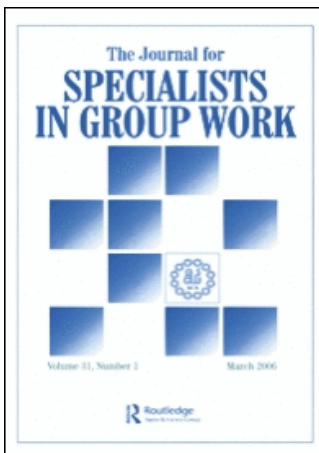


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A Psychoeducational Group Model to Build Academic Competence in New Middle School Students

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Students entering middle school are faced with many challenges and opportunities. School counselors can optimally assist them in their journey through academic development by providing skill building experiences. With study skills and the ability to self-advocate, students can build a solid foundation upon which confidence and academic performance can increase. This article outlines a psychoeducational group designed to assist 6th graders to identify their learning styles and strengths. The group also addressed their academic concerns by teaching them communication skills and how to build relationships with teachers and peers.

Keywords: *advocacy; middle school groups; psychoeducational groups; study skills*

"Young people undergo more rapid and profound personal changes between the ages 10 and 15 than at any other time in their lives" (NMSA, 2003, p. 3). The balance of increased academic expectations, pressures to fit in socially, and urge for independence can seem daunting to a middle school student. Moving into early adolescence, students often experience a decrease in self-esteem and declines in both academic and nonacademic skills (Woolfolk, 2005). Students themselves report that the most difficult aspects of the transition revolve around classes, grades, homework, and teachers (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

Because the focus on middle level education highlights early adolescent challenges and opportunities, the middle school counselor is held accountable for developing programs and services aimed at promoting positive development while underscoring academic achievement. Policies such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) exemplify the rising

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accountability pressures faced by all educators. Achievement has become a primary marker, and yearly goals (referred to as annual yearly progress) must be measured and disclosed. Standards-based programs can support educators in attaining the academic achievement goals outlined by these policies. The American School Counselor Association [ASCA] (2003) asserts that counselors can and will be partners in facilitating the educational progress of students and assisting teachers and parents in meeting the academic goals. Specifically, ASCA's National Standards for School Counseling Programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) offer three areas of development (academic, career, and personal/social) through which counselors can implement comprehensive counseling programs to address accountability. The National Center of Transforming School Counseling (The Education Trust, 2003) also stresses the school counselor role in contributing to academic achievement and equity as they promote the school counselor role in supporting high academic expectations.

Middle school counselors can best address these academic goals in a group format. Past research has suggested that groups that provide structure and a combination of counseling and psychoeducational skills can positively impact academic achievement (Wilson, 1986). Most recently, Cook and Kaffenberger (2003), Bemak, Chi-Ying Chung, and Siroskey-Sabdo (2005), and Webb, Brigman, and Campbell (2005) showed the potential that structured group work has in terms of providing students with valuable tools to increase achievement. As Brigman and Campbell (2003) suggest, research-based interventions are needed that show the positive effect school counselors have on student performance. This article presents a developmentally relevant group model and promising pilot data for early adolescents based on previous research on promoting academic development.

SIXTH GRADE STUDY SKILLS GROUP

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of forming this group was to address the needs of students identified as struggling to meet the academic demands of middle school. As outlined previously, educators collaborate to support students so they may overcome the obstacles of transition into middle school. Teachers can outline goals for achievement for their students and work with counselors to address them in the group format with selected sixth graders. The group objectives were for students to learn how to ask questions and seek help (self-advocate), to learn and use

proper study skills, and to assess their own level of understanding of new material presented in the classroom.

Member Recruitment, Screening, and Selection

In forming this group, the counselor met with sixth grade teachers and asked for recommendations for students who were experiencing difficulties with test taking, organization of school materials, and communication with teachers. Teachers were also asked to consider students they believed would be motivated to improve their skills and work productively in a group setting. Additionally, some parents were approached for parent conferences to explore the possibility and potential benefits of membership in the group. Lastly, after all recommended students were reviewed with teachers, the selected students were then screened by the counselor. During this screening, students were introduced to the main topics that were to be covered during the sessions. They were then asked if they would like to voluntarily join the group. Permission slips and program descriptions were given to the students to take home and review with parents.

Group Size, Composition, and Format

The school counselor assembled the group of seven students, based strictly on the teacher, counselor, and parent recommendations and students' willingness to participate. Initially, nine students were approached; however, two declined the invitation to join the group. Therefore, the group was comprised of three male (one Black and two Caucasian) and four female (one Hispanic and three Caucasian) sixth grade students. All sessions were held in the counseling center conference room during the sixth grade lunch period. All students were given a "Front of the Lunch Line" pass to allow them to pick up lunch and move swiftly through the line and to the sessions. Some students chose to bring their lunch (all were encouraged to do so on group days) and reported directly to the counseling center. Since the lunch period was 30 minutes long, students ate during the sessions while contributing to the group work. The study skills group met once per week during this lunch period for a total of 16 weeks.

Curriculum and materials from *Learning to Learn, Revised* (Frender, 2004) formed the basis of discussion and groupwork for sessions I–IV. The topics of self-advocacy and communication with teachers (sessions V–VII) were developed from information and recommendations provided to the counselor during team meetings and parent conferences. During sessions VIII–XVI the counselor encouraged peer

review and collaborative efforts to address the academic areas of concern and to review topics discussed during previous sessions.

Session I—Welcome and Introduction to Learning Modalities

Students received a special pass in the morning inviting them to the counseling center for a pizza luncheon to kick off the study skills group. At the start of the session, students introduced themselves while having pizza and juice. Afterwards, the counselor explained the purpose of the group, and group rules were established by members. The following items were agreed upon by the members:

- All group members would positively contribute in their own way
- No names of non-members would be mentioned during sessions
- Confidentiality was explained and understood by all members

Following the establishment of rules, the group members were introduced to and discussed visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning modalities. The session ended with members completing a brief, 14-item Self-Assessment of Modality Strengths (Freder, 2004) to determine their dominant learning modality (style).

Session II—Characteristics of Learning Styles and Suggested Study Aids

After a brief review and summary of session I, the students scored their learning modality self-assessments. Students then discussed the specific characteristics of each learning modality and listed the ones they thought most applied to themselves (Freder, 2004). Students then looked at characteristics of the other (non-dominant) learning styles and discussed which characteristics they possessed and the importance of being a well-rounded learner who utilized all three modalities. The group then discussed learning and how they could focus on increasing their performance by identifying the various learning aids for each modality.

A final summary was conducted in rounds, with students stating their dominant learning modality, a few characteristics of that modality, and a few of the suggested study aids they employed (or would like to start employing). For example:

“My name is __ and I am mostly a *visual* learner, who has good handwriting, likes to read, and uses flashcards and ‘cue’ words when studying for tests.”

Session III—Time Management and Study Skills

By this session, all students had a folder with a sticker indicating their dominant learning modality on the cover and a copy of their self-assessment, learning modality characteristics, and suggested study aids. Students repeated their Session II closing descriptive sentences to open this session. Then the group talked about time management, including what it meant to the group members and how they could employ their learning styles to manage the demands of their school work.

Students were then asked to reflect on how well they thought they studied for tests and quizzes and prepared for their classes overall. Following this, they completed the Study Skills Assessment (Freder, 2004), which contained 38 questions related to studying and preparation (i.e., “Do you proofread for spelling and punctuation errors?”; “Do you compile study sheets for tests?”). The last task of the group was to circle five items they wanted to improve. Group members then discussed the five items and collectively brainstormed strategies and how to employ them on a regular basis.

Session IV—Note Taking, Memory, and Becoming “Test-Wise”

This session began with a review of the topics from the past three weeks and a discussion of how they would be putting all of the materials together to form an Individual Improvement Plan (IIP) during the next session to address the subject they wanted to improve the most. Using handouts from Freder’s (2004) *Focus On Note-Taking Skills* and *Focus On Test-Taking Skills*, the group members worked together to identify strategies to assist with both class (lecture) notes and text notes. Students then discussed how they organized notes and prepared for tests. The importance of utilizing flashcards for review was discussed. Then group members reported how they currently used them and brainstormed how to improve or increase their effectiveness.

The session ended with a discussion of the IIPs. Group members were assigned to pick an academic subject that they wanted to focus on improving over the course of the marking period.

Session V—Individual Improvement Plans (IIP)

Prior to this session, the counselor compiled all previous report card and progress report data for each student. Also, reports were given to their teachers explaining the topics discussed over the previous four weeks. Each student was also provided with a blank table for their IIP. The sheet had columns for students to list “Learning/Study

Habits to Use” and “How am I going to use them?” A space at the bottom for “Teacher Recommendations” was also provided.

Students were greeted with the IIP sheet and asked to think for a few moments about all the learning strategies and habits their group explored over the previous sessions. They were instructed to fill in the charts using the five strategies they identified from the Study Skills Assessment (Freder, 2004), that they wanted to utilize more often. They were then asked to list how they would utilize each of the strategies. The session closed with a discussion on how the plan would be reviewed and implemented with each teacher after the students refined them and felt comfortable with the process.

Session VI—Self - Advocacy and the F.U.R. concept

This session opened with a discussion to determine how comfortable the group members felt with the relationships they had with their teachers. Classroom expectations were discussed, and opinions of teacher policies and procedures were reported by group members. Group members were asked to list all the reasons why it was important to be able to communicate with teachers (asking questions for clarification, getting extra help, exhibiting interest in and motivation to learn, etc.).

The counselor then reported that the top three goals identified by their teachers for that year were: 1) getting students to utilize study skills, especially flashcards, 2) helping students learn the steps to take so they gain full understanding of material, and 3) forming relationships with their students so they felt comfortable in the learning environment. The group members formed the acronym F.U.R. (flashcards, understanding, and relationships) to remember these topics.

Group members explored strategies for addressing these topics (i.e., getting help after school or during free periods, utilizing study sessions, peer tutors, study buddies). The remaining time was spent revising IIPs and getting them ready to share with their teachers.

Session VII—Teacher Input and Discussions

Prior to this session, each teacher received a copy of the IIP for their review and recommendations. Group members were instructed to meet individually with their teachers to go over the plan prior to implementation. During the group session, members shared reactions to meeting with teachers and reported positive teacher feedback and recommendations on their plans. According to students, teachers were impressed with their commitment to an improvement plan, and they expressed an interest in continuing to work with the students to achieve the goals. Where Sessions I–VI contained some mini-lecture,

information giving, and learning exercises, the remaining sessions purposefully centered on group process and deepened the focus on peer relationships and support. The group members became more comfortable offering suggestions and feedback on one another's IIPs. At this working stage of group process, the school counselor facilitated through linking of conversations, asking for clarification when needed, and raising questions for discussion.

Session VIII—Processing and Revising IIP's—Troubleshooting

After a week of the plan being implemented, group members returned to discuss progress and consult with their peers. Various strategies were explored and analyzed. The group looked at upcoming assignments and projects and revised their plans to accommodate the expectations of the workload. The counselor provided feedback and encouragement to the members to maintain motivation and confidence in the IIP.

Sessions IX and Session XVI—Follow Up and Closure

These sessions provided further peer support and consultation. Group members updated each other on progress, and the counselor shared general comments based on discussions with teachers. During the ninth session, it was collaboratively determined by the counselor and group members that they had the necessary tools to continue with the IIPs. Sessions X–XVI were added to further peer interactions and were purposefully unstructured to allow group members to work together and exchange ideas and feedback. Members were encouraged to seek advice from peers and to consult with the counselor. Members were praised for their hard work and commitment to the group.

Evaluation of Group

After the 16 sessions were complete, the counselor continued to monitor the group members' progress and met individually with them to address concerns and questions with their IIPs. Teachers were also regularly contacted by the counselor to ensure that the IIPs were positively impacting the students' progress. Progress reports and report cards were reviewed, and concerns were addressed on an individual basis.

Nearly a full school year after the students started the group in sixth grade, they were given a brief evaluation to report on their current academic situation and provide feedback on their participation in the previous year's sessions. Table 1 outlines the feedback provided in

Table 1 Study Skills Follow Up Evaluation

<i>Evaluation Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>
I feel that Mr. B's study group helped build my confidence with my academics.	2.6
I feel more comfortable now approaching teachers with questions/concerns.	2.5
I am pleased with my current grades.	2.5
I use strategies we talked about in group to help with my academics.	2.6
I feel confident in my study habits.	2.3
I feel I manage my time better now than last year.	2.6
I feel more organized now than before I started the group last year.	2.5
I remember what my primary learning style is, and the others we discussed.	2.5
I remember characteristics and suggested study strategies for my learning style.	2.5
I would recommend the study skills group to 6th grade students that want to improve their study skills.	3.0

Note. $N = 6$. Ratings based on a 3-point scale where 1 = not at all, 2 = some, 3 = very much.

response to each of the 10 items. Report card data were also monitored to see if there were gains in academic performance from the group's inception in sixth grade to current year academic standing (Table 2).

Discussion of Results and Limitations

A substantial amount of time has elapsed since the group's formation during the 2004–2005 school year. Encouraging feedback was reported through the evaluation items (Table 1). For instance, it appears that the students are continuing to employ the strategies discussed during group, and they still feel confident in their academics

Table 2 Student Report Card Data by Academic Quarter

<i>Student</i>	<i>Qtr 2 (2004–05)^a Pre</i>	<i>Qtr 4 (2004–05)^b</i>	<i>Qtr 1 (2005–06)^c Post</i>	<i>Pre-Post Difference</i>
S1 Average	56	71	83	+ 27
S2 Average	60	49	76	+ 16
S3 Average	55	65	69	+ 14
S4 Average	85	85	91	+ 6
S5 Average	73	83	80	+ 7
S6 Average	49	60	59	+ 10
S7 Average	79	74	Na	Na

^aBaseline/pretest report card data for student's chosen subject area.

^bEnd of school year report card data for student's chosen subject area.

^cGrades as of 11/2005 for student's chosen subject area.

overall. Also, students reported feeling more comfortable approaching teachers with questions and concerns. However, the lowest report came in response to the confidence in study habits. Since this was a primary focus of the group, further information needs to be gathered to determine the specific study habits in which the students lack confidence (i.e., test preparation, homework completion) and what mechanisms are most useful to boost confidence.

While the pilot data seem promising, there needs to be a more precise data and pretest tool that can be matched for the posttest evaluation. Nevertheless, reports that they feel more organized, remember their primary learning styles, and remember suggested study strategies indicates positive feedback. The fact that they all would "very much" recommend the group to sixth grade students wanting to improve their study skills is encouraging as well.

Report card data is promising in that group participants experienced improved academic performance in the subjects they targeted. However, the group and pilot data do not account for other factors that may have contributed to the academic improvement from the second marking period of 2004 (Qtr. 2 2004) to the first marking period of the following school year (Qtr. 1 2005). The students are currently in 7th grade, and have new teachers with new expectations. It is plausible that the relationships with these teachers are stronger and also that students are naturally developing (maturing) and becoming more responsible and dedicated to their education.

For groups held in the future, pretest study skills confidence ratings might be collected (in very similar format to Table 1). In addition, students could work with their entire team of sixth grade teachers, rather than identifying a single class to target for improvement. This process would allow for further development of advocacy skills, since they would work on specific goals in each subject with different teachers. Lastly, in addition to report card data, narrative teacher feedback or teacher ratings should be collected to document their judgments on study and advocacy skills development for the students over the group's duration.

Building solid study skills and habits at the critical juncture of early adolescence can have a positive and meaningful impact on both student achievement and advocacy skills. The results from this group lend support to that skill building process. Similar to research on group counseling with academic focus (Webb, Brigman, & Campbell, 2005), long-term effects one year after the group intervention suggest that the students retain and employ the skills on a regular basis. It is likely that the small group setting allowed for students to openly disclose their academic concerns and problems and work with peers to identify and try out new academic skills in a safe environment.

Post-group data suggest that they understood their academic potential and grew confident in the strategies discussed. The results also suggest that they have been able to translate the small group success into the classroom, since they continue to improve and employ the strategies and suggestions they learned during the group counseling format.

As academic achievement pressures increase, it is important that school counselors understand their role in assisting with student performance. Group counseling in particular is one intervention that is developmentally appropriate for middle school students and can be a valuable tool in promoting academic development.

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