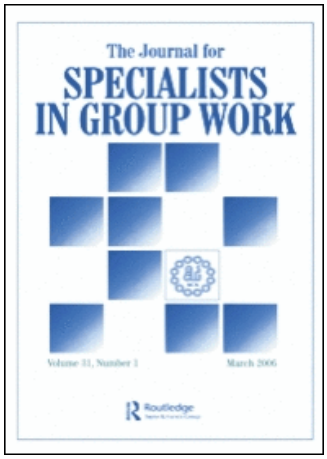

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Ecological Group Work Applied to Schools

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This article underscores the value of school counselors connecting their group work practice with ecological concepts of context, collaboration, interconnection, social system maintenance, meaning-making, and sustainability (Conyne & Cook, 2004; Conyne, Crowell, & Newmeyer, in press). The authors elaborate ecological group work (Bemak & Conyne, 2004) applied to the schools and in keeping with the ASCA national model, highlighting five successively complex levels of ecological group work involvement: (1) Student Group Level, (2) Classroom Group Level, (3) School Personnel Role Group Level, (4) Whole System Group Level, and (5) School-Community Group Level.

Keywords: *ecology; group work; schools*

Schools are dynamic, complex institutions. Moreover, schools themselves are nested within larger dynamic and complex systems. Indeed, each person in a school is himself or herself a dynamic and complex organism. The sum total of all of these interactive dynamic and complex factors, occurring both within and outside the school, is captured by the umbrella term, "school ecology."

Ecological counseling (Conyne & Cook, 2004) has been articulated to assist counselors to function in ways that are consistent with the dynamism and complexity of ecology. Ecological counseling is defined as: "Contextualized help-giving that is dependent on the meaning clients derive from their environmental interactions, yielding an improved ecological concordance" (Conyne & Cook, p. 6).

Group work is one of the important methods counselors can use to promote an improved ecological concordance, or a better fit, between clients and their environment. The purpose of this article is to describe how school counselors can employ ecologically-oriented group work to improve the lives of students and of others both in and out of schools.

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SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND ECOLOGY

Implicit within an ecological orientation is the realization that no one functions in isolation. As the poet, John Donne, pointed out: "No man [sic] is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. . .." (Donne, 1624).

Certainly, this aphorism applies to school counselors. They cannot work alone. As is pointed out in the four themes of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2003), school counselors need to engage in leadership, advocacy, collaboration and teaming, and systemic change as they become involved in school transformation. None of these important functions can be accomplished through a reliance on the "counseling services paradigm" of individual-remedial-direct service (Conyne, 2004), because doing so produces an isolationism unsuited to the realities of daily life in the schools. Further, scaling one's work at the individual level alone, seeking only to change one student at a time, affords a limited capacity to meet the significant and substantial needs of students and others.

Instead, school counselors need to be prepared to work ecologically within the school setting, helping to shape school environments that are unique, dynamic, and also fundamentally different from those in mental health (Coker & Schrader, 2004). An ecological approach suggests that school counselors conceptualize and conduct their services within and between the various levels affecting the school.

As we mentioned earlier, group work is an important intervention for school counselors. In schools, examples of such groups can include IEPs, classrooms, local school decision-making groups, staff meetings, interdisciplinary curriculum development teams, psychoeducation groups, PTA meetings, parent workshops and instruction, classroom appraisal, peer mediation training, consultation and teaming, counseling groups, student clubs, training workshops, and others. School counselors lead, facilitate, consult, or advise any of these kinds of groups.

Group work is not an individually based service, although it can and does benefit individual group members. Importantly, group work effects occur through the wise and skillful harnessing of interpersonal dynamics and therapeutic factors occurring within the group and of systemic factors arising external to it. In ecological group work (Bemak & Conyne, 2004; Conyne & Bemak, 2004; Conyne & Harding, 1976) group work is both interpersonal and contextualized, with group work leaders paying attention to the interplay of all related factors.

Ecological Group Work Concepts

Ecological concepts applied to group work have been identified and described (Conyne, Crowell, & Newmeyer, in press). These concepts, which are summarized below, are: (a) context, (b) interconnection, (c) collaboration, (d) social system maintenance, (e) meaning making, and (f) sustainability. Utilization of the ecological concepts in group work becomes increasingly salient as the complexity of group level increases, a point that will be elaborated later in this article.

School counselors can enhance their group work, connecting it more closely to precepts mentioned earlier contained in the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2003), by framing it appropriately within the following concepts:

Context. External and group factors influencing the group and its members. For school counselors, it is important to incorporate neighborhood, community, and family influences into group work practice.

Interconnection. Frequency and quality of member-to-member relationships. School counselors need to help group members to form relationships and to function interdependently.

Collaboration. Working together to move ahead. School counselors do not solve problems independently, lead a group autocratically, or do things to people; rather, they seek to work with others to produce joint processes and outcomes.

Social system maintenance. Group culture, including clarity and integrity of rules, norms, expectations. School counselors help group members to articulate understandings, goals, and directions for the group clearly, and they attend to the general culture of the group. Helping members to establish and maintain their own group rules provides one example.

Meaning making. Understandings being gained of experience. School counselors help advance a "deep ecology" (Capra, 1996), where the experience of members is converted to understanding and meaning. Age and psychosocial development of group members can strongly influence meaning making; for younger group members, it may be of lesser relevance.

Sustainability. Transferability and generalizability of learning and change. School counselors view any group as a means to the end of

helping members to apply and sustain what they learn, develop, or change outside the group, in the "real world."

LEVELS OF ECOLOGICAL GROUP WORK IN A SCHOOL

A school can be conceived of as a set of loosely linked and differential levels of group that increase in scope and complexity. Reflective of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) view of human ecology, these group levels each contain a unique set of circumstances (e.g., the ecology of students and that of teachers is different), and they also are dynamic and mutually influencing. For example, students who learn new skills in a counseling group may influence other students in their classroom and, indeed, in the larger school system itself. This kind of "ripple effect," similar to what occurs when a stone is tossed into a lake, describes how change at one level can affect other levels, as well.

We define five levels of groups in schools, each of which is amenable to school counselor involvement: Level 1: student groups, Level 2: classroom groups, Level 3: school personnel role groups, Level 4: school as a total group system, and Level 5: school-community groups. Note that each level is hierarchically arranged, beginning with student groups and moving outward, becoming progressively broader in scope and, concomitantly, more complex. This condition also may apply to the actual size of the group being worked with by the school counselor; that is, a group may remain at a typical small group size of 3–12, or it may expand in size to become a large group of size 20 or even more, depending on circumstances. In any case, as the group level progresses in scope, the complexity automatically increases.

The increasing scope and complexity of group level involvement requires group leaders to attend even more closely to the ecological group work concepts described above as they assist with understanding and managing multiple interacting factors. When working with broader, more complex groups (e.g., with groups comprised of school and community members), school counselors need to rely on basic and essential group skills and therapeutic factors, but they also must pay particular attention to the ecological concepts described earlier: being aware of context, forming interdependent connections among members and between school and community, helping members to collaborate together to establish goals and procedures and to make decisions, developing group rules and procedures and a general working culture that is positive, and giving specific attention to the implementation and sustainability of innovations the group may generate. These ecological concepts are well-suited to address larger, systemic dynamics. To reiterate, working at successive "next-complex levels"

of group, as we suggest is necessary for school counselors to do and which is consistent with the ASCA National Model, means that counselors must become adept at employing basic group skills and ecological concepts effectively.

ECOLOGICAL GROUP LEVELS AND THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S ROLE

The following descriptions are offered to provide further understanding of these group levels and the school counselor's role within them. Note that as school counselors become involved in ecological group levels of broader scope, their role becomes both more complex and more visible. Moreover, school counselors who expand their group work application become potentially more powerful as an "innovative school leader" (Amatea & Clark, 2005), and possibly more contrary to historical expectations held by many in and out of the school. Thus, increased risk accompanies the potential for increased positive change.

A discussion of the five ecological group levels and related school counselor roles follows. Ecological concepts are highlighted in parentheses.

Level 1: Student Group Level

At this smallest and most familiar group level, group members include students and a counselor. The group is usually initiated to fit the students' specific needs, such as anger management, grief reduction, communication skills, self-esteem, academic support, and behavior management (**context**). These groups are often psycho-educational and time limited. Members of this group are often identified by a teacher, a staff member, a parent, or counselor **(collaboration**).

School counselors use basic group work leadership skills (e.g., see the ASGW Professional Training Standards, 2000) and therapeutic factors (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) to facilitate groups at this level. Also, with younger students, these group sessions need to be brief, use structure, and contain concrete activities in order to be age appropriate.

Consistent with ecological group work, the leader applies basic group skills to promote connections among members (**interconnection**), while being sure that the group provides a good fit for each member. Assessing and screening for suitability is important at this level. Development of a clear plan for the group also is a critical component (see the ASGW Best Practice Guidelines, 1998), as is helping members to learn and make changes that will assist them in

navigating the school environment more successfully (**meaning-making, sustainability**).

Level 2: Classroom Group Level

A step beyond the student group level, a school classroom is considered to be a group itself, and group processes become a focus (Martin, Jordan, Martin, Semivan, & Wilkins, 2005; Schmuck & Schmuck, 2001). As teachers learn and apply group development, group process observation, and how to manage group dynamics, unruly classrooms can become more appropriately regulated, increasing the opportunity for developing a positive learning environment (**social system maintenance**). Attending to ecological concepts such as social system maintenance is critically important in helping the classroom to become better managed and a source for learning. Psychoeducational group activities can be conducted in classrooms around behaviors that can occur continuously, such as bullying, poor study skills, ineffective communication skills, and poor problem-solving competencies (**context**).

The school counselor continues to use many of the same group skills that were used at the student group level. Sometimes the counselor is invited into the classroom to observe dynamics or to deliver psychoeducation/classroom guidance group instruction (**collaboration**). In other cases, the counselor may consult with the teacher to help him or her to learn group process skills in order to manage this classroom more effectively—as well as to learn skills than can be generalized to future classrooms (**sustainability**).

Level 3: School Personnel Role Group Level

A step beyond the classroom group level, the school personnel role group includes those from within the school who share or occupy a particular role and position. Consistent with their role, these school personnel tend to be concerned with school issues from their role-bound perspective, and members always have issues, concerns and ideas that are important—but frequently not recognized. Examples at Level 3 include groups comprised independently of teachers, of administrators, of staff, and of students (**collaboration**).

School personnel role groups meet periodically in a variety of ways, including for staff meetings, supervision, and professional development. These meetings provide ongoing, naturally occurring opportunities for school counselors to provide small group facilitation to assist in improving group effectiveness (**interconnection**). This group function builds on the ecological concepts described earlier by

engaging school counselors in reaching out to other important groups in the school, connecting with them, and collaborating in an effort to improve interpersonal support and role functioning. Counselors should be aware that a ripple effect may result when the improvement in any one group has a positive impact upon the whole system.

School counselors draw from ecological concepts to connect with existing members who occupy the same role in the school to facilitate interconnections, collaboration, and mutual support. It is important to note that members of such a group can impact those at many of the other levels in the school, as well. The comprehensive elementary school group work program of Littrell and Peterson (2002) illustrates levels of how school counselors can collaborate effectively with other school personnel to produce meaningful systemic change.

Level 4: Whole System Group Level

A step beyond the school personnel role group level, the whole system group includes members who are internal to the school focus on the school as an ecosystem, a totality of mutual influences. Group members might include members or representatives drawn from any and all preceding group levels: students, teachers, administrators, building staff, student personnel staff, clerical staff, and others internal to the school (**collaboration**). Group work at this level usually addresses tasks or goals affecting the entire school system (**context**). The focus is on the school-as-a-whole, not on any independently existing group. Therefore, school counselors by definition are concerned with ecological interconnections among people, groups, and all aspects of the school environment.

Ecological group work at this level first involves perceiving the need for group formation, facilitation, and continuation. Once a whole system level group is formed (which is a complex process in itself; see ASGW Best Practice skills of planning), special attention needs to be given by the school counselor to cross-role member communication, developing common goals, collaboratively designing strategies that might positively impact the entire school, and planning for the maintenance and sustainability of successful strategies (**interconnection**). The school counselor needs to deploy effective and appropriate skills in collaboration and group dynamics in order to allow members with diverse perspectives and experience to work together in helping these accomplishments to take shape. The social-competence promotion program for young adolescents (Weissberg, Barton, & Shriver, 1997) provides an example of an effective system-wide effort that takes advantage of group work in a variety of ways and at multiple levels.

Level 5: School-Community Group Level

This group level is the most complex. Group members at this level often represent their constituency, which may come from internal levels already discussed, plus those from the community who are external to the school. Examples of the external community might include local business owners, police, fire, township or city representatives, religious leaders, community and recreational center personnel, families (including those with students at school and those without students), and any others in the community where the school is located. IEPs, local school decision-making committees, and the establishment and maintenance of learning community partnerships between the school and community agencies all represent excellent examples of school-community groups, and they provide key opportunities for school counselor leadership (**collaboration, interconnection, context**).

After obtaining administrative approval, school counselors can help to identify and bring together school and community representatives. By regularly assessing the context surrounding the school, the counselor can identify school-community partnerships that presently work and those that should be started. School counselors can serve as "boundary spanners" between the school and the community, seeking to help build and then maintain bridges that can connect resources. Across these linkages resources can move reciprocally and effectively, thus benefiting both the school and the community. School counselors—at least theoretically—occupy an ideal position to promote school-community joint projects through application of ecological group work. As in all the applications discussed, the need is for school counselors to translate the theoretical/ideal conception of their role to pragmatic practice.

AN EXAMPLE OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY GROUP (LEVEL 5)

Below we summarize one example of a school-community (level 5) effort for promoting change, involving members drawn from multiple levels both within and outside the school. At Union Middle School in Sandy, Utah, student behavior was out of control, poor morale existed among teachers and students, and discipline was very inconsistent (Kay, 2005). In an attempt to improve this school ecology, counselors, administrators, faculty, staff, parents, and community members came together to develop a plan to promote positive behaviors in the students and, thereby, to affect change in the school environment. What is important about this example for ecological group work was the way

the members of all of the group levels within the school ecology collaborated to develop the plan and to participate in the implementation.

Different ecological group work concepts were activated in this project. A team was formed comprised of members from all group levels. Members worked on becoming interconnected and in learning how to collaborate effectively. To assist that effort, members committed to a year of training in Positive Behavior Support (PBS), and then they worked together in implementing the PBS strategies and skills they had learned.

The Union Middle School project included group work occurring at various levels. Nested in the team plan for change, groups at each level functioned within the same overall goals that existed at the School-Community Level (Level 5). Examples of activity at different levels follow.

High risk students were directed to small groups focused on supporting positive behavior initiatives (Level 1). Students and teachers participated in classroom groups (Level 2) focused on standards of behavior aimed at enhancing positive behavior. School personnel representatives were formed into a team (Level 3) to design and guide implementation of the school-wide behavior plan to prevent inappropriate behavior and promote positive behavior. The whole school system (Level 4) became involved when personnel from all levels within the school worked together to implement the positive behavior plan.

Positive results were found. Student behavior improved markedly and the school atmosphere became considerably more positive. The success of the initiative was credited not only to the concepts learned in the training, but to the fact that members of all of the group levels formed a team and functioned well together. Team members used knowledge that they shared about context (factors influencing the students and their behavior), they formed new working relationships, and they collaborated toward common goals. Team members felt empowered and the changes realized were sustained. The Union Middle School example not only exemplifies the success this school-community initiative had using ecological group work concepts to promote change, but it also shows how groups are interconnected with each other.

CONCLUSION

Whether school counselors lead groups at the level of student group (Level 1), classroom group (Level 2), personnel role group (Level 3), whole system group (Level 4), or school-community group (Level 5), activating an ecological perspective can facilitate student growth

and development and promote positive school settings. Being able to apply group skills across multiple levels, both in and outside of a school, is an important part of this work.

Often schools elicit the assistance of the community and others to provide expertise and help to facilitate change. Attempts to form these partnerships, although well intended, fail too frequently. Partnerships that are weakly formed without strong interconnection are vulnerable, subject to fading. As we have indicated throughout our discussion, school counselors who incorporate ecological principles in group work and in general program design and execution can improve the success rate of their efforts with others (Chronister, McWhirter, & Kerewsky, 2004; Trickett & Birman, 1989).

Understanding and applying ecological concepts to group work broadens school counselor contact and potential effectiveness with students and others in and out of the school, thereby promoting opportunities for school counselors to become increasingly valued. This kind of ecological perspective naturally provides a way for school counselors to use their skills to collaborate with others more fully. As a result, an abundance of interconnected resources can accumulate to benefit students and the school. In addition, group work occurring at broader ecological levels of the school is consistent with the fundamental precepts of the ASCA National Model, which are focused on leadership, advocacy, collaboration and teaming, and systemic change.

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