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Psycho-Educational Groups in Schools: The Intervention of Choice

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Abstract

While school counselors are expected to serve all students, they have myriad responsibilities and are pressed with time to provide one-on-one counseling to all students. Adapting group work as the treatment of choice could remedy this problem-it is not only an economical use of counselors' limited time, but also therapeutic to students. This article discusses several topics that can be addressed in psycho-educational groups including social skills development, emotional issues, sexual issues, stress management, study skills, and diversity.

Keywords: psycho-educational groups, school counselors, intervention, choice, efficient

School counselors are an essential part of school children's success (Dahir, Burnham, & Stone, 2009). As school counselor responsibilities grow, time for one-on-one counseling sessions with children has decreased. In addition to providing counseling services to students, school counselors are often responsible for such duties as computing grade-point averages, maintaining student records, administering tests, registering students for classes (Perusse, Goodnough, & Lee, 2009) consulting with parents, and facilitating meetings. With a heavy load of administrative responsibilities coupled with high counselor student ratios, it is often difficult for school counselors to justify and/or find time for individual sessions with students in need. To assuage this situation, school counselors can utilize group work to reach and serve multiple students simultaneously.

Group Work in Schools

Group work has merit and is beneficial in many settings especially schools (Johnson & Johnson, 2005). It is not only time saving for a school counselor (Bore, Armstrong, & Womack, 2010), but also therapeutic for children. Many children that need therapeutic intervention are unlikely to receive it unless in a school setting (Dore, Nelson-Zlupko, & Kaufmann, 1999; Rice & Meyer, 1994). In fact, schools are "the sole institutions with a significant and sustained access to children and adolescents" (Rice & Meyer, 1994, p. 145) and are conducive environments for peer-to-peer interactions.

Peer-to-peer interactions in groups allow students to observe and learn from each other in a controlled therapeutic environment (Sayder, 2008; Van Velsor, 2009). This environment is analogous to everyday peer relationships in such settings as church, sports, and committee meetings (Akos, Hamm, Mack, & Dunaway, 2007). Accordingly, their familiarity create a nonthreatening environment wherein students can express their concerns and feelings, learn to solve problems, and gain insight via peer interaction and constructive feedback. In addition, groups are favorable settings to enhance students' academic, social, and physical growth and development. For these to be realized, however, school counselors must undergo a "major paradigm shift whereby group counseling becomes the intervention of choice rather than individual counseling" (Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005, p. 379) and begin to appreciate that group work is "no longer 'second best' or 'cheap or diluted' treatment compared to individual therapy" (Barlow, 2008, p. 241). In fact, as Parcover, Dunto, Gehlert, and Mitchell (2006) discovered, group work is therapeutically beneficial and 25% more effective than individual counseling. Consequently, it should be embraced as a powerful intervention in schools.

With its wide array of applications, group work in schools is an essential service that counselors can utilize to address students' academic, social, and emotional concerns (Akos et al., 2007). Given that most groups have specific goals and consist of a few students, usually 6-10, who meet regularly in confidential sessions, group members not only support each other, but are also able to collectively handle myriad issues. The small number in groups makes it easier for confidentiality, a prerequisite for any meaningful work, to be established and maintained. Unlike individual counseling, confidentiality in group settings is not only harder to establish and maintain; it is easily broken (Van Velsor, 2004). Given that group members' growth is elusive without confidentiality and trust (Berg, Landreth, & Fall, 2006); group leaders must make concerted efforts to encourage members to respect each other by remaining confidential.

Psycho-Educational Group Work

There are typically four types of groups: task, psycho-educational, counseling, and psychotherapy (Barlow, 2008; Bore et al., 2010). While detailed differences may not exist between these types of groups, each has recognizable characteristics with professional utility (Association for Specialists in Group Work [ASGW], 2000). Of the four types, psycho-educational is commonly utilized in comprehensive school counseling programs (Geroski & Kraus, 2002). It is suitable for well-functioning individuals who may have some information shortfall in some areas (Corey & Corey, 2006). Consequently, the focus is to teach, discuss,

orient, and cause an examination of member attitudes, values, beliefs, ideas, and opinions (Rivera, Wilbur, Phan, Garrett, & Betz, 2004). In psycho-educational groups, new knowledge and skills are acquired through the use of designed skill-building activities (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007).

Psycho-educational groups have historical roots in the field of guidance and continue in their popularity today (Geroski & Kraus, 2002). School counselors have widely utilized them to focus on skill acquisition for preventive and interventional purposes across grade levels. For instance, school counselors have successfully conducted groups to promote coping skills and self-esteem with preschoolers (Kenny, 2009), grade school children (Dore et al., 1999), middle school children (Schechtman & Ifargan, 2009), and high school students (Dowden, 2009). In conducting such groups, school counselors fulfill one of their roles in the lives of children, "to maximize the potential for students' healthy development and success" (Geroski & Kraus, 2002, p. 233).

Besides the great potential to enhance students' development and success, psycho-educational group work is also diverse in its applicability and can be tailored to address a wide variety of topics. These could include topics such as: social skills development (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007), study skills (Kayler & Sherman, 2009), personal empowerment (Wingett & Milliren, 2008), pregnant and parenting teens (Thomas & Looney, 2004), sexual assault victims (VanDeusen & Carr, 2004), sexual abuse prevention (Kenny, 2009), school athletics and athletes (Harris, Altekruse, & Engels, 2003), gender issues (O'Neil & Lujan, 2009), self-advocacy training (Dowden, 2009), grief (Samide & Stockton, 2002), drug addiction (Dore et al., 1999), aggression (Schechtman & Ifargan, 2009), childhood cancer (Maurice-Stam, Silberbusch, Last, & Grootenhuis, 2009), serious mental illness (Sibitz, Amering, Gossler, Unger, & Kataschnig, 2007), bullying (Hall, 2006), depression (Rice & Meyer, 1994), stress (Baker, 2001; Romano, 1992), and diversity (Dowden, 2009) among others. This article will briefly discuss the following topics: social skills development, emotional issues, sexual issues, stress management, study skills, and diversity.

Social Skills Development

In this digital and information era, social interactions are fast being replaced by electronic communication. For the youth in particular, communication through such modes as texting, tweeting, emailing, and Facebook among others is the norm. It is not uncommon to find two young people in the same room texting each other instead of communicating verbally. While this is quickly becoming the default mode of communication, it is robbing students of opportunities to acquire significant social skills. Since group settings are akin to peer relationships in the real world, they are apposite for students to acquire pertinent social skills (Evans, Axelrod, & Sapia, 2000) necessary for social and academic success.

Mirroring, expounding, and highlighting common concerns facilitate students' appreciation of the interpersonal milieu available in group settings (Parcover et al., 2006). They have an opportunity to develop insights about themselves and others (Steen, Bauman, & Smith, 2007), exchange ideas, test suppositions about themselves and others, and compare and contrast their views with each other (Veach & Gladding, 2007). Groups herald new insights atypical in individual work, boost social development, and promote social competencies (Bemak et al., 2005). In fact, in this era when high stakes testing and academic productivity are emphasized at

the expense of social skills, peer relationships, and social interactions (Bemak et al., 2005), groups can be a means for the youth to solve their social problems. This way, group work would make it possible for schools to reclaim their place as training grounds for social and moral development.

Groups tap into the natural inclination of children and adolescents to rely on peers for information, companionship, and affirmation (Akos et al., 2007). Usually, counselors consider common concerns as the basis for putting students in the same group; it is believed that students with similar issues will experience a sense of belonging and benefit more through group sharing (Schmidt, 2008). A sense of belonging "is positively related to a positive orientation toward school, class work and teachers, achievement motivation and intrinsic academic motivation, participation in school activities, school engagement, and dropout" (Akos et al., 2007, p.56). In addition, group settings present safe environments through which students can share concerns, rehearse new behaviors, and support one another (Parcover et al., 2006). Through sharing of their problems in groups, students discover and identify with familiar issues and perceptions held by their peers (Steen et al., 2007).

Emotional Issues

Students' ability to function at school can be affected by a number of emotional issues such as grief (Samide & Stockton, 2002), depression (Rice & Meyer, 1994) bullying (Hall, 2006) and aggression (Schechtman & Ifargan, 2009). Psycho-educational groups can be used to help students avoid, remediate, and manage a variety of these experiences (Paisley & Milsom, 2007; Villalba, 2007). In matters of grief for instance, psycho-educational groups can be used to educate children on the grief process, teach coping skills, as well as validate and normalize their feelings (Samide & Stockton, 2002). According to Samide and Stockton (2002), 4% of American children will lose a loved one before their 15th birthday. Such children often respond to death with behavioral problems and social withdrawal and would require support outside of the family unit to resolve these issues. In some instances, these children may be depressed (Samide & Stockton).

Depression among school age children, especially adolescents, continues to be a significant mental health problem (Rice & Meyer, 1994). Rice and Meyer "estimated that 12% to 15% of youth under the age of 18 years experience emotional and behavioral problems serious enough to justify treatment" (1994, p. 145). With the use of psycho-educational groups in schools, depressed students can be taught adaptive ways of coping.

In their study of 145 students at three different schools, Rice and Meyer (1994) found the use of psycho-educational groups could potentially eliminate or at least reduce significant mental health problems in adolescents. The most common mental health diagnosis among children involves some sort of antisocial behavior (Schechtman & Ifargan, 2009). Schechtman and Ifargan (2009) suggested that short term cognitive behavioral psycho-educational groups are most effective with this population. Psycho-educational groups can be utilized to make students aware of their behavior, find what triggers the behavior, and learn how to control it. Antisocial students may act aggressively and/or bully other students.

Bullying continues to be a serious problem in today's schools and it is estimated that 1.7 million children in the United States can be identified as bullies (Gerrity & Delucia-Waack, 2007). Psycho-educational groups can be utilized in helping both the bully and the bullied. For

bullies, this group experience would help them learn communication, anger management, aggression control, empathy, and problem-solving skills. According to Gerrity and Delucia-Waack, "the average child in treatment improved 69% more than the control group members" (2007, p. 102). For the bullies, Hall (2006) found that psycho-educational group work can be a powerful tool in teaching students susceptible to bullying the knowledge, attitude, and skills to enable them to deal more effectively with bullies.

Sexual Issues

There are many sexual issues that arise in school settings such as sexual abuse prevention (Kenny, 2009), sexual abuse (VanDeusen & Carr, 2004), and pregnancy and parenting (Thomas & Looney, 2004). In all of these areas, the use of psycho-educational groups has proven to be effective (Kenny, 2009). The primary goal of such groups would be to help children recognize problem situations, learn to say no, and learn to communicate any inappropriate situations to their parents, teachers, and other adults they trust (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007). According to Kenny (2009), running simultaneous psycho-educational groups for parents and preschoolers, for instance, is an effective way to educate about sexual abuse prevention. These groups would educate parents about spotting abuse in their children as well as how to speak to their children about sexual abuse. In addition, children could learn anatomically correct terminology for their sexual organs and good versus bad touches. This knowledge would help prepare children to guard against sexual abuse as they grow up (Kenny).

While lifetime sexual abuse prevalence rates are about 20%, rape prevalence rates for youth are between 15-20% (VanDeusen & Carr, 2004). These statistics are staggering and the need is clear for sexual abuse issues to be addressed. Psycho-educational groups are not only safe environments for students to express their thoughts and feelings, but also ideal settings to receive education, and therapy (VanDeusen & Carr, 2004). Moreover, group settings can allow students to help each other heal and to have their feelings normalized. According to VanDeusen and Carr, the most effective group therapy for sexual abuse survivors "combines education and support to foster survivors' recovery and the development of effective coping and healthy relationships" (2004, p. 54).

As children become teenagers and enter puberty, different types of relationships emerge. Every year, one million teenagers become pregnant and two thirds give birth (Thomas & Looney, 2004). Of the one million pregnancies, 95% are unplanned. While pregnancy prevention programs in schools have not yielded significant results in delaying the onset of sexual intercourse, increasing the use of birth control, or reducing pregnancies (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007), utilization of psycho-educational groups has proven effective (Thomas & Looney, 2004). Comprehensive psycho-educational parenting groups are effective in changing "parenting attitudes and beliefs, which suggest an improvement in health promotion and disease prevention in adolescent women and their children" (Thomas & Looney, 2004, p. 66).

Stress Management

With the increase in testing combined with normal developmental changes and environmental conditions such as poverty, home life, and bullying among others, stress is a staple in school children's lives (Romano, 1992). Romano stressed that "it is imperative that at a

young age children learn about stress and stressors and develop healthy strategies to cope with the inevitable stressors of life" (1992, p. 199).

Currently, one source of stress for children is rampant violence in schools. Violence related stress is more widespread among boys (O'Neil & Lujan, 2009). According to O'Neil and Lujan (2009), over the past 15 years, for instance, all of the 35 school shootings that were committed in the United States were perpetrated by boys. Power, powerlessness, restricted emotions, loss of control, abuse, humiliation, emasculation, and revenge were all precursors to the violence. In addition, boys are three times more likely to be in special education classes, 35% of 15-17 year-old boys are below their grade level, and they are five times as likely to commit suicide compared to girls (O'Neil & Lujan).With all the grim statistics, O'Neil and Lujan implored school systems to commit to utilize psycho-educational groups because, "psycho-educational approaches emphasize both cognitive and affective processes and facilitate boys exploring the complexity of gender roles" (p. 260). Indeed, psycho-educational groups can be used to alleviate existing stress-provoking conditions and teach coping skills that may prevent or lessen the effects of stress (Baker, 2001).

Study Skills

Currently, school counselors are being challenged to be more accountable in guaranteeing academic and self-development success for all students (Dahir et al., 2009). In fact, the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) was enacted in order to increase student performance. In a quest to support its implementation and guarantee success for all students, the federal government disburses school funding contingent on at risk students' ability to succeed.

While psycho-educational groups can be effective with all students, they can be particularly beneficial for at risk students by improving their cognitive, social, and coping management skills (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007). The safe group environment would encourage children to express their concerns and feelings, learn to solve problems, and to gain insight via peer interaction and constructive feedback (Akos et al., 2007). In addition, emerging peer connections in the group may help students explore factors that influence achievement.

Diversity Issues

Race and cultural issues can be sensitive and may often go unaddressed (Dowden, 2009). For instance, Dowden established that teaching black children self-advocacy helps in empowering them. He defined empowerment as "efforts to increase an individual or group's control over life decisions and awareness of the potentially damaging role of power structures in society" (2009, p.119). It is through empowerment that children can learn skills to help them overcome the inequities they might face in life, as well as giving them control over their life situations. Teaching self-advocacy and empowerment can be done in a psycho-educational group setting. Dowden noted that brief psycho-educational groups can be efficient and effective in reaching minority populations.

In addition to schools comprised of students from different minority groups, many other students may present with unique issues such as coming from drug addicted families (Dore et al., 1999). Children that grow up in a home where adults abuse drugs may be cognitively delayed, have a poor attention span, and have emotional and behavioral problems all of which make

classroom functioning difficult. In one project to intervene for students from drug addicted families, Dore et al. (1999) established a psycho-educational group wherein students' emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral responses to drug use were addressed. At the completion of their project, they found positive changes in children's loci of control. In addition, group participants demonstrated higher levels of social acceptances and enhanced feelings of self-worth.

Conclusion

School counselors have an important and often times busy role to play in the school setting (Dahir et al., 2009). Since administrative duties often occupy their time limiting the amount of individual counseling they are able to perform, group work not only offers an efficient way to serve many students (Perusse et al., 2009), but is also more therapeutically beneficial than individual counseling. As school counselors continue to explore effective strategies that facilitate potential development for all students, psycho-educational group work appears to be a good fit. It is, perhaps, the only intervention suitable for addressing a myriad of school counseling needs.

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