Closing the Achievement Gap: A Structured Approach to Group Counseling

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This study evaluated the impact of a group counseling intervention on student academic and social performance. Twenty-five school counselors were trained to use a structured approach to small-group counseling with students scoring in the mid-to-low range in math and reading. The group intervention focused on improving student achievement and student success skills, which included academic, social, and self-management skills. Results indicated gains in reading and math achievement scores and in teacher-rated behavior related to student success skills with elementary and middle school students.

Keywords: *group; counseling; student; success; and skills*

The purpose of this article is to describe a group counseling intervention by school counselors. A related goal is to promote research-based group work in schools in which the groups are led by school counselors. The group counseling intervention used was the Student Success Skills (SSS) model, which focused on helping students develop competence in three skill areas considered crucial for school success: academic, social, and self-management skills. Twenty-five school counselors were trained to use this structured approach to small group counseling with mid-range to low performing students. The group counseling program, the training used to prepare school counselors to deliver the program, and the impact of the program on student achievement and behavior are described.

In order to increase group work in schools, the support of administrators, teachers, and parents is needed. The authors believe that one important way to gain support is to align school counselor interventions to the mission of the school by focusing on helping students

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develop the academic and social competence needed for school success. Two additional strategies used to gain support for this project were to highlight the research base of the SSS model and to note that the SSS model is closely aligned with the *National Standards for School Counseling Programs* (Campbell & Dahir, 1997), which state that the purpose of the school counseling program is to help all students to be successful in school. The SSS model focuses on two of the three central components of the national model: academic and personal/social development.

While there is consensus on the overall effectiveness of group counseling with children, more specific research is needed to support the claim that group counseling can positively impact student achievement and behavior. Several reviews of group research have validated the efficacy of working with children in groups. Shechtman (2002) reviewed child group psychotherapy in schools and reported strong support for the effectiveness of child group psychotherapy but urged further research to clarify which type of group is most effective for specific presenting problems. Prout and Prout (1998) conducted a meta-analysis of 17 school-based studies of group counseling and found an average effect of 0.97, which is considered to be a very strong positive impact. Hoag and Burlingame (1997) also conducted a meta-analysis on child and adolescent group treatment, reviewing 56 outcome studies, and found on average a 0.73 effect size, also considered a strong positive impact. Weisz, Weersing, and Valeri (1997) conducted a meta-analysis on 300 clinical trials involving psychotherapy and counseling with children and adolescents and found positive results. The average effect size ranged from 0.71 to 0.81. The treatment effects generally lasted for at least six months. They also found that behavioral and cognitive behavioral approaches outperformed nonbehavioral treatments. Two other reviews, both meta-analyses, one reviewing 150 studies and the other reviewing 33 studies, found that group counseling with children and adolescents was effective and equal to, or better than, individual counseling (Weisz, Weiss, Han, Granger, & Morton, 1995; Prout & DeMartino, 1986).

While a strong body of research supports group work in schools, most of the group leaders in the studies cited above were not school counselors. Whiston and Sexton (1998) conducted the latest review of outcome research specific to the impact of school counselors on student performance. While they found tentative support for group counseling, they urged more research to support the impact of school counselors on student achievement and behavior. Whiston (2002) again found insufficient documentation supporting the impact of school counselors on student performance and called for increased accountability research. This project was aimed at evaluating the impact on student performance of school counselor-led group interventions and encouraging further research and

development of group interventions in schools. The goal is to provide more accountability data and thereby increase support for school counselors to conduct structured groups to help students develop academic and social competence.

The specific skills in the SSS model were selected based upon three comprehensive reviews of research. Masten and Coatsworth (1998) reviewed 25 years of research to determine the most critical factors associated with children and adolescents developing the academic and social competence needed to be successful. Hattie, Biggs, and Purdie (1996) reviewed 10 years of research on the effects of learning skills interventions on student learning. Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1994) reviewed 50 years of research that examined what helps students learn. All three reviews found a very similar collection of skills that were considered to be most critical to student success. These skills include: (a) cognitive and metacognitive skills such as goal setting, progress monitoring, and memory skills; (b) social skills such as interpersonal skills, social problem solving, listening, and team-work skills; and (c) self-management skills such as managing attention, motivation, and anger.

For this study, the authors and school district administrators were interested in the evaluation of a school counselor-led group counseling program. The purpose of the group counseling program was to increase student school success skills and achievement in reading and math. The expectation was that if school counselors had sufficient training to lead a research-based group counseling intervention, they would be able to show significant student progress in the two areas of interest, student achievement scores and behavior. A related goal was to increase support for school counselors to provide more direct services to students, especially group counseling.

The following two research questions were addressed in this study: (a) What are the performance trends regarding reading and math scores on the FCAT for students who participate in school counselor-led groups using the Student Success Skills (SSS) program versus comparison students who do not participate in the group?; and (b) What are the performance trends regarding behavior rating scores for students who receive the SSS program?

METHOD

Participants

This study involved 240 students (12 students each from 20 schools) who participated in the Student Success Skills group counseling

program. An equal number of comparison students were selected. Roughly half of these students were elementary (fifth grade); half were middle school (sixth grade). Approximately 82 percent of the students were white, 9 percent African-American, and 5 percent Hispanic. Approximately 60 percent of the students were on free or reduced lunch programs.

Students in both the treatment and comparison groups were randomly selected from all fifth- and sixth-grade students in the participating schools scoring between the 25th and 60th percentile in math and reading on the previous year's (2001) FCAT. The rationale for using this particular range of FCAT scores to select students was that they represented a mid-to-low-range performing group that usually received little or no support services. The school district leaders considered this group to be the "gray area" kids who sometimes "slip through the cracks" because they are not low enough or high enough to qualify for exceptional student services.

Instruments

The two measures used to evaluate the school counselor-led group counseling intervention were the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) math and reading scores and a behavior rating scale, The School Social Behavior Scales (SSBS) (Merrell, 1993), which measures three skills considered to be essential to school success: academic skills, social skills, and self-management skills.

FCAT is the state mandated achievement test for Florida schools. It is administered each March. The scores from March 2001 were used as the pre-test and scores from March 2002 were used as the post-test. The technical manual for the FCAT reported internal consistency, using Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients, ranging from 0.88 to 0.92. Criterion-related validity was reported using Pearson product-moment coefficients. The correlation between FCAT math and SAT math was 0.79. For FCAT read and SAT verbal the correlation was 0.71. For the ACT, the correlation was 0.66 for read and 0.79 for math. Content validity was verified through the use of content experts on Florida's Sunshine State Standards. These curriculum standards are what the FCAT purports to test.

The second measure, SSBS, was administered to the treatment group but not the comparison group. The pre-test was in September and the post-test was in April. The students' math teachers were asked to complete the 32-item scale on both occasions. The SSBS technical manual reports internal consistency reliability as coefficient alpha ranging from 0.96 to 0.98. Regarding test-retest reliability, Pearson product moment coefficients ranged from 0.76 to 0.82.

Inter-rater reliability was reported using Pearson product moment coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.83. Content validity was based on the literature on social competence, content of social skills training curricula, existing social skills, and behavior rating scales and teachers, graduate students, and parents of K-12 students who reviewed items. Regarding criterion validity, Pearson product-moment coefficients ranged from 0.60 to 0.83. Construct validity was reported as the correlation between subscales and ranged from 0.76 to 0.78.

Research Design

A pre-test–post-test control group design with randomization was used (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). The dependent variables were reading and math scale scores on the FCAT and percentile rank scores on the School Social Behavior Scale. The independent variable was a school counselor-led intervention using the Student Success Skills group counseling program.

Post-test means for treatment and comparison students on the FCAT were compared. In order to account for differences between treatment students and comparison students at the beginning of the study, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to evaluate student FCAT data. The pre-test FCAT in 2001 was used as the covariate and the post-test FCAT in 2002 was used as the dependent variable. The 0.05 level of significance was chosen for this study. For the School Social Behavior Scale, pre-test scores from September 2001 were compared to posttest scores from April 2002. No comparison group was available for these behavior-rating scores.

Procedure

The intervention, provided by school counselors, was structured group counseling focused upon student success skills. All of the groups began the first week of October. The groups met for 45 minutes, once a week, for eight weeks, followed by four "booster" sessions of 45 minutes each. The booster sessions met once per month from January through April to reinforce the skills acquired and motivation achieved in the fall.

Structured group format. The researchers believed that the use of a three-phase, structured group format would help ensure that the counselors would conduct the specific group sessions as they were designed. Each of the three phases of the group format required the use of specific group skills. A form focusing on the format and group skills was developed and used as a checklist to provide feedback to each counselor as they participated in training to prepare them to lead the SSS groups.

A group manual was developed that provided detailed group plans for each of the eight weekly sessions and the four monthly booster sessions. Each plan used the format described below and combined strategies aimed at helping students develop the three student success skills, academic, social, and self-management skills. Each group plan included goal-setting, goal reporting, and progress-monitoring related to the three skills areas. The beginning and end of each group session focused on goal-setting, goal-reporting, and progress-monitoring. The middle of each session focused on student-identified social or academic issues that provided practice opportunities for students to apply the Student Success Skills Peer Coaching Model, which is a social problemsolving model that uses dramatization and feedback.

The beginning phase. Three critical tasks were covered during the beginning phase each time the group meets. First, the counselor began with a brief, two-to-four-minute "temperature check" to access energy and mood. On occasion, when a student is very troubled, this may uncover the need to follow up with a student outside of the group. In general, the temperature check serves as a transition, and a "settling in" time. Simply admitting to being preoccupied can help bring students back into focus. For example, the counselor might say, "Take a moment to tune in to how you are feeling right now. Choose a feeling word that describes how you are feeling. Now, let's go around and share your feeling word. Who wants to start?" Another way to quickly check the group temperature involves asking students to rate their mood and energy on a 1–5 Likert scale.

The second task involves two levels of progress monitoring and goal reporting. First comes a review of the previous session and a report on progress made during the week toward goals set at the last meeting. The counselor asked students to share their goals and progress with a partner, then asked for volunteers to tell the group how things had gone since the last group session. Next, the students took a few minutes to fill out self-ratings on the Student Success Skills Checklist that includes items related to wellness and academic, social, and self-management skills. This checklist is important both from a monitoring and a therapeutic standpoint and will be described later.

The third task in the beginning phase was a preview of the main focus of the current session, which included giving a rationale for the session framed to appeal to students' interests and goals. We identify this rationale as "WIIFM," or "what's in it for me?" It is the motivational piece and is considered very important in setting positive expectancy, helping students grasp the relevancy of group activities and discussion to their current situations and thus promoting high involvement. The beginning phase of the group was fast-paced and typically lasted between five and ten minutes.

The middle phase. This phase was the heart of the group. In a typical 45-minute session, the middle phase lasted about 25 to 35 minutes. This was when new material was introduced and skills were practiced. The counselor used structured role-play and other active counseling tools (such as art, music, or drama) to deepen involvement, enhance skill development, and to help students transfer insight and skills to life outside the group. The focus of these techniques was social problem solving, anger management, and other self-management skills.

Modeling and feedback are the keys for this skill-building phase. We have found that structuring positive modeling is a key to constructive behavior change. The SSSPC Model was a major component of the middle phase of each group session. It used material from the students' current lives and tends to heighten group involvement and provided the opportunity to practice positive social skills in a supportive environment. A brief description will be provided later.

The ending phase. The three subparts of the ending phase were review of the session, goal-setting, and goal-sharing. After students reviewed the day's session, each student formulated a specific goal related to academic, social, or self-management skills. The procedure for goal setting was always the same. First, students were given "think time" to come up with and write down their goal and related action. The goal was connected to one of the three critical skills areas: academic, social, or self-management. The student selected the area of most current interest and thought of something specific that could be done in the next week to help reach the goal. Next, they were given the opportunity to share the goal and action verbally with a partner. While sharing goals and actions with partners, the listener practiced attending, listening, empathy, and giving encouraging statements. After one minute of sharing privately with a partner, the counselor invited volunteers to share with the whole group.

The student success skills peer-coaching model (SSSPC). The SSSPC was developed to provide a practical way of teaching children pro-social skills in a systematic, interactive, and fun way. It was influenced by the works of Adler (1964), Bandura (1977), Benson, Galbraith, and Espeland (1995), and Dinkmeyer, McKay, Dinkmeyer, and McKay (1998). This five-step model helps children to develop positive interpersonal skills and to receive encouragement from peers for practicing these new skills within the safety of a group counseling setting.

A particular strength of this model is the relevance of the content to the students' own lives. Students have the opportunity to grapple with their own current challenges rather than attempting to role-play how they would deal with a hypothetical situation presented to them by a counselor or a commercial program designed to teach pro-social skills.

Counselors who have used the SSSPC Model with students report that involvement is very high because the subject matter is very "real" to the students. After rehearsing positive social skills for successfully meeting a recent challenge faced by a group member, the students are encouraged to try these new skills with peers outside of the group and report their successes to the group on the following week. The key to behavior change in this model rests with peer feedback and encouragement. Students are taught, through modeling techniques, how to be highly encouraging to each other in the group. Student confidence develops as they learn that their pro-social skills lead to more harmonious relationships with their teachers, parents, and peers.

The student success skills self-monitoring tool. Each week, during the group, the students were asked to respond to a seven-item checklist dealing with student success skills. The checklist is geared to the three success skills that anchor the group program—academic, social, and self-management skills. The act of completing checklists similar to this one and reflecting on behaviors associated with school success have been found to have a therapeutic as well as a monitoring value for students (Campbell, 1985). Goal setting, progress monitoring, and memory skills are embedded in this checklist and represent three effective cognitive skills associated with successful students (Hattie, Biggs & Purdie, 1996).

Counselor training. Kulic, Dagley, and Horne (2001) call for training specific to the group task at hand to insure fidelity of treatment. In their graduate training program, the majority of school counselors currently in the field have taken one course about group counseling theory and practice to prepare them for their role in leading groups in the schools. This course meets the Council of Accreditation of Counselor Education and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (2000) preparation standards. Unfortunately for many school counselors, this single course was often geared toward counseling with adults, was highly theoretical in nature, and may have been taken many years, even decades, ago. Thus, for this project, specific training related to leading small groups with elementary and middle school students was provided. The training emphasized a specific focus on improving student academic, social, and self-management skills.

The 25 counselors who participated in this study were all certified by the state of Florida and had one to 29 years of experience as a school counselor. Nineteen of the 25 were female, and six of the 25 were male. There were 22 Caucasians, one Hispanic, and no African-Americans. The average age was 34 years. The average years of experience was seven. All described having taken only one course about group counseling in their training programs. In addition, many of them had not received training in group work since graduation. The majority

indicated that they had never received direct supervision of their own group work and that they had not had the opportunity to watch their instructors or their peers leading groups.

A preliminary survey of the counselors' self-perception of skills and confidence revealed that about 16 percent of the counselors had never led a group in the school setting and felt very apprehensive about beginning the project and being held accountable for results in terms of measured student achievement and behavioral gains. Widespread uncertainty was expressed regarding the plausibility of producing measurable gains within the context of eight weekly sessions of group counseling followed by four booster sessions.

In general, the counselors' self-reported degree of confidence in leading groups correlated with the amount of group work being done. The counselors leading the most groups reported the highest levels of confidence. However, few of the counselors leading groups routinely implemented accountability practices other than to ask students open-ended questions regarding their experience in the group. Thus, even the counselors who were conducting the most groups (up to 8 groups per semester at the elementary level were reported) could not offer data to substantiate the effectiveness of their groups in terms of affecting behavior or academic change. At the beginning of the training the participating counselors were asked to rate their level of confidence on a 1–5 Likert scale ranking from low confidence to high confidence. The overall rating of confidence in being able to show gains in student achievement and behavior due to a counseling group was low (2–3 range) at the beginning of the training and moved to high (4–5 range) by the end of the training.

The training was delivered over three days in August prior to beginning the school year. The counselor-led student group treatment began in October. Follow-up training for group leaders included 3 half-days occurring in October, December, and February. The training consisted of demonstrations of group sessions by the trainers, using the structured group format and group manual, and emphasized specific group skills. In addition to live demonstrations, taped group sessions—led by counseling interns with elementary and middle school students using the format, skills, and content of the student success group—were used. The interns serving as models had received training in the model from the university trainers as part of their master's degree program. After observing examples of the group sessions, participating counselors led group sessions using other counselors as role-play students and received feedback on how closely they followed the model. A feedback tool to measure degree of adherence to the model was developed that included Likert ratings of the specific group skills as well as whether or not each component of the format was followed.

In addition to the trainer led sessions, participating counselors met in peer coaching groups of 3 to 5 counselors for half-days in September, November, and January. The peer coaching sessions consisted of structured feedback sessions. At each session, counselors presented videotapes of themselves leading a student success skill group. All peer-coaching sessions were evaluated by participants. Thus, the researchers not only kept a record of attendance, but were able to assess the participants' degree of satisfaction with the perceived benefit from the process of reviewing tapes and receiving feedback from peers.

Overall, each participating counselor observed multiple models (trainers, peers, and interns) leading the group sessions and participated in rating each modeled session for skills, format, and content. In addition, all of the counselors led a group session with their peers and received immediate feedback during the August, October, and December trainer-led sessions.

Another aspect related to fidelity of treatment involves the level of adherence by group leaders to the treatment procedures. According to Kulic, Dagley, and Horne (2001), "the best way to document a treatment is through the creation of a treatment manual" (p. 215). For this project, a group manual by Brigman and Goodman (2001) was used in conjunction with four specific strategies. The first strategy involved a structured format for each group session, which the group manual emphasized. The second strategy involved the use of the Student Success Skills Peer-Coaching Model (SSSPC), which was a structured role-play model for teaching social problem-solving skills while using real-life situations identified by participants. The third strategy was the weekly use of an inventory with students, the "Student Success Skills: Seven Keys to Mastering Any Course," which focused on monitoring progress and goal setting related to several cognitive and life skills such as memory skills, social skills, and anger management. The fourth strategy employed a group attendance log to record student attendance weekly and to document the use of the group manual topics and plans for each session.

In summary, attention was given to insuring fidelity of treatment. First, attendance of participating counselors at all training and peer coaching meetings was documented. Second, student attendance was documented. Third, counselors documented use of the specified group topics. Fourth, specific training in how to use the group format, skills, and manual content was provided with multiple models and opportunities for practice and feedback. Fifth, all participating counselors were trained in providing feedback to fellow counselors on the group format, skills, and content. The use of a Likert scale in assessing the degree to which a particular skill was demonstrated in the videotaped

session under review helped to keep the feedback to participating counselors specific. Although it would have been ideal to have outside, trained observers rate each counselor's skill level and degree of adherence to the format and content, it was not considered practical by the school district leaders or the university trainers for this particular project evaluation.

RESULTS

We examined performance trends of the fifth- and sixth-grade students with regard to reading and math FCAT scores. Students receiving the treatment scored significantly higher than comparison students in both math and reading. ANCOVA indicated a significant difference (0.002) between treatment and comparison students on math FCAT scale scores (see Table 1). A significant difference (0.051) was also found for reading scores (see Table 2). Means and standard deviations were calculated for the FCAT scores (see Table 3 and 4).

In addition to achievement test scores, changes in student behavior were of interest. Teachers rated the behavior of students in the treatment group on school success in the areas of academic, social, and self-management skills on the SSBS (Merrell, 1993) in September and again in April. Sixty-nine percent of the students improved. The average amount of improvement was 18 percentile points. No comparison data were available for the behavior scale.

DISCUSSION

This study addressed an important issue in school counseling—the need for research that evaluates the impact of school counseling services on student academic and social performance. One of the underlying assumptions was that if a group program could improve

Table 1   ANCOVA Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for FCAT NRT Math 02

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	38554.786a	2	19277.393	49.123	.000
Intercept	50033.825	1	50033.825	127.497	.000
FCAT NRT M SS 01	37441.361	1	37441.361	95.408	.000
Group (Math)	3962.632	1	3962.632	10.098	.002

Note: Computed using alpha = .05, R Squared = .258 (Adjusted R Squared = .252).

Table 2   ANCOVA Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for FCAT NRT Read 02

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	51569.062a	2	25784.531	64.865	.000
Intercept	23423.903	1	23423.903	58.926	.000
FCAT NRT R SS 01	50759.957	1	50759.957	127.694	.000
Group (Read)	1532.189	1	1532.189	3.854	.051

Note: Computed using alpha = .05, R Squared = .314 (Adjusted R Squared = .309).

student skills considered critical to school success, then this skill change would translate into changes in achievement and behavior. This connection was supported. The measure used to determine skill/behavior change was the School Social Behavior Scale. Teachers used this instrument to rate student behavior before and after the group intervention. The instrument measures three skill sets considered critical to school success: academic skills, social skills, and self-management skills. Two questions of interest to district leaders and the investigators were (a) What percent of students would show improved behavior related to these critical skills and how much would they improve? and (b) What percent of students would show improved FCAT scores in math and reading, and how much improvement would they show? The answers to these questions were that 69 percent of the students showed improvement in percentile rank on the behavior scale with the average amount of improvement of 18 percentile points. Regarding the math FCAT, 86 percent showed improvement with the average scale score improvement of 25 points. In reading, 76 percent improved an average of 15 scale score points.

While the effectiveness of group work with children and adolescents has a strong research base, the literature specific to school counselor led groups is limited. Since groups represent a potentially powerful tool for helping students develop critical skills and since school counselors are in place to deliver group counseling, it is important to

Table 3   Treatment and Comparison Means and Standard Deviations for FCAT MATH 2001–2002

Group	N	Mean MATH 02	Std. Dev.	Mean MATH 03	Std Dev.	Gain/loss
Treatment	153	623.75	20.575	649.05	24.153	+25.30
Control	153	631.23	27.400	645.04	21.196	+13.80

Table 4   **Treatment and Comparison Means and Standard Deviations for FCAT READ 2001–2002**

Group	N	Mean MATH 02	Std. Dev.	Mean MATH 03	Std. Dev.	Gain/loss
Treatment	154	631.43	20.270	646.45	24.364	+15.02
Control	154	633.50	23.830	643.05	23.429	+9.55

develop and evaluate group counseling programs that target student needs and are appropriate for school counselors to lead.

One of the reasons for the lack of research on the impact of groups on student achievement may be tied to low counselor confidence in their ability to lead groups that make a significant difference in student performance. One of the assumptions of this study was that in order to increase performance, there is a prerequisite need to help students (or, in this case, counselors) increase confidence by developing or polishing the skills needed to achieve the targeted goal; in other words, to perform with confidence and sustained effort requires skill practice and coaching. This study involved training experienced school counselors in a specific group counseling model, which emphasized a structured format for each session that included goal setting and progress monitoring for academic, social, and self-management skills. The model also stressed behavior rehearsal and feedback. The fact that participating school counselors began the project with low confidence in impacting achievement and behavior through group counseling and ended the training with high confidence may indicate a continuing need to offer specific group training to practicing school counselors.

There also may be other reasons for the limited amount of research on the impact of school counselor interventions, such as time, money, and expertise. Conducting research with a comparison group and prescribed interventions involving training is time-consuming. Most school counselors have not been trained to conduct research and do not feel confident in designing and conducting such investigations. One answer to this dilemma may be the model used in this project, a collaboration between practicing school counselors and counselor educators who were experienced in structured group counseling with elementary and middle school students. Funding was provided by a grant from the state department of education.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations are expected when attempting to conduct research in schools with human subjects. Some of these limitations can be

corrected in future studies. One such limitation of the study is that the sample was relatively narrow. One way to increase generalizability is to broaden the range of grades to see if the gains made hold up when studying younger and older students.

Another way to increase generalizability is to select a more diverse population. Students in the participating schools were diverse but not an exact match of the national population. For example, there were 13 percent Hispanic versus 12 percent nationally, 82 percent Caucasian versus 71 percent nationally, 5 percent African-American versus 12 percent nationally, and 62 percent were on free or reduced lunch versus a poverty rate nationally of 14 percent. Follow-up studies are planned with more diverse student populations.

Another limitation of this study is that the long-term effects of the treatment were not evaluated. Follow-up studies are planned to evaluate long-term effects.

An important aspect of this study deals with training school counselors in leading specific types of groups. In any type of outcome study where counselors are being trained to deliver a particular program or interventions, treatment fidelity is a key issue. Since determining if the treatment is being delivered as designed is of great importance and since a particular group program is being studied, it is helpful to have multiple methods to evaluate treatment fidelity. In this study, several methods were used to insure treatment fidelity, such as having a group manual, having an extensive training process with multiple models, using a peer coaching model, and requiring group attendance sheets that listed group topics for each session. Lack of independently rated videotaped group sessions for each participating counselor was a limitation of this study. Treatment fidelity could be improved by obtaining videotapes of one or more group sessions from each counselor and having trained raters sort counselors into high, medium, and low implementation groups based on level of adherence to the group manual, the group format, and the use of prescribed counselor skills.

Conclusions

The purpose of the project was to measure the impact of group counseling led by school counselors on student achievement and behavior. It was hoped that showing a strong connection between group counseling and improved student performance would build support for more group work in schools. The results were promising and showed a positive correlation between group treatment and improvement in both academic performance and behavior.

As hoped, district level and school administrator interest has increased since results have been shared, and continued interest is

high for this type of accountability effort and for expanding the use of group counseling. The district has since decided to train all school counselors in this model.

Participating counselors reported on workshop and peer coaching evaluations a general trend of enthusiasm for doing more groups and measuring their impact. Counselors also reported that teachers were very positive about the focus of the groups and the behavior changes they witnessed in participating students.

After examining the results of this study, many of the counselors reported commitment to working in a more structured manner when leading groups. One of the counselors, who had at first expressed feelings of discomfort with the structured format, openly shared with the group that she had learned that some of her "creativity" was really disorganization. She believed that she knew specifically what she could do to help her students obtain better results the next time she led the groups and that it would involve more preparation on her part and sticking more closely to the structured format. Many of the counselors expressed that they felt comfortable with the structure after they had used it for a semester and had a chance to see the students react positively to the groups. Counselors also shared with the researchers that the students had become accustomed to the structure and routine of the group and that a transfer of leadership had begun to gradually take place, with the students not only participating more, but also helping to facilitate their peers' responses.

If continued progress in increasing effective group work in schools is to be made, then additional research related to the impact on student performance is crucial. School counselors can help students develop school success skills. This linkage is extremely important for school counselors in order to maintain and gain support from administrators and teachers.

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