-one meetings with their practitioners were not as high as attitudes toward Lunch Bunches, 43% reported that they were great, whereas 55% said that they were ok. This finding may indicate support for RALLY's strategy of devoting more time to whole group interventions and less time to one-on-one pull-out interventions. However, all the students said that they were more likely to talk to practitioners than to guidance counselors or teachers if they had a personal problem. This finding is supported by the overall evaluation of the program where 85% of students said they "feel comfortable talking about feelings to RALLY people."

### *Practitioner Perceptions*

While the evaluation focused on student outcomes and student perceptions of the program, practitioners' perception of different intervention components were also solicited through surveys as well as focus groups. According to practitioners, one-on-one support, informal and formal group, school-wide activities, and RALLY support space were evaluated as positive or very positive (see Chapter 5). The only service that was evaluated as somewhat mixed was the in-class support: 34% evaluated this service as negative or neutral, whereas 66% reported it as being positive. The latter finding may be related to the fact that the efficacy of in-class support strongly depends on the practitioner-teacher interactions and how much the practitioner feels that he or she can affect the classroom climate. It also sometimes puts the practitioner into the role of disciplinarian or at least as someone who holds high expectations to conform the classroom expectations and focused task completion, something the students don't necessarily like.

Practitioners were also asked how they perceived the training RALLY provided, as well as the strength of collaboration between the different people and groups involved in RALLY. Quality of training, collaboration, and communication between the different parties is of key importance to high-quality program implementation. Practitioners perceived the formal and informal supervision as very useful ( $M_s = 4.50, 4.33$ , scale ranging from 1 = not at all useful to 5 = very useful). The overall support and training

provided by the program was also perceived as high ( $M = 3.83$ ). In contrast, the weekly seminar and the one-day training at the beginning of the program year were perceived as somewhat lower usefulness ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $M = 3.00$ ). Focus groups revealed that these trainings were perceived as less connected to practitioners' daily work than, for example, informal supervision.

Practitioners also assessed the quality of the collaboration with the various people involved in RALLY. The perception of the different collaborations was predominantly neutral-to-positive. The collaboration with the homeroom teacher was perceived as predominantly positive (67%), whereas the collaboration with other teachers, community organizations and family was perceived as somewhat more neutral (60-67%). This is not surprising, as practitioners worked most closely with homeroom teachers.

#### Teacher Perception.

*"Often teaching is an isolating experience. As the only adult in the room you must be all things to all people. A capable practitioner means you have twice the eyes, twice the ears, and twice the time to listen and guide the children."*

*RALLY Teacher*

The teachers reported favorably on their experience collaborating with the RALLY staff. All of the three teachers who returned questionnaires agreed or strongly agreed that the RALLY staff formed close relationships with students and worked effectively with them. However, as only half of the classroom teachers participated in this survey, we cannot entirely exclude the possibility that only the teachers with a positive attitude completed the questionnaires. However, practitioner reports reflect similar positive perceptions, thus, making negative evaluations unlikely. Nevertheless, one teacher recommended improving communication about ongoing problems and referrals of students. Furthermore, the teachers evaluated the practitioners as being respectful of classroom teachers' agendas, collaborating effectively with teachers, and making teachers feel supported. Teachers' positive

reporting of interactions with practitioners is notable, as sharing the classroom with another adult requires an adjustment. As one teacher stated: “I needed to learn that the practitioner had his job to do, too. Sometimes he wanted to meet with a student when I wanted to teach a lesson. We had to figure out how to work around each other, and how to talk about our plans.”

### *Program Satisfaction*

Regarding overall program satisfaction, there was a high level of satisfaction reported by students, practitioners, and teachers. When students were asked to complete the sentence “RALLY is...”, 99% of students wrote in a positive adjective or experience. 93% of students agreed that they wished they had RALLY every year. Overall, practitioners also held positive attitudes toward RALLY, with 60% reporting being satisfied with the RALLY program. Eighty percent of the practitioners evaluated the impact of participation in the RALLY program on professional development as positive. The teachers also reported being highly satisfied with the program as a whole. The teachers also reported being highly satisfied with the program as did the principal and the administrators.

### Conclusions

The RALLY program services provide various social, emotional, and academic benefits to the students it serves. In this pilot study of one year in a RALLY program, student participation in services was reported as impacting resiliency and academic skills. More specifically, there was an increase in empathy, emotion regulation and trust in others, as demonstrated in the pre-post-test comparison. Emotion regulation skills were related to students’ higher level of development at program end after having controlled for development at the beginning of the program. Furthermore, over eighty percent of the students reported that the program helped them with their social relationships at school and helped them to improve their schoolwork. Thus, evidence shows that RALLY promoted resiliencies that in turn facilitate development. Furthermore, practitioners reported feeling successful in providing students with

support to enhance their resiliency, development, and academic success, as well decrease problem behaviors. This view was supported by the teacher reports. However, students' self-reported social-cognitive development stayed stable, and the level of risk factors did not decline. Possibly, these latter findings indicate that students became more aware of their emotions and more honest in reporting their problems as a result of program participation and discussions with RALLY staff. On the other hand, as not all referrals that were thought to be beneficial were successfully completed (as a result of logistical and/or motivational obstacles), this finding may also indicate that more effort needs to be put into a fast and comprehensive referral system that covers as many referrals as an individual adolescent might need.

Previous evaluations of schools that implemented RALLY revealed also promising evidence that RALLY program services can improve resiliency, mental health, and academic functioning in adolescents. For example, over the course of one program year in a U.S. urban public school, two-thirds of the students working with RALLY showed improvement in their school functioning.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, 42% of the Tier 1 and Tier 2 students (i.e., students with high levels of risk) showed increased grade point averages at the program's end. More than three quarters of these students showed decreased involvement in antisocial behaviors compared to the pretest. Regarding classroom outcomes, a great majority of students showed improved attitudes towards school, conflict resolution skills, and social skills in the classroom; they also showed a clear decrease in problem behaviors in the classroom when compared to the pretest data.

One of the greatest benefits of RALLY is the increase in supportive relationships, i.e. positive adults within the school setting who offer guidance and care to students. These adults also act as facilitators of developmental growth, such as establishing trust in others, which is a cornerstone for the majority of adolescents whose assessments indicated they were predominantly at the reciprocal-instrumental level in their development. Thus, creating caring and supportive relationships with

practitioners and working with the developmental needs of the participants yielded a key to program success and helped facilitate students' resiliency. This is supported by previous findings that supportive relationships and the creation of a caring school environment is key to students' growth.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, developmental resiliency can be increased by targeting the overall group, but also by offering one-on-one support or group treatment for students with different needs.

Despite the mostly positive outcomes, several barriers prevented the presented program from reaching its maximum capacity. These included less positively perceived seminar training, insufficiently rapid or incomplete referrals, and at times weak perceived collaboration and integration of some of the service components. Ensuring that students reach their maximum potential requires a high degree of collaboration, integration, and communication between project components.

Furthermore, several limitations of this evaluation report need to be mentioned as well. First and foremost, we only included self-report data in the pre-post test design. Although this information was backed up by post-information from practitioners and teachers, this methodological needs to be supplemented in the future by observations and additional objective data. Likewise, as this was a pilot study, no control group was included, and therefore it is not possible to draw causal conclusions on the intervention effects. Future studies with rigorous empirical designs are in the planned and will be conducted once funding is secured. Third, many of the measures were rather limited (i.e., using 2-3 items pro scale), and although reliabilities were predominantly strong, validation studies are certainly needed for a few of the instruments, especially those pertaining to resiliency and relationships.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these limitations, the RALLY program model has demonstrated a strong buy-in from teachers, administration, guidance, and other school staff over more than 10 years of services, with a solid network of community partners who are committed to supporting the program. The findings are promising and show that a focus on caring and supportive relationships and bridging different services

to students is likely to be helpful to promote students' resiliency and development. Furthermore, a fast and efficient referral system based on holistic assessments is needed to implement program services appropriate to the adolescent's development needs, and interests. Finally, collaboration and supervision are of key importance to ensure program quality.

While we focused here on the evaluation for the RALLY program, this issue is also about the RALLY approach. Thus, we presented the method of evaluation here not only as a way to explore whether we are showing positive evaluation results, but to describe how school-based programs can make themselves evidence-based without spending a big part of their budget. Thus, the RALLY approach to evaluation includes to build in assessment and have them short and focused so they can be done in one classrooms session, this helps to avoid a lot of missing data and organizational problems. The use of pre assessments helps to understand the students so that evaluation and assessments do not need to be done separately. Continuous, qualitative and quantitative program quality evaluation and satisfaction during the program year help to assure high program quality. This helps also to assure that the data collected are not only for funders and outside organizations or the evaluation community, but that it is applicable to program management and planning of the following year. Finally, if possible, it is important to get data from all parties, students, practitioners, teachers, administrators, community partners and families, because this will help to understand the entire system in which the student is embedded and helps him or her to develop.

#### Summary

- Evaluation is an important program component of RALLY and helps to define the gains of RALLY. RALLY's Six Step Plan aims to ensure high quality evaluation for schools that implement RALLY.

- One RALLY program implemented at an urban middle school was described to illustrate evaluation strategies for practitioners, researchers, and others interested in RALLY. We analyzed student outcomes and program implementation quality.
- The findings showed effects on student's resiliency as well as academic success, as indicated by student-, practitioner- and teacher reports. The practitioners and teachers also reported a decrease in behavioral problems.
- Relationships to practitioners proved to be of key significance for changes in students' resiliency and academic outcomes.
- Regarding program implementation, high numbers of students were referred to services. However, there was also a group of students who were not successfully connected to resources due to various obstacles. The quality of services was perceived as high, and collaboration between the different providers was predominantly perceived as positive. Supervision was also evaluated as positive overall, although some components need improvement. The program satisfaction, as reported by students, practitioners, teachers, and program leaders, was overall high.
- Future studies with mixed quantitative and qualitative research designs are needed to evaluate RALLY in a comprehensive way.



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Eighty-six percent of the students who participated in the pretest also participated in the posttest (N = 79). This lower number was, in part, due to the fact that some of the students moved away and were not in the program at the end of the year anymore. Others were not in class when the post-assessments were administered. Thus, we cannot entirely exclude the possibility that the drop-out students were systematically different from the students for whom pre- and posttest data were available.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Malti, T., Liu, C.H., & Noam, G.G. (in press). Holistic assessment in school-based, developmental prevention. *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community*.

Noam, G.G., Goldstein, C., & van Dyken, L. (2003). *RALLY – Program manual*. Harvard University & McLean Hospital.

<sup>2</sup> Gibbs, J. C., Basinger, K. S., & Fuller, D. (1992). *Moral maturity: Measuring the development of sociomoral reasoning*. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum.

<sup>3</sup> Achenbach, T. M., & Edelbrock, C. (1987). *Manual for the Youth Self-report and Profile*. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Department of Psychiatry.

<sup>4</sup> Gibbs, J.C., Basinger, K.S., Grime, R.L., & Snarey, J.R. (2007). Moral judgment development across cultures: Revisiting Kohlberg's universality claims. *Developmental Review*, 27, 443-500.

<sup>5</sup> Maike, M.M., & Nixon, A. (2007). *Tacoma public schools. Responsive advocacy for life and learning in youth: Rally*. Unpublished Evaluation Report, Tacoma public schools.

---

<sup>6</sup> Berkowitz, M.W., Sherblom, S., Bier, M., & Battistich, V. (2006). Educating for positive youth development. In M. Killen & J.G. Smetana (Eds.), *Handbook of moral development* (pp. 683-701). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.

<sup>7</sup> (Tolan, P.H., & Dodge, K.A. (2005). Children's mental health as a primary care and concern. A system for comprehensive support and service. *American Psychologist*, 60, 601-614.

### **Author's Biographies**

Tina Malti, PhD, is a Visiting Research Scientist at McLean Hospital and Harvard University.

Sarah Schwartz is a PEAR Research Fellow at the Program in Education, Afterschool, and Resiliency (PEAR) at Harvard University and McLean Hospital. Before coming to PEAR, Sarah taught in New York and Boston Public Schools.

Cindy H. Liu, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Fellow of Clinical Psychology at Harvard Medical School – Children's Hospital of Boston.

Gil Noam, PhD, is Founding Director of the RALLY Program and Associate Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at McLean Hospital and Harvard University.