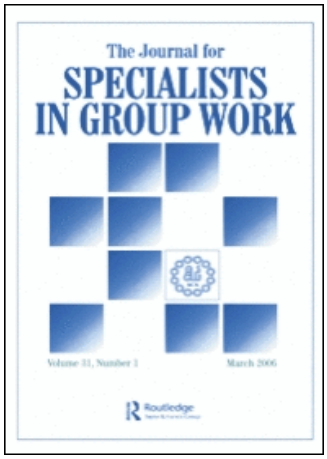

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Group Work as an Essential Contribution to Transforming School Counseling

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Group Work as an Essential Contribution to Transforming School Counseling

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Professional school counselor roles have changed over time in response to societal needs and professional initiatives. Although school counselors consistently have been involved in group work, the intent of that involvement has changed. New ways of viewing group work can enable school counselors to engage in roles related to leadership, advocacy, and collaboration while continuing to provide direct services to students. This article provides recommendations for intentional group involvement.

Keywords: *collaboration; committees; school counseling; task groups*

The new vision of school counseling, developed as part of the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI), calls for professional school counselors to extend their traditional responsibilities (e.g., counseling and coordination) to embrace other roles including educational leadership and advocacy in order to enhance educational experiences and outcomes for all students (The Education Trust, 2006). The most recent evolutions in the specialty of school counseling are anchored both in the TSCI and in the adoption of National Standards and the National Model by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). The TSCI began in 1996 and was funded by the DeWitt Wallace–Reader's Digest Foundation and directed by the Education Trust (The Education Trust, 2006). The ASCA National Standards were adopted in 1997 and the National Model in 2002 (ASCA, 2003). Both the TSCI and the ASCA initiatives represent a shift in the school counselor role. Emphasis is placed on student

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outcomes rather than counselor input, on data-driven program development, and on connecting the school counseling program to the mission of the school. School counselors are asked to think and work differently—to accept responsibilities for educational leadership and advocacy as well as the more traditional direct services to children and adolescents.

One response to these calls for working and thinking differently involves returning to one of the most central and effective methods of providing school counseling services—group work. The Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW, 2002) defines group work:

> as a broad professional practice involving the application of knowledge and skill in group facilitation to assist an interdependent collection of people to reach their mutual goals which may be interpersonal, intrapersonal, or work-related. The goals of the group may include the accomplishment of tasks related to work, education, personal development, personal and interpersonal problem-solving, or remediation of mental and emotional disorders (p. 2).

Additionally, ASGW has identified four types of groups: working or task groups, psychoeducational, counseling, and psychotherapy groups. The first three of these types of groups are very appropriate in implementing the new vision for school counseling. Traditionally, school counselors provide direct services to children and adolescents through preventive, psychoeducational interventions with classrooms and/or smaller targeted groups of students. They are also likely to be involved in facilitating small counseling groups around specific issues related to primary prevention, remediation, or crisis. In relation to contemporary themes of leadership, advocacy, and collaboration, school counselors can also facilitate and/or participate in working or task groups (e.g., Individualized Education Program [IEP] teams, middle school teams, advisory councils) comprised of other adults who are stakeholders in the outcomes of educational endeavors.

The skills associated with working in teams or groups are not unknown to school counselors. In fact, group work is one of the core content areas in school counselor preparation (CACREP, 2001), and classroom guidance and small groups have traditionally been a central part of the delivery system for comprehensive, developmental programs (ASCA, 2003; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). Nevertheless, school counselors must now be able to do more than facilitate groups of students. They must utilize skills and apply general principles of group work to effectively collaborate with adults in students' lives. A translation of what school counselors know about groups to teaming within the embedded communities of schools and societies may be critical to the success of school counseling programs. More

significantly, the formation of task or working groups may be one of the most effective methods for promoting systemic change leading to enhanced educational experiences and outcomes for all students. School counselors need to recognize that to promote academic, career, and personal/social development for all students, they are not the only stakeholders. In fact, in developing responsive programs, not only *can* they involve others, they *should*.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USING GROUP WORK TO IMPLEMENT THE NEW VISION

Collaboration in Educational Leadership and Advocacy

Suggesting educational leadership and advocacy as appropriate roles for professional school counselors does not require that they become building level administrators. It does, however, require that they become part of the team that accepts responsibilities for educational experiences and outcomes. More specifically, it requires: (a) that the school counseling program be connected to the mission of the school, and (b) that professional school counselors work with others to challenge inequities, remove barriers to student success, and give voice to those issues that would otherwise be ignored (ASCA, 2003). In all cases, school counselors are not being asked to accomplish any of these goals in isolation, but instead in collaboration with others.

This collaboration refers to a style for direct interaction between at least two parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision-making as they work toward a common goal. Typically, collaborative efforts occur in teams or working groups (Gladding, 1997). A team can be defined as "two or more people who interact dynamically, interdependently, and adaptively and who share at least one common goal or purpose" (Azar, 1997, p. 14). Many adults within the school, the district, and the community have vested interest in the outcomes of education, and by working together these stakeholders reap the benefits of multiple perspectives, skills, and resources. School counselors will need to recognize their often unique skills in building community within these groups of stakeholders and facilitating the team's process.

The professional literature in school counseling has reflected a change of emphasis from the school counselor to the school counseling program. The school counseling program does not belong to an individual counselor, but instead to the school. Some of what the program seeks to accomplish will be the responsibility of the school counselor, but many program goals will be outcomes shared with or generated in collaboration with others either within the school or with members

of the family or community (e.g., goals generated by home-school partnerships or school-based teams). As educational leaders within the school, school counselors will need to think at the system level rather than at the individual point of intervention. Two implications are apparent.

The first implication concerns how school counselors develop comprehensive school counseling programs. Rather than developing programs in isolation from others, school counselors can use advisory councils as recommended in the ASCA National Model (2003). An advisory council is "a group of people who are appointed to review program results and make recommendations. The group representatives are students, parents or guardians, teachers, counselors, administration, and community members" (ASCA, p. 22). ASCA's recommendations regarding advisory council composition reflect the importance of group representation from all relevant stakeholders and a diversity of perspectives. School counselors should consider the unique needs of their buildings and communities as they generate advisory councils that can address their needs while also keeping the size of the group manageable. By using group leadership knowledge and skills to form, plan, and facilitate these task groups, school counselors can insure that group goals are clear, facilitate active participation from all members, and manage potential conflict among members (Elliott & Sheridan, 1992). For example, school counselors might invite individuals with whom they have successfully worked in the past to become involved with a committee in an effort to increase the likelihood of that individual's active participation and cooperation. Also, they might intentionally avoid selecting individuals for task group membership who have exhibited an inability to work together effectively in the past.

A second implication is that the original framework from the TSCI included teaming and collaboration as a primary role for professional school counselors (The Education Trust, 2006). This initiative suggested that school counselors might use teaming and collaboration in several specific ways. First, focusing on how they might share their specialized knowledge or expertise, school counselors could participate as a member of or consult with teams for problem-solving in an effort to serve as advocates for students. Their contributions might be to ensure team responsiveness to equity and cultural diversity issues, to student learning styles, or to specific academic, career, or personal/social concerns that other group members might overlook. For example, school counselors might provide disaggregated data related to school grades and attendance to a school-based committee examining school dropout rates before initiating a group discussion of the impact of the data. By imparting this type of information to a group, school counselors can help the group consider relevant interventions

for specific subgroups of students while allowing for representatives from all stakeholder groups to debate strengths and limitations of the options generated. School counselors might also work with others in the school and community to develop and implement a multi-faceted response to improving attendance for all sub-groups to meet the goals for adequate yearly progress. Becoming involved in teams such as these can allow school counselors to become aware of data related to multiple dimensions of students' lives and work with other stakeholders to impact policies that affect the school community. Their roles as student advocates can be greatly enhanced through their active participation in these types of teams.

Another way that school counselors might use teaming and collaboration is to emphasize the importance of collaborative problem solving. As the school or individuals within the school face new issues or problems, professional school counselors as educational leaders will need to constantly ask: (a) who are the other stakeholders, or (b) who else has a vital interest in the outcome? Bringing representatives of these stakeholders together to help in problem solving or goal setting will enrich any solutions that might be generated independently. While formal needs assessments could be conducted to gather perception data from teachers, parents, or community members, school counselors can take a group leadership role by discussing student outcome data to determine program and school priorities. For example, if behavior referrals have significantly increased during the year, school counselors might use these data to initiate a school-based task group (i.e., committee) discussion about the possibility of developing and implementing a violence prevention or character education program.

A final implication requires that school counselors become involved as leaders of school-based improvement and empowerment teams in addition to some of the ad hoc committees discussed previously. Equally important, however, is the ability for school counselors to advocate for themselves when it is inappropriate for them to serve as leaders (e.g., special educators or school psychologists might be more appropriate leaders for IEP team meetings). They might help administrators and other school personnel determine task or working group leadership by referencing characteristics of effective group leaders and identifying staff members who possess those qualities and characteristics. Educational leadership as a new role for school counselors does not mean replacing an administrator but instead means that school counselors will be actively engaged in thinking and working at the system level, impacting policy as well as school personnel and individual students.

In their efforts, not only will school counselors sometimes have to take initiative to organize stakeholder groups, but they will also need

to use their group leadership skills to lead these team meetings effectively and efficiently when appropriate and to ensure that all members feel invested in the process. These types of efforts will be most successful when communication flows openly and members feel a sense of cohesion (Elliott & Sheridan, 1992). In support of current recommendations to utilize data and assess outcomes (ASCA, 2003), school counselors can highlight the benefits of formally evaluating the efforts of the working group, including how well the group functions (Elliott & Sheridan; Fleming & Monda-Amaya, 2001; Hulse-Killacky, Kraus, & Schumacher, 1999) and whether or not the group achieved its goal. Additionally, as one of few school personnel who has completed training in group work, school counselors might contribute by informally monitoring group process (Hulse-Killacky et al., 1999) and providing suggestions for more effective team functioning when appropriate. In these evaluations of process and product, new vision school counselors will consistently consider student outcomes in measuring success.

Counseling

In addition to system-level initiatives, ASCA (2003) recommends that school counselors ideally spend anywhere from 15–45% of their time in direct services to students. The use of groups as a vehicle for delivery of services is appropriate for several reasons (Paisley & Hubbard, 1994). Comprehensive programs imply all students receive counseling services. With high student-to-counselor ratios present in most situations (ASCA, n.d.), reliance on individual interventions is often not feasible. Beyond this logistical issue, some concerns are more appropriately and productively addressed in groups. Working individually with students who have poor social skills or difficulty resolving conflicts may not be the most effective intervention. Instead, group situations that allow students to practice new skills and behaviors may be more effective. Therapeutic factors such as imitative behavior (e.g., modeling) and interpersonal learning (Yalom, 1995) can facilitate change in students. Students work through conflict and also give and receive peer support through groups. Often young people believe that they are the only ones who feel a particular set of emotions. There is a major difference between an adult saying "you are not the only one" and a peer really showing them that they are not alone. Group work allows for therapeutic factors such as cohesion and universality (Yalom) to facilitate a climate for change.

An additional rationale for group work in direct service to children and adolescents can be found in what is known about how cognitive development occurs. In accordance with Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Green & Piel, 2002), one method of promoting

development involves the challenge of hearing other perspectives, particularly those one level above where a student currently is functioning. The development of heterogeneous groups provides an opportunity for students to hear and discuss different approaches or views concerning the same problem or issue. Groups also provide a more successive approximation of the actual environments in which children and adolescents live, Yalom's (1995) concept of a social microcosm. Although there are certainly problems that must be dealt with on an individual basis, there is also a therapeutic advantage to dealing with concerns in the context in which they occur. In using group work in direct service, school counselors not only affect individual change, but also provide for healthy adjustments to events in the environment.

Given current emphasis on high stakes testing and accountability, school counselors working to improve student achievement are encouraged to consider the benefits of group interventions. Although little data exist regarding the effectiveness of group interventions designed to improve student academic outcomes, a few studies revealed positive outcomes. For example, Webb, Brigman, and Campbell (2005) reported the results of a structured group intervention targeting academic and social skills among elementary and middle school students. They found that, compared to students in a control group, group members demonstrated significantly higher increases in math achievement tests.

In a study funded in part by the Education Trust, Bemak, Chung, and Siroskey-Sabdo (2005) implemented an empowerment group targeting African-American females in an urban school. Arguing that "new and innovative interventions" (p. 377) are needed to address the achievement gap for students both from ethnic minority groups and from lower socioeconomic groups, Bemak et al. designed a less-structured group in which "group process was utilized as the basis for group intervention" (p. 381). No formal pre-post tests measures were used, but participants reported improvements in academics and attendance. Additionally, compared to the beginning of the group when none of the participants planned to pursue postsecondary education, upon completion of the group all members aspired to attend college.

Others have documented the potential benefits of group interventions on academic outcomes. For example, the majority of elementary students participating in a small psychoeducational group targeting school success skills and student responsibility demonstrated improved grades and work habits (Boutwell & Myrick, 1992). Additionally, Blum and Jones (1993) designed a peer support group for junior high students at risk for dropping out. As a result of participating in the groups, students improved their grades and teachers

reported improvements in student classroom behavior and completion of assignments. Readers are referred to Prout and Prout (1998) and Whiston and Sexton (1998) for a review of effective school counseling small group interventions.

Implications from the research presented above suggest that traditional psychoeducational group approaches addressing topics such as study skills and time management might be beneficial in addressing student academic concerns, but more outcome studies are needed. Additionally, school counselors might consider designing group interventions holistically, acknowledging the environmental factors (e.g., discrimination, family relationships) that affect students and providing opportunities for students to discuss those factors with their peers in a group setting. Although emphasis on academic achievement is important, school counselors should not discount the importance of providing the types of group interventions (i.e., small group and classroom guidance) they have been running for years in an effort to continue to address the personal/social and career counseling needs of students as well.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The new vision for school counselor preparation and practice requires professionals to extend their historical involvement with counseling and coordination to work as advocates and leaders in collaboration with other stakeholders. Group work, whether in teams to support the mission of the school or in direct service to students, is a significant part of this new vision of school counseling. If professional school counselors intend to promote academic, career, and personal/social development for all students, then acknowledging the potential benefits of group work and identifying opportunities to implement groups will be critical. It is imperative that professional school counselors be involved not only in the traditional and significant roles of facilitating small counseling or psychoeducational groups and classroom guidance, but also in reaching out to collaborate with teachers, administrators, parents, and community members to improve educational experiences and outcomes for all students.

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