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Advanced Group Training for School Counselors

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School counselors understand that group counseling and group guidance serve as cornerstones for a comprehensive developmental guidance curriculum (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Myrick, 2002). Groups were identified as a tool to increase productive learning (Myrick, 2002) and as more effective interventions for students with emotional/behavioral issues, such as ADHD (Webb & Myrick, 2003). Group counseling sessions emulate peer relationships outside the group setting and assist in the acquisition of social skills important for social and academic success (Webb & Myrick, 2003). Despite the importance of utilizing groups in schools, most counselors have taken only one introductory group class (Conyne, Wilson, & Ward, 1997) and are left to discover for themselves how to prioritize goals for implementing groups. The purpose of this article is to identify advanced issues in employing groups and increasing competence in group utilization for school counselors.

Recruitment and Screening

Novice group practitioners often form groups without the benefit of proper recruitment and screening, thus creating a group that is ineffective, and perhaps unethical (Conyne, Wilson, & Ward, 1997; Corey & Corey, 2002). Sullivan and Wright (2002) described a lack of reports illustrating how to recruit students for group counseling in schools. Methods of advertising groups in schools might include classroom presentations, posters and notices, announcements, or individual letters (Corey & Corey, 2002). However, relying upon the resultant volunteers might eventuate in responses from many students who are inappropriate for your proposed group. Such methods for recruitment take considerable time, which is a primary barrier to the implementation of groups in schools (Sullivan & Wright, 2002).

We advocate recruiting members through teacher referral. It is likely any school counselor will work in a school in which there is resistance from some teachers to implement counseling groups (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). Turn initially to teachers who support the counseling program for recruiting

assistance. As the school grapevine reports the success and effectiveness of your groups, additional teachers will be motivated to provide referrals. Because many school counseling groups include only six to eight members, one to three teachers might be approached with a list of specific behavioral clues for recruiting prospective group members. Sullivan and Wright (2002) described a model of teacher collaboration in which school counselors met with a group of teachers to discuss which students the teachers were concerned about. The purpose of collaborating with teachers was based on the idea that teachers know their students well. When discussing concerns with teachers, themes of problems and issues can be delineated, and group topics, as well as potential group members, can be identified.

Regardless of whether you speak to teachers individually or in a group, Corey and Corey (2002) emphasized the need for private screening between the group leader and the potential participant. While the group leader tries to assess whether a candidate would be a good fit for the group, the candidate can also guess whether or not group work could be productive. Students who are unwilling to examine either their behavior or their issues are not good candidates for group counseling; while students who appear to have goals consistent with what the leader has planned and see potential benefit from participation would be appropriate members (Dye, 1978). Students who might menace or intimidate other students, or who might demand more than their share of the limelight, might best be seen in individual counseling. During the selection process the group leader is attempting to form a team of members who could be helpful to each other during the group. Constructive opinions of peers are especially helpful in groups of adolescents, where peer influence is at its highest. Group leaders could use the *FID* selection criteria in order to provide variety in perspective. Variations of member experience with *frequency, intensity, and duration* of the group topic could lead to stronger complementarity and group cohesion.

One remaining decision for selection of group members is whether to include both genders in a group, or to involve only one gender. This decision is

sometimes guided by the relevance of the topic (e.g., single mothers), but most often depends on the developmental levels of the specific children involved. Age is not the paramount consideration when selecting members. Girls develop verbal and social skills earlier than do boys, thus a mixed group of seventh graders, for example, might produce a group where the girls attempt to hold tentative conversations about relationships while the boys nudge each other, joke excessively, or act out. Because there is no research indicating when to include both genders in a counseling group, this remains a decision for trial and error. In earlier grade levels, it might be practical to mix highly verbal children from, for example, third grade with those of average verbal ability from fourth grade. In high school, combining emotionally mature students of any age could be beneficial. The focus on group selection in these instances hinges more on similar verbal and cognitive abilities than on gender. If you are attempting to lead a new group, you might be tempted to simplify the task by including only a single gender. Learning firsthand how boys or girls approach a topic will give you insight on the practicality of including both in a future group.

Goals and Roles

Many group practitioners describe their initial group experience as confused, as sharing the common experience of participants asking the question, “What are we supposed to do here?” (Conyne et al., 1997; Corey & Corey, 2002; Dye, 1978). Conyne, Wilson, and Ward cautioned that this matter could seriously inhibit a group or result in premature termination. Group leaders should prepare a succinct explanation for the benefits of their group. It should answer the question, “What will be different about a member’s life as a result of participating in this group?” Results mentioned should be both specific and concrete; for example, “After this group you will be able to ask for the help you deserve during class, without feeling embarrassed.”

The Association for Specialists in Group Work’s *Professional Standards for the Training of Group Workers* (2000) clearly identified the pertinence of addressing the goals and overall purpose of a group. However, an overall purpose does not negate the individual goals group members set for themselves. One characteristic that distinguishes group counseling from group guidance is the presence of individual goals! Individual group goals are similar to the classroom teacher’s individualized education plan for each student. For a group to be successful, individual goals must have some consistency with group goals, and it is important the group leader negotiates individual goals during

initial sessions so that members have investment in the group process (Conyne et al., 1997). When groups focus on multidimensional topics similar to personal growth or self-concept, members frequently manifest such issues in a wide variety of ways. Dye (1978) suggested that in an effort to generate common ground and personal self-disclosure the group leader focus on one of three processes: (a) how clients focus on others—intrapersonal, (b) how clients focus on themselves—interpersonal, or (c) how the group interacts—group processes.

Member and leader roles should also be explicitly stated during the initial group meeting. For example, “My job is to introduce the day’s topic and serve as a referee for your discussion, to be certain everyone has a chance to speak his or her mind. Your job is to share your ideas and feelings, and sometimes help us role-play solutions to our dilemmas.”

Structure

Group structure can either inhibit or enhance group work. With too little structure, particularly in the initial stage, anxiety may run high among group members. If there is too much structure, the group may become overly dependent on the leader (Corey & Corey, 2002). Structure is necessary to build trust, promote self-disclosure, and encourage feedback by group participants (Rohde & Stockton, 1994). There are two sorts of structure: rule structure and session structure. Structuring the group with rules, for example, might include aspects such as confidentiality, attendance, and regard for other members’ feelings. When working with students, a popular intervention utilized prior to group work is Millard’s (1995) full value contract. Students agree to respect all group members, provide a safe environment for self-disclosure, give and receive feedback, and work together toward group goals. By establishing this agreement initially, behavior and group participation is structured for group members—achieved through peer pressure and the awareness of the expectations by all group participants.

Session structure is the consistent way in which the leader attends and addresses responses of group members. One dimension of session structure is the degree of concreteness and specificity employed. Teachers with experience teaching several grade levels already understand that fourth graders need hands-on experiences and short, concrete discussions, whereas many ninth graders are capable of longer and more abstract conversations. If the school counselor works with several grades, checking students’ class assignments could remind the counselor about stereotypical grade-appropriate cognitive, social, and

emotional development levels. Although stereotypical approximations provide an estimate, individual variations must still be identified for each student.

Another dimension of session structure is the format of each session. For example, sessions might begin with a stated topic, and then engage members in an activity, discuss the activity, and relate the discussion to individual members' lives. As this routine takes hold, students feel reassured when their expectations are met. Groups like to adjust the amount of structure, exercising control of their environment. It is therefore helpful to offer groups a few choices in the format during the initial stage, so students feel structure is supportive rather than limiting. Structure has been documented to increase self-disclosure, group cohesion, and self-awareness (Corey & Corey, 2002; Rohde & Stockton, 1994). However, Rohde and Stockton cautioned about an overemphasis on structure, because high levels of structure are correlated with decreased group cohesion and negative evaluations of the group experience. The flexibility to include both the boundary setting of a routine plus a willingness to pursue an inspired student's teachable moment is a difficult balance to accomplish.

Processing

It is customary to use a number of structured activities during the life of a group. With younger students a group leader might even use several brief activities during each single session. Smead (1994) noticed that students often participated in group activities with gusto, but were not as enthusiastic to discuss the meaning of an exercise. Students would say, "Oh, let's just play another game instead!" Perhaps they hoped the group might become a series of party games for the purpose of entertainment. Instead, Smead set a new rule for the group: "Before we play another game we must answer these three questions: (1) What? (2) So what? and (3) Now what? To answer the first question students had to describe what the activity meant to them. The second question asked students to find the activity's relevance to the group's goal or current process. The third question asked if students could apply that relevance to their individual goals, or guess whether the new learning changed what the group might do next. Thus, processing becomes a routine part of each group activity that students anticipate.

Training

Most school counselors have not taken an advanced group practicum during their master's degree coursework and might feel insecure about initiating groups in their school. Luckily, group leadership is

learned behavior to a large extent, not a caste into which one must be born (Dye, 1978). It is possible to become competent by practice and study, and it need not take forever. Dye outlined a series of six steps counselors could take to master group counseling: (a) developing individual counseling skills for a variety of concerns; (b) gaining experience as a member in a variety of groups, along with reading and study; (c) initiating a coleading experience with a competent veteran, along with lots of feedback and consultation; (d) continuing advanced training in methods and techniques with several types of groups; (e) embarking on solo leadership with feedback and consultation; and finally (f) coleading with a veteran peer. Parts of this sequence might have already been completed in the university setting. Additional steps could be accomplished with feedback from colleagues. If counselors in your school system do not use groups, you can network with experienced school counselors through your state or local chapter of the American Counseling Association and American School Counseling Association. The Association for Specialists in Group Work offers advanced training and a mentoring service to all members.

Conclusion

Group counseling can be an effective intervention to reach a number of students in need of responsive services in the schools. School counselors, in an effort to develop a growth-promoting experience for students, may find it helpful to collaborate with teachers in assessing student needs and recruiting appropriate students. Successful groups occur as a result of appropriate recruitment and screening, as well as the counselor's ability to lead and facilitate the students through the stages and processes of group work. Attentiveness to group and individual goals and group structure are pertinent to the development of a meaningful group experience for students. Additional training for school counselors through continuing education, cofacilitation, and supervision may be helpful in increasing school counselors' comfort and frequency in providing groups in schools.

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