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Group counseling: An effective model for middle level education

Abstract

Guidance has been proclaimed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) as one of the main functions of middle level education in the United States, as outlined in its newsletter *Schools In The Middle*, September, 1985. Guidance programs are major reference points for determining the appropriateness of any program changes for the middle level, i.e., remedial or modified curriculum, student extra-curricular activities and involvement, and provisions for accelerated and advanced students.

GROUP COUNSELING: AN EFFECTIVE MODEL
FOR MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION

A Research Paper
Presented to
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

By
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Guidance has been proclaimed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) as one of the main functions of middle level education in the United States, as outlined in its newsletter Schools In The Middle, September, 1985. Guidance programs are major reference points for determining the appropriateness of any program changes for the middle level, i.e., remedial or modified curriculum, student extra-curricular activities and involvement, and provisions for accelerated and advanced students.

A number of guidance and counseling models are used in education. Individual, commonly referred to as one-on-one, is the most often used model; a consultation model is used for some situations when a third party facilitates a problem-solving process; and peer counseling is gaining popularity in school curriculums (Hargrave and Hargrave, 1979. Ryan and Varenhorst, 1973). However, group counseling has provided a model for successful guidance and counseling for middle level students that may very well be the most effective and efficient (Knudson, 1971; Kaczowski, 1979; Subich and Coursol, 1985; Calsyn, Pennell and Harter, 1984; Moore, 1969; Bretzing and Caterino, 1984; Riester and Tanner, 1980; Cole, 1979; Cantrell, 1986).

Despite broad support for the efficacy of group counseling, except for an overview by Trotser (1980) the empirical research for group counseling is somewhat narrow in focus, e.g.,

permanance in self-esteem gains (Calsyn, Pernell and Harter, 1984); goal setting (Riester and Tanner, 1980); minimal time investment (Bretzing and Caterino, 1984); expectations of group process (Subich and Coursol, 1985). A comprehensive overview of characteristics and advantages of group counseling for the middle level years is not readily available.

If group counseling is, in fact, as efficient and effective as the existing literature implies, it seems important then, that middle level counselors be aware of the key characteristics and advantages of successful group counseling in middle level education. There is a need for a thorough review and examination of the available literature (empirical research and specific application).

The purpose of this paper is to present a literature review of selected advantages of group counseling in the middle level years for middle school students and counselors. The advantages to be presented are development of social skills, gains in self-esteem, goal setting, efficiency of time, problem-solving opportunities, flexible leadership, confidentiality, utilization of media, and optional group designs. A preliminary literature review indicated that these components may have important influence on the success of the group counseling model, making group counseling a natural choice for guidance and counseling programs in middle level education. The significance of the study is that it

will bring together authors' views on narrowed topics concerning group counseling and will reveal in one study advantages of this counseling model.

In order to provide some common understanding of group guidance and counseling, Trotzer's definition, (1980) seems meaningful and relevant. "Group guidance is the process of providing personally relevant information and skills and encouraging interpersonal interaction, discussion, and sharing in order to help group members understand themselves, their development, and their world, thereby facilitating effective decision-making, appropriate adjustment, and satisfactory personal growth" (p. 342).

There is ample literature, empirical and non-empirical, supporting the theory that group counseling is an effective and efficient model for middle-level counselors, as well as ideas on methods for school-based group counseling (Riester and Tanner, 1980). These authors stated that group counseling in elementary and secondary schools is an accepted educational activity, and Subich and Coursol (1985) presented group counseling as a recognized and frequently observed activity in counseling centers and other agencies, i.e., schools. Garawski (1982) presented group counseling as an educational vehicle for students to express themselves and share reactions and experiences. Effectiveness was also supported by elementary counselors who made use of group counseling in helping children in their growth and development,

Kaczkowski (1979). Hargrave and Hargrave (1979) particularly emphasized the development of social skills. Bretzing and Caterino (1984) reminded us that researchers have demonstrated the successful use of group counseling with school-aged children. Structured group counseling programs as prevention programs have been a helpful and successful strategy for school counselors as revealed by Sheridan, Baker, de Lissovoy (1984). Trotzer (1980) summarized the support of group counseling effectiveness: "Counselors, counselor educators, school administrators and other pupil personnel professionals acknowledge the advantages of group guidance based on efficiency, practicality, and general merits, as a vehicle that makes positive use of peer dynamics" (p. 341).

Development of Social Skills

It was the opinion of Hargrave and Hargrave (1979) that one of the most important advantages of group counseling is the development of social skills. These authors stated, "Failure to master social skills during the middle years of school will lead to the incorporation of a sense of inadequacy and inferiority into a child's self concept" (p. 546). Hargrave and Hargrave, utilizing 9 male and 3 female subjects enrolled in grades 4-6 in a parochial school, investigated the effect of group work and age-appropriate social skills for fifth and sixth graders. All subjects were selected by teachers as the children who "most needed" this type of program. Twelve students enrolled in

another parochial school in the same system were similarly selected as a no-treatment control group meeting for fourteen weekly sessions. Their detailed empirical study (including a Classroom Behavior Inventory and post-group questionnaire) found changes in terms of classroom adjustment and social behavior. Students who participated in the treatment group decreased in emotional fluctuation, impulsivity, destructiveness, attention seeking, rigidity, inappropriate talkativeness, and increased in obedience and calmness. Teachers' ratings of improvement among treatment subjects indicated substantial, positive change. Although sample size was small, results provided support for the usefulness of this type of group program in improving children's behaviors and social skills.

The development of social skills was also considered by Bretzing and Caterino (1984) in their research of the positive effect of group counseling on self-concept within peer relationships. In the program evaluation of group counseling with three groups of sixth graders, classroom teachers rated students and found improved behavior in specific areas of weakness, such as attitude toward school, peer relationships, and classroom behavior. Homeroom teachers' ratings indicated above-average gains. Anecdotal remarks included "has shown dramatic improvement," "feels better about himself," and "better attitude and work habits" (p. 518).

Another empirical study supporting social skill development was done by Pasnau, Williams, and Tallman (1971) who researched a number of hypotheses, including the effect of small group counseling sessions on participating children. The children felt helped, independent, relaxed, important, liked and approved of by significant others. They felt no stigma attached to group work, and preferred group activities to classroom work.

Gains in Self-esteem

Permanency of gains in self-esteem is another researched advantage of group counseling. One empirical study dealing with this theory of group counseling belongs to Calsyn, Pernel and Harter (1984). Their study on affective education programs was backed by all previous empirical research on self-esteem and academic achievement, empathy and interpersonal problems, problem-solving skills, values clarification and social development. What remained unanswered for the research team was the permanence of gains in self-esteem caused by affective education programs, i.e., a group counseling model. This study included a follow-up assessment of self-esteem two months after the conclusion of the formal treatment program in addition to an immediate posttest that was conducted on the last day of the treatment program. Results of their study revealed that these group experiences (classroom or guidance group) not only improved self-esteem and interpersonal skills of children, but had some permanence.

Pasnau, Williams and Tallman (1971) also researched their hypothesis that small groups have a positive effect on the self-esteem of participating children. When subjects were tested six years later, responses revealed feelings of importance, approval, and significance. Participating students realized support from group activities and took more responsibility for their learning and socialization at school than they had previously.

Goal Setting

Goal setting is an important advantage in group counseling (Riester, Tanner, 1980). Establishing clear-cut goals with participants and evaluating those goals is important to the group counseling model. A follow-up study by this research team concluded that a group of students surveyed did attain the group's counseling goals of developing peer and adult interpersonal skills and a positive attitude towards school. Their study was conducted with sixty junior and senior high students who had participated in group counseling in elementary school eight years earlier. The elementary program was for students with problems in the interpersonal area and for those who had negative feelings about school. The elementary school counselor supervised the program and led 90 percent of the groups, ensuring that consistent orientation, methods and goals were followed in the group experiences. Eight years after being in the group, the students could offer articulate and insightful responses about their

group experience. The students expressed their feelings regarding the group as an agent of change in their lives. The cohesiveness present in the groups, identification with other group members, and freedom to discuss a variety of issues, feelings and needs were reasons why the researchers believed group counseling had a lasting impact on participants. One of the major implications of the study was that evaluation of group counseling effectiveness must be conducted in relationship to well-formulated goals of the group (Riester and Tanner, 1980).

Calsyn, Pennell and Harter (1984), in their study of sixth and seventh graders, concluded that counselors and classroom teachers achieved success with those goals and objectives on which they concentrated their time and effort. Furthermore, these researchers concluded that change in one dimension of a child's behavior does not routinely lead to improvement in other areas. Miles (1981) supported the importance of goals and objectives when he suggested that group goals can make a decided difference in the group member's behavior, concern and approach to the task.

Efficiency of Time

Bretzing and Caterino (1984), concerned about time constraints and lack of training or experience that sometimes kept group counseling from being successful, developed a simple design with particular emphasis on minimal time investment. After

finding definite improvement in behavior and attitude for participants, Bretzing and Caterino concluded that group counseling may very well be the appropriate model for many middle level students who need an intervention but who do not qualify for formal placement (p. 9). Bretzing and Caterino (1984) concluded that group counseling was successful in that students demonstrated gains and that personal satisfaction for the counselor was high. Personal growth counseling and discussion groups designed to meet the needs of a variety of students were appealing to school personnel, parents, and students.

Problem-solving Opportunities

Another advantage of group counseling mentioned frequently in the literature was the emphasis groups frequently place on problem solving (Cantrell, 1986; Subich and Coursol, 1985; Sheridan, Baker and de Lissovoy, 1984). The focus of group sessions is often on solving problems that interfere with the student's education. Sessions are often devoted to discussing common problems such as test anxiety, stress, lack of confidence, poor organization of time, poor study habits, dislike of school, loneliness, inability to make friends and family relations. Low risk, less threatening, less personal topics could be dealt with in group sessions without endangering either individual participation or the group's success, as studied by Subich and Coursol (1985).

The basic benefit of these problem solving groups is the development of individual problem-solving skills that can be applied at home and at school (Cantrell, 1986). The author also suggested that these group counseling experiences can help diffuse feelings and offer a supportive environment as children learn that others are experiencing similar concerns.

Problem-solving groups maximize the counselor's contact with students and give all students the opportunity to get to know their counselor better through the sessions. Such groups also provide valuable feedback on student attitudes, needs and concerns (Paul and Dean, 1981). Once again, emphasis was on the advantage of efficiency of group counseling (Bretzing and Caterino, 1984).

Sheridan, Baker and de Lissovoy (1984) also supported group counseling as a time for problem solving by their research on youth of changing families. Forty-eight students (23 males and 25 females) in seventh, eighth and ninth grades participated in one of two treatment groups for 64 days. Students in structured group counseling with prevention goals rated the help they received higher than did students receiving remedial, treatment-focused and individual counseling services. Sheridan, Baker and de Lissovoy suggested the following as possible reasons for this result: Students receiving counselor attention may have responded positively to that attention because they merely

appreciated the attention given. Students appreciated the opportunity to have the group experience to receive information and relate the experience to their immediate lives. Students who seek help on an as-needed basis are unlikely to refer themselves to school counselors unless conditions or symptoms become drastic. The more positive group member attitudes attributed to those in the prevention programs may indicate that structured prevention programs are more likely to prevent future problems than is traditional, as-needed, individual counseling. Sheridan, Baker and de Lissovoy commented that although the individual counseling services of many schools may be good, many youth of changing families may not experience them because their immediate needs and behaviors are too "normal."

Often the group guidance program consists of a series of special programs devoted to special topics throughout the year, such as drugs, alcohol, sex education, divorce and suicide are examples (NASSP, 1985; Cole, 1979; Cantrell, 1986). Usually the counselors, with input and assistance from teachers and parents, explore, evaluate and plan these programs in response to middle level students' needs and patterns. Topics might change from year to year as student concerns and needs are examined and new resources are available (NASSP, 1985).

Leadership Flexibility

It is widely agreed that flexibility of leadership of group is a very important factor in group counseling (Garawaski, 1982; Bretzing and Caterino, 1984; Riester and Tanner, 1980). The literature revealed that the team approach of group counseling is often used. The health teacher, the home economics teacher, the school nurse, the school psychologist, a community person or classroom teachers are all potential candidates for group counseling leadership (NASSP, 1985; Paul and Dean, 1981; Knudsen, 1971). Co-educational groups are sometimes co-led by one female and one male, one of whom is the school counselor. Both leaders are usually trained in group counseling techniques. Although the non-counselor, probably a classroom teacher, will change from time to time, the counselor supervises the program and ensures that consistent orientation, methods and goals are followed. Although the emphasis is on the problems and concerns of students in the group, the leadership can be extremely involved, with leaders assuming responsibility for the planning, the group counseling process and the success of the process (Riester and Tanner, 1980).

Leadership roles shared by teachers and counselors at the middle level was also addressed by Knudsen (1971). Teacher and counselor relationships become involved in helping because problems are rarely expressed in only a single class or area;

and often special teachers in home economics, industrial arts, etc., are able to reinforce the counselor's work.

Once the goals of group counseling are determined, the counselor and/or co-leader help work towards reaching these goals by role playing, offering positive feedback when appropriate social skills are exhibited in the group, and supporting rules and policies of the school (Riester and Tanner, 1980).

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP Bulletin, June 1983) in their research from 1969-1974 mentioned the impossibility of school counselors being able to handle all the guidance related functions due to the high ratio of students to each professional. They also felt there was a real need for students to have adults to whom they could relate (Wise, 1985).

Confidentiality

Because self-disclosure is encouraged as a very important part of group counseling, the confidentiality factor becomes an important component in group work at any level and especially in the middle level years when students usually have had little exposure to this idea. The group counseling experience offers an opportunity to present this concept and to observe the follow-through. In an extensive research survey, Kathleen Davis (1980), explored the thoughts and feelings of group members (thirteen and fourteen year-olds) and leaders (counselors and teachers)

regarding the issue of confidentiality. Questions were asked about the leader's presentation of the subject of confidentiality, participants initiating the idea of confidentiality, the extent to which confidentiality was a priority, and if so, was it maintained? Results of this exploratory study indicated that the group leader's presentation of confidentiality significantly affected group members' thoughts and actions about revealing group information.

The study revealed that respect for confidentiality grew when the group leader clearly outlined to whom the leader might talk (teacher, parents, social workers, etc.), and what information the leader might share with the group or non-group member (Davis, 1980). By discussing the leader's needs to respect confidentiality, members had a clear idea of what would happen when any member disclosed, rather than having to rely on speculation.

The limits of confidentiality are observed when group leaders take time to explain confidentiality thoroughly to group members (Davis, 1980). Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, but it can be expected if it is presented at the first group session and discussed at other appropriate times.

Utilization of Media

Another interesting advantage of group counseling is the opportunity it provides for the counselor to utilize films and

tapes varying in length and subject matter to promote interest and stimulate meaningful discussion (Paul and Dean, 1981). Special media provides a way to present topics subtly and discreetly and still keep the group environment low risk. Counselors appreciate the media approach in group counseling, because it serves as a reference point during discussions for students and counselors and helps facilitate the discussions. Familiar topics presented through tapes and other media are stress, peer relationships, parental relationships, listening skills, examination of feelings and communication (Paul and Dean, 1981). For Miles (1981) the use of tapes improved the sensitivity of group members. He suggested that repeated tape playbacks polished skills much more quickly and that tapes communicated the essence of an interpersonal situation of which the students were not a part.

Optional Group Designs

An extremely important topic is the group design used in group counseling (Kaczkowski, 1979). The author summarized the components of the group design and charted possible goals and leadership styles for group counseling. According to Kaczkowski, the largest role for the counselor in making a group productive is that of developing appropriate relationships among key elements (goal, leadership style, child's response, materials) in the group work design. Counselors differ in the degree to which they view key factors such as verbalization, activity, structure

and materials in group work. The type of counseling process needs to vary with age of the student and the type of developmental concern (Kaczkowski, 1979).

After assessing the prospective group members' current maturity level, a counselor considers all of the variables of approach and materials, age and expected outcome to determine the goals and leadership style for the group counseling sessions. The main idea Kaczkowski emphasized was that of the counselor choosing a leadership style that would enable him or her to put together a combination for students based on knowledge, skill, and professional acumen.

Conclusion

The efficacy of group counseling with middle level school children has been established. This is a time when students are searching and are usually willing to be helped. This paper has presented important advantages of group counseling: development of social skills, gains in self-esteem, goal setting, efficiency of time, problem solving opportunities, leadership flexibility, confidentiality, utilization of media, and optional group designs. According to this recent survey of literature, it is these advantages that make group counseling an efficient and effective model in middle level education.

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