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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS' EXPERIENCES ENGAGING IN GROUP WORK by CHINWE JOVITA UWAH, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chair, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standard of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty. The Dean of the College of Education concurs.

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ABSTRACT

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS' EXPERIENCES ENGAGING IN GROUP WORK
by
Chinwé Jovita Uwah

This qualitative study explored the experiences of a sample of secondary school counselors who facilitate groups. Specifically, 18 diverse secondary school counselors were interviewed regarding how they conceptualize, perceive, and experience group work. Three research questions guided this study: (a) What are the experiences of secondary school counselors who conduct groups?; (b) What are secondary school counselors' attitudes and perceptions towards group work?; and (c) What do secondary school counselors perceive as barriers and /or challenges to engaging in group work? Data were collected in three phases: Phase One, an initial focus group informed Phase Two of the study, individual interviews. Phase Three, member-checking, was used to validate themes generated from data analysis. Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology guided the data analysis process. Findings revealed four themes associated with participants' group work experiences: meaningful relationships, staff response, challenges, and encouraging feedback. Practical and research implications for secondary school counselors and counselor educators are discussed.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS' EXPERIENCES ENGAGING IN GROUP WORK

by
Chinwé J. Uwah

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CHAPTER 1

PREPARING SECONDARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS FOR ADOLESCENT GROUP WORK: PROMOTING COOPERATION AND BELONGING

Overwhelming evidence illustrates that society is changing at an ever increasing pace. This period of rapid change is characterized by increases in single-parent families, dual career households, chemical dependency, and international unrest (Thompson, 2002). Nested within larger, complex, and dynamic systems, schools are a primary indicator of our changing society and are directly impacted by such societal changes (Conyne, 2007). With the recent shift in societal demographics and the prevalence of risky student behaviors, the complexion of the school has drastically changed. Given this current state of society, professional school counselors at every level intervene with a variety of complex student issues. Some of these student concerns are related to academics or career decision making; however, many of these concerns relate to students' personal, social, family, and behavioral adjustment. For instance, studies indicated that between 17% and 22% of all school-age youth suffer developmental, behavioral, or emotional problems (Zill & Schoenborn, 1990).

While student concerns vary in severity, the issues school counselors encounter are becoming increasingly multifaceted and challenging, particularly at the secondary level (Thompson, 2002). One of the fundamental objectives of secondary school counselors is to assist adolescents' transition into adulthood (ASCA, 2003). Secondary school counselors assist students in developing an awareness of personal strengths and

weaknesses, problem-solving skills, academic achievement, and an appreciation of individual differences (2002). In order to meet these ever increasing needs, secondary school counselors are required to intervene both preventatively and remedially. According to Sexton, Whiston, Bleur and Walz (1997), preventative and cost-effective interventions employed by secondary school counselors could potentially save tax payers a significant amount of tax dollars.

Group work is a cost effective counseling intervention that is uniquely designed to address the challenges of living in contemporary society (Trotzer, 1999). Dies (1985) hypothesized that groups will emerge as a vehicle for "rehumanizing the educational process for children and adults" who feel alienated in a highly technological society (p.70). Dies elaborated by noting that the sense of universality and cohesiveness—both hallmarks of effective group work—would help to mitigate the increasing individualization and isolation that threatens individuals' sense of personal relatedness. Researchers have documented the importance of a sense of belonging in the school environment (Goodenow,1991; Osterman, 2000). Dagley (2000) asserted that groups provide adolescents with an increased sense of belongingness by way of positive, healthy interactions with members of the school community.

With regard to the changing complexion of today's schools, group work has broad applicability. For instance, group interventions have been found to positively align with the collectivistic culture of African American and Hispanic students. One example of an intervention that blended academics, career exploration, and job shadowing was found to significantly improve the overall career maturity of minority participants (Dunn & Veltman, 1989). Moreover, research shows that group work with adolescents has a

positive impact on social skills development, stress management and depression, as well as significantly decreases delinquent behaviors for students with a substantial number of discipline referrals (Prout & Prout, 1998; Whiston & Sexton, 1998). As Paisley and Milson (2007) so succinctly concluded, group work is an efficient and essential intervention for school counselors.

Despite numerous benefits, studies show that small group work is not frequently employed in the high school setting (Dansby, 1996; Tennyson et al.,1987). Moreover, the high school environment provides unique challenges and supports for school counselors who do engage in group work (Schmidt, 1999). A brief listing of these challenges include group setting, frequency, duration, complex bell schedules, and teacher - administrative support. Given the increasing complexities of society, the changing role of the school counselor, and adolescents' need to belong, group work can be an appealing choice for secondary school counselors seeking to make an impact on students' personal success and academic achievement. This manuscript presents distinguishing characteristics between group guidance and group counseling at the secondary school level and addresses relevant literature on effective group work with adolescents. Additionally, recommendations in an effort to encourage the consideration of group work as an ideal treatment modality for meeting the personal/social and academic needs of adolescents will be made. Further, implications for school counselor preparation and future research directions will be discussed.

ASGW Professional Standards

Prior to a discussion of best practices with regard to group work, a clear definition of the term *group work*, along with the distinguishing characteristics of *group guidance*

and *group counseling* is needed. In 1990 the Association of Specialist in Group Work (ASGW), a division of American Counseling Association whose members are interested in group work revised professional standards to include an articulation of the term *group work.* In 2000, the definitions of group work specializations were expanded and clarified. The definitions of the four distinct specializations (*task groups, group psychotherapy, group counseling, and group psychotherapy*), described the methods of (a) the typical working stage of the group, (b) the typical purpose, and (c) the typical population being served. Definitions of types of groups most school counselors facilitate will be presented below, beginning with ASGW's definition of group work.

Definitions

Group Work. A broad professional practice involving the application of knowledge and skill in group facilitation to assist an interdependent collection of people to reach mutual goals which may be intrapersonal, interpersonal, or work-related. Goals may include work, education, personal development, interpersonal problem solving, or remediation of mental and emotional disorders.

Task/Work Group. Applications of principles of normal human development and functioning through group-based educational, developmental, and systematic strategies applied in the context of here-and-now interaction that promote efficient and effective accomplishments of group tasks among people who are gathered to accomplish group task goals.

Psycho-education Group. The application of principles of normal human development and functioning through group-based educational, developmental, and

systematic strategies applied in the context of here-and-now interaction that promote personal and interpersonal growth and development and the future difficulties.

Group Counseling. The application of principles of normal human development and functioning through group-based educational, developmental, or systematic strategies applied in the context of here-and-now interactions that promote personal and interpersonal growth and development.

Distinguishing characteristics

The differences between group guidance and group counseling are important considerations for secondary school counselors due to the differences in leader role group purpose, and size (Baker & Gerler, 2008). The role of the leader and the purpose of the group are two major distinctions. In group guidance, one example of a psycho-educational group, the purpose is usually determined by the leader and group goals are typically instructive and preventative. The leader assumes the role of teacher, guide, and director and group size can be up to the size of a classroom. In contrast, the purpose of group counseling is determined by group members and the role of the leader is therapeutic, often using counseling skills to assist members in reaching individual and common goals. Members often discuss topics that are personal and related to normal developmental concerns. Due to the more personal nature of group counseling, the group size should be limit to between 5 and 8 members (Myrick, 1997).

Content and Process. Of the three previously defined groups, counseling and guidance groups are the most frequently led in the school setting. Both counseling and guidance groups are similar to and different from each other. They are similar in that comparable events occur in both and they are different in that the purposes or goals in

each are unique. Both types of groups can attend to *content* (subject matter) and *process* (interactions amongst members, reactions, and reflections). Guidance and groups are generally more structured, while counseling groups are more process-oriented. However, any number of topics (e.g., grief, stress, academic development) can be discussed, depending on the developmental level of students. Secondary school counselors may even conduct a blend of both. An excellent example of a blended content and process group is outlined by Muller (2000), in which she described a European-American led African American female group designed to discuss topics of sexism, racism and racial and gender identity. Muller attributed the group's success to the members' ability to express themselves in an environment that encouraged feelings of connectedness, belonging and interpersonal learning. Additionally, goals of the group appeared to align with issues and needs of the group members.

In summary, the main objective of counseling groups is to influence members in very *personal* ways. Some authors argue that process is the most important part of leading groups (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 2002); while others maintain that a balance of both process and content is necessary (Hulse-Killacky, 1986). The first author of this manuscript contends that effectively run psycho-educational groups and counseling groups with an emphasis on both process *and* content have great merit in assisting adolescents in building healthy peer relationships.

Group Work Principles Related to Adolescent Development

Theories of human development address the biological, cognitive, moral, and social stages that occur within adolescence. Two primary developmental tasks of adolescents are to establish a sense of identity and autonomy apart from their family of

origin (Erickson, 1968). According to Santrock (2000), adolescence is characterized as a time of rapid change and heightened emotionality, experimentation, and a desire for independence. Therefore, due to the inherent social quality of groups, group work is considered a particularly well suited treatment format for adolescents (Kulic, Horne, & Dagley, 2004).

Developmental approach to group work

A developmental approach to effective group counseling considers the general stages and tasks that most adolescents experience, as they mature. Additionally, it recognizes the need for differential treatment for different groups of students. Moreover, the developmental approach acknowledges that feelings, thoughts, and behaviors are linked and that appropriate leader responses can empower adolescents and enhance efforts towards successful group experiences (Gladding, 2003). Starting in early adolescence, students naturally form peer groups based on shared interests, academic achievement, and orientations (Akos et al., 2007; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). These naturally occurring peer groups represents a primary developmental context for adolescents to evaluate their unique strengths and abilities. The peer group is an important source of cognitive growth and can significantly impact adolescent identity development. Akos, Hamm, Mack, & Dunaway (2007) reviewed the literature on peer relationships and strongly recommended that professional school counselors take advantage of the influence of the peer group to promote healthy adolescent development and achievement.

Therapeutic elements and leader roles

Many of the curative factors found to facilitate positive change in groups are related to themes that appear in adolescent development (Yalom, 1995). Researchers (Akos, Hamm, Mack, and Dunaway, 2007; Paisley & Milson, 2007) argue that Yalom's therapeutic factors of group cohesiveness, universality, interpersonal learning, and modeling are particularly relevant when working with adolescents in groups. Equipped with an understanding of adolescent development, and peer dynamics, school counselors can be in the position to enhance the power of group work with adolescent students.

Group leader roles are largely determined by the type of group, and the developmental levels of students whom they lead. Myrick (1987, p. 53) identified six basic responses for effective group leadership with students: 1. Feeling-focused responses 2. Clarifying or summarizing responses 3. Employing open ended questions 4. Facilitative feedback 5. Simple acknowledgment and 6. Linking member responses. Important leader characteristics leader include self-awareness and courage. Adolescent generally respond well to leaders who are transparent, enthusiastic, and caring (Gladding, 2003). In general, group leaders who work with high school students must be active; yet trusting of the group process. These leader traits appear to personify genuineness, flexibility, and congruence, which can be excellent skills for secondary school counselors to model for adolescents.

Group Cohesiveness/Belonging. A sense of belonging or connection to others is of great importance during adolescence (Goodenow, 1991). The importance of the peer group at this stage of development cannot be overstated. In adolescence, the psychological sense of school belonging and the support students experience influence

their educational adjustment and improve academic success (Goodenow, 1991; 1992). Furthermore, a sense of school belonging is related to students believing that they are liked, respected, and valued members of the school community (Goodenow, 1991); and that they are invited to participate in school activities (Uwah, McMahon & Furlow, in revision).

Hazler and Denham (2002) proposed that one way school counselors can promote belonging in adolescents is by increasing the amount of quality relationships. An invitation to participate in groups is an example of one way secondary school counselors can enhance belonging. A small group can increase feelings of belonging particularly for those students who have been socially isolated (Fergusen, 1992). Moreover, a cohesive group environment can provide the security needed for students to comfortably learn new skills and take risks in a safe environment (Yalom, 1995). This concept of group cohesion, or belongingness, is salient for all adolescents who strive to be accepted and valued by others, but is particularly important for African American and Hispanic adolescents who consistently report less school belonging than their European-American counterparts (Kuykendall, 1991; Goodenow, 1992).

Universality. Universality, another primary therapeutic factor in group work relates to a feeling of commonality and shared experiences and concerns (Yalom, 1995). Adolescents tend to focus intently on their own personal struggles and often report that no one shares nor understands their plights (Akos et al., 2007). In addition to realizing that their experiences are not unique, adolescents, with adept facilitation by their school counselor group leader, are better able to hear and focus on others experiences rather than just their own. Group work provides students with the opportunity to hear from other

students with similar experiences, thus reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness and increasing feelings of connectedness.

Interpersonal Learning/Collaboration. As group members begin to feel safe and connected to other members, they may begin to take risks by trying out new ways of relating to others (Yalom, 1995). Groups provide adolescents with opportunities to collaborate through the practice of new skills and reality testing in a safe environment. Moreover, the giving and receiving feedback inherent in most process groups can be a powerful tool in assisting adolescents in increasing their social interest. Within groups, adolescents are able to express themselves, test limits, and develop an enhanced sense of identity and intimacy (Shechtman, 2004). Furthermore, through participating in groups, adolescents can learn problem solving, and interpersonal communication skills, thereby improving relationships with peers and adults.

Modeling. Through modeling, secondary school counselors provide students the opportunity to observe and learn new behaviors. Additionally, by participating or observing others participate in group activities such as role-plays, students can vicariously learn new behaviors and consequences of certain behaviors. Although there are certain presenting concerns that are best addressed in individual sessions, group work provides the distinct therapeutic advantage of addressing problems in the context in which they occur (Paisley & Milson, 2007). In engaging with group work, school counselors help to promote optimal student development and provide adolescents with arenas for healthy adjustment.

Group Work with Adolescents: A Brief Review

In 1920, Jesse B. Davis, a school principal, recorded the first application of group work in the school environment. Davis facilitated groups in the school to assist students with educational and vocational decisions. Although no formal research was conducted, Davis contended that groups were helpful to students' life decision making processes. Frank Parsons, another school-based group work pioneer, is widely viewed as the father of the modern counseling profession due to his endorsement of guidance and counseling services for public school students (Gazda, Ginter & Horne, 2001). Parsons advocated for the efficient delivery of career development services by introducing vocational groups to the school.

Belonging and Cooperation

In that same era, Alfred Adler began facilitating groups for families and children (Dagley, 2000). Adler and his followers, Rudolph Driekers and Don Dinkmeyer, utilized the group approach to enable families to identify the relationship between children's difficulties and their family history. Similar to previous group pioneers, Adlerian group workers did not measure the impact of group, apart from leader observations. However, Adlerian-based interventions emphasized the importance of developing a sense of belonging and social interest with children and adolescents (Dagley). Adler believed that it should be the goal of educators to increase cooperation and social interest among students (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Further, Adler posited that belonging and social interest could be fostered though positive group experiences that emphasized cooperation, respect, and shared decision-making (Ferguson, 1992). He asserted that allowing students this opportunity to practice new behaviors within their social setting is

key. This opportunity to practice new *appropriate* behaviors may be especially salient during the peer driven adolescent stage of development.

Recent Trends

In the 1950's, the application of group work in the schools became a trend as counseling began to replace guidance as a main function of school personnel (Gazda, 1989). Educators recognized the need to assist students in career selection and also began to focus on applying group knowledge at the school setting. Limited outcome research, at that time, demonstrated that group counseling in the schools could facilitate improved family relationships and lead to students' increased school satisfaction, and academic success (Gazda).

For the past 15 years, group research has focused more on specific treatment applications such as depression, eating disorders, and grief groups for students of all ages. With this shift, there has also been a sharp increase in psycho-educational and counseling groups for adolescents (Dagley, Gazda, Eppinger, & Stweart, 1994). However, this increase has not necessarily coincided with an increase in sophisticated evaluations of group work efficacy. Gazda, Ginter, & Horne (2001) reported that school-based group evaluations tended to focus more on the satisfaction of the group leader and members, rather than measuring if change has actually occurred. Such a limited outcome measure raises some concern as self-report on satisfaction does not document nor speak to a measurable change. As group work reviews have identified a general lack of methodological sophistication (Dagley et al.; Hoag & Burlingame, 1997), an acknowledgement about the complex nature of conducting group research is warranted. Firstly, therapeutic factors are complex and difficult to control (Gazda et. al.). Secondly,

authors note that there are relatively few experimental comparisons and long-term follow-ups within the group work literature (Gazda, 1989; Kulic et al., 2004). Further, the consistent use of multiple measures, with instruments with proven validity and reliability appears to be a challenging task for researchers (Kulic et al., 2004), as well as a well-documented absence within the group counseling literature.

Is group work with adolescents effective?

Given the general complexity of group work research, one begs the question, *Is group work with adolescents effective*? Collectively, meta-analyses demonstrates that there is no difference between individual and group counseling and recent outcome research (Dagley et al.,1994; Kulic et al., 2001; Whiston & Sexton, 1998) presents overwhelming research citing the effectiveness of group work with children and adolescents. In fact, group counseling is one of the few areas in school counseling supported by a vast body of research. One example is Omizo, Herberger and Ormizo's (1988a) study that found that group counseling was very successful with children who displayed aggressive and hostile behaviors. Their cognitive–behavioral group incorporating role- plays and positive reinforcement resulted in a significant decrease in members' delinquent behaviors as rated by teachers. Similarly, Ormizo & Ormizo (1988b) found that group counseling involving role playing and peer discussion had positive effects on the locus of control of adolescents whose parents were divorcing. Moreover, in one study that examined the effects of a stress management group with high school students, results indicated positive benefits for students who reported high levels of emotional stress (Haines, 1994).

Research indicates that group work is just as effective, and in some cases, more effective than individual depending on the setting and the area of concern. For example, psycho-educational and counseling groups in the school setting have been found to increase children's and adolescents' adjustment to divorce, as well as improve study and social skills (Dagley et al., 1994; Gladding, 2003). Additionally, Prout & DeMartino (1986) found that group counseling was more effective than individual sessions in increasing academic performance. They also found evidence suggesting the greater efficacy of group and behavioral theory interventions and interventions that target observed behaviors and problem-solving skills.

In an expansive review of 56 outcome studies published between the years of 1974 and 1994, authors reported large effect sizes (.61) and support for group work with children and adolescents (Hoag & Burlingame, 1997; Whiston & Sexton, 1998). Conducting the only meta analysis focused specifically on group work, Hoag and Burlingame (1997) revealed that students who received group treatment could be placed at the 73rd percentile of those who did not. Thus, students who participated in a group treatment improved significantly more than students who were placed in a wait-list or placebo control group. Conducting the most recent review of the effectiveness of school-based groups, Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack (2007) concluded that adolescent group work is effective, particularly with topics such as divorce, school entry/change, and anxiety.

One study points to a mixed intervention of group *and* individual treatments as being most effective (Prout & Prout, 1998). Yet another study suggested that adolescent groups are more effectively conducted in a clinical setting rather than a school setting (Hoag & Burlingame, 1997). There are a variety of conclusions that can be generated on

about why some researchers find that groups are less effective in the school setting. Some of these reasons may be related to a, lack of a clear group purpose, a lack of leader alignment with member goals, and lack or little attention paid to developmental considerations. Other reasons may pertain to the school context. For instance, complicated bell schedules (e.g., 4x4 block, 6-period day, skinnies) inherent in secondary school settings, often result in an inconsistency in group settings, as well as frequency and duration of group meetings.

In groups in which research found to be effective, interventions generally focused on behavioral and cognitive-behavioral skills and group leaders worked to enhance problem-solving and interpersonal skills. Moreover, techniques utilized by group leaders were age appropriate, and interventions focused on the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional components of group members' presenting concerns. Finally, sound leader training and expertise in group processes appear to be two significant variables related to effective groups (Kulic et al., 2004). This is not a surprising revelation as group effectiveness often hinges on leader attention to group process and dynamics.

Nature of Counseling Interventions in School Settings

The American School Counselor Counseling Association's (ASCA) National model (2003) stipulates that a school counseling program should be developmental, preventative, and provide counseling services in a comprehensive manner in order to make best use of counselor time. Thus the school counseling profession has shifted from service delivery model to a more systemic and programmatic model. Additionally, the ASCA National Model suggests that school counselors spend 80% of their time providing direct services to students. Gone are the images of school counselors sitting in their

offices awaiting a student in crisis. School counselors are now expected to engage in comprehensive programming that impacts the academic, personal/social, and career success of *all* students (ASCA, 2005).

Distinct from the traditional therapeutic hour that many counselors in private practice enjoy, many school counseling interventions are brief. Short term interventions are necessary due to time constraints inherent in a school setting. Other factors that impede session duration include (a) large caseloads, (b) complicated academic schedules, and (c) teacher protection of instructional time (Baker & Gerler, 2008). Such logistical and time limitations have challenged many school counselors to seek interventions which are effective and cause minimal interference with class time.

Changes in the social, political, economic, and educational climates often results in a shift in school counseling focus (Paisley & Borders, 1995). Due to multiple educational reform movements, most recently No Child Left behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, the roles of professional school counselors have changed considerably (The Education Trust, 2004; Herr, 2002). School counselors face increasing demands to demonstrate that what they do is empirically based and effective (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Moreover, accountability movements have fueled school counselor efforts to seek more time efficient models of serving. Further, with teachers intensely focused on meeting their own accountability standards (AYP), there are less likely to be in favor of students missing valuable instructional time, unless it impacts academic achievement. Thus, school counselors must rely on efficient and effective treatment interventions that impact the most students.

Adolescents face distinct and varied challenges, personally and developmentally, that can impact their academic success. In this era of rapid societal change, high stakes testing, and multiple social demands, today's adolescents are understandably stressed and in need of school counseling services more than ever. While the jury may be out in regards to which treatment modality is "best". It is likely that some students will respond more favorably to one or the other intervention depending on students' goals, counselors' therapeutic style, and specific area of concern. Therefore, it makes sense that secondary school counselors intervene using a variety of empirically-based methods, specifically group work. However, school counselors, particularly at the secondary level, are more likely to intervene individually, or even in a classroom format, and *less* likely to conduct small groups (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Tennyson et. al, 1987). Given the desirable aspects of group work with adolescents, (peer interaction, risk taking, collaboration), the logistical advantages (efficiency), and the demonstrated efficacy (Hoag & Burlingame, 1997), group work appears to be a logical choice for addressing the various and complex academic, personal/social, and post-secondary concerns encountered by many adolescents.

Implications for Preparation and Training

Group Implementation

Effective group work in any format requires the implementation of quality services by well trained, process-oriented group leaders who recognize the power of groups (Kulic, et al., 2004). Overall, group work appears to be an effective intervention for assisting adolescents with a variety of concerns. Even with favorable ratings, there are areas of concern with regard to how groups are implemented in the secondary school

setting. For instance, research shows that there is great variability in what constitutes group work (e.g., group composition, purpose, length) in the school setting. Moreover, research has indicated that there is great variability in how school counselors conduct groups (e.g., group size, member selection, frequency of sessions) and their attention to content and process. This variability, perhaps, is due to secondary school counselors' lack of a clear understanding of the distinguishing features between group guidance and small group counseling. Counselor educators and supervisors could address this issue by first examining and understanding the manner in which practicing secondary school counselors conceptualize group work and how those terms are used. A consensus should arise about what term is most appropriate and how to use each concept accurately.

Also, Counselor Educators and District Coordinators can collaborate to provide periodic in-service training that will be useful in refreshing veteran and novice secondary school counselors about effective group leadership, and group work principles and dynamics. Moreover, schools are settings in which secondary school counselors regularly participate in several types of groups including task groups (e.g., parent teacher conferences, administrative meetings) and counseling groups (e.g., academic, anxiety, family change) (Paisley & Milson, 2007). Therefore, the pervasiveness, variation, and distinguishing characteristics of different types of group work in the secondary school settings may require additional training considerations beyond what is currently offered.

Developmental Considerations

School counseling preparation programs must equip trainees with the knowledge to meet the developmental needs of children and adolescents. In order to meet such developmental needs, secondary school counselors must be keenly aware and

knowledgeable of the complex cognitive, emotional, and social factors that affect the maturation of their group members. In addition, secondary school counselors must be knowledgeable of how developmental factors such as gender, age, intrapersonal, and cognitive abilities impacts the group process and dynamics.. For example, the adolescent developmental stage ranges from early (11-14) to mid and late adolescents (15-18) and knowledge of this impacts such factors as group size, composition and duration. Secondary school counselors must commit themselves to designing and implementing developmental group counseling programs that include group activities that meet members developmental needs. There is a need for increased school counselor training on developmental and preventative considerations in regards to effective group work with adolescents. Accordingly, school counseling training programs should consider working to further enhance the differentiation of group work principles and interventions by grade level, and increase trainees' knowledge and understanding of preventative approaches to group work. Clarifications of these issues will provide novice school counselors relevant information and an increased degree of self-efficacy as they prepare to serve a variety of students in groups.

Multicultural considerations

As today's secondary school counselors continue to face increasingly diverse student populations, school counselor preparation programs must train students to understand how issues of diversity can profoundly affect group process, dynamics, and facilitation. For example, oppressive, sexist and homophobic language and attitudes, and culturally based pathology that go unnoticed or unaddressed by the group leader may have damaging and lasting effects on group dynamics and cohesion (Ginter & Robinson,

1999). Paisley and McMahon (2001) cited the importance of multicultural counseling competencies in the preparation of counselors and ASGW (1998) endorsed a document outlining principles for diversity-competent group workers. However, many counselor preparation programs offer only one course in multicultural counseling and one course in group counseling. In spite of limited course offerings, multicultural and diversity issues in group work are becoming increasingly salient for school counselors facing changing school demographics. Moreover, during periods of rapidly changing demographics and cultural transitions, professional school counselors are uniquely qualified to provide group work designed to improve student relations and understanding of racial, ethnic, and sexually diverse groups. Therefore, an increased focus on multicultural group dynamics in counselor preparation programs will improve secondary school counselors' understanding and effectiveness in working with diverse adolescents in groups.

Accountability & Assessment

Accordingly, given the era of accountability, secondary school counselors must document their contributions to the school mission and overall student achievement (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). With today's emphasis on high-stakes testing, teachers are less willing to allow students to miss class time and secondary school counselors, in particular, are finding it increasingly difficult to gain access to students for individual meetings. Given this fact and the high student-to-counselor ratio, it is the belief of the first author that group work provides a method for reaching more students in the same amount of time. Group work has been long associated with increasing belongingness which has been linked with academic achievement (Goodenow, 1991:1992; Osterman, 2000). Moreover, several groups have been shown to increase academic success (Prout &

DeMartino, 1998). For example, group interventions focused on specific academic skills has been shown to assist students with whose ability is average or greater to improve academically (Thompson, 2002). According to Schectman (2002), group counseling is one of the most promising interventions for school counselors who wish to show the impact of their services on student achievement.

School reform initiatives emphasize the importance of program evaluation; yet current literature is indicative of school counselors' overall hesitance to assess. This hesitancy may be due to a number of factors including, lack of time, training or the lack of reliable and valid group assessment instruments (Astramovich, Coker & Hoskins, 2005). School counselor preparation programs must provide trainees with experience with group evaluation. More examples of practical, school-based group assessment techniques is needed in both group and assessment courses. While the breadth of reliable and valid group assessment instruments is limited, step-by-step action research models can help facilitate counselors ease into and comfort with group work evaluation (Mason & Uwah, 2007).

Directions for Future Research

Current research delineates the many advantages of group work in the school setting, as well as the importance of increased empirical studies measuring the outcomes of group interventions. Continued study of this treatment modality is important, especially as counselor-student ratios continue to rise. This manuscript began by addressing the relevant literature on group work with adolescents, the distinguishing features of typical groups ran by school counselors and therapeutic factors that fuel change in adolescents who participate in groups.

Outcome studies utilizing multiple comparison groups comparing different group interventions for specific concerns have increased overall knowledge about what type of group intervention works with what type of population and under what condition. However, these studies have primarily been conducted with adults. The development of the child and adolescent group literature is still bourgeoning. Although accountability and outcome research has provided evidence regarding the effectiveness of group work with adolescents, there remains a paucity of knowledge in the literature in regards to the specific variables associated with effective group work with children and adolescents (Hoag & Burlingame, 1997). In other words, while research strongly suggests that group work is an effective intervention, authors assert that more research is needed to investigate which interventions are most effective for each presenting concern and with which student population (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007). Such a failure to identify and thoroughly analyze characteristics of effective group work eliminates the identification of the unique characteristics or the "magical" power of group work not present in individual interventions. Clarification of this characteristic will lead to further research adding a significant and needed contribution to the child and adolescent group literature

Another area for future research is multicultural group counseling. Many school counselors have undergone multicultural training in an effort to understand the specific issues faced by diverse groups and to learn appropriate counseling approaches (Sue & Sue, 2003). Additionally, school counselor training programs are charged with developing multicultural competent school counselors. However, school counselor training programs struggle to demonstrate if their efforts not only increase school

counselor trainee's awareness and case conceptualization skills, but also their practical skills in working with diverse student populations in groups. Very little data currently exists that indicates whether the multicultural training has translated to group principles and has impacted their actual work with students. For that reason, additional measurable accountability data is needed in order for school counselor education programs to assess their efforts toward increased multicultural competence among school counselor trainees working with diverse group members.

Another less frequently explored topic in the school counseling literature is school counselors' perceptions of group work. While there is evidence that indicates that counselors see the value, worth, and importance of group work, there is a glaring disconnect with the numbers of school counselors who actually practice group work (Dansby, 1996). Future research should explore the attitudes and perceptions of secondary school counselors who engage in group work, and how these perceptions influence the perceived quality of the actual group experience.

Moreover, very little is known about group leader experiences. Future research should continue to explore the experiences of professional school counselors who regularly engage in group work. Studies should explore not only their experiences, but also perceptions of what elements make up an effective group. Qualitative and longitudinal studies may be beneficial to provide a deeper understanding of the unique experiences of secondary school counselors who engage in group work. Continued research and training interventions are warranted to strengthen understanding and implementation of effective group work principles at the secondary level. Such

interventions may serve as a bridge between practice and school counselor training in regards to best practices in group work with adolescents.

Conclusion

Professional secondary school counselors continue to face a myriad of challenges in response to contextual and social issues that affects all students and their families. In addition, the role and function of the school counselor has been developed in response to various societal influences, most recently school reform movements (The Education Trust, 1997; Myrick, 1997; NCLB). As secondary school counselors continue to struggle internally on best to define their role and use their time (Paisley & McMahon, 2001), group work has been and remains an essential component of a responsive and preventative comprehensive program. In conjunction, enhancing adolescents' thinking, feeling, problem-solving, and relationship building skills is critical for their survival in this increasingly changing world. These skills transcend racial, ethnic, and gender boundaries and can mitigate many potential negative circumstances. Efforts at group counseling by secondary school counselors, when properly implemented, will promote adolescents sense of belonging, cooperation, and collaboration, thereby enhancing their potentials for success in this rapidly complex world.

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CHAPTER 2

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS' EXPERIENCES ENGAGING IN GROUP WORK

Introduction

In light of the current outcomes-focused initiatives in education and the emphasis on accountability, school counselors are increasingly asked to increase their efficiency and demonstrate the impact of their services on student achievement (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). School reform initiatives such as the No Child Left behind (NCLB) Act (US Department of Education, 2001) and the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI; The Education Trust, 2007) have encouraged a greater and more strategic focus on academic achievement of *all* students. Group work is part of the delivery system endorsed by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) as an effective responsive service offered by school counselors to address the personal/social and academic needs of all students (2005). Additionally, group work has been found to be a valuable intervention and serves as a cornerstone for any comprehensive developmental guidance curriculum (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Myrick, 2002). Furthermore, group counseling has been known to promote student learning and achievement (Goodnough & Lee, 2004; Prout & DeMartino, 1986).

Group work, by its nature, embodies social characteristics representing the environment in which they are formed (Trotzer, 1999). Likewise, according to Gazda (1968), groups are a "microcosm of social reality" (p.1). Hence, the social environment

of counseling groups presents a transferable quality that heightens the probability of successful change outside of group. This element of *transferability*, unique to group work, remains a significant and powerful therapeutic asset (Trotzer). The power of groups, in addition, rests on the influence of its members. While peer influence is certainly apparent with child and adult members, it may be particularly more salient during adolescence. Professional school counselors working with adolescents are increasingly seeking creative and effective ways of integrating academic interventions with personal/social objectives into small groups (Steen & Kaffenberger, 2007). An integration of academic and personal/social objectives into small group work can serve to demonstrate the impact school counselors have on school success, a noteworthy contribution particularly in this era of accountability.

Group Work and Adolescent Development

The advantages of group work with adolescents have been well documented in the school counseling literature (Dagley, Gazda, Eppinger, & Stewert, 1994; Kulic, Dagley, & Horne). Some authors note that the developmental characteristics associated with adolescence make groups an appealing intervention with adolescents (Kulic, Horne, & Dagley, 2004). Adolescence is a stage in which the peer group is highly influential and peer interaction can bring clear benefits. For example, the peer group is a source of cognitive growth as it can support adolescents' developmental of reasoning skills, and also significantly impact identity development (Azmita & Cooper, 2001). Due to this increased focus on peer relations, groups are a viable method of working with students dealing with a variety of concerns (Dies, 2000). As adolescents naturally turn to peers for affirmation, information and connectedness, groups provide secondary school counselors

a powerful means for intervening, thereby helping to promote academic and social adjustment (Akos, Hamm, Mack, & Dunaway, 2007)

Therapeutic Elements of Adolescent Group Work

Many of the therapeutic factors thought to facilitate change are related to themes that appear in adolescent development (Yalom, 1995). Specifically, factors such as cohesion, universality, interpersonal learning, and modeling are thought to enable students to express themselves, test limits, and develop a greater sense of belonging, identity and intimacy (Shechtman, 2004). Additionally, Yalom asserts that concerns that are most appropriate for group work include interpersonal issues, feelings of isolation and meaningless, anxiety, and fear of failure. Adolescents are likely dealing with issues related to appropriately managing emotions, relationships, and identity within their social contexts. Whereas individual counseling is beneficial with certain presenting concerns, groups provide the unique advantage of providing a safe environment for which students can address concerns within the relational context in which they often occur (Paisley & Milson, 2007). Additionally, adolescent preoccupation with self may lead to doubts and concerns about self and one's presentation of self to others. An increased sense of understanding may help to reduce barriers and defense mechanisms that many adolescents uphold (Berg, Landreth & Fall, 2006). This shift in self-image can result in more healthy and socially appropriate behaviors. While it is unlikely that group counseling will completely eliminate adolescent self-preoccupation, groups provide adolescents a safe space in which to be vulnerable and practice risk taking.

Is Adolescent Group Work Effective?

Most research on counseling groups for adolescents has been conducted in schools. Although still emerging, outcome research suggests that group counseling is an effective intervention for treating adolescents with certain concerns and, overall, is just as effective as individual counseling (Dagley et al., 1994; Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007; Hoag & Burlingame, 1997; Kulic, Dagley & Horne, 2001). While literature supports the efficacy of groups, authors assert that more research is needed to investigate which interventions are most effective for which presenting concern and with which population (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack). Overall, however, researchers endorse group work as an effective, research-based method of serving a large number of students.

Secondary School Counselors' Underutilization of Groups

Despite endorsement of group work and its documented benefits, studies consistently show that, oddly enough, group counseling is not an intervention frequently employed in the high school setting (Dansby, 1996; Steen, Bauman, & Smith, 2007; Tennyson, Miller, Skovalt, & Williams, 1987). Students across all grade levels report meeting with their counselors more frequently in individual sessions rather than in large or small group sessions (Dansby). Several explanations have been offered for school counselors' lack of engagement with group counseling. Lack of time, limited access to students, and a perceived lack of group training are cited as some of the primary obstacles to conducting groups (Carroll, 1985; Dansby). However, perhaps the most salient reason pertains to school counselors' low degree of self-efficacy regarding understanding of the group counseling process and principles (Dansby; Trotzer, 1999). As Danzer (1996) points out, the apparent belief in and value of group work that school counselors espouse

is incongruent with actual practice. Invariably, group counseling is placed relatively low on the priority list, particularly for secondary school counselors. These studies suggest a more idealistic and less pragmatic view of group work in the secondary school setting.

Related to this incongruence is that, moreover, the high school environment provides unique challenges and impediments for school counselors who do engage in group work (Schmidt, 1999). For instance, complicated academic schedules, teacher protection of instructional time, and lack of administrative understanding and support are just a few challenges that many secondary school counselors face (Baker & Gerler, 2008). Further, some secondary school counselors perceive that the intensely academic climate of the high school setting is not conducive to the type of environment necessary for group counseling implementation (Schmidt).

Previous Research

Research related to secondary school counselors' experiences conducting groups is limited. Previous outcome studies have primarily investigated school counselors' general utilization of groups (Dagley et al., 1994) with specific studies examining the efficacy of groups with targeted populations (e.g., Goodenough & Ripley, 1996; Zinck & Littrell, 2000). Additionally, the work that has been published is more procedural-based or training-oriented. Specifically, articles providing strategies for planning and implementation in a school setting are prevalent in the adolescent group work literature. (e.g., Muller, 2000; Ripley & Goodenough, 2001). While reviews comparing the effectiveness of one treatment or theory versus the other are helpful in contributing to our general understanding of group work, these studies do not explore the meaning attributed to group process and dynamics for those school counselors who do engage in group work.

More recently, Steen Bauman, & Smith (2007), utilized an online survey to examine the group work practices of professional school counselors at all levels. However, very little is still known about secondary school counselors' experience with, and specifically, their conceptualization and perceptions of group work.

Beyond training purposes, this research advances the present knowledge of scholars, educators, administrators, and other stakeholders by acquainting them with the topic, as well as updating present literature in the field. Further, this study provides a forum for secondary school counselors to voice their concerns, struggles and triumphs in order to allow for a better understanding of their experiences.

Purpose of Study

Considering the changing role of the school counselor, and adolescents' need to belong, group work can be an appealing choice for secondary school counselors seeking to make an impact on students' personal success and academic achievement. In addition, given the rising demands of accountability and the numerous advantages to group work, it would seem logical that secondary school counselors engage more in group work. Yet, many secondary school counselors report reluctance to doing group work (Bowman & Dansby, 1996). Additionally, since no known qualitative research to date has been conducted investigating current secondary school counselors' perceptions regarding group work and their perceived challenges and barriers to conducting group work, the information obtained can be rich. Attention to these issues will not only direct future research in group work, but could provide Counselor Educators and school counseling District Coordinators with significant insight for the development of training strategies to

assist secondary school counselors in furthering their understanding and effective use of group work principles, processes, and strategies, thereby improving current practices.

Thus, the purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study is to (a) explore secondary school counselors' (SSC) experiences engaging in group work, (b) describe their conceptualization of group work (c) describe their attitudes and perceptions toward group work, and (d) examine what SSC perceive, if any, as major barriers and/or challenges to engaging in group work.

Given the paucity of information regarding this topic, a phenomenological approach will allow for an in-depth exploration of their experiences and perspectives. The distinct advantage of qualitative methodology is that it allows for a detailed, multifaceted exploration of a phenomenon, grounded in the world-view, vocabulary, and context-specific experiences of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Phenomenological researchers contend that unique characteristics of consciousness require a distinct scientific method, utilizing data collection procedures designed specifically for developing general descriptions of individual experiential processes (Giorgi, 1994; Moustakas,1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). Whereas phenomenological researchers in various disciplines agree that there are some basic guidelines, they assert that the methods and design should be flexible and adapted to suit the phenomenon under investigation (Giorgi).

In this study, I used procedures for organizing and analyzing data as suggested by Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology allows researchers to develop an "essence" through aggregating subjective experiences of a number of individuals. It is most useful when the researcher has identified a

phenomenon to understand, and has individuals who can provide descriptions of their experiences (Moustakas). The guiding question for the current study is: What are the experiences of secondary school counselors who conduct groups?

Method

Participants

Participants included 18 secondary school counselors employed by various schools within four diverse school districts in the southeastern part of the United States. Participants were between the ages of 25 and 58 (mean age 37.38). Sixteen participants were female and two were male. The participants were from diverse racial and ethnic groups. Six identified as African American, eleven identified as Caucasian or White, one identified as Latino. Ten participants reported earning a master's degrees, and the remaining participants reported earning either a Specialist degree (seven participants) or a doctorate (one participant). Seven of the participants reported between 1 and 5 years of experience, eight had between 6 and 10 years of experience, and three had 12 years or more. Thirteen of the participants worked in a suburban school setting, while the remaining five worked in urban settings.

Procedure

Essential criteria for recruitment in phenomenology require that participants have experience with the phenomenon and are willing to articulate their experiences (Moustaks, 1994). Relying on that rationale, purposeful sampling procedures in the form of purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit participants (Creswell, 1998). First, the Primary Researcher (PI) forwarded email-invitation flyers to District Counseling Supervisors and department chairs at several counties in a large metropolitan

city in the Southeast. Efforts were made to achieve maximum variance in regards to race/ethnicity, age, gender, years of experience, and school setting. With the initial contact, the PI described the purpose and design of the study. The PI explained the Informed Consent detailing potential benefits and risks of the study. Twenty-four individuals contacted the PI by email about participating in the study. The PI conducted a brief screening interview *via* email and telephone to determine eligibility for participation. Four individuals did not meet the study's criteria (three had not conducted a group in the past year, and one was a middle school counselor). Additionally, two school counselors expressed interest, but were unable to participate due to scheduling conflicts. Four participated in an initial focus group, and an independent sample of 14 participated in individual interviews. The PI requested that two members of the focus group also participate in a follow-up individual interview. While both agreed, only one was able to participate, as the other member suffered a tragedy due to severe weather conditions.

Data Sources

The three main data sources included a demographic questionnaire, a focus group, and individual interviews. Individual interviews and focus groups are useful in exploratory and descriptive research seeking to obtain the opinions, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of research participants (Krueger, 1994). Individual interviews can provide a means for understanding participants' perceptions of a unique or specific experience or event. In addition, a focus group, according to Kress & Shoffner (2007), is an efficient intervention that promotes the exploration and exchange of salient issues and attitudes that are potentially beneficial for a number of participants. The utilization of focus groups ties naturally with many counseling philosophies as it provides a respect for varying

perspectives, an encouraging, inviting stance, and a search for deep understanding (Paisley & Reeves, 2001).

Demographic questionnaire. Each participant completed a screening questionnaire, which requested the following information: race/ethnicity, sex, age, highest degree earned, school setting, and number of years of school counseling experience, the number of formal or informal training experiences related to group work, and a list of groups they have engaged in within the past school year. Participants were also asked to identify any professional counseling or group work memberships (Appendix A).

Focus Group. The first phase of the study was a 120-minute focus group facilitated by the PI in a private, confidential space located on the campus of a southeastern university. Light refreshments were served. The session was audio recorded and responses were transcribed, analyzed, and used to generate more focused questions for the subsequent individual interviews (Appendix B). At the end of the focus group, members were asked if they would be willing, if necessary, to participate in a brief follow-up interview once the interviews had been transcribed. All of the participants in the focus group consented to participate in the follow-up interview.

Interviews. Phase 2 of the study included a *total* of 15 individual interviews, including 14 new participants and a follow-up interview with a focus group member. The PI conducted 15, 60 to 80-minute interviews using an interview guide with a series of open-ended semi-structured questions (Appendix C). Individual interview questions were informed by relevant group work and school counseling literature and were revised and refined based on members' responses from the focus group. The initial question asked

participants to discuss what role group work played in their school counseling program. The remaining questions, each drawn from relevant literature, touched primarily on three topics: conceptualizations, perceptions, and barriers. Finally, participants were asked about perceived qualities that led them to continue to facilitate groups, (e.g. “According to the literature, most secondary school counselors do not engage in group work, what makes you different?”) and their overall experience participating in the study, (e.g. “What was this experience like for you, discussing group work?”). All interviews were recursive and designed to clarify and elaborate on responses from previous interviews and emerging themes. The PI audio recorded and transcribed each interview.

Member Checking. Phase 3 of the study included an opportunity for participants to provide a check of data analysis and interpretations. Transcriptions and summaries of emerging themes and subthemes were presented *via* email, and participants were asked to confirm or deny, and check the accuracy of the descriptions. This phase was utilized to strengthen the trustworthiness of the initial and subsequent data analyses.

The Researcher’s Role. From the initial formulation of the research topic to the process of data collection and analysis, qualitative research is highly influenced by the primary investigator (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), hence, a discussion of the characteristics of the PI is warranted, if not vital. The researcher identifies herself as a female, early 30’s, and a former secondary school counselor. The PI is also a facilitator of group work and an instructor of a master’s level Group Counseling course. As such, the researcher acknowledges a strong endorsement of the field of school counseling and the specialty of group work. These and other factors have the potential to influence how she views the data; thereby prompting a need to address various biases and assumptions that may arise.

Epoché/Reflexive Journaling. Epoché, a Greek word meaning, "to stay away from or abstain," is the first step of the phenomenological reduction process. Prior to the start of data collection and using the exact focus group questions, a former school counselor interviewed the PI in order to set aside biases, prejudgments, and previous assumptions of the phenomenon. The interview was transcribed and contents were discussed. This step is conducted to help ensure that focus is fully on the perspectives offered by the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, the PI kept a reflective journal throughout the interview and data analysis processes of recorded biases, assumptions, and reactions (Creswell, 1998).

Research Team. The PI sought collaborative assistance in the data analysis portion of the study from members of the research team. The research team was comprised of two Counselor Education doctoral students who are experienced in school counseling and/or phenomenology research methods. One member was a female, who specialized in phenomenological research methods and group work. The other member was male, a middle school counseling department chair, and an expert group worker. Finally, the research team was supervised by a Counselor Education faculty member with a specialty in school counseling and group work. In an attempt to address potential biases and assumptions, the research team utilized a rigorous study design with multiple layers of verification checks that will be outlined in detail in the following section.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) outlines a specific six-stage process of analysis: Stage 1, *Epoché*, began with the PI describing and recording her experiences with the phenomenon, utilizing focus group questions. Stage 2, *Holistic understanding of raw*

data, occurred when PI read the transcribed data repeatedly to achieve a holistic understanding. The PI summarized the content of each interview, highlighting unique statements. Stage 3: *Horizontalization* occurred as the research team identified and highlighted significant (non-repetitive, non-overlapping) statements that provided an understanding of the overall experience. The PI transferred the statements to a table to demonstrate the range of perspectives about the phenomenon. Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to *reflect* on two questions: "When you consider your experience with group work, what are some examples of your experiences?" and, "What situations typically influence your experience with group work?" According to Moustakas (1994), the first question allows researchers to build a textural description and the second question, a structural description. Responses were analyzed for texture and structure. Texture refers to the feelings, thoughts, images, of the phenomenon as it appears in every day life. Structure is the part of the phenomenon that does not vary. Structure evokes and precipitates feelings and thoughts. The researcher's goal was to sift through the texture to get to the structure. The research team, then, clustered the statements into meaning units and emerging themes. Stage 4: *Thematic analysis*. The research team met, in-person, after every two interviews for eight weeks, to review the coded transcripts, examine themes, and identify contexts in which they appear. Specific coding procedures will be detailed in the following section. For the last eight interviews, the research team met weekly to finalize classifications of themes and establish inter-rater-consensus. Stage 5, *Searching the Thematic Index,* the PI then provided a description of "what" was experienced in textural descriptions, and "how" it was experienced in structural descriptions. (Moustakas).

The last stage, Stage 6: *Synthesis* resulted following the re-exploration of the data whereby the research team independently used frequency counts to determine an overall idea of the salient experiences of each participant, and then for the entire sample. The research team reconvened to discuss summaries of major themes and gain consensus for each theme. The PI asked then asked the team to reflect upon and identify specific situations, individuals, and events that spoke to each major experience/theme. The PI, then, synthesized themes into a description of the experiences of each participant. A composite description of the meanings and the essences of the experiences were constructed. Finally, textual and structural descriptions were synthesized into a composite description of the phenomenon through the research process referred as "intuitive integration" (Moustakas 1994, p. 100).

Coding Procedures

A grounded theory approach, also, guided the rigorous coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The coding process was conducted by the PI and the two members of the research team, and occurred in four distinct steps. In step one; transcripts were initially evaluated to achieve a holistic understanding of the raw data. The team conducted a blind, line-by-line coding process, in which each member individually assessed each transcript. Open coding was utilized to reduce data into meaning units (Moustakas, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After every two transcripts, the team would meet in person to discuss their thoughts, initial interpretations, and emergent themes. A constant comparative method of analysis was utilized in which coded units of meaning were compared with other coded units and concepts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Units of meaning, broad concepts, and emergent themes were gradually grouped into larger categories. After consensus was

reached, the team began to construct a common code book. The team then used the code book to individually code every transcript. The initial code book resulted in 78 separate codes.

In step three, the research team met weekly and compared codes throughout each transcript to establish consensus. The process was then repeated with each transcript until all emerging themes were included in the code book. The completed code book consisted of four broad categories of themes, each one containing several subthemes to capture the essence of the participants' experiences. Saturation is generally determined when no new themes emerge (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). While saturation was reached after the 13th individual interview, the PI felt it was important to commit to the last two scheduled interviews, in order to ensure that each willing participant voice be heard.

The fourth and final step of the coding process was a confirmatory step to ensure that the final themes were sufficient, understood, and easily identifiable by each team member. The PI began this process by forwarding, *via* email, the definition and description of each theme and requested that the research team return to each transcript, and line by line, identify participant quotes that capture that experience. Consensus criteria required that all raters are in agreement about each designated quote for inclusion in the study. From that process an additional consensus was reached. Throughout this coding process, emphasis was placed on capturing participants' subjective experiences rather than imposing the biases and assumptions of the research team.

Trustworthiness

One measure of good qualitative research is the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two key components of trustworthiness in qualitative research

are credibility (i.e., the appropriateness and accuracy of the data sources and interpretations) and dependability (i.e., the reliability of the coding procedures). Several steps were taken to establish credibility including criterion sampling and member checking. Moreover, triangulation of the data (e.g., demographic sheet, reflexive journal, interview and focus group data) occurred in which researchers attempted to analyze data from multiple sources in order to overcome the weakness or intrinsic biases that could potentially come from one source. Finally, dependability was addressed through use of an audit trail which detailed the record keeping procedures of the study so that an independent examiner could review step-by-step how data were analyzed and how conclusions were reached.

Findings

Findings from data analysis revealed four major themes: *Meaningful Relationships*, *Staff Response*, *Challenges*, and *Encouraging Feedback*. All 18 participants were represented in each theme. Additionally, 11 sub themes emerged related to their group work experiences (See Table 1). First, overall themes that capture the experiences of the participant sample are described. Next, individual sub-themes are discussed and examples given. Thirdly, quotes illustrating participants' experiences will be offered to support these themes. Lastly, implications and directions for future research will be discussed.

Meaningful Relationships

The first theme, "meaningful relationships" describes the overall sense of closeness, or connectedness (specifically an emotional connection) experienced between and among group members, and between the SSC and the group members. Participants

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Topics and Their Defining Characteristics

Themes, Subthemes, & Topics	*Defining Characteristics*
Meaningful Relationships Subthemes 1. Facilitating Relationships Among Members 2. Building Deeper Relationships 3. Gaining Access	Refers to an overall sense of closeness, or connectedness (specifically an emotional connection) experienced among group members, and between the SSC and individual group members.
Staff Response Subthemes 1. Reluctance 2. Empty/Shallow Support 3. Cooperative	Refers to the perceived messages SSC received by members of the school community in response to their expressed interest in group implementation.
Challenges Subthemes 1. Systemic Barriers a.) Time b.) Expectations 1. Other duties 2. Departmental expectations 2. Internal Struggles a.) Fear of Inadequacy 1. Managing Group Dynamics 2. Comfort Level with Topics 3. Group Facilitative Skills 4. Sense of Vulnerability	Refers to the various external and internal challenges participants' perceived to have negatively affected their experiences with group work.
Encouraging Feedback Subthemes 1. Student Engagement a) Contribution b) Engagement c) Commitment/Ownership 2. Outcome Data a.) Measurable b.) Informal c.) Intuitive 3. Planting Seeds/Installation of Hope	Refers to experiences in which participants felt facilitated their enjoyment of, and positive perceptions of group work. Such experiences inspired and raised the confidence of participants and helped to buffer effects of external barriers.

also identified three subthemes: *facilitating relationships among members*, *building deeper relationships* with members, and *gaining access*.

Between members. Relationship was not a term mentioned within the interview protocol. However, 100% of the 18 participants interviewed overwhelmingly perceived the bond formed between and amongst group members to be a valuable and an essential component of group work. While discussing the bonding that occurred between members of a bi-racial support group, one female participant stated:

> I'll have to say when the relationships are forming…the way they are relying on each other for support. They are sharing their experiences of being biracial that their other peers outside of the group don't have. They are processing the events that happen to them, the names that they are called…the relationships [formed] are important.

Another participant who worked at an alternative high school for students with significant discipline and attendance concerns, recalled a story of an impactful member – to-member interaction. She insisted that:

> When I can think back…the best scenario is when you had a kid who was a higher functioning kid and just happened to be in the mix, and they would kinda challenge the other kids and stir things up a bit. And, you would really see something kind of click in them.

Building deeper relationships. While SSC were able to make contact with students in various ways, more than 50% of the participants indicated that groups were an avenue to get to know students not only differently, but also on a deeper level. One participant shared the following:

> The best thing is developing deeper relationships than I would get by just being their school counselor or signing transcripts, or someone who walks in their classroom and delivers a guidance lesson once a year. That ongoing, deeper relationship [is meaningful].

Additionally, four participants discussed how conducting groups provided *access* to students that they may have never have met otherwise. For instance:

> I can't tell you how often that after a group meeting--and it can be completely innocuous, that someone is going to feel comfortable, then, to come in and talk about a much deeper problem. I'm a firm believer that this [groups] opens doors.

Another participant discussed how this initial connection often led to an opportunity to be of service:

> I do enjoy the fact that the members feel connected to me as someone helpful in the building….when the group is over then they know that they can come and we can try to be helpful. I like that part of it.

Gaining access to a variety of students along with building and enhancing relationships appeared to be a significant motivating factor for SSC who implemented groups. Such relationships, once formed, helped to strengthen member connections with each other and with their school counselor.

Staff Response

The theme "Staff response" refers to the perceived messages SSC received by members of the school community in response to their expressed interest in group implementation. Despite aforementioned positive statements regarding the creation of meaningful relationships, a majority of the participants expressed difficulties they experienced obtaining wholehearted staff support or buy-in for group work. Related feelings expressed by participants were "discouraged", "frustrated", and "supported". Three subthemes were identified: *Reluctance*, *Empty/ shallow support*, and *Cooperative*.

Reluctance. Three participants indicated negative administrator and teacher response towards group implementation. For example, three participants reported that, while their administrators did not prevent them from conducting groups, they would

make "sarcastic" or ridiculing comments such as, "Oh, yeah, good luck with that." Or, they discouraged efforts of potential group implementation with, "You have these ideas but I don't know that they are realistic." Six participants conveyed confused and frustrated feelings regarding teachers' unwillingness to release students for group. For example,

> I kinda got some resistance…one teacher in particular was very adamant about not pulling the kids for a large period of time during the day because they were already failing. The teacher was like, "Why pull them out if they are failing?" I'm like 'Well, they are not getting it anyway and it's better for them to come to the group to understand graduation requirements, the results, the effects of not doing well in school and living in poverty the rest of their lives!
>
> When asked how she processed that event, the counselor disclosed:
>
> That was hard because I had never really faced opposition with anything that I was trying to do…and I kinda felt a little defensive, a little put out, a little like, 'Don't you see the effects of everything that I'm doing?' It kind of diminished…it kind of made me second guess myself like 'Is there something I should be doing? Or, how do I prove to people that these groups are really what they need to be.

Another notable experience related to perceived staff reluctance was revealed. Several participants shared that as counselors who conduct groups, they were often considered atypical within their own departments, and therefore did not receive the support they would have wanted from fellow counselors. Following the death of a popular student, one counselor expressed disappointment in the lack of support she received from her colleagues around her desire to implement grief groups:

> We had a big death here. It was a football player. It affected the whole school. It was, I mean it was big. After that happened, I started mentioning to some of the kids that I work with that I would be doing groups later. I suggested [to the other counselors] that all three lunch periods do it. And, nothing has happened. Nothing has happened. Not any of them. Some of the other counselors say, "Oh, well so and so, and so and so didn't have any interest." I just decided to just check out with them because I knew some of the kids too. I emailed the teachers and asked

> if they could miss the last 30 minute part of the period. They've given permission to do it. So, I'm going to go ahead and do it (*sighs*).

Whereas many participants indicated that staff were generally obliging of group work; several indicated that staff, specifically, administration offered shallow or empty support, evidenced by a lack of resources such as time, space, and funds that participants deemed necessary for group implementation. The issue of displacement was also a concern, as one participant lamented:

> We've had some problems, because I think everybody wants us to run groups so they can say, "The counselors run groups and are doing stuff." But, they don't really want to give up the space or if anything happens we are the first ones to be moved from the room. One of the APs said, "We understand that you want to use this room but it's awkward because if we have students fighting, we want to use that room." I'm like yeah, 'It's awkward for me as well'…but most of ours has been logistic problems, trying to get space, room, and get them to be respectful of that.

Cooperative. While such events elicited feelings of discouragement in several participants, the majority of the participants did not experience direct resistance. Rather, staff was thought to be generally approving of groups. In fact, six stated that teachers and administrators were cooperative, "The teachers are very good about letting kids out" and "We've always had really good administrative support." In some cases, participants reported that administration actually encouraged specific groups, "They'd like us to do more anger groups."

While all the SSC received specific messages regarding staff response to group implementation, those messages, overall, were mixed. Some experienced reluctance from staff in the form of ridiculing remarks or disinclination from teachers and fellow counselors, while others professed staff cooperation and encouragement.

Challenges

Participants expressed general concerns related to a variety of external and internal challenges that negatively impacted their group work experiences. Related feelings expressed were “over-taxed,” “frustrated,” fear,” and “incompetent.” Participants identified two subthemes: *systemic barriers* and *internal challenges*.

Systemic Barriers. Participants often discussed perceived external or systemic barriers. Systemic barriers are practices that restrict or inhibit participants from conducting more groups or the types of groups that they deemed necessary for students. Participants identified the following two topics: *Time*, and *Expectations*, which includes two subtopics: *expectations for other duties* and *departmental expectations*.

Time. Time constraints were, overwhelmingly, a barrier experienced by all of the participants. Each participant acknowledged that time was a precious commodity and one of which they were lacking. Also, the perceived lack of time seemed to conflict with their individual conceptualization of what is considered an effective group. For example, one participant shared the challenges of maintaining a consistent group schedule:

> The time commitment. It’s just having that set time. If it didn’t have to be once a week, or once every day, that would be fine (*laughs*) but to get the most out of it, it needs to be on a regular schedule. And, that is difficult with my schedule.

Expectations. The issue of time appeared to be closely related to the multiple duties and obligations that many secondary school counselors juggle. Expectations for other duties including administrative tasks such as scheduling, testing, and coordination left little time for groups. While listing the many demands she faces in a high school setting, one participant, in her 9th year as a school counselor stated:

> All of the demands at the county office: principals, parents, teachers, everybody wants a piece of the guidance counselor--school counselor--

> community agencies. We're being pulled from all over. So much rides on the high school counselor.

Departmental Expectations. "Departmental expectations" refer to the overall implicit and explicit message participants received within their departments about the priority given to group work. As they shared their experiences, it became evident that over 60% of the participants were the only counselors within their departments facilitating groups. Two participants disclosed the difficulty they faced implementing groups, while being the only counselors within the departments doing so: "If the whole department doesn't make groups a priority and keep the expectation that you will do groups…it is so easy to get snowed under the avalanche of stuff that you just won't get to it." One SSC, who resides in a department that historically has implemented groups, discussed specific issues unique to working within a team. He spoke about feeling guilty and hesitant to run groups when other counselors weren't:

> I think when you work in a team setting everyone expects you to be pulling your own weight. By definition we have to do some things at the same time. If I'm not doing my senior meetings because I'm doing groups…then the other counselors are going to be like, "Wait a minute, what about the good things that I want to take care of too?"

The multiple roles and the increasing demands of a high school counselor often left many participants feeling stretched and wondering how to incorporate groups into their busy schedules. All participants spoke of being overwhelmed by their numerous responsibilities. Lack of time, expectations for other duties, and departmental expectations were just a few external factors that limited SSC engagement with groups.

Internal Struggles. In addition to systemic barriers, a great deal of energy surrounded the subtheme "Internal struggles." These were challenges that appeared to have significantly shaped participants' group work experiences. Subtopics include

feelings of inadequacy pertaining to *managing group dynamics*, *comfort level with topics*, and a *sense of vulnerability*.

Managing group dynamics. All of the participants relayed stories of moments within sessions when members were disengaged, disruptive, distracted or derailed onto another topic. For two participants, attempting to gain student commitment to and engagement in group posed a challenge. When asked to cite examples, one participant laughed uncomfortably as she responded:

> When students wouldn't come to group meetings and they were at school (laughs). Or when they would have these blank stares. Or, when group is supposed to last 45minutes to an hour, but we'd be finished in 30 min. When they are not connected and not wanting to come.

Discussing her reaction to that experience, the 3rd year SSC shared:

> . . . it made me feel like maybe I wasn't appealing enough for the kids. Or, I was boring to them. Or, I had to reach them in a different way. I then had to think about what I had to do differently . . . I felt inadequate with . . . just how to reach them . . .

However, attendance alone did little to guarantee a successful group as all of the participants shared exasperating experiences when members were "chit chatting" and "not staying on task." One participant recalled a particularly frustrating session:

> They basically were talking over each other, so disrespectful; I mean I got nothing accomplished to the point where I had to pull the plug…'Everyone clean up everything, I'm done.' And I just had to stop; it got completely out of control.

With regard to managing difficult group dynamics, one participant expressed ambivalence over the best way to handle behavioral concerns:

> I sometimes wonder about how to deal with behavioral problems. Do you deal with it then and there or do you wait? Or, having the kids look at you as the expert when you know there are things that they know more about than you. Also, fear…. I'm sometimes scared to say the wrong things

Another SSC likened group management to discipline, “The part that I like least about school counseling is being responsible for the discipline for a group of kids and, with groups, the potential for having to manage discipline is always there. Several participants echoed similar comments: “[It] is like managing disciplinary problems. Managing the energy of group is lots more difficult than managing the energy of an individual.”

Related to the concept of resistance, participants shared the difficulty of managing group members’ firm mindsets. Specifically, participants recounted challenging moments when working with group members who were reluctant to release firm beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that participants deemed negative or maladaptive. For instance:

> As teenagers, they are continuously choosing options that may not be the best choice. In my group now, some of these boys are in gangs and we try to talk about making better choices. It’s really hard. I try to let them know that I understand that sense of family, but I also teach them that being in gangs is not the only way to get that sense of community. But, they are like “These are my brothers for life.” And, it is so hard to try to get them to change their minds when they are already so involved in something.

Similarly, one member discussed the challenges of managing perceived member resistance. However, she made meaning of those experiences by acknowledging that it may be best to accept students where they are. For example:

> Actually…I do remember feeling at the end, some frustration. Frustration in realizing that you are not going to change some of these ideologies and mindsets and sometimes you just have to accept that this is where they are.

A remarkable fourteen out of the 18 participants shared fears related to *comfort level* with topics, confidence in their *group facilitative skills*, and experiences of *vulnerability*. When asked to clarify her uneasiness, one participant asserted:

> It is my own comfort level with the needs that arise. 'It would be good to have a group with eating disorders; that's an issue we are seeing a lot of, but wait, I haven't done that before so, what are my resources?' I'm wanting to make sure I am doing good and not harming anyone. So, it's the comfort level.

Another participant described a similar situation that sparked discomfort:

> When the students try to get into issues that I don't feel as comfortable with or not ready to talk about…just being put on the spot with stuff that I don't feel comfortable with or may need more help or training with.

The desire for connection and collaboration about group topics was revealed by a participant who served as the sole counselor for the entire school. For example:

> …It's also very hard being in a small school and working alone. I'm not in a department so I don't get much opportunity to collaborate, and not ever about groups. Knowing where to get good resources is challenging. Often, I go and search websites on my own.

With regard to a lack of confidence in facilitative skills, one counselor relayed a trend she had noticed in her all-female academic and social support group:

> If I'm not sure of what I'm going to do or if I have a couple of options of trying to reach them and I'm not assertive enough and say this is what we are doing, they [students] become chatty. If their math teacher walked in right now, I ask myself, "Does what I'm doing justify them being out of class?" If I say no, that makes me uncomfortable.

Half the sample disclosed occasional feelings of vulnerability. For example:

> I think there is always a little bit of fear too… that you are going to forget something or not teach it well. I think it puts you on stage a little bit. I think there's some stage fright that goes with it. You're not just teaching social studies facts where you are looking at a page and saying ok, this happened on this day. There's a little bit of the unknown that's both exciting and scary.

The "onstage" theme seemed to resonate with many; "They know when I mess up or don't do it right. There's that onstage feeling almost every day." While various participants shared this fearful experience of exposure and vulnerability, one participant

acknowledged that fear is related to the unfamiliar, asserting, “Being afraid of it is a function of not having a ton of experience. When I’m more comfortable with it, it’s better”.

Stories disclosed by participants indicate that facilitating groups can be an anxiety-laden experience. Participants uniformly discussed internal struggles ranging from perceived inadequacy with topics and facilitation skills that were seemingly related to a fear of vulnerability. Certainly challenging, those experiences appeared to present disconcerting aspects of group work to some participants, and limit full engagement for others.

Encouraging Feedback

The final theme revealed from the data was “encouraging feedback,” which refers to feedback which participants felt facilitated their enjoyment and positive perceptions of group work. Such feedback appeared to inspire, motivate, and raise the confidence of participants. Related feelings were “pleased,” “enthusiastic,” “purposeful,” and “effective.” Participants shared three subthemes which supported their commitment to group work: *student engagement, outcome data, and planting seeds*.

Student engagement. Student engagement, perhaps the most prevalent theme, is characterized by participants’ perception that students were committed to group goals, invested in the group, and active contributors to the group process. The degree to which they felt that students were engaged in the group process provided great encouragement to participants. 100% of the SSC recounted a story that illustrated that vision of engagement. For example:

> It was how completely engaged the kids were in the activity I was leading them through. They were excited about it and couldn’t wait to share what they got out

> of it. I think I picked something good and they went off with it to places I hadn't even planned. I really liked that one cause we had been together long enough I had a feeling it would work and it did. It made me want their input more on what was going to happen in group each time.

Perceived investment in the group process was meaningful to participants. One SSC characterized "investment" in the following way, "They need to be invested and not because someone is making them do it. They have to kind of own a piece of that group and feel some ownership of their own learning." And another participant remarked, "When I see that connection being made and they are excited and they are actually participating and they are getting involved and engaged…that's meaningful to me!"

Outcome Data. One particularly salient sub-theme that emerged was the importance of feedback. Without any prompting, each participant discussed how positive member feedback, whether it was *measurable, informal data*, or *intuitive impressions* significantly enhanced their experience of group work. Although each participant noted the importance of member feedback, they appeared to have different ideas about how to go about obtaining such valuable feedback. Ten participants described utilizing empirical or traditional data collection methods ranging from written qualitative data to Likert scale-surveys with pre and post-test measurements. For instance:

> We pulled together some…data at the end. Qualitative and quantitative. Qualitatively, the students felt like they got something out of it. They liked coming to group, they felt like they learned how to get back on track. But, the quantitative data was really impressive! Behavioral referrals went down, attendance went up, and grades went up.

One SSC who was the only counselor at her school asserted the importance of evaluation as a way to demonstrate school counselor credibility:

> I try to be very data driven…one because I don't want to be doing something and I don't know the result…I think also at the end of the year, I need to be able to show that these are the things that I've done and either

> it's worked or it hasn't. But, I think it adds to the credibility of counselors when we can say "Hey, 67% of kids passed their classes because they came through the [Skills] group." So, for me, that is almost as important as running group, is being able to evaluate it and being able to present that information to the faculty.

Informal: Even more common than outcome data, were informal measures of group effectiveness. The most frequently mentioned type of informal data was positive member feedback, which included verbal and non-verbal member reactions, within and outside of group sessions. The following quotes helps to further illustrate this:

> I know it's important to them [members] too because I'll be walking in the hall and they say, "Are we having group today?" Just the look on their face, the excitement they have about going to group. That lets me know that it is effective. That makes me feel like I am doing something that's working.

And:

> When you are working with really highly at-risk kids, a lot of times you don't see a lot of dramatic "aha" or change or anything like that. That's not something you see a ton of with at-risk kids, they are pretty tough, so you look for change in very small (laughs) ways.

The majority of the participants facilitated social/emotional groups. One male participant shared a memorable success story as a result of his grief group:

> …a Latino girl from the grief group who had been pretty depressed, having a hard time at school. You can see it on her face; you could see that she started smiling! I can see that smile; I can see it right now. She wound up graduating; I really thought that she was an at-risk kid. She was a prime candidate to go off to go to work and help support her family. But, she didn't…It's motivating, makes you want to do it more!

While many of the participants relied solely on intuition, member reaction or member self-report to gauge group success, about 50% of the SSC supplemented that informal data with measurable (e.g., discipline and/or attendance) data. For example:

> I can tell that something clicked. She came back a few days later, she was so excited, and said, "It worked." I said 'What?' She said, "You told me to

> look at this picture of [Fred] in my folder and I was getting really angry, but I looked at this picture and I thought that he would not want me to fight. So I calmed down." This was a girl who was *constantly* in the administrator's office, and she has not had a fight since then. Not one! …If just one person has learned even one technique for managing anger, then I feel like the group has been somewhat successful. It felt good, because I really think the kids should walk a way with some kind of skill set.

The perception that members left the group experience with deeper insights or a new skill was very meaningful for these SSC, as also demonstrated by this statement:

> I think just at the end of it… knowing--I always do evaluations--having the students not wanting the group to end. Hearing them saying how much they learned. When they are able to communicate something great that they have accomplished. That is great… that makes me smile.

Planting Seeds. The final subtheme "planting seeds" was a phrase explicitly stated by four participants, and conveyed by more than half of the sample. This verbiage was used to describe the process of facilitating some type of change in thinking, feeling, and behaving amongst group members. Participants seemed to use this phrase to convey hope that in the future, the seeds implanted on "fertile ground" will take root and bear fruit. One SSC who ran a grief group for Latino students commented, "My hope was that I was seeing the beginning or the continuation of the healing process but also the budding possibilities to carry this thing over to other parts of their lives." And another SSC shared:

> It seemed like such a meaningful interaction that probably…at some point even if they weren't changed right then, they might think back on it and say, "I remember when So and So in my group said this." That kind of struck me later on…so there's always the hope of that.

One male SSC shared a meaningful story of a former member of a male empowerment group, who had graduated and was contemplating selling drugs. The former student later visited the school and inquired about the group. The participant shared some of his reflections regarding that visit:

> … his father sold drugs and made a very good living for himself. He [the student] was determined that that was what he was going to do….then I ran into him and he said he really wanted to help out with the group. That told me that there was that dichotomy there! He was stuck because he wanted to make money, but then again, he realized that there was another side of things that he needed. So, it's still there! That plant may be straggly but it's still alive!! So, there's still some hope there and that was encouraging!

When asked to share the meaning behind his work with students in groups, the above participant remarked, "It makes me feel like my job or my efforts aren't going unnoticed. It's like planting the seeds; I'm just trying to provide for that fertile ground."

For many of the participants, group work meant just that, the act of providing proverbial fertile ground with hope that efforts would one day be evident. Participants shared various accounts of successful outcomes thought to be, at least partial, attributed to group work. These SSC sought to obtain outcome data from formal, informal, and intuitive impressions. Ultimately, and for all 18 participants, it was extremely valuable, if not indispensable to assess some measure of student growth and/or achievement.

Discussion

Findings from this study contribute important data to the literature by capturing the voices of secondary school counselors who engage in group work. Overall, the current research suggests that participants perceived groups as "valuable" and an "efficient" way to "connect" with students while creating a "sense of belonging." Moreover, participants uniformly viewed groups as a "safe" space for students to practice healthy interactions and to "mutually" contribute their individual expertise. Further, their conceptualization of the purpose of groups is consistent with literature discussing the therapeutic elements of group work (Yalom, 1995). Aspects of the findings are consistent

with various strands of prior adolescent group work research (Dagley et al., 1994; Shechtman, 2004).

Also consistent with literature, although not typically from the perspective of the school counselor, is the importance of relationships and intimacy within groups. While literature is replete with information regarding the intimate quality of member-to-member interactions, our participants also discussed groups as an avenue for connecting with and "getting to know" students "in more depth." Additionally, several participants explained how groups often served as an "access" to students who might not have sought the assistance of her or his school counselor otherwise. Building and sustaining new relationships as well as helping to facilitate bonding between members appeared to be paramount. Relationships were an essential way of conceptualizing groups, contributed to participants' perceptions of group efficacy, and, in large part, the reason why participants initiated and continued groups despite multiple challenges. As one participant succinctly stated, "It's all about the relationship; I wouldn't be doing this otherwise."

Of special note, is the finding that feedback played a significant role in participants' group work experiences. Findings revealed that favorable student feedback inspired and raised the confidence levels of many of the participants, and appeared to buffer the effects of the external barriers. However, there were important differences in the types of feedback sought by participants. Specifically, participants measured group success not just solely based on informal feedback, but also by outcome measurements. Outcome data, an often-cited source of school counselor resistance, provided an emotional uplift to the group facilitators. This may be, perhaps, due to the increased emphasis of data driven practices in the profession (ASCA, 2005). When unable to

collect formal or empirical data, it was not unusual for participants to look for informal gestures of appreciation and feedback, especially, when data appeared inconclusive. For example,

> It's been interesting…the study skills groups. We weren't sure how effective they were because the data did not…it just showed kinda flat and, so, that was discouraging. However, I developed a relationship with them [members] and I've talked to them a couple of times. They will tell me that they've used things from the group. That it really helped them. So, it was the feedback that I received that it really actually was beneficial even though the data didn't show it.

Such reliance on informal feedback may be, in part, connected to the importance of the relationship. As over half of our participants were conducting groups in isolation and with some perceiving a lack of buy-in from staff and fellow counselors, interestingly, the simple act of a student reporting a skill that they learned or inquiring about when group will be held again, was enough data to indicate the effectiveness of the group experience, thus indicating success.

One common interpretation for SSC's underutilization of groups is lack of staff support and/or staff resistance (Carroll., 1985; Dansby, 1996; Steen, Bauman & Smith, 2007). Findings from the current study, however, paint a somewhat different portrait. While several participants discussed the difficulty of securing a consistent schedule and space for group work, all of the participants denied staff resistance. Rather, some counselors indicated support and in some cases, encouragement of groups by administration. For instance, "The administrators and teachers are supportive" and "Our principal has always backed us up well; we don't even have to run an outline by her." This finding appears to contradict literature and conventional wisdom or "common talk" about the lack of administrative and teacher support for group work.

Despite aforementioned support, there were definite challenges. Participants expressed many of the external barriers mentioned in literature, including lack of time and space . Moreover, participants frequently cited time constraints due to the juggling of multiple and often non-counseling related duties such as administrative record keeping, class scheduling, and testing.

One participant commented,

> Forgive me for jumping at the cliché because I'm sure you've heard this far too often if you've met with high school counselors, but testing is killing us and it only seems to be increasing. At a minimum, seven weeks out of our year, time is taking up with things that don't have anything to do with kid contact. Between that and the other paper pushing, it eats into time.

It is important to note that while external barriers did emerge from the data, they *were perceived as more of annoyances than barriers to leading groups. Instead, it was the internal barriers that seemed to be the bigger obstacle for these participants.*

Existing research highlights multiple external barriers that secondary counselors face in regards to group implementation (Baker & Gerler, 2008; Dansby, 1996; Tennyson et al., 1987). Less attention, however, is given to internal variables, particularly fear. In this study, participants consistently noted various fears related to group facilitation. Fear is relevant because while it was not a direct barrier, as all the participants conducted groups, it often inhibited them from effectively facilitating within the sessions and perhaps may have prevented group work from being a central focus of their school counseling program. Moreover, fear appeared to have prevented the SSC from conducting more groups or the types of groups they deemed necessary for their students. Furthermore, fear was frequently mentioned as a barrier for "other" high school counselors who choose not to conduct groups.

It is perhaps necessary to stress that the fear mentioned appeared to be internally generated, deriving from an apparent sense of inadequacy in their capacity to successfully conduct groups. This apparent fear of failure may in some measure be related to the often-cited external barriers. And, perhaps, there is an interrelationship. Specifically, group work takes energy, and the complexities inherent within a high school setting may present energy depleting obstacles for SSC who wish to conduct groups. With multiple external demands coupled with a perceived lack of support, it may be easier for counselors to emphasize external challenges as the issue rather than their own internal struggles. This avoidance denies SSC the opportunity for utilizing group facilitative skills, which are developed with continuous practice. Conversely, the perception of poorly developed or inadequate facilitative skills may cause external barriers to appear insurmountable due to the comfort found in avoidance. As one participant stated,

> I do believe that a lot of that is internal perception. I think that they [counselors who don't conduct groups] believe that they don't have time or they believe that these barriers are insurmountable and I don't. I believe that they can do what they wanted to do. A lot of times I'll hear things like 'Oh, the teachers will get mad if we take them out of class.' Well, I've been pulling these girls out of class every week…and I haven't ever had one teacher say anything negative. So, you can say things like that but I'm not sure what that's grounded in. Is it based in fact or [perception]?"

The above quotation illustrates one participant's perception, which may provide much needed insight for counselor educators, supervisors, and school counselors.

Finally, while external constraints should not be minimized, it is important to note the flexibility many secondary school counselors have in setting their schedules and prioritizing their commitments. As one participant indicated, "I certainly think I would be making time to do those things if I think it's important. So, unless I hit a big barrier like

the principal getting in my face and saying "No." then of course I'm going to say "Yes, sir." (*laughs*) But, you have to at least try."

Another counselor expressed a similar sentiment regarding freedom, "I realize that I have the freedom within my prescribed responsibilities to organize myself the way I want to and counsel the way I want to. So, it is priority." And perhaps, a sacrifice:

> It's something I enjoy. If something is what you enjoy, you make time for it. So, a lot of my planning--it doesn't happen here in my office, it happens at home. After my kids are asleep, I pull out the workbooks and I pull out the literature, and I plan. Just like teachers do lesson plans at home. I do group planning at home.

Implications for School Counselors

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered to secondary school counselors on ways to best prepare themselves for managing both external and internal challenges to group implementation.

Prioritize and Commit. One of the most apparent findings from this study was that in the midst of multiple duties and responsibilities, participants chose to make group work a priority and exhibited a high level of commitment to groups. As suggested in the above quote, the time to plan and create does not always present itself in the busyness of a school day. Therefore, counselors interested in incorporating groups must be intentional in creating a space for groups, even if it is outside of the school day. Otherwise, they run the risk of being snowed in under the "avalanche" of other duties, tasks, and obligations.

Moreover, once groups are initiated, counselors must commit to implementation. That commitment may come by way of a contract made to self or with their counseling department during pre-planning for the subsequent year. Contracts can also be made between departments and administration, as recommended by ASCA Model (2005). Stating openly and in written form group implementation goals and objectives perhaps

could lead to a sense of self and administrative accountability, as well as provide modeling and encouragement for other counselors within the department.

Evaluate. With relatively few external rewards involved, it is understandable why many school counselors look for informal data to demonstrate group success. However, in light of the increase in accountability fueled by initiatives such as NCLB, school counselor utilization of outcome data is paramount. SSC must be encouraged to view evaluation as necessary to determine actual outcomes rather than relying solely upon individual perceptions of effectiveness. As has been noted, one surprising finding was that many participants reported the use of outcome and achievement data as a form of evaluation. Additionally, SSC discussed how receiving positive outcome data served as an "uplift" and encouraged their efforts. School counselors must utilize data to help transform counselor roles and incorporate advocacy (TSCI; The Education Trust, 2007.

In this day of accountability and as school counselors are increasingly called upon to demonstrate efficacy, it is imperative that SSC' practice be informed by data that will enable them to provide the most appropriate interventions to students. Furthermore, evaluating group counseling in the school setting is necessary in order to justify resources (e.g, time, energy, space) spent, thereby enhancing credibility in the eyes of teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders. Successful data regarding group interventions should be consistently presented to teachers and administrators in order to garner increased support for group work. By reviewing best practices in group research and utilizing group evaluation methods (ASGW, 2008), school counselors place themselves in a unique position to receive valuable feedback, demonstrate the fruits of their labor, and as one participant stated, "establish credibility."

Advocate. An indirect, but valuable, service that SSC can provide for themselves and others is that of educating parents, teachers, and administration about the benefits of group work. Advocacy is an integral part of the school counselors changing role (Bemack, 2000;TSCI) and involves facilitating an action that leads to some sort of environmental change. Counselors must not only advocate for individual students but also for effective interventions that will meet the needs of most students. Group work is a service not often advertised in the high school newsletter, school bulletin, or at open house. During collaborations with parents, administrators and teachers, counselors can describe the purpose and advantages of group work and emphasize that groups are a valuable component of the school's counseling program. By evaluating, educating, and advocating, school counselors can foster recognition of the value of group work and help to create a wider base of support, therefore enhancing support from a variety of sources.

Professional Development. One of the most significant findings from this study is the lack of self-efficacy regarding group facilitative skills. Professional skill development is necessary for school counselors who wish to effectively meet the needs of their students (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Counselors must take advantage of any group development opportunities offered by their schools and local districts. In addition, secondary school counselors must venture beyond the boundaries of their school setting in order to receive support for group implementation. An essential responsibility for SSC is continued professional development, as dictated by ASGW Best Practice Guidelines (1990). Professional development activities like membership in professional organizations, and attendance at workshops, seminars, and conferences such as ASGW can provide not only skills, but also much needed support for group implementation. In

the face of perceived resistance and issues of competence, it was evident that participants would have benefited from skills training and encouragement from peers. By surrounding oneself with a network of professionals who share a similar passion for group work, counselors can not only combat any sense of isolation, but also find camaraderie and rejuvenation for their work.

Implications for Counselor Educators

By understanding the challenges and successes that secondary school counselors experience while engaging in group work, counselor educators and district supervisors will be better equipped to provide targeted training of effective group work processes, principles, and strategies as well as support for new and existing professionals. Findings from this study revealed secondary school counselors' willingness and commitment to group work. Such willingness and commitment must be coupled with adequate pre-service training and professional development opportunities to equip counselors with the necessary tools in order to increase their confidence in group skills.

Training and Professional Development. Groups are complex, as any veteran group leader will attest. Added to that complexity are the challenges of facilitating groups in the school environment. The complex nature of group work in schools requires training on multiple levels. Counselor Educators and Supervisors might consider conducting in-service training on proactive management of group dynamics, facilitative skills, and appropriate group techniques. Learning about appropriateness and effectiveness of selecting and implementing group techniques (i.e., understanding that one technique may not be better than another, but it may come down to selecting the one that garners greater

advantages than disadvantages) may prove valuable to many SSC who continue to struggle or second guess themselves (Conyne, Crowell, & Newmeyer, 2008).

Training should also include a component emphasizing the uniqueness of group work in the secondary school environment. School counselors should be cognizant that traditional group standards of implementation may not fit many school environments, particularly high school. Providing options to traditional group work techniques and encouraging an exploration of alternative strategies may help reduce the fear and anxiety connected to unrealistic expectations that many school counselors who conduct groups experience. A discussion of issues relevant to the secondary level would be beneficial for both pre-service and existing school counselors.

Networking. An important factor in the success of secondary school counselors' group experiences may be support received from administrators, teachers, and fellow counselors. It seems ironic that the interpersonal support participants' attempted to create for their students was the very sense of belonging they, themselves, desired. While such support cannot be guaranteed, counselor education programs may work with students in the creation of list serves whereby a network of counselors interested in group work can connect, share ideas, and seek support. This network may include both school counselors and university professors. A focus on skills for building professional networks may, in turn, help to improve SSC's sense of connectedness.

Evaluation. Participants reported several positive experiences related to student feedback. While group counseling is a hopeful intervention for school counselors who wish to demonstrate the impact of their efforts on student success (Schectman, 2002), evaluation is critical. Counselor educators must encourage the use of valid and reliable

group assessment instruments. Particularly due to the hectic and unpredictable nature of schools, the introduction of step-by-step action research models may also help to facilitate school counselors' comfort level with assessment in general (Mason & Uwah, 2007).

Self-Reflection. Furthermore, counselors should be encouraged to not only take time to assess student growth, but to also reflect upon themselves as group facilitators, assessing personal strengths and weaknesses (ASGW, 1990). After experiencing a perceived negative experience, many of the participants took time to refocus and re-commit to the group process. Creating time to self-reflect may be as important as spending time preparing content. Conyne, Crowell and Newmeyer (2008, p. 216-217) outlines a group counselor self-assessment for training that can be incorporated into an individual self-evaluation exercise: "What have you learned about yourself as a group leader?; "What interpersonal strengths have you noticed?"; and "What areas do you need to improve?" These and other questions may be useful for school counselors wishing to process and reflect upon their work, particularly those without the benefit of a co-leader or departmental collaboration or support.

Limitations and Future Research

Study findings must be examined in the light of several limitations. Limitations include those typically associated with qualitative inquiry, including a relatively small participant sample. Additionally, the PI was able to obtain only one follow-up interview. While the PI perceived participants to be honest in their disclosures, prolonged engagement with participants may have generated deeper clarifications, while allowing participants time to further reflect upon current and past group work experiences. A third

limitation was the unknown influence of response bias. The fact that the PI was a university-affiliated researcher may have affected the content shared. Specifically, participants may have been motivated to share content perceived as socially desirable.

Future research might include a year-long longitudinal study of secondary school counselors' group experiences. Such a study would further highlight challenges and successes and examine differences in perception during and after the initial interview to examine how participants were informed by study participation. In addition, quantitative measures could be utilized to relate variables like previous training and years of experience with reported group experiences. Although not a focus of the current study, future research might examine a comparison group of SSC who do not engage in group work. Such a comparison may establish the distinctiveness of the current themes. Finally, future research may replicate this study and include the perceptions of stakeholders (administrators, teachers, and students). Inclusion of these additional data sources may strengthen verification standards by providing corroborating evidence of the phenomenon being studied (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Conclusion

School counselors play a critical role in assisting with academic and personal growth, as well as creating a sense of worth and belonging amongst adolescents. Group work as a component of a comprehensive secondary school counseling program is one efficient way to serve students, but takes willingness and a commitment to consistently and efficiently execute. Although participants in this study experienced both external barriers and internal struggles, they managed to overcome those pressures and find success through group implementation. They used their experiences, both positive and

challenging, as a catalyst to ref-focus, re-dedicate, and re-commit themselves to group work. The voices captured in this study provide insight to counselor educators and supervisors, and might be a source of inspiration for other secondary school counselors who hope to implement groups.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

XXXX University
Department of Psychological Services
Participant Demographic Survey

***Participant pseudonym*_____** ***3 Digit Code:* ___-___- ___**

1. **GENDER**: _____

2. **Age**: _____

3. **Number of years of School Counseling Experience_____**

4. **School Setting (urban, suburban, or rural) : _____**

5. **ETHNIC GROUP**:
   - ☐ African American or Black (Not of Hispanic Origin)
   - ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
   - ☐ Asian or Pacific Islander
   - ☐ Hispanic (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American)
   - ☐ White (Not of Hispanic Origin)
   - ☐ Multiracial

6. **What is your highest earned degree?**
   - ☐ Masters
   - ☐ Ed.S
   - ☐ Ph.D or Ed.D
   - ☐ Other: _____

7. **Have you had any formal or informal training related to group work? If so, please describe**:
   _____
   _____
   _____

8. **List any groups you have led or co-led in the past school year:**
   _____
   _____
   _____

9. **Are you a member of any of the following professional associations? (Check all that apply):**

   - ☐ Georgia School Counselors Association (GSCA)
   - ☐ American School Counselors Association (ASCA)
   - ☐ American Counseling Association (ACA)
   - ☐ Association for Specialist in Group Work (ASGW)
   - ☐ Other: _____

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What part does group work play in your sc program
2. What different types of groups have you led?
3. What first attracted you to group work?
4. What motivated you to actually try it out?
5. From your experiences, what constitutes a group?
6. What value do you see in engaging in group work?
7. From your experiences, what elements make groups effective for adolescents?
8. Tell me about a time when you had a very successful group?
   follow up: What meaning did you make of that experience?
9. What are some positive things about running groups? Negative?
10. What have been some barriers or obstacles (internal or external) that have gotten in the way of engaging in groups?
11. Many secondary school counselors do not engage in group work, what makes you different?
12. Are there any other comments you would like to share about group work and your experiences?
13. What was this experience like for you?

APPENDIX C

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for your participation. Before I begin, please reflect on the following: “When you consider your experience with group work, what are some of your experiences?” and, “What situations typically influence your experience with group work?”

1. What part does group work play in your sc program?
2. What first attracted you to group work?
3. What motivated you or what experiences influenced your decision to try it out?
4. From your experiences, what constitutes a group?
5. What are the elements that make groups effective with adolescents?
6. What makes groups important to you?
7. Describe an “ideal” group
8. How does that description of your ideal group compare with your current experience? How does that description contrast?
9. If you would, think back to a time in which you led a real successful group (by your own measures), what about that experience makes you smile?
10. So, that is something that comes easy for you/ that you had some success in. "What about something that posed a challenge?
11. What have been some external barriers or obstacles that get in the way of you conducting an effective group work?
12. What have been some internal barriers or obstacles that get in the way of you conducting an effective group work?
13. Many secondary school counselors do not engage in-group work, what do you see as some barriers for them?
14. What are some external or internal barriers you face?
15. Are there any other comments you would like to share about group work and your experiences