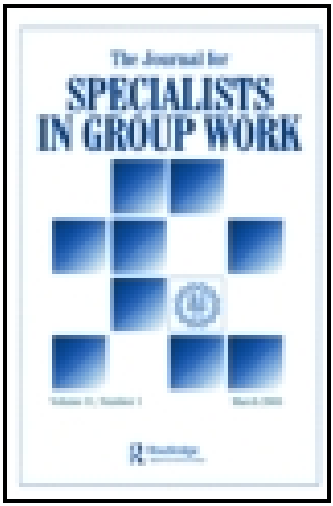

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Preparing School Counselors for Group Work

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Preparing School Counselors for Group Work

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The American School Counselor Association has endorsed group work as an important component of school counseling programs, and research has demonstrated the effectiveness of group work in schools. Yet there is still considerable variation in practice of group work in schools. The type of group training preservice school counselors receive is an important factor. School counselor educators should maximize the one group course format by integrating and sequencing content most appropriate for school counseling, linking and infusing group principles in all coursework, especially practicum and internship classes, and consider group leadership skills and competencies in admission and programmatic decisions. This manuscript presents a one-course infusion model for preparing school counselors for group work.

Keywords: *school counseling; group work; school counselor education and training; preservice training*

Group work in schools today is an essential, efficient, and multifaceted intervention for school counselors. Groups provide support, acceptance, and safe risk-taking opportunities, promote peer interaction, and are a way for children and adolescents to learn to solve problems. Groups can help students learn ways to handle life's stressors, provide an avenue for feedback, and support students' growth and development (Newsome & Gladding, 2003). Schools are settings where teamwork and group work are endorsed (e.g., school

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improvement committees), occur regularly (e.g., teaching teams), and are legally mandated (e.g., IEP meetings). One unique aspect of group work in schools is that school counselors are typically the only professionals working in the school setting that have training in group facilitation (Fleming, 1999). This uniqueness increases the salience of preservice training in group work for school counselors.

Traditional models of group preparation have focused most on counseling groups. School counselors spend 8–12% of their time in group counseling activities with students, and group counseling is one of the few areas of school counseling that has been supported by a vast body of effectiveness research (Whiston & Sexton, 1998). Given the research evidence and the breadth of group work in schools, training programs need to devote considerable instructional time to help preservice school counselors learn and build competence in group facilitation. The task of preparing school counselors for group work should be conceptualized as a process that extends throughout the training program. For example, school counselor preparation programs should interview candidates for training programs in group interviews and investigate applicants' experience, attitudes toward, and abilities in group work. Additionally, similar to how many programs have operationalized multicultural concepts, group work principles should be infused throughout the curriculum (e.g., see Stockton & Toth, 1996). For example, explicit attention to the use of group work throughout the curriculum (e.g., cohort models, group supervision) would increase student awareness and appreciation for the influence of group work.

The Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW, 2000) recommends a two semester course sequence in group, such as the model presented by Furr & Barret (2000). It is difficult to provide the depth and breadth of training adequate for the realities of school counseling practice in only one course. Yet, most programs in counselor education only require one group counseling course of their students (Conyne, Wilson, Kline, Morran, & Ward, 1993). It is therefore essential to capitalize on the one course in group work offered in most programs.

MAXIMIZING A SINGLE GROUP COURSE

Content and Knowledge Competencies

Much of the content appropriate and necessary for a single course in group work is outlined by ASGW (2000) and Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2001).

This recommended group content provides training essential for an introduction to general group work. For group preparation particular to school counselors, specific content should receive additional attention.

For example, of the four types of group work, most group work courses provide instruction primarily in relation to leading counseling or therapy groups. Psychotherapy groups are almost nonexistent in the school setting (Kulic, Horne, & Dagley, 2000) and should not be a focus for school counselors. Seen as an extension of individual counseling, training in group counseling is focused on helping students facing developmental problems (e.g., grief, family change, anger management). Typically, counseling students learn to address common developmental problems for students in counseling groups. In this way, school counseling students appreciate the need to help with developmental problems such as family change, grief, and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Alternatively, school counselors can also adapt solution-focused theory to counseling groups where students are grouped heterogeneously instead of according to developmental problems. Solution-focused groups have demonstrated effectiveness and remove some of the stigmatization of participating in a theme group (LaFountain, Garner, & Eliason, 1996). School counselors can also learn to focus more on group process and dynamics, rather than on an application of individual theory to group work.

School counselors must also be prepared to offer a variety of psychoeducational groups (e.g., new student groups, study skill groups) to students to promote growth and development and to prevent future problems. In order to help school counselors prepare, plan, and develop psychoeducational groups, factors such as the developmental and multicultural needs of the population (e.g., children and adolescent developmental tasks) as well as ecological factors (e.g., school climate, guidance curriculum, National Standards) should be discussed as important considerations. Preservice school counselors can examine and critique existing psychoeducational group proposals, create group proposals, and outline sessions based on research. Logistical considerations (e.g., available meeting space, student schedules), screening and selection, and strategies for securing support for group work (e.g., districtwide support for group work, teacher cooperation, informed consent, confidentiality) are also important in helping school counselors plan groups (see Ritchie & Huss, 2000).

While task group leadership is given minimal attention in training and counseling literature (Conyne, Wilson, & Ward, 1997), school counselors are involved in and lead a variety of task groups. For task group preparation, the group class should utilize direct instruction in task group leadership, include relevant readings (e.g., Conyne, 1989), and discuss the political dynamics, impact of culture, and politics in

the school. Students can either role play or lead task groups in the group class. For example, four or five students, with one assigned leader, can create group plans for leading a psychoeducational group on college choice for 10th graders. In this one task, students work directly in task groups while working on psychoeducational group proposals. Intentional supervision on the leadership and work in the task group and time for members to process the task group provide a dual process of experiential learning in task groups and planning for psychoeducational groups.

Evaluation. Also important, school counselors must plan and lead groups with evaluation in mind and be aware of research on group work. The group course should address the importance of developing measurable goals and objectives as well as designing evaluation of group work. Students can also be required to locate and critique journal articles pertaining to group work in schools. This can be an independent assignment or may be integrated into group proposals on which students work during class. In either way, students become more aware of the existing knowledge about group work and the research journals that pertain to group work. As the foundation for group leadership is built through content, preservice school counselors should also be able to develop basic group skill competencies.

Skill Competency and Practice

While content knowledge and skills are complementary and equally important, skill training in group work appears to occur less frequently in counselor preparation (Conyne, Wilson, Kline, Morran, & Ward, 1993; Wiggins & Carroll, 1993). For example, 85% of masters programs report addressing knowledge competencies, while only 72% address skill competencies (Conyne et al., 1993). Additionally, most available research is on adult groups and lacks attention to techniques specific for group work with children and adolescents (Delucia-Waack, 2000).

An effective method for skill practice and one easily integrated into a group class is role play scenarios, similar to what most programs use in individual training. Instructors can create group scenarios and ask students to role play children and adolescents so that they can adapt skills appropriate to the developmental age of the members. It is often useful to ask two students to co-lead the role play, allowing them to feel less pressure and experience the co-leading process. Role play scenarios can be created for task, psychoeducational, or counseling groups utilizing the various levels of K-12 schools. Role plays can also purposefully incorporate multicultural issues. In this way, students are exposed to realistic developmental issues that school counselors face. In order for these role play activities to be useful and safe, it is

essential to process or debrief with students and link the experience to skill instruction and the learning objectives of the course (Stockton & Toth, 1996).

Integrated into content, skills can be taught, practiced, and supervised in a developmental progression within task, psychoeducational, and counseling groups. For example, in moving from task group leadership to psychoeducational group leadership, the skill of focus may take on more significance because of the theme or instructional purpose of the group. In that same way, maintaining a here-and-now orientation in the group may be more pressing in a counseling group as compared to task or psychoeducational groups. This suggests that group instructors may be able to teach group skills in a progression that coincides with the discussion and practice of the types of group leadership. These developmental notions of learning group leadership place an emphasis on the sequencing of the group course itself.

Sequencing

For a foundation, students can spend time early in the group course on self-examination and introspection as it relates to leading groups, the challenges of group counseling, the ethical guidelines for leading groups, the cultural considerations for group work, and understanding why and when group work is appropriate. Without clear understanding and purpose of group intervention, students may not utilize groups properly in the school.

Once a foundation is built, the group course may start with task groups, as ASGW (2000) suggests that task groups require the lowest level of training. Students can begin group skill training by applying basic individual counseling skills in a task group role play. Applying counseling skills in an IEP or special education planning meeting, team meetings with faculty, or various school committees is an appropriate introduction to group skills and process. Further, task groups also help introduce and demonstrate important concepts of group dynamics, shared group purpose, and conflict in groups. They can provide less risky or less complex opportunities to learn and practice group specific skills.

Processing. Another instructional advantage to starting with task groups is the ability to focus most on process, rather than content. Processing has been mentioned as the most important part of leading groups, and students need to be taught basic skills for processing in groups (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 2002). In task leadership, students can focus primarily on the process of the group rather than researching and preparing content for the group. Often as beginning students start with counseling groups, they direct more attention to content or

activities and lose focus on process of groups. In task groups, the content emerges from group members, allowing leaders to devote more attention to process.

Cooperative Learning. In addition to skill instruction and a focus on process, utilizing cooperative learning with small groups of students built around class assignments is an effective way to provide experience leading task groups. Similar to the model presented by Furr and Barrett (2000), task group assignments can be focused on research projects, class presentations, or creating group proposals for psychoeducational or counseling groups. The task of creating group proposals can act as a segue into psychoeducational group leadership, where more advanced group leadership skills can be introduced.

While skills may be similar to task groups, the ability to teach and process new information or skills requires more extensive group leadership. Unlike task groups, psychoeducational group leaders also must foster the application of new learning and skills outside of the group. Additionally, the ability to process group content and experience increases in importance with psychoeducational groups. Along with skills, psychoeducational groups also require content like selecting and screening group members; preparing group proposals for parents, administrators, and teachers; and planning group sessions.

Saving instruction on counseling groups for last affords instructors the opportunity to build on the concepts taught in task and psychoeducational groups and, at the same time, to introduce more advanced concepts that fit with counseling groups. For example, stage development may be more observable in counseling groups, as opposed to task and psychoeducational groups, and purposefully comes after the majority of skill training. With instruction and basic competence in group skills, students can apply skill use particular to group stage development. For instance, basic skills of reflection, scanning, and linking may be more useful in early stages of group, where cutting off and drawing out may be more useful later. This sequencing of content and skills can be enhanced by concurrent experiential groups.

Experiential

Both ASGW and CACREP guidelines include an experiential component to group training. The *Professional Standards for the Training of Group Workers* (ASGW, 2000) recommends 20 hours (minimum of 10 hours) of observation and participation in a group as a member or leader. CACREP has a 10-hour requirement for students in a small-group activity that provides direct experience as a participant in a small group. Researchers have debated the best model for the experiential group, and Merta, Wolfgang, and McNeil (1993)

suggest either an instructor led, instructor observer, or a feedback model where the instructor is not present at experiential groups. Kline, Falbaum, Pope, Hargraves, and Hundley (1997) suggest there is little agreement in the literature about what exactly makes the group experience useful for preservice counselors. To maximize student's preparation for group work in schools, a feedback model for experiential group is suggested.

The link between the student's class learning to the group experience is an important aspect of training (Cummings, 2001). When experiential groups are offered concurrently with group class instruction, students' awareness of group dynamics, group leadership skills, and group concepts are enhanced. The concurrent nature of the experiential group can augment skill training and increase student awareness of group concepts (Kline et al., 1997).

Sample Model. For preservice school counselors, it is useful to divide the class into smaller groups of six to eight students. This allows the instructor to purposefully create groups with diverse members and gives students a group experience similar to the size of groups run in the school. The group can be co-led by student participants in the group on a rotating basis. Although there are limitations to rotating leadership, the co-leadership requirement gives students meaningful and demanding experience as both a leader and member. The rotating leadership also allows students a view of various types and styles of leadership from their peers. The ability to observe various types of leadership is an important aspect in training (Kane, 1995) and the "blind leading the blind" is often a good idea in group training (Russell, Moulton, Corey, Pedersen, & Kottler, 2002). This type of model also is feasible for most school counseling programs that have limited resources (e.g., no doctoral students, limited outside group opportunities).

The course instructor can preplan sessions with the purpose of personal growth and a here-and-now experience. Topics can be chosen that both demonstrate and relate to group concepts (e.g., trust building) and activities that help prepare students for work in the schools (e.g., team building, diversity). The experiential group plan (including objectives, evaluation, and informed consent) can also serve as a sample for students. Using class time (without instructor present) for experiential groups conveys the importance of the experiential group and provides informal pressure to attend. It also establishes the experiential group process as an important component of instruction. Only group attendance should be used in evaluating students during the group, although each student should be required to keep a structured, introspective journal of group membership and leadership that will be collected by the instructor after grades have been determined.

Journals can be used to allow students to reflect on the group process, course learning, and personal growth. Explicit instructions to maintain student anonymity should be provided, and students can be asked to reference group concepts from readings and course discussions. While this format does not allow for instructor observation and supervision of the experiential group, quality control, gate keeping, and ensuring group competence can be managed in skill role plays during the group class, as well as the practicum and internship experiences.

INTEGRATING GROUP WORK IN PRACTICUM AND INTERNSHIP

In order to ensure opportunities for group work, particular attention to practicum and internship site selection is needed. School sites should be selected based on the opportunity for group practice and the site supervisors' abilities and attitudes toward group work. Similar to the way content and skills are sequenced, students can be socialized into task groups quickly. Student assistant teams, teacher and IEP meetings, PTA, and school committees are all means of engaging interns in group work. In addition to seeking opportunities to lead those task groups, supervisors can explore and promote indirect service to students by shaping school climate on school committees, advocate for appropriate instruction and opportunity in student assistant teams, and promote strong parent involvement and connections in PTA. Routinely, these opportunities in group work are too often viewed as laborious administrative tasks. Approaching these group opportunities as a helping function exemplifies the calls for advocacy and leadership by the emerging models of school counseling (e.g., Transforming School Counseling Initiative [The Education Trust, 2003]; ASCA's National Model [Hatch & Bowers, 2002]).

The practicum and internship experiences are crucial opportunities for students to practice needs assessment; create group proposals; recruit, screen, and select students for groups; and co-lead or lead psychoeducational and counseling groups. Again, with an intentional developmental sequence, students can start with supervised practice with lower risk psychoeducational groups, such as new student groups, and progress to more demanding leadership opportunities (e.g., counseling groups, parent groups).

LIMITATIONS

The model presented here incorporates a one group class structure. It seems obvious that students will be better prepared to lead groups

in schools with more course work focused on groups. Additionally, the structure built around the types of group work may not allow for enough attention to important group topics such as theory, stage development, and therapeutic factors in groups. For example, group courses that include students in tracks other than school counseling may need modification. The format of the experiential group never seems to be ideal, and the model presented here has risks in the absence of experienced and supervised leadership. In weighing the limitations, being intentional about preparing school counselors for group work is a necessary and important aspect of school counselor training.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to recognize that school counselors are one of the few, if only, professionals in K-12 schools that have formalized group training. To maximize group work training for school counselors, we recommend the following strategies:

- Consider group interviews, attitudes toward group work, and previous experience in groups as important admission considerations.
- Look to infuse group concepts throughout the curriculum and recognize and discuss the group process involved in group supervision and cooperative learning.
- Utilize role play activities to practice and supervise group skills, model and demonstrate leadership, and acclimate students to the themes and techniques appropriate for children and adolescents in K-12 settings.
- Sequence program course work and the group course itself to emphasize a developmental, skill-based preparation appropriate to school counseling (e.g., type of group work may be more useful rather than group stage development).
- Emphasize and prioritize group concepts most influential to school counseling practice. These include, but are not limited to, task and psychoeducational group leadership, active and directive leadership, creating small group proposals based on school need, and appropriate selection, consent, and procedures.
- Give preservice school counselors the opportunity to lead and observe multiple types of leadership in experiential groups that closely represent the types of groups run in schools (e.g., number of students in groups, personal growth activities).
- Select practicum and internship sites based on opportunities to utilize group work and require assignments that take advantage of the abundance of group process in schools as effective ways to help students.

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