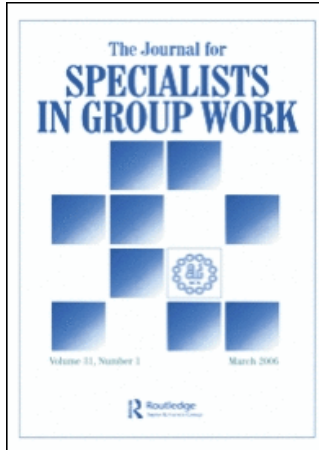


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Strong Teens: A School-Based Small Group Experience for African American Males

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This article describes the school-based, small group adaptation of the existing Strong Teens Curriculum (STC) for African American male adolescents in high schools. The STC was created to equip adolescents with skills that promote more effective social interaction and enhance personal emotional and psychological wellness. The authors present a twelve-session small group school counseling experience based on the STC for use with African American adolescent males in a high school. Within the small group sessions, attention was given to the unique African American male experience in adolescence and in schools. Based on African American cultural values, historical figures were used as role models in helping to illustrate session concepts, and activities were modified to better connect group members with one another for social support in and outside of the school environment.

Keywords: *adolescents; African American males; group counseling; group counseling in schools*

African American adolescents have been described as one of the most “vulnerable and victimized groups in contemporary American Society” (Gibbs & Huang, 1998, p. 171). Perhaps even more disturbing is that African American male youth often are considered to be an “endangered species” (Gibbs, 1989, p. 3). Contributing to the “endangered” description are the facts that African American adolescent males have high rates of incarceration and HIV/AIDS, have suffered increases in suicide and homicide in the last 20 years, have lower academic achievement and persistence, and have low high school graduation rates (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005; Hackney, 2001; Lee, 2001; Muller, 2002; Roderick, 2003). Because African

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American male adolescents' academic achievement and graduation rates are low, they often have fewer options for career opportunities after high school and greater barriers to social and economic mobility and higher education (Gibbs & Huang). Other academic-related concerns include: behavioral patterns that interfere with learning such as withdrawing and disengaging from school work; being disruptive in class; physical aggression; and negative stigmas associated with academic excellence (Lee, 1989, 1996; Muller; Roderick; Tatum, 1997). Compounding these concerns is the fact that numerous African American adolescent males are in school environments with longstanding institutional barriers in which the schools do not provide adequate resources and culturally competent support needed to properly facilitate pursuit of their academic achievement, career development, or personal/social goals (Arredondo et al., 1996; Lee, 2001; Roderick).

Teachers, coaches, and school counselors may play crucial roles in the mentoring and support of African American male students (Lee, 2001). Despite well-intended attempts to provide educational, social, emotional, and psychological support and guidance to these young men in school settings, many African American males continue to have difficulty successfully navigating the school system and realizing their full potential. Lee (1989) highlighted the idea that "the school often impedes the academic development of Black adolescents, causing their motivation-to-succeed educationally to suffer" (p. 300). Given the academic and personal/social challenges facing these adolescents, the small group counseling delivery system component of the American School Counseling Association's *National Model for School Counseling* (ASCA, 2003) provides a potent environment for supporting African American males and equips them with skills that promote positive social interaction and enhance personal emotional and psychological wellness.

Past studies of school-based small groups have shown great promise for empowering African American male students' personal behavior, interpersonal relationships, and academic achievement (Bradley, 2001; Muller, 2002). The advantages of small group counseling with African American male adolescents have been recognized based upon the important role group interactions play in African American culture (Lee, 1989, 2001). Additionally, small group counseling is an effective modality for African American male youth because group interactions foster identity development and create a place for social identification and emotional support (Lee, 1989). Small group counseling in schools offers a venue for strengthening African American adolescent males' sense of self in addition to providing personal/social skills needed for emotional health and positive social interaction, possibly leading to academic success (Greenberg, 2003; Lee, 1989, 2001).

The purpose of this article is to present a socially and emotionally competence-based, racial/ethnic-specific small group counseling model for use with African American males in high schools. We outline a theoretical group model adapted from the existing educational classroom curriculum, *The Strong Teens Curriculum* (STC; Merrell, Carrizales, & Feuerborn, 2004). The STC is a competence-based, social-emotional classroom learning curriculum designed to promote the personal/social and emotional resilience, psychological wellness, and coping skills of all high school adolescents. The STC specifically targets "internalizing behaviors and emotional problems" such as depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, and somatic problems (Merrell et al., p. 7). Additionally, the authors of the STC note that no single curriculum is designed to meet the needs of every student and therefore make some general recommendations for how to adapt the model based upon racial/ethnic/cultural context (Merrell et al.). With these recommendations in mind, we adapted the classroom curriculum for use in a small group experience with special attention to African American adolescent males' lives and experiences and with culture- and race-based activities.

While the core ideas of the STC were maintained, concepts were made more relevant to this specific population by allowing for more discussion of the impact of culturally relevant factors (i.e., role models, peers, family, school, church, and community members) and addressing individual students' experiences. In our small group adaptation, we used historical figures as role models to illustrate session concepts. We also included more reflective group processing that created a culturally rich climate suited for personal/social growth to occur; members connected socially and emotionally with one another for social and academic support purposes, and this promoted effective social interaction and enhanced emotional and psychological wellness. The implementation of a group specific to the needs of African American males provides a timely example of how the principles for diversity-competent group leaders, as described by Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW, 1999) can be implemented by school counselors.

STRONG TEENS: A SMALL GROUP MODEL

Leader Background and Theoretical Foundation

The senior author who designed this particular group experience was an African American male doctoral student in a counseling psychology program. He had significant training in group work experiences and has received instruction in working with culturally

diverse clients as part of his coursework and practicum experiences. Ideally, because this group was designed for African American adolescent males, it was recommended that the school counselor/leader also be an African American male. While studies such as Muller (2002) illustrated that school counselors who were not male or African American could effectively lead African American male groups, an African American male school counselor remains an added advantage. Lee (1987) stressed this in his group-counseling model for empowering Black male adolescents and emphasized that African American male counselors may serve as important role models for participants. However, due to the fact that European American counselors outnumber African American counselors in many school systems, this may not be possible (Muller). In this case, we suggest that a male school counselor (of any racial/ethnic background) is ideal for leading the small group experience (Lee), because male role models help foster and affirm the development of positive qualities and behaviors in young men and help in their understanding of what it means to be men in today's society (Pollack, 2000).

With respect to school counselor background preparation, extensive training is not required to implement the STC adapted small group model; the original STC was designed for easy and minimal professional training (Merrell et al., 2004). However, when adapting the STC for purposes of a small group counseling experience for African American males, school counselors' knowledge of psychoeducational group composition and dynamics, ethical issues, racially/culturally responsive counseling techniques for African American adolescents, and school-based group counseling approaches are crucial (Lee, 1987, 2001; Muller 2002; Yalom, 2005).

School counselors' knowledge of African American history and the current effects of racism and oppression on African Americans in society and in the educational system are essential (Lee, 1987, 2001). Knowledge of African American history remains important to understand this particular group's experiences and how those experiences have changed over the years due to sociopolitical movements such as the American Civil Rights Movement. Insight into the current school experiences of African American adolescents was helpful in recognizing how discrimination, prejudice, and social injustice continue to persist despite some progress. Resources such as Tatum (1997) and Lee (1989) offer insight into these concerns and illustrate how racial/ethnic minorities have a unique experience and often think about race more frequently and how African American youth struggle to survive in U.S. school systems.

In terms of racially/culturally responsive counseling techniques for use with African American male adolescents, the school counselor

integrated popular music and film and family and peer social interaction case examples from the African American rural and/or urban communities within which the students lived (Lee, 2001). In addition, the school counselor integrated these racially/culturally responsive techniques with school-based group counseling approaches. Small group counseling currently is considered the most effective form of providing direct counseling services in a school counseling program (Davis, 2005) and helps students acquire skills, attitudes, and knowledge that are associated with adolescents' development (Greenberg, 2003).

In terms of theoretical background for this specific group model, it was recommended that the school counselor have knowledge and training in multicultural counseling theory (e.g., oppression, world view, family structure, acculturation, social identity, language, nonverbal communication; Arredondo et al., 1996), and cognitive-behavioral therapies. A cognitive-behavioral theoretical background proved to be an advantage given that several of the lessons focus specifically on the replacement of negative thoughts and behaviors. With this foundational background, the school counselor integrated the use of culturally responsive, basic school-based group counseling skills and here-and-now techniques to facilitate members' focus on group content and what was occurring during the process of the group (Yalom, 2005). Such techniques proved valuable in strengthening the trust and social bonds between members during sessions.

Planning and Group Design

Prior to implementing the group, the school counselor became familiar with the STC as it existed for classroom implementation (please see <http://orp.uoregon.edu/strong%20teens.htm>). By becoming familiar with the STC, the school counselor better understood this STC school-based small group counseling model and was able to implement it more effectively. The first goal was to promote the development of students' personal/social domain as outlined in the *National Standards for School Counseling Programs* (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). The group supported emotional and psychological resilience in African American male adolescents and equipped them with skills that promoted more effective social interaction and enhanced emotional and psychological wellness. Fortunately, school counselors are in positions to deliver small group counseling experiences that facilitate students' personal/social resiliency, which likely leads to increased academic achievement (ASCA, 2003). Therefore, in planning the group's implementation, the school counselor made adaptations and changes to meet the specific needs of African American male students in his

school. These needs may vary based on geographical location of the school (i.e., urban or rural) and may include academic performance data, transportation to and from school, and student and family-based expectations. In addition, the school counselor conducted a needs assessment of the African American males in his high school (ASCA).

The second goal of this group experience was to address the unique experiences of African American adolescent males. Therefore, this group model allowed the school counselor to facilitate and teach social and emotional skills within the school setting within a culturally responsive small group that incorporated the unique experience of African American adolescent males. Special attention to racial/cultural experiences helped to provide opportunities that enabled group members to learn and think critically about what it meant to operate as successful men within society and school.

The group model includes 12 sessions, an additional suggested session for a panel discussion, and follow-up group experiences. The group met for 12 sessions, once per week for one hour; each session contained an STC psychoeducational component that the school counselor facilitated. In addition, the school counselor received student assent and parental consent through informed consent forms that presented the ideas of confidentiality and how the group aligned with the overall mission of the school. Furthermore, the school counselor made adaptations as needed for each of the 12 group sessions; for materials and visitors for the group; and organized meeting days, times, and group meeting locations with administrators and teachers. Group sessions were delivered once a week on a rotating schedule (i.e., during first period for week one, during second period for week two) within an available classroom or other accessible space.

Finally, the school counselor included a session dedicated to several older African American male role models who served as a guest panel. Group members brainstormed possible role models (e.g., fathers, brothers, teachers, and/or coaches) they wanted to visit the group, and members helped in the co-construction of the panel. Invited guests shared their own stories as they related to the group's goals and discussed important life principles that they had learned. The group sessions described below include modifications of the STC specifically used by the school counselor. The counselor also utilized a round robin activity at the end of each session to allow group members to discuss helpful things they learned.

Participants: Screening and Selection

This STC school-based small group counseling model was designed for African American males in grades 9–12. The school counselor

notified teachers, administrators, and parents/guardians of the upcoming, specialized group for these students in order to allow them to refer students. The school counselor advertised the group to students via flyers, academic clubs and sports team meetings, presentations in classrooms, and through an official needs assessment of African American male students. Between 10 and 12 students were selected for this group, and screening prospective members allowed for the school counselor's assessment of commitment to the group goals (Yalom, 2005). During the screening process, the school counselor strived to understand students' motivations for taking part in the group and ensured that students understood the group rules and goals, duration, meeting times, and session lengths. In addition, the school counselor ensured that students understood the expectations of group members such as appropriate behavior in the group, actively participating and attending all sessions, and making up missed academic work when needed.

THE STRONG TEENS GROUP SESSIONS

Session 1: Introductions

During the first session, the school counselor offered an overview of the group sessions, discussed group goals and rules, and allowed students to gain a better idea of what would be expected of them. The counselor discussed confidentiality and explained that participation was encouraged but voluntary. In addition, participants were given opportunities to talk about what it was like to be African American males and the types of struggles they had in common. For introductions, group participants offered their names and briefly discussed two positive defining moments in their lives: one academic moment and another of their choice. Utilizing a round robin technique, participants shared what they wanted to get out of the group.

Sessions 2 and 3: Understanding Your Emotions

Pollack (2000) discussed how boys often have difficulty expressing their emotional experience because of how they are socialized into repressing their feelings. Given how African American male youth are a group that is at-risk for academic and personal/social difficulty, the need for having a forum to discuss their emotions is critical. Sessions two through five allowed group members to explore their feelings. In session two, members discussed emotions they had as African American men and labeled them as comfortable or uncomfortable.

Members described in what kinds of situations they had experienced these varying emotions and processed how they had learned and grown from these comfortable versus uncomfortable emotions by reflecting on how these emotions had influenced their development as African American men in terms of identity, confidence, and their current and future goals. Here and now group techniques allowed members to comment on their experiences of talking about their emotions with others during this session and how others in their culture/family might have reacted to their talking about these issues (Yalom, 2005).

The school counselor moved into the third session by facilitating a discussion about the different kinds of emotions experienced and the actions that typically are associated with them. Students brought in a compact disc with a song from their culture that represented some examples of both comfortable and uncomfortable emotions. Portions of the songs were played during the session and a discussion followed that involved identifying the emotions present in the song. For the emotions recognized, group members identified how the artist singing the song expressed the emotion. Group members reflected on whether the expression of the emotion was appropriate or inappropriate. It was important to have members brainstorm appropriate ways of showing the emotions identified. In addition, members discussed what emotional situations they believed were specific to African American male adolescents in today's schools and society and appropriate ways of handling such emotions.

Sessions 4 and 5: Dealing with Anger and Understanding Other People's Emotions

In session four, the counselor asked students to identify African American male figures in history (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Meredith) who had legitimate reasons to feel angry but expressed their emotions in positive ways and were successful in their lives. The leader walked participants through the STC Anger Model, which focused on how students' thoughts lead to emotional reactions, which in turn influence subsequent behaviors, positive or negative (Merrell et al., 2004). When brainstorming positive examples for appropriate use of the Anger Model, King, Meredith and others identified by the members were used. Participants discussed thoughts about these figures and what they learned about anger expression.

The school counselor introduced the fifth session by discussing the importance of empathy and how using visual cues was a way of sensing other people's emotions (Merrell et al., 2004). The leader and group members brainstormed examples of how their family members have modeled various emotions and how these emotions indicated

individuals' experiences of a given situation. At the conclusion of the session, students spent time applying some of the skills they learned by having others guess some of the emotions that varying group members might have had during the session based on visual cues they observed.

Sessions 6 and 7: Clear Thinking

In order to promote changes in the behavioral patterns among African American male youth that interfere with their learning and the pursuit of their academic, personal/social, and professional goals, time was devoted to the emotional and psychological arenas. Sessions six through nine focused on these themes. In the sixth session, the school counselor asked group participants to think of situations in which they had experienced emotions such as fear, sadness, or anger as African American men and how intense these emotions were. The leader used a cognitive-behavioral approach and explained the five different types of negative thinking errors such as binocular vision and black-and-white thinking, followed by subsequent session activities (Merrell et al., 2004). After introducing the seventh session, the school counselor explained that identifying thinking errors is only part of the process of changing negative thought patterns. The leader explained the idea of evaluating evidence and reframing using hand-outs such as STC Supplement 7.2 (Merrell et al.), which gave examples on how to evaluate the evidence for negative thinking.

Sessions 8 and 9: Positive Thinking and Solving People Problems

In session eight, the school counselor used a cognitive behavioral approach to lead members through the ABCDE model of learned optimism and subsequent STC exercises involving the practice of positive thinking (Merrell et al., 2004). Participants discussed obstacles they faced as African American males that prevented them from consistently using the skills learned during sessions. Students discussed changes they might make to address these difficulties more effectively.

In session nine, group participants discussed common conflicts in their own lives and in the lives of their families. The school counselor asked participants to look for positive examples of what to do that the students might have learned from their families, people in their churches, coaches, and/or friends. The school counselor followed the scripted lesson in teaching and practicing how to identify a conflict and brainstorming a solution for it (Merrell et al., 2004).

Sessions 10 and 11: Stress and Setting Goals

The minority experience is one that includes certain stressors that are not experienced by other members of society (Tatum, 1997). Therefore, it is important for minority youth to deal effectively with these stressors and others. In addition, as previously discussed, African American male youth face various academic, social, and emotional challenges. It is imperative for them to learn how to set positive goals for their futures. Sessions ten and eleven provided skills on how to deal with stress and how to set academic and personal/social goals. Following a review of session nine, the leader introduced and discussed varying forms of positive and negative stress. When discussing positive and negative examples of handling stress, the school counselor asked participants to look for examples within their own families and communities. In closing the session, group members were guided through the STC relaxation exercise (Merrell et al., 2004), and the school counselor asked participants how they could incorporate this technique in their daily lives.

In session eleven, the leader followed the STC session on goal setting and behavior change. At the end of the session, participants discussed how they believed they were better prepared to reach their future goals after learning skills for academic and personal goal setting. The school counselor asked group members to recognize additional resources they needed as African American men to reach their goals. In closing, the leader reminded students that only one session remained and asked members to prepare by coming in for the final session ready to discuss what they had learned about themselves and others, as well as what changes they hoped to make in their lives and how they would act as role models for other African American males.

Session 12: Finishing Up and Endings

In the final session, the school counselor reviewed and highlighted important ideas discussed throughout all the sessions such as the STC Anger Model and the ABCDE model (Merrell et al., 2004). To review key points in sessions, the leader divided the group into two teams and awarded points to the team who appropriately recalled important group concepts. Following the game, the leader had members reflect upon any significant changes that occurred from the beginning sessions.

The final session was an opportunity for members to talk about what it was like to meet with other African American males and talk about their personal experiences. Participants were asked to discuss their thoughts about the reality of their group ending. The school

counselor initiated an activity in which members thanked another member for something that was learned or something that they found valuable in their interactions together. Finally, participants discussed the future and how the personal/social insights, knowledge, and skills they gained will not be wasted but remain an integral part of their lives. Members were invited to visit a similar subsequent school group.

A follow up session occurred one month after the group ended, that included a social event (i.e., attending a sports game). This activity was useful in further strengthening bonds between members that were made during the sessions. A portion of the social event was set aside for talking as a group and discussing personal/social and academic experiences. It was important to reflect upon any significant changes that came about since the group ended, how their lives looked different, and what types of experiences with which they were still struggling. The school counselor encouraged members to think of how they would support one another in the future. Another follow-up experience was planned for two months later.

CONCLUSION

In reviewing the personal/social needs of African American adolescent males, a theme emerged: providing an outlet for African American adolescent males to reflect on and learn about their social and emotional skills and psychological wellness in a culturally responsive environment. In considering this, the STC-based, school-specific small group offered high school counselors an innovative and exciting group experience that supported, guided, and taught young African American male adolescents in a safe, racially/ethnically/culturally rich environment; a group through which members became *strong teens*.

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