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# Group Leadership of Experienced Middle School Counselors

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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, GROUP LEADERSHIP OF EXPERIENCED MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSELORS, by ROBERT E. RICE, 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.

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ABSTRACT

GROUP LEADERSHIP OF EXPERIENCED MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSLEORS
by
Robert E. Rice

Middle school students experience biological, cognitive, and social changes as they struggle with identity formation, self-concept, self-esteem, and academic success. Psycho-educational groups are an effective and efficient method for confronting social/emotional or academic problems that prohibit middle school students from performing well in schools. An essential component in the successful counseling of middle school groups is the skill and experience of the group leader. Research on school-based groups has focused on all areas with the exception of group leadership. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how experienced middle school group leaders approach and conduct psycho-educational groups. This qualitative study uses a grounded theory methodology to investigate the practices, experiences, and perceptions of fourteen middle school counselors. The theory that emerged is grounded in the data from the participants and represents how they were able to conduct small groups in schools despite barriers many other school counselors experienced. Through educational leadership, relationship building, and an understanding of the systems at work in schools, these participants were able to establish a group program in their schools. The participants in this study also reveal the experiences they used to develop their skills as group leaders. The results of this study may have important implications to middle school counselors,

researchers, and counselor educators in understanding the group and educational leadership skills needed to conduct effective groups in a middle school setting.

# GROUP LEADERSHIP OF EXPERIENCED MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSLEORS

by

Robert E. Rice

A Dissertation

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Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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## ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| ACA | American Counseling Association |
| ASCA | American School Counseling Association |
| ASGW | Association for Specialist in Group Work |
| CACREP | Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs |
| ELT | Extended Learning Time |
| NCLB | No Child Left Behind Legislative act of 2000 |
| RTI | Response to Intervention |
| NCLB | No Child Left Behind Legislative act of 2000 |
| SES | Socio Economic Status |
| SST | Student Support Team |

# CHAPTER 1

# MIDDLE SCHOOL GROUP LEADERS

In 2003, the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) established guidelines for school counselors to develop and implement a comprehensive school counseling program called the ASCA National Model® (ASCA, 2003). One of the four elements of the ASCA National Model® included the delivery system used by school counselors to implement their program. This delivery system is comprised of four parts: guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and systems support. The ASCA National Model® recommends that school counselors spend eighty-five percent of their time in the first three components and suggests group counseling as an essential means of delivering services in those three areas (ASCA).

Groups are an effective and efficient format for confronting social/emotional or academic (i.e. organization, study skills, or test taking skills) problems that prohibit students from performing well in schools (Gansle, 2005; Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007; Gladding, 2008; Hoag & Burlingame, 1997; Kulic, Dagley, & Horne, 2004). Gladding lists five types of groups (i.e. psycho-educational, tasks/work, counseling, psychotherapy, & mixed method), the Association for Specialist in Group Work (ASGW, 2000) lists four (i.e. task/work, psychotherapy, counseling, and psycho-educational). The most common types of groups offered in schools are counseling groups and psycho-educational groups (ASCA, 2003; Dansby, 1996; Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack). Counseling groups are remediation interventions (i.e. depression, grief); while psycho-educational groups are preventive treatments and the most common type of groups facilitated by school counselors. School counselors use psycho-educational groups to

address issues such as bullying, study skills, making friends, anger management, or self-esteem (ASGW; Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack).

Numerous studies (e.g. Gansle, 2005; Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007; Hoag & Burlingame, 1997; Lavoritano & Segal, 1992; Paisley & Milson, 2007; Prout & Prout, 1998) confirmed the efficacy and effectiveness of groups for a variety of issues (i.e. anger management, depression, self-esteem/self image, test anxiety) that affect school performance and child development. Further examination of these studies revealed two facts. There was little exploration into the group leaders that facilitated the groups, and school counselors were seldom group leaders in these school-based studies (Gansle; Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack; Hoag & Burlingame; Kulic, Dagley, & Horne, 2004). Experienced, skilled, and effective group leadership is a critical component of effective group treatment (Conyne, Harvill, Morganett, Morran, & Hulse-Killacky, 1990; Yalom, 2005). While recent research (i.e. Rubel & Kline, 2008) has examined the complex workings of experienced group leaders in the clinical field, little information exists concerning the processes middle school counselors employ when leading groups. In three meta-analyses of school-based studies of group interventions (i.e. Hoag & Burlingame; Kulic, et al; and Gansle) the group facilitator or change agent was not fully examined. In this chapter, the author will provide a literature review of groups in the school setting and group leadership perceptions and attitudes toward group work within the school setting.

## Review of Group Work in Schools

### Groups in the School Setting

Hoag and Burlingame (1997) reviewed 56 studies of group treatment for children and adolescents published between 1974 and 1997. Their analyses found that groups in

the clinical setting were more effective than groups in the school setting. However, group in schools were significantly more effective than placebo groups. Hoag and Burlingame did not find group leaders to be a major contributing factor in the success of the groups. Though they mentioned the therapist (group leader) as one of the variables, their analyses found the influence of the role of the group leader did not reach statistical significance. Their analyses disclosed little data on the training or experience of the group leaders. Hoag and Burlingame's study revealed that a fifth of the group leaders were described as school counselors and over a fourth of the studies "utilized a mix of school counselors, other professionals (psychologist or social workers), and graduate students" (p. 237). The significant variable in the study was the socio-economic status (SES) of the students. Students with middle SES exhibited more improvement from group intervention, and Hoag and Burlingame concluded that for lower SES students "pre-training interventions may be valuable with challenging adolescent population" (p.241). While pre-training may be one option for higher group success, several other possibilities may account for poor success with lower SES students. These include the following: the students may have been inappropriate for the group intervention, the group members were incompatible (perhaps from poor screening), or the group leaders were not experienced leading lower SES students in a group setting. Hoag and Burlingame's study was followed by Kulic, Dagley, and Horne's (2004) study of group work for children and adolescents that found the SES of students a factor for group effectiveness.

Kulic, Dagley, and Horne (2004) concentrated on 94 studies of prevention intervention groups for children and adolescents conducted from 1990 to 2000. Like Hoag and Burlingame's (1997) study, most of the studies (79.8%) were conducted in

schools, and they found clinical settings to be more effective than school settings. They proposed that this might be because the client referred to a clinical setting is in a more severe pathological state and has "a greater gap to be crossed going from 'ill' to 'healthy' in schools, one is more likely to see prevention oriented treatments…with a smaller gap to be crossed from 'ill' to 'healthy'" (p. 143). While Hoag and Burlingame found SES to be a factor related to group efficacy, these studies included inconsistent data about the race and gender of the clients. The mention of race and gender implies that the consideration of the race and gender of the client combined with the clients' SES has implications for group outcome.

It is not surprising that students with lower SES were less responsive to group intervention because students from lower SES families generally are less successful in schools and have difficulty feeling like they are a part of the school community (Ahar & Krombry, 1993; Fine & Davis, 2003; & Rumberger, 2010). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2009) reports that dropout rates, retention rates, and poor academic performance are higher among students from families of lower SES compared to students from families of middle and upper SES. While the number of students dropping out of high school has declined (15% in 1970 to 8% in 2008) in the last 38 years, students from the lower SES quartile (16.4% dropout rate in 2008) are dropping out of high school at almost twice the rate of students in the lower middle economic quartile ( 9.4% dropout rate in 2008). This is three times the rate of students in the upper middle quartile (5.4% dropout rate in 2008). Fine and Davis found that students from families of low SES were 40% more likely to be retained (in some grade prior to high school graduation) than students from higher SES families.

Jimerson, Anderson, and Whipple (2002) examined research literature concerning retention as a variable in high school dropout rates, and they found that students retained once in elementary school (grades K-6) were three times as likely to drop out in high school as their non-retained counterparts. Further, students retained more than once were almost five times as likely to drop out of high school. They found that the literature on retention suggested that emotional immaturity, low SES, and low parent educational levels were risk factors for retention and dropout. They argue that once retention occurs, "disengagement, absenteeism, low self-esteem associated with dropout is more likely to occur, reinforcing developmental pathways leading to high school dropout" (p.454). Disengagement as well as disruptive classroom behavior may be what the researchers saw in low SES students not being as receptive to group treatment (Hoag & Burlingame, 1997; Kulic, Dagley, & Horne, 2004). Hoag and Burlingame suggested training the students prior to the group intervention; however, they did not address the group leader's skills in working with this population.

Edmondson and White (1998) conducted a study that directly addressed the SES and dropout question using a combination of group counseling and tutorials as an intervention. Their quantitative study addressed middle school students from low SES families who were doing poorly in academics. The study included a control group (students with no intervention but they could see their counselor for individual concerns), students with only tutorials, and students with group counseling and tutorial groups. Undergraduate and graduate education majors tutored students, and the school counselor conducted the groups. The content areas for the groups were identity exploration, identification of group member's strengths and weaknesses, self-nurturing, and study

skills. Edmonson and White found that the combination of group counseling and tutorial groups yielded the highest gains in academic achievement, positive classroom behavior changes, and higher self-esteem when compared to students who had no services or students with tutorials alone. While the students in this study were all from lower SES families, volunteering gave them the motivation to do well. All of these students were White and from a rural community, therefore generalizations cannot be made to other SES populations.

Arhar and Kromrey (1993) found that at-risk middle school students perform better in schools where the "teaming" of students creates a sense of belonging. Interdisciplinary teams or teaming is a middle school construct where students are grouped with teachers of usually four subject areas (math, English, science and social studies) forming small academic communities (Forte & Schurr, 2002). In their study of African American adolescent males, Uwah, McMahon, and Furlow (2008), found that "belonging" in school was more than being recognized by students and teachers, it included being actively incorporated in the activities and organizations of the schools. The engagement of students by adults in the school was critical to the students' connectedness to and achievement in the school environment. This is especially true for early adolescents transitioning from elementary school to high school (Forte & Schurr).

While the aforementioned studies focused on clients as a significant variable, Kulic, Dagly and Horne's (2004) analyses highlighted the lack of information the studies disclosed about the group leader's training. They found that mental health professionals led groups in more than a third of the studies. The remaining studies had either poorly trained group leaders or facilitators with little experience leading groups. They spoke

about the importance of group leader training in their discussion section: “We cannot stress enough the importance we place on the change agent [group leader] variable. The change agent is the central element around which an entire study circles; [group] interventions can work wonders or fail miserably on the basis of its delivery” (p.149).

Gansle’s (2005) meta-analysis of school-based anger interventions and programs also failed to address the training of group leaders and revealed the use of professionals other than school counselors as group leaders. Though Gansle primarily focused on interventions, her analysis revealed that the majority of the studies described implementation of interventions by school psychologists, school consultants, or professionals. The remainder of the studies listed university faculty, masters and doctorate students, and schoolteachers as group leaders. The scant number of school counselors as group leaders in these meta-analyses brings into question the number of school counselors who actually conduct groups. The studies also leave unanswered Kulic, et al.’s (2004) concern regarding the training and experience of the group leader in schools. An examination of three studies of school counselor perceptions may reveal the answer.

Dansby (1996) conducted a survey regarding group work in schools with school counselors in Tennessee. From a list of 1368 Tennessee school counselors, Dansby sent the survey to 300 randomly selected school counselors. The responding 159 school counselors (representing a response rate of 53%) consisted of 54 elementary, 57 middle, and 48 high school counselors. The majority of the school counselors (81%) were female and all of the school counselors had ten years or more years of experience in school counseling. The survey questions explored school counselors’ attitudes towards groups

and implementation of groups in schools. The majority of the respondents indicated that group work was vital to their school counseling program and that they felt adequately trained. While psycho-educational groups were the most prevalent groups conducted, there were some remedial (i.e. suicide/depression, and fears) groups conducted.

School counselors reported that interferences (i.e. teacher, parent, or administrator resistance) and lack of time were the predominant reasons school counselors gave for not conducting more groups (Dansby, 1996). Interestingly, 39% of all school counselors reported using counselors who were not in the school system, and 40% reported that another school counselor was running groups. This practice of using personnel outside of the school building may account for the large number of studies that reported groups conducted by persons other than school counselors. In her discussion, Dansby gave possible reasons for the interferences to groups. She suggested that school counselors are not looking at their interventions from a systems theory perspective. She argued that using a systems approach will allow the school counselor to see the "interrelatedness of the interferences reported by the counselors and recognize the need to consider the effects on the various subsystems" (p. 239). She suggested that if school counselors could show teachers, principals, and parents how group interventions reinforced the other systems in the school, they would gain more support for groups.

Dansby's (1996) study was consistent with the meta-analyses of Kulic, Dagley, and Horne (2004) and Gansle (2005) that reported non-school counselors conducted many of the groups. There seems to be a conflict in the results school counselors reported in Dansby's survey. If school counselors viewed groups as vital, and they are adequately trained to conduct groups, why are other school counselors or outside mental health

professionals conducting a large portion of school counseling groups? Dansby argued that if groups are effective with outside mental health professionals, the outside professionals may become a separate system within the school. She positioned her logic from a systems theory approach. She contended that allowing group leaders from outside of the school to conduct groups, teachers' and principals' view the results as separate from the school counseling program. This may affect the way school counselors' roles and services are defined.

Others (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Clark & Amatea, 2004; Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006) echo Dansby's concern for the role of the school counselor. Educational leadership is a major component of the movement to define that role (DeVoss & Andrews, 2006; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; House & Hayes, 2002; House & Martin, 1998; Mason & McMahon, 2009). ASCA and the Education Trust believe that school counselors should become agents for change in transforming schools and they should be advocates for access and equity (ASCA, 2003; Education Trust, 2003). According to the ASCA National model educational leadership is one of the four major themes central for defining the role of the counselor and setting the parameters of the counseling program (ASCA). Not taking a leadership approach invites others to define the role of the school counselor and scope of the school counseling program.

Amatea and Clark (2005) found that principals' perceptions of the role of the school counselor and the counseling program depended upon whether the principal believed that the counseling program could improve test scores and attendance and reduce discipline issues. Because principals are the leaders of the school, their perception of the school counselor is critical in how the school counselor constructs, implements,

and delivers the services in their program. Principals in the study had a view of the counselor role as one of four categories: innovative school leader, collaborative case consultant, responsive direct service provider, and administrative team player. It is significant to note that only three percent of the participants saw the counselor's role as an innovative school leader (the role that ASCA advocates in a comprehensive program). Principals, who did see the school counselor as an innovative leader, saw the school counselor as a leader sharing ideas and suggesting innovations to improve student achievement, but they did not see the school counselor as another administrator. The majority of the principals who felt this way were middle school principals.

Clark and Amatea (2004) conducted a qualitative study on teachers' perceptions of school counselors. The results of this study found that the 23 teachers in this study viewed school counselors as being helpful. The level of helpfulness correlated to the degree of communication, collaboration, and teamwork between the school counselor and the teacher. Further, the teachers that experienced a working relationship in these three areas supported classroom guidance and small group activity. Many looked to the school counselor for support with students with special needs and help with classroom management strategies. All teachers from the study expressed the importance of individual counseling even without the three components.

While the perceptions of teachers and administrators can shape the school counselor's role within the school, outside forces also greatly affect the school counselor and the choices in interventions and services. Dollarhide and Lemberger (2006) found that the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation act of 2001 created changes in schools as adjustments were made to the mandates that the legislation requires. Their study

explored the impact of school change on the school counseling program. Data from an on-line survey from 210 school counselors, who were members of the ASCA, showed that the counselors surveyed had a clear understanding of NCLB. However, 74% of the participants reported that the NCLB legislation had negative effects for the school counseling programs because of school counselors' increased time spent coordinating testing. In addition, teachers and administrators became more resistant to allowing students to see the school counselor during class time, because they did not want students to miss instruction. Both of these conditions resulted in less time the school counselor could devote to the academic and social/emotional needs of students.

**School Counselors as Educational Leaders**

Dollarhide and Lemberger's (2006) also found that 17%, of the participants saw positives changes because of the push by NCLB legislation to include a focus on accountability. This group of school counselors believed that a focus on accountability could provide a forum for school counselors to provide data to show the effectiveness of counseling interventions. They believed that the shift to a focus on at-risk-students creates more opportunity for collaboration between teachers and school counselors. DeVoss and Andrews (2006) take this further arguing that there is a mandate for school counselor leadership that stems from a social justice perspective which promotes access and equity to education for all students. They agree with the view of the Education Trust, ASCA, and NCLB that national and local data can be used as evidence for determining the population of students that have gaps in their academic training (ASCA, 2003; Education Trust, 2003; NCLB, 2002). DeVoss and Andrews advocated an integrative educational leadership style that considers the systems operating in the school community

(i.e. local school systems, district systems, and community influences) and actively uses counselor skills to build coalitions, collaborate with administrators, parents, and teachers, and promote the use of school counseling services to influence change. DeVoss and Andrews believe that the gaps in academic success revealed in the nation and local data offer, "…examples of targets for system-wide school reform in which school counselors have a leadership role" (p 43).

The appeal by Dansby (1998) that school counselors adopt a systems approach to incorporating groups in schools has become a major tenet in the school counseling movement (ASCA, 2003; DeVoss & Andrews, 2006; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; House & Hayes, 2002; House & Martin, 1998). House and Hayes specifically call for school counselors to become effective leaders by collaborating with other professionals in their schools to influence system-wide changes. They contend that through collaboration school counselors can influence the whole school and support individual students. They caution that this "working relationship" requires a mutual understanding and appreciation of the shared goals of student success, access-and-equity, and an appreciation of the school as a community.

Dollarhide (2003) called for a holistic approach to leadership whereby leadership is viewed in four contexts. The first context is structural leadership; this is, working to build organizational structures such as an effective comprehensive counseling program. The ASCA model provides the foundation for the development and implementation of a viable counseling organization. The second context is human resources leadership perspective or empowering and inspiring others to work together to achieve a common goal. This style is exemplified when school counselors collaborate and actively support

the common mission of the school. The third context is political leadership where the school counselor uses interpersonal skills and the school's organizational power to influence change. In this context, school counselors work with teachers, principals, parents, and community leaders to build understanding and links between school counseling and mission goals. The fourth context is symbolic leadership that interprets and states the vision and meaning of change. In this leadership role the school counselor advocates through the promotion of results data and leads by example. In their yearlong qualitative study of new school counselor's efforts in leadership, Dollarhide, Gibson, and Sagnick, (2008) found that the school counselors who were the most effective in defining their roles as leaders and school counselors were active in all four leadership contexts. School counselors who can use these approaches to include group work in their efforts to reach targeted student populations.

Conyne and Mazza (2007) advocated for an ecological approach to group work by essentially applying the same four leadership contexts to five levels of group work. They recommended approaching the school as a dynamic organism composed of many connecting dynamic organisms including the student, the classroom, the school personnel, the school itself, and the community. By understanding the interactive and dynamic nature of the factors in this ecosystem, school counselors can use group work to "promote an improved ecological concordance between the clients and their environment" (p.19). Conyne and Mazza believe that drawing a connection between student, classroom, teacher, school, and community can "improve the lives of the students and of others both in and out of school" (p. 19). This is consistent with the four themes of the ASCA model: leadership, collaboration, advocacy, and systemic change.

In sum, the literature on the educational leadership of school counselors supports school counselors taking an active leadership role to influence school reform and promote systemic change for the good of all students. That role as educational leader places the school counselor at the forefront of school policy, gives the school counselor a school wide view of the systems within the school, and allows the school counselor to become part of the school's decision-making team. School counselors can use this holistic approach to help incorporate the comprehensive school counseling program as a part of the school's plan for achieving its goals. This active involvement in school planning, decision making, and improvement makes it possible for the school counselor to advocate for the implementation of a group counseling program as a part of the comprehensive school counseling program (Conyne &Mazza, 2007; Dollarhide, Gibson, & Sagnick, 2008; House & Hayes, 2002).

**Group Leadership**

While educational leadership can influence the reduction of external barriers to group work by teachers and administrators, school counselors also have internal barriers to group work. Uwah (2010) found that school counselors harbored concerns about group leadership skills, time commitment, and often lacked the desire to conduct groups. Further exploration into the internal barriers school counselors experience is evident in the studies exploring school counselors' perceptions of group leadership (Sisson, & Bullis, 1992; Steen, Bauman, & Smith, 2007; Wiggins & Carroll, 1993). Sission and Bullis surveyed elementary, middle, and high school counselors' perceptions of the training they received in graduate counseling programs. The school counselors from this study reported that they valued skills that were of practical value to their working

environment. Elementary school counselors gave more significance to the group leadership training they received than either middle school or high school counselors. Based on the results of their survey, Sisson and Bullis concluded that the upper grade level school counselors did not see the need for more group work training because they conducted few groups.

Wiggins and Carroll (1993) analyzed two surveys conducted with practicing school counselors. The first study surveyed 90 school counselors with at least two graduate courses in group work; however, there was no delineation of the counselor's grade level. These school counselors also had attended various workshops on group leadership. The survey sampled school counselors from a single large suburban school district. The survey asked school counselors to rate their training and ability. Significantly school counselors "reported that their foremost need, listed three times more often than all other items combined, was to learn more and better group leadership skills" (p. 25). They also believed that the training they received in counseling preparation courses and in workshops were predictable and offered only basic skills. Wiggins and Carroll's second study covered a three-year period and surveyed 2, 270 participants from the United States and Canada. Forty percent of the participants came from school settings (again no grade delineation was given), but represented school counselors, social workers, and support group workers. The major concern for these participants was learning more effective skills for working in the 'here and now' with group members.

In a more recent study Steen, Bauman, and Smith (2007) conducted a mixed methods survey to explore school counselors' practice of group work. They used the ASCA members' list serve and received 802 completed surveys, a 15% response rate.

While a response rate above 50% is optimal (Granello & Wheaton, 2004; Rubin & Babbie, 2009), the survey sampled practicing school counselors from across the United States thus, obtaining responses from school counselors who received their training from many different institutions. This broad sampling may present a more comprehensive view of school counselors' perceptions toward group leadership and present more ability to generalize.

Consistent with previous studies, Steen, Bauman, and Smith (2007) found that school counselors believed counseling groups were an effective intervention for students. The school counselors voiced the same group work interferences that Dansby found in her study (i.e. resistance by teachers and administrators and time constraints). However, Steen et al. found that slightly over a half (63%) of the respondents listed school counselor confidence in group skills as at least somewhat a factor in not conducting groups. More than half of that number cited confidence in group skills as a major factor. This and the previous two studies offer a departure from Dansby's study that reported that school counselors had confidence in their training for group work.

Additionally, Steen et al. (2007) found that of the school counselors who conducted small groups, only a small number of them included multicultural considerations. This is troubling because of the diverse populations school counselors work with in today's schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008 & 2009). The American Counseling Association (ACA), the American School Counseling Association (ASCA), and the Association for Specialist in Group Work (ASGW) adopted a strong stance on multicultural competence for their members. Each of the organizations has adopted multicultural components requiring counselors to show proficiency in the areas

of self-awareness, knowledge of cultures and oppression, and skills for working with diverse clients (ACA, 2005; ASCA, 2003; ASGW, 2007).

Many studies have linked multicultural understanding and sensitivity to student school success and identity development. Skills cannot be taught or learned if the student's cultural world is not considered (Rice, McMahon, Uwah & McLeod, 2009; Schwallie-Giddis, et al, 2004; Skowron, 2004; Villalba, Brunelli, Lewis, & Orfanedes, 2007). Phinney, Cantu, and Kurtz (1997) studied African American, Latino, and White students in grades nine through twelve and found that positive racial identity was an important factor in student self esteem and increased level of comfort in participating in the classroom. In their longitudinal study, Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, and Zimmerman (2003) found a close connection between academic attainment and racial identity. They discovered that the connection between academic achievement and racial identity development was stronger at early points in the student's middle and high school life than in later grade levels. Chavous et al. concluded that students with greater racial identity development had higher grades and fewer discipline referrals.

School counselors can assist students in the development of racial identity and academic success through group counseling that encourages identity exploration and open discussions. Allowing the group members to explore their self, identity, and growth depends on the school counselor's ability to establish an environment, which embraces group members' various cultures (Bailey & Bradhury-Bailey, 2007; Rayle & Myers, 2004). Berger (2006) studied the link between a caring environment and academic attainment. His study was set in an alternative school setting of African American

students in middle and high school. He looked at micro-aggressions transmitted by caregiver to students and found that this interaction induced iatrogenic harm to the student eliciting feelings of inferiority, incompetence, or unworthiness. While the micro-aggression might not be intentional, the choice of words, tone of voice, or body language has the potential to cause iatrogenic harm when the student's culture is not considered. When students perceive caretakers as unresponsive to their culture and needs the result can be resistance, acting out, or "shutting down" behaviors (Berger, 2006; Villalba, et al., 2007). Clearly the need for a building a relationship with the student is important to establishing the bond between student and caregiver. The importance of the relationship and resulting alliance between the client and therapist is well-documented (Bordin, 1979; Lambert & Barley, 2001; Martin, Garske, & Davis, 1999; Yalom, 2005).

**Therapeutic alliance in the school setting.** There is scant research that discusses the therapeutic alliance in the school setting. A review of the literature concerning the therapeutic alliance reveals the importance to the success of therapeutic interventions. Bordin's (1979) therapeutic alliance theory suggests that the working alliance between client and therapist has more effect on therapeutic outcome than the theoretical orientation of the therapist or the techniques employed by the therapist. Bordin attributed three factors to the development of the therapeutic alliance: task, goals, and bond. Lambert and Barley (2001) contend that the importance of the therapeutic alliance is almost double that or therapists activities and second only to factors outside of therapy. The research points to the strength of the therapeutic alliance as a strong predictor of outcome regardless of the therapy or techniques used (Martin et al., 1999). Ross, Polaschek, and Ward (2008) in a study of the therapeutic alliance in offender

rehabilitation proposed that the interaction of "treatment setting, therapist and client characteristics, cognitions, perceptions, emotion, and therapist and client behavior produce a therapeutic alliance as measured by Bordin's goals, tasks, and bond" (p. 477).

While many traditional therapist frown on self-disclosure, Saunders'(1999) study found, that for brief therapy, the quality of sessions improved and were more effective when there was a reciprocal intimacy (i.e. self-disclosure) between the client and therapist. Goldfried, Burckell, and Eubanks-Carter (2003) suggest two types of positive self-disclosure—disclosing personal reactions to the client (encouraging or discouraging behaviors) and disclosing personal experiences (modeling pro-social behaviors)—can aid in establishing the therapeutic alliance. Yalom (2005) contends that developing a therapeutic alliance with group members is critical to the success of the group process. Because of their proximity to students and the potential to see students regularly, school counselors have the opportunity to create alliances with their students.

**Confidence in group leadership skills.** Further complicating the problem of school counselor confidence is the differences between the perceptions of treatment outcome between the group leader and group members. In Kastner and Ray's (2000) study with high school groups and Hagborg's (1993) study of middle school students the cohesion felt between the group members and group leader was considered, and the researchers discovered a difference in perceptions. In both studies, group leaders' perception of the group experience varied greatly from group members. Group members perceived higher levels of group cohesion, group building, group maintenance, and believed they were more task focused than the group leaders reported. Kastner and Ray attributed the discrepancy between group leader and group member to the differences

between psychotherapy and psycho-educational groups. The more severe clients and more intense sessions in psychotherapy groups would see the opportunity for greater change, and may not be an error in perceptions. Hagborg attributed much of his results to the tendency of middle school students to be less concerned about goal achievement and more focused on the sense of belonging that groups provided. This perception discrepancy between group leader and members is not unique to adolescents; it can also occur in adult groups and requires the group leader to seek feedback for clarification of perceived group dynamics (Hagborg; Kastner & Ray). Though they found a disconnect between counselor perceptions of gains in groups and the adolescent group members, Kastner and Ray saw that student gains, while small during the group experience, continued to have an impact long after the group experience. These studies focused on outcome results and did not factor in group leadership skills or group leaders multicultural competence.

While many of the studies described here did not directly address counselor/group leader confidence or training, Kulic, Dagley, and Horne's (2004) challenge that lack of group leader experience and training in facilitating groups is critical when evaluating group treatment outcomes remains significant. Experience and training of group leaders has been the subject of research for some time (Akos, Goodnough, & Milsom, 2004; Hillerbrand & Claiborn, 1990; Kivlighan & Quigley, 1991).

In 1988, Hulse-Killacky assembled four renowned expert group leaders to discuss effective group leadership (Conyne, Harvill, Morganett, Morran, & Hulse-Killacky, 1990). The themes that emerged from these conversations revealed the complexity of conducting groups and the frustrations many group leaders face. There was general

agreement that in training there was too much attention spent on process and not enough on the mechanics of group leadership. While techniques were important, there is not a set list be checked off during a session. They expressed that the skills required to conduct groups are many but include flexibility, preparedness, knowledge of self, the ability to create therapeutic climates and intervene critically, and the ability to problem solve group processes. They underscored the complexity of leading groups that, in addition to the aforementioned challenges, requires the group leader to be imaginative and alert to the intricate and impromptu situations that often occur during the group process.

In the most recent study of group leadership, Rubel and Kline (2008) found that experts divulged that the experience of running groups shaped leader attitudes and knowledge. As counselors conducted more groups, they gained increasing confidence in the group process, group members, and their perceived leadership abilities. Rubel and Kline's study revealed that as they conducted more groups the expert group leaders grew in three skill areas the researchers called perceiving, understanding, and formulating. Perceiving is the awareness of the group members' feelings, behaviors, and ideas as the group leader is actively self-aware. Understanding is the marrying of perceptions and knowledge gained through experience or theory. Finally formulation is the process of developing or sensing (that 'aha moment") an intervention to fit the understanding of an event during group interaction or what Yalom (2005) calls the "group discourse". Honing these three skills is an active and reflective endeavor requiring multiple group experiences. Rubel and Kline's participants self-identified as counselors, psychologists, social workers, and groups psychologist. There were no reported school counselors in the

study, and the unique nature of conducting groups in a school setting may require skills not explored in their study.

The literature concerning group leadership for school counselors is found in manuals for group counseling in schools (Brigman & Goodman, 2001; DeLucia-Waack, 2006; Greenburg, 2003). These books give suggestions for conducting groups in schools, and offer some insight into group leadership, however they do not address the logistical challenges school counselors face. I could find no studies that examined the experiences of school counselor group leadership.

This review of literature examined group counseling in middle schools. The initial review found group counseling is an effective and efficient intervention for addressing academic and social emotional concerns that impede the success of early adolescents in middle schools. The literature also reveals that few school counselors are conducting groups in schools because of external interferences from within the school. Time constraints, teacher and administrator resistance to groups, the reluctance of students from lower SES to participants fully were cited as external inhibitors of successful groups. Additionally internal barriers to school counselors leading groups also abound. Internal barriers to groups were examined through the lens of educational leadership, the therapeutic alliance between student and group leader, and group leader confidence. The review of literature represents an extensive review of relevant literature to the grand question examined. If some middle school counselors are successful in conducting groups in schools, what are their secrets? How do experiences middle school counselors approach and experience psycho-educational groups in schools?

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# CHAPTER 2

## GROUP LEADERSHIP OF EXPERIENCED MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Numerous studies confirm that groups are an effective and efficient method for mediating the social/emotional and academic complications that may be inhibiting students from achieving success in schools (Gansle, 2005; Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007; Gladding, 2008; Hoag & Burlingame, 1997; Kulic, Dagley, & Horne, 2004). In three meta-analyses of school-based group counseling studies, psycho-educational groups were found to be an effective treatment for a variety of issues (i.e. social/emotional or academic) that affect student learning (Gansle; Hoag & Burlingame; Kulic, et al.). Kulic, et al. found that while the results of groups conducted in clinical settings were more significant, school-based group counseling was also an effective intervention. Their justification for the disparity was that children and adolescents in the clinical groups typically had more serious pathologies than school-based group members, therefore, a greater movement toward wellness was to be expected.

The American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) national model for comprehensive school counseling programs has responded to this research by suggesting that groups are an essential means for delivering focused services to a large number of students (ASCA, 2003). School counselors agree that groups are an effective intervention for students with difficulties in school, yet school counselors also report that there are challenges to conducting groups because of inhibitors such as teacher and administrator resistance to groups, non-counseling duties, time constraints, and large caseloads (Dansby, 1996; Steen, Bauman, & Smith, 2007).

An extensive review of the literature reveals that the majority of the research on groups in schools has been conducted in elementary and high schools. There are scant empirical studies on group efficacy conducted in middle schools. Middle level education is a unique period and therefore warrants further exploration. Middle level education was adopted to address the developmental needs of early adolescence (e.g. ages 10-15). The term middle school is typically used to identify middle level education however; some schools still remain a k-8 or k-12 configuration that does not separate schools into distinct grade levels. While configuration varies among middle schools (i.e.5-8, 6-7, 7-8, 7-9), the most common is a grade configuration of grades 6-8 and all of the schools in this study fell into the 6-8 grade configuration (Capelluti, 1991;Kasak, 2001). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how middle school counselors experience and conduct group counseling sessions.

**Group Leadership**

Hoag and Burlingame (1997) did not find group leadership to be statistically significant in group counseling outcome, however, Kulic, et al, (2004) maintain that the outcome of the group intervention was directly related to group leader effectiveness and skill. Kulic, et al.'s findings are consistent with others (e.g. Conyne, Harvill, Morganett, Morran, & Hulse-Killacky,1990; Rubel & Kline, 2008; Yalom, 2005) who have expressed the importance of experienced, skilled, and effective group leaders to group treatment success.

While there are studies that have researched effective group leadership skills, the unique nature of middle school counseling presents dilemmas that require approaches different than that of clinical group leaders (Akos, 2005; Akos, Goodnough, & Milsom,

2004; Kulic, Dagley, & Horne, 2004; Rubal & Kline, 2008; Yalom, 2005). Assisting the early adolescent in the school environment presents distinctive challenges to the middle school counselor and may require unique skills for group leadership. More studies are needed to assess the skills required by middle school counselors to enhance their delivery of group counseling services.

Given the importance of group leadership, there is another conclusion that can be drawn from these studies. The studies in the three meta-analyses primarily used professional counselors, schoolteachers, school psychologists, or university personnel as group leaders (Gansle, 2005; Hoag & Burlingame, 1997; Kulic, et al., 2004). The fact that few school counselors were group leaders in the studies is important because school counselors are trained to work within the unique framework of the school environment. Further, the ASCA national model recommends that school counselors use group work in three areas of their delivery of services: guidance curriculum, individual student planning, and responsive services (ASCA, 2003).

**School Counselor Confidence and Attitudes Concerning Group Leadership**

Surveys of school counselor training and attitudes reveal some insight into the lack of school counselors' group leadership in the literature. Sisson and Bullis (1992) surveyed elementary, middle, and high school counselors, and examined their attitudes towards the training they received in counseling programs. From the answers to questions on skill development, they found that school counselors valued skills they perceived as necessary for their work environment. However, only elementary school counselors valued group training and saw group counseling as important to their counseling program. Sisson and Bullis concluded that because the middle and high school counselors

could not make groups a significant or practical part of their program (due in part to time constraints), group training and group leadership skill development were not perceived to be an important part of their school counselor training.

Dansby (1996) studied Tennessee school counselors' attitudes and implementation of group work in schools. The majority of the school counselors who answered the survey reported in the initial questions that psycho-educational groups were the most common groups conducted and that group work was an important part of their school program. However, upon review of more probing questions, Dansby found that 39% of the reporting school counselors used professionals from outside of the school to conduct groups, and 40% reported that a school counselor other than themselves conducted groups. The most common reasons given by school counselors for not conducting groups were lack of support from teachers, administrators, and parents, and insufficient time during the school day. These surveys, which revealed reluctance on the part of middle and high school counselors to conduct groups, provide one possible reason why so few studies included middle and high school counselors as group leader participants.

The perceptions of school counselors who conducted groups provide a slightly different view of group leadership in schools. Wiggins and Carroll (1993) gave two surveys to practicing school counseling group leaders from the United States and Canada. One survey was given at a conference session on group work with 90 participants (including school counselors) surveyed. Their other survey was a longitudinal survey of school group workers (40% were school counselors) over a three-year period. The analyses of these two surveys revealed a desire on the part of active group leaders to learn

more effective group leadership skills and learn skills that helped them lead groups in the "here and now". A more recent study by Steen, Bauman, and Smith (2007) surveyed ASCA member school counselors who were conducting groups. They found concurrence with Dansby's (1996) study regarding the lack of support and time as the major constraints to conducting groups. School counselors in Steen, et al.'s survey also reported a lack of confidence in their group leadership skills, which contributed to less group work in their schools.

Kulic, et al. (2004) challenged researchers who studied groups to use experienced, well trained group leaders to obtain valid, clear outcome results. Understanding what determines an experienced (effective) and well-trained group leader was explored by Conyne, et al. (1990) and studied by Rubel and Kline (2008). Conyne, et al. explored effective group leadership in a series of discussions with four renowned group leaders. A general theme emerged from those discussions that too little attention in training programs has been devoted to the mechanics of leading groups. They believed that the complexity of leading groups has been overshadowed by the fascination with the group process and the outcomes of group counseling (Akos, Goodnough, & Milsom, 2004; Conyne, et al., 1990; Frey, 1998). They addressed the mechanics of group leadership and enumerated skills necessary to lead groups. Agreeing with Yalom (2005), the experts emphasized that more was needed than a list of skills for group leadership. Group leaders needed to be creative and adept in leading members through the fluid and intricate interactions experienced during the group process (Conyne, et al., 1990).

Rubel and Kline (2008) studied the skills needed for group leadership in a recent qualitative study using grounded theory methodology. They discovered that group leaders

gained confidence and greater insight into leading groups as they gained experience leading groups. The theory that emerged from their study identified perceiving, understanding, and formulating as the three skills necessary for group leadership. While the rich information gained from their study is useful to all group leaders, the participants of their study did not include school counselors. Elementary groups have been the primary source of group counseling studies; however, the elementary setting is very different from the middle school setting. There is a different structure (i.e. students and teachers are arranged into teams), unique nature of conducting groups in a middle school setting and the distinctive nature of adolescence demand close investigation of the leadership required to conduct groups in a school environment (Akos, Goodnough, & Milsom, 2004; Rice, McMahon, Uwah-Williams & McLeod, 2009).

**Multicultural Considerations in Group Leadership**

In their study, Steen, Bauman, and Smith (2007) found that of the school counselors who conducted frequent groups, few included multicultural considerations in their groups. While leadership confidence and multicultural issues were not fully discussed in their study, and only hinted at in the previous studies reviewed, these two concerns are significant in view of the growing diverse populations entering schools today. In 2008, minorities make up 41% of US school student population in public schools and a large portion of these students are from lower SES families (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008 &2009).

All of the major counseling organizations—American Counseling Association (ACA), American School Counseling Association (ASCA), and the Association for Specialist in Group Work (ASGW)—have made multicultural competences an important

part of their codes of ethics (ACA, 2005; ASCA, 2003; ASGW, 2000). Numerous studies have linked cultural sensitivity in schools to student achievement and identity development, particularly during adolescence (Chavous, et al., 2003; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Schwallie-Giddis, et al., 2004; Skowron, 2004; & Villalba, Brunelli, Lewis, & Orfanedes, 2007). The connection between student achievement, cultural identity, and groups in schools has been made in several studies (Bailey & Bradhury-Bailey, 2007; Rayle & Myers, 2004; Rice, et al. 2009). Groups conducted by culturally competent school counselors with effective group leadership skills can help students explore perceived micro aggressions, identity development, and other issues that constrain the learning process in schools (Bailey & Bradhury-Bailey, 2007; Berger, 2006; Chavous, et al., 2003; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997).

**Missing Pieces and Need for This Study**.

The emphasis that ASCA puts on groups and the wealth of literature concerning the effectiveness and efficiency of groups as an intervention makes group work an important tool for school counselors as an intervention to help students succeed in school (ASCA, 2003; Gansle, 2005; Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007; Hoag & Burlingame, 1997; Kulic, et al., 2004). Yet the external barriers to groups in schools i.e. teacher and administrator resistance, time constraints, and large case loads are common reasons given by school counselors for not conducting more groups (Dansby, 1998; Steen, et al. 2007). Additionally, school counselors' internal barriers may be a factor in the lack of group work in schools (i.e. confidence in group organizational and leadership skills, and desire to make groups a priority) particularly in high school and middle schools (Sisson & Bullis, 1992; Steen, Bauman, & Smith, 2007; Uwah-Williams, McMahon, McLeod &

Rice, 2008; Wiggins and Carroll, 1993). However, there are middle school counselors who are successfully conducting groups in their schools. How do these middle school counselors establish and promote groups in their schools and what is their experience as group leaders? An exploration of successful middle school group leaders may provide insight that will help other middle school counselors begin a group counseling program in their schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how experienced middle school group leaders' approach and experience psycho-educational and counseling groups.

## Method

### Conceptual Context and Theoretical Orientation

An investigation into the experiences of middle school counselors as they establish groups in their schools and lead students through the group process is critical to understanding how they conduct groups in their schools. By studying experienced middle school group leaders, I hope to find commonalities that provide useful information for future middle school counselors seeking to conduct groups in their schools. To gain insight into the approaches and processes of middle school counselors who are successfully conducting groups a research method that provides an avenue for them to explain their challenges, feelings, and successes is needed. A qualitative methodology provides the best opportunity to fully explore the group leadership experiences of middle school counselors, and grounded theory affords the desired structure. Grounded theory uses the systematic collecting of participants' statements and explanations of their actions and perceptions to construct theories that make sense of those data (Charmaz, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I employed Guba and Lincoln's fourth generation evaluation to guide

my grounded theory approach because I wanted a practical plan for systematically collecting and evaluating the data. As a practicing middle school counselor who conducts groups, I wanted my voice as a participant and researcher to be heard along with the voices of the participants and Charmaz' approach provided a framework for interpreting the constructions that emanated from the interactions with the participants and aided in writing the results. By merging Guba and Lincoln with Charmaz, I am maintaining a constructivist approach yet realizing a trustworthy method for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data.

Frey (1994) contends qualitative research is ideal for the complexities found in the study of groups because of the rich information gained from the sustained interaction between researcher and participant. He proposed that the interaction should be a partnership that empowers both the researcher—through analysis and reconstruction of data—and the participant—through examination of their thoughts and the acceptance or rejection of the reconstructions by the researcher. This partnership implies equal status of researcher and participant and seeks to negotiate outcomes that benefit researcher and participant. The constructions that develop through the discourse, negotiation, and reconstruction of the qualitative process are used to bring into social action a product that improves—through agreement or disagreement—group leadership practices of middle schools counselors and contributes to the research literature (Frey, 1994). Merriam (1998) asserts that qualitative research methods seek to understand the meaning people place on experiences, and their perception of these experiences in the context of their social world is how reality is constructed. These concepts suggest that qualitative methodology through the lens of the grounded theory approach is the best method of

research to answer the grand research question, “How do experienced middle school group leaders approach and experience psycho-educational and counseling groups?”

**Research Team**

I, the primary researcher, am a practicing middle school counselor of fourteen years. At the time of the study, I was head of the counseling department (over two other counselors) at a suburban middle school and a member of the school’s leadership team. The school had a student population of 879 students with an ethnic mix of 53% African American, 24% White, 12% Hispanic, and 9% Asian and 47% of the students were consider students from low Socio Economic Status (SES) families. The number of students on free and reduced school lunches is the measure used to determine SES in schools under NCLB and these students are considered an at-risk population for academic success (NCLB, 2002). I conducted seven middle school groups over the course of the study. I am an African American male in my fourth year as a doctoral student in the counselor education program at a large urban university.

The second member of the research team, an African American female, was a recent graduate of a doctoral program in counselor education, and has five years experience as a school counselor and group leader. Both the primary researcher and the second researcher had conducted qualitative studies and participated on numerous qualitative research teams. Both taught courses in group counseling to master level students in a counselor training program.

The third researcher, a Caucasian female, was in her first year of a doctoral program in counselor education. She conducted quantitative research, and was taking classes in qualitative research at the time of this study. The third researcher had group

counseling experience but no experience in school counseling. Having a research member outside of the field of school counseling aided in clarifying biases and added an objective perspective to the project. I used two outside auditors to add an unbiased perspective of the team's analyses. One outside auditor was a practicing middle school counselor with 25 years of experience. This auditor reviewed a draft of the final analyses and member checks, and negotiated the emerging themes with the primary researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The second outside auditor has a doctorate in humanities and has conducted qualitative research. This auditor reviewed the transcript for consistencies and audited the data trail for the study.

**Biases identified and discussed**.

Interview questions and prompts were determined through the process of "bracketing interview" and consultation with the research group. The bracket interviewing took place between the primary researcher and the third researcher. The fit of questions and prompts was initially adjusted through the hermeneutic negotiation process and further adjusted after the first two interviews (Janesick, 2000). Both the primary and secondary researcher acknowledged they observed the benefits of group work in schools when they were group leaders. Both had successful experiences and expected that cooperation with school personnel and consideration of the school culture would result in a flourishing group counseling program. Because of the group experiences of the primary and secondary researcher, the research team was vigilant in their observance of bias encroachment. The team relied on the hermeneutic negotiation process to assist with bias recognition and discovery of emerging themes (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Janesick, 2000).

**Participants and Settings**

The second step towards establishing goodness is purposeful sampling, data collection, and data analysis (Frey, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The participants in this study were purposefully selected. Purposeful sampling gives power to the study by including information-rich realities that directly address the grand question (Frey, 1994; Merriam, 1998). The study used the technique of chaining to obtain the sampling. Chaining involves asking knowledgeable participants to identify information-rich people who then identify other participants, who identify other participants to interview (Merriam, 1998). The primary researcher, who has extensive practice in leading middle school groups, began the process of chaining by asking personal contacts three questions:

1. "Who do you know who has been able to conduct groups and maintain a comprehensive counseling program?"
2. "Who do you consider to be a highly effective or experienced group leader?"
3. "Who would you refer your child or relative to for group counseling?"

I sent emails to members in the ASGW list serve, middle school counselors in the ASCA list serve, and to school counselors known by the primary researcher. The email contained the questions listed above and specifically asked for middle school counselors who had practiced groups at the middle school level for at least five years and who had been a group leader of psycho-educational and counseling groups. It is important to note that this study explores the experiences of group leaders who practice alone. Co-leadership, while common in middle school, is not the focus of this study and middle school counselors who co-lead groups may have very different experiences, than a sole group leader. Preference was given to school counselors who were currently conducting

psycho-educational groups or had conducted psycho-educational groups in the past year. The proximity to the group experience would prove useful in gaining insightful leadership experiences from the participants about their group process and providing a clear understanding of the participants' experiences as group leaders. While the pool of school counselors contacted varied by race, ethnicity, and gender, a larger proportion of females to males participated which matches the proportion of middle school counselors by gender at the national level (ASCA, 2003). Twenty counselors responded, and I conducted an initial screening to determine if they met the criteria (only two males were in that initial interview process and only one agreed to participate). Fourteen school counselors met the criteria (i.e. at least five years as a middle school group leader, conducted groups within the last school year, and was the sole group leader) and agreed to participate in the study. Table 1 shows the demographic information for the participants and their settings.

Table 1

*Demographic Chart for Participants and Their School*

| **Participant/ Status*** | **Gender/ Ethnic** | **Yrs as MS Coun/yrs gr. wk** | **#gr pt yr/ TOS**** | **School Type/ Location** | **SES %/50%< Maj Ethincity** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Helen – PhD | F/W | 22/18 | 1/1 | Urban/ southeast | 44% Afr. Amer |
| Connie – MSC | F/B | 5/12 | 7/8 | Suburban/ southeast | 57% Afr. Amer |
| Sue – Ed.S | F/W | 7/12 | 8/1 | Suburban/ southeast | 34% White |
| Neet – Ed.S | F/B | 6/6 | 7/2 | Suburban/ southeast | 23% White |
| Ronnie – Ed.S | F/W | 16.5/25 | 14/2 | Suburban/ Midwest | 14% White |
| Billie – Ed.S. | F/W | 9/9 | 12/1 | Suburban Western | 4% White |
| Kasey – Ed.S | F/W | 18/18 | 4/3 | Suburban/ southeast | NA White |
| Kija – PhD | F/W | 13/13 | 5/3 | Suburban/ | NA |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | southeast | White |
| Tennis Pro - PhD | F/W | 25/25 | 11/3 | Suburban/ southeast | 59% Afr Amer |
| Jackie – MSC | F/B | 5/5 | 10/4 | Suburban/ southeast | 79% Afr. Amer |
| Jacqueline – Ed.S | F/W | 19/13 | 19/3 | Suburban/ Northeast | 6% White |
| Kay – PhD | F/W | 20/7 | 20/3 | Suburban/ Midwest | 0% White |
| Alan - MSW | M/Jewish | 18/5 | 25/11 | Urban/ Northeast | 100% Latino/Afr Amer |
| Shelley – MSC | W/F | 9/9 | 3/3 | Suburban/ Northeast | 10% White |

*PhD – Doctorate in School Counseling, Ed.S – Education Specialist in School Counseling, MSC – Master in School Counseling, MSW – Masters in Social Work TOS – Time of Study

Of the thirteen females and one male, ten identified as White, one as Jewish, and three as African American. Four of the participants had a doctorate degree in school counseling, one had a master's degree in social work, and the remaining had either a master's or a specialist's degree in school counseling. The years of experience in school counseling ranged from five to twenty-five years. The average years of middle school counseling experience was 11 years with a median of 9 years. All of the participants worked in public middle schools—two in urban locations and 12 in suburban settings. The participants were located in seven different states covering the southeastern, midwestern, northeastern, and western parts of the United States. The average caseload for these participants was 300 students with one having a caseload of 150.

The populations of the schools varied ethnically and in SES. Eight of the participants reported a majority White population with various minorities (e.g. Asian, African American, Hispanic and multiracial) under 11%. Three participants reported a majority African American population with other ethnic groups (e.g. Hispanic, White,

Asian, and multiracial). The remaining participants reported virtually equal populations, either Hispanic and African American or White and African American.

The SES of the students in the schools also varied. The range of student SES was zero to 100%. Five schools reported below 10% SES student population, and two schools reported 79% and 100% SES populations. The remainder of the schools ranged between 23% and 59% SES.

Nine of the participants had or were also practicing counselors outside of the school setting. Seven of the participants were licensed professional counselors, and one was a licensed social worker. Four of the participants reported no professional organizational affiliations. The other ten were members, or had been members, of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA), and two of the participants were past members of the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW).

The number of groups these participants conducted per year ranged from three to twenty-five. The breakdown of groups per year for these participants was—five participants conducted 3-4 groups, five participants conducted 7-8 groups, and four participants conducted 11-25 groups. Twelve of the participants were conducting between one and three groups at the time of the interviews, one was conducting eleven different groups, and one participant was not conducting groups.

An approximate sample size of 12 participants was chosen to achieve the status saturation. Saturation or the replication of data is accomplished when the addition of new participants and information fits into established categories and the data replicates (Charmaz, 2000; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). While this condition was satisfied on the twelfth interview, the additional two interviews were conducted

because of geographic and gender differences among participants. While the resulting analysis of the last two interviews provided no new themes, the two schools in which these two participants practiced had a large number of students with disabilities and were located in urban settings. This added information about a different population of students than was discussed in previous interviews. The research team reached consensus through negotiation that saturation occurred after analysis of the fourteenth interview. While this study does not seek to generalize the results, the use of representative samples may be helpful when comparing emerging themes to national trends and innovations in school counseling.

**Procedure**

My role, as primary researcher, is that of retelling the participants' story. I am not a neutral observer or gatherer of data but had personal involvement in the process (Charmaz, 2006; Frey, 1994; Guba & Lincoln; Schram, 2006). I am a practicing middle school counselor who conducted groups during the study, and therefore it was critical to disclose biases. I maintained a journal of concerns, feelings, disagreements, and agreements during the research process to record and process possible biases and reactions to the data collection and analysis procedure.

Interview questions (Appendix A) and prompts were determined through the process of a "bracketing interview" and negotiations with the research group. In a bracketing interview a member of the research group interviews the primary researcher using the prompts developed for the participants (Janesick, 2000). Through this bracketing process, the research team determines fitness of prompts and identifies biases that emerge. The research group and one of the outside auditors helped with the "analysis

of the narrative" by cooperatively discovering the significance of the themes and theories that emerged (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Janesick, 2000). The research team met over the course of six months to conduct the hermeneutic analyses, which included a vigilant observance of emerging biases.

**Data Collection**

The data collection process included individual, semi-structured interviews with each participant. I interviewed six participants face-to-face and eight participants by phone. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and I transcribed the interviews from those taped recordings. All participants received an electronic copy of the informed consent form (Appendix B) and the demographic form (Appendix C). I read the informed consent to the participants and asked them to verify their understanding of the consent. After gaining consent, participants either signed the consent form or electronically sent their agreement to participate. Each participant retained a copy of the informed consent form. The demographic form was either completed at the time of the interview or sent electronically. The demographic form included questions about the participant's professional experience, years leading groups, gender, and ethnicity. Participants were also asked to describe their school type (e.g. grade levels, location) and their school's population (e.g. ethnicities, SES, and gender make-up).

**Semi-structured interviews.** The primary researcher individually interviewed and recorded each participant in a session of approximately one hour. Every effort was made to conduct the interviews in person, but telephone interviews were necessary because of the varied geographical locations of the participants. The central interview questions for the participants remained the same, but additional questions evolved or

questions were deleted after the first two interviews. This was possible because of the recursive nature of the analyses of the interviews. Analyses of the interviews were recursive every two interviews and the coding from open coding through selective coding was fluid. The research team used the process of hermeneutic negotiation to resolve issues. After the fourth interview, the research team made final adjustments to the questions, which remained constant for the remainder of the interviews. The design of interview questions and interviewer's prompting elicited the participants' narrative construction of their experiences and process. These interview questions created what Charmaz (2006) called intensive interviewing. Intensive interviews are semi-structured in that they are directive but allow for divergent answers. While I paced the questions, I followed the lead of the participant (Charmaz, 2006). Throughout the interview, I asked the participants to clarify or verify my understanding of their responses.

**Memoing.** As an active participant in the study, I kept a journal or memo of the interview process and record of my reactions, feelings, and biases. I used memoing as an intermediate step in the ongoing analysis of data, codes, and the hermeneutic dialectic process (Charmaz, 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The memos were a method of hypothesis and theory development that was then brought to the research team to negotiate. The memos were used in the data analysis as a means of recording my thoughts and reactions to the interviews and analyses, and to record my developments of hypothesis and themes. Ideas gained through these memos were discussed with the research team. I also recorded my reactions to literature I reviewed as themes from the study began to emerge. While I used the memos for discussion with the team, the original memos remain with the researcher for reference use only.

**Data analysis.** Throughout this study, I followed what Guba and Lincoln (1989) call the Hermeneutic Dialectic Process. The hermeneutic dialectic process is a quality control function and the first of three steps toward establishing the quality of goodness standards set forth in Guba and Lincoln's "Fourth Generation Evaluation." This process involves negotiation and shared power on the part of all participating parties. The negotiation is steeped in the emic and etic views of all, and I searched for consensus when possible. Where consensus was not possible, differences were clarified using the six conditions Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest for a successful hermeneutic dialectic process. This process served as the basis for interaction in the study. The research team used the process throughout this study and found it to be useful in keeping the sessions flowing and productive. The minimal conditions for all parties are:

1) A commitment to work from a position of integrity.
2) Minimal competence to communicate.
3) A willingness to share power.
4) A willingness to change if they find negotiations persuasive.
5) A willingness to reconsider value positions as appropriate.
6) A willingness to make commitment of time and energy that may be required in the process. p. 149-150.

Two noted examples of this process were the removal, rearranging of questions, and development of questions. The team negotiated the removal of a question about the theoretical orientation of the participants because we found that participants appeared hesitant and intimidated. The team reframed the question to read, "How have you moved your students to change?" This garnered an in-depth response that reached the goal of

discovering the participant's theoretical lens for conducting groups. Another example was to table the question "Has this interview sparked you to make changes in your group counseling?" until the final contact with the participants. The response from the participants was that they needed time to reflect. We expanded that question and asked it during the member check.

**Coding.** The process of data collection and analyses was recursive. After the first two interviews and transcriptions, the research team met to open code, revise questions, and begin developing themes and categories. Each team member received and coded the transcripts ahead of the meetings. The team met for approximately one hour each session and we used the hermeneutic dialectic process to manage the meetings. Codes were discussed, emerging themes were accepted or rejected, and hypotheses were formed at these meetings. I retained the coded transcripts from each member to maintain confidentiality and to use for review purposes. The research team repeated this process of coding and recycling every two successive interviews (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). New questions that arose from this process were presented to previous participants by way of a second interview, by either phone or email. No new questions arose after the fourth interview and analyses. The participants were sent a copy of their transcript and a chart of emerging themes (Appendix D). I asked them to verify and comment on the themes. I included questions in the chart of emerging themes and asked the participants to reflect upon: changes in their group counseling practice since the interview, and their reactions after reviewing the emerging themes. The member check is a technique used to satisfy the criterion of ontological authenticity. Ontological authenticity is one method for establishing fairness and trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln).

***Open coding.*** Each member of the research team received a transcription of each participant's interview. The research team conducted a line-by-line investigation and categorization of the data (e.g. participant's experiences, phenomena, or events). They arranged the categories along a continuum of categories, sub-categories, and variables. As questions arose from the data, I entered them in the memo journal (Charmaz, 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

***Axial coding.*** After the fourth interview, relationships between the codes began to develop, and I developed a codebook for use as a 'coding paradigm', which led to better understanding of the phenomena, experiences, and events. The 'coding paradigm' led to selective coding and the development of themes and a theory (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

***Selective coding.*** The selective coding process initiates the development of theory that involves comparing participant-to-participant, experiences-to-experiences, interviewees with themselves, and categories to categories (Charmaz, 2006; Janesick, 2000). Through the hermeneutic dialectic process of negotiation, the research team verified, defined, and developed the themes into a theory (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I reviewed memos and evaluated the developing themes to ensure that key ideas were presented to the research team for negotiation and consensus.

**Verification**

Trustworthiness is the parallel to rigor used within the conventional paradigm (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). This study pursued the four criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability set by Guba and Lincoln. Credibility is achieved when the researcher can show a link between realities constructed

by the participants and those realities the researchers reconstruct and attribute to the participants (Guba & Lincoln). There are several techniques for accomplishing credibility, and this study used self-disclosure, peer debriefing, triangulation, progressive subjectivity, and member checks. Guba and Lincoln state that member checks verify constructions collected and triangulation attempts to verify facts. The participants verified the accuracy of the data collected in the transcripts, and they responded to the themes that emerged. This member checking was conducted after the research team had completed theme analysis. The period between the interviews and the member check allowed the participants' time to consider their thoughts and clarify their views.

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that triangulation is necessary for credibility and recommended a variety of sources to provide feedback on the generated theories. Triangulation is the use of a variety of methods to corroborate or challenge the data and the generated theories. The goal of triangulation is to eliminate biases, secure deep understanding of the phenomena, and give validity to the constructed theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman). I triangulated through the hermeneutic dialectic process with the research team, ongoing review of literature to check concepts against existing literature, and feedback about the theories and themes from the outside auditors (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The strategy used in the triangulation of data and themes is an iterative interaction of grounded theory methods, dynamic sampling and data collection, and selective coding for saturation and theory development (Morse, et al., 2002). Ideally, when all of these methods corroborate the findings, a successful triangulation of the theories has been met. When the methods did not agree, a

description of the disagreements with the theory was delineated through memoing (Frey, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In this study, judgments concerning transferability were established through the transparent disclosure of time, place, context, and culture in extensive and rich descriptions. Because the participants and their schools were from varied locations and demographics, many of the themes may be salient for other school counselors. Dependability and confirmability are similar in that they both require an audit process and occur together. The audit in the case of confirmability is an accounting of the constructions that allows an outside person the ability to trace the data (whether the data and constructions have been merged, deconstructed or not) to its original source. Dependability is established through careful tracking of changes in the methodology through a dependability audit and accounting of changes using memos. It is important to note that both the hermeneutic process and the process for trustworthiness are ongoing and iterative (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This iterative process towards trustworthiness flows between reviewing literature, participant recruitment, data collection strategies, and the analysis (Morse, et al., 2002).

The third standard in the fourth generation evaluation is the authenticity criteria. This is the final check in evaluating the research process and is unique to constructivist research. Guba and Lincoln (1989) divide the authenticity criteria into five parts: fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactic authenticity. Fairness is satisfied using two techniques. One is through the identification of the claims, issues, concerns, and observations of the stakeholders and exposing conflicts and convergences. This requires the clear audit trail mentioned in the discussion

of credibility. The second is through the negotiation process of developing recommendations and the establishment of the agenda for future action (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The dependability audit will show that the methodological changes and adjustments are made in response to the negotiation of unresolved claims, concerns, and issues. The negotiation should have the characteristics of openness to all parties—carried out by equally skilled contributors of equal positions of power—and by contributors who are all privy to the same information.

According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), ontological authenticity represents improvements or expansion s in the participant's emic experience after the interview process. This was evaluated from the participant's own account of the growth and from analysis of the participant's data progression. Educative authenticity refers to the participant's understanding and appreciation of the views of other participants. This may include a return to literature, the negative case analysis used for establishing credibility, and peer debriefing. Catalytic authenticity results when the evaluations of the participants' constructions spark action and decision-making. Negation results and testimonies from the participants are ways to show catalytic authenticity. Tactical authenticity takes the action stimulated by catalytic authenticity and empowers the participants and evaluators to act (Guba & Lincoln). The final question in the interview was "How was this interview for you?" The responses that some of the participants gave seemed vague and the research team suggested adding the question, "How will you change or adjust your thinking about how you approach groups after this interview?" This was determined to be premature, after two participants requested more time to contemplate the experience. The research team determined that this question and another

become a part of the final member checking. The two questions added were “Since the interview, how have you changed or adjusted your thinking about how you approach groups?” and “After reviewing the themes that emerged, what insights did you gain that might influence how your approach to groups?” The answers to these two questions added clarity to the last interview questions and generated information to satisfy ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical authenticity.

**Ethical Considerations**

It was important for me to remain genuine as I maintained dual roles as collaborator and investigator. The roles included building a rapport with the participants, presenting questions that were non-leading and unbiased, reporting the participant’s responses accurately with frequent checks, and maintaining boundaries while boundary spanning. Boundary spanning is objectively viewing differing perspectives and explaining these without showing a bias (Schram, 2003). The research team assisted in this by discussing questions or responses that appeared biased or leading. When this occurred, the team used the hermeneutic negotiation process to come to a consensus, and the primary researcher noted the event in memos.

Disclosure and exchange were held to a minimum to avoid contaminating the participants’ data. Minimal exchange and disclosure were used to avoid misrepresentation of identity and research purpose, move the process forward, and avoid leaving the participants feeling misled. Participants were told the length and number of the interview(s) and estimated time of the research project. They were told that all interviews would be audio taped and transcribed, their names would not appear on any

written record of the interview, and that the records would be stored in a locked cabinet in my home office.

Participants received an IRB-approved informed consent that included the purpose of the study, procedures used for interviewing, and a statement of non-disclosure of personal identifiable information. Participants were informed of the possible risk, which was minimal, and benefits they might receive. This did not include monetary or promotional benefits. I assured the participants that involvement in the research was voluntary, and should they decide to be in the study and change their mind, they had the right to drop out at any time. They were allowed to skip questions or stop participating at any time and could strike any of their statements from the data. The primary researcher deleted identifying material from the transcript. Participants received a copy of their transcript and emerging themes and a final copy of the drafted document to review. Confidentiality is assured in the disclosure, and their records will be kept private to the extent allowed by law. Each participant chose or was given a pseudonym which is used on all documents instead of the participant's name. Only principal investigators have access to the information provided, and all paper information or tapes are being stored in the researcher's locked filing cabinet. The pseudonym key is stored separately from the data on a firewall—and password—protected computer. Names and other facts that might point to a participant do not appear when the results of this study are presented or published. The findings are summarized and reported in group form. No participant was identified personally.

## Results

Results are organized according to the grand question: How do experienced middle school group leaders approach and experience psycho-educational and counseling groups? This question is composed of two components. The first component of the question explores how experienced middle school group leaders approach the process of conceptualizing, establishing, and promoting psycho-educational groups in middle schools. The second component of the grand question explores how middle school counselors conduct groups and experience group leadership. These two components of the grand question were posed to investigate the deterrents to group work that school counselors voiced in the research literature and explore the group leadership skills of experienced middle school counselors.

The interview questions addressed each component of the grand question. The themes that emerged are consequences of interview questions and prompts used as follow-up reactions to the participants' responses. The tables below provide an organizational structure for the themes that emerged from those interviews. As part of the member checking process, I sent the participants the emerging themes (Appendix 3), and asked them to respond to each theme with "agree" or "disagree". Participants also had the option to give comments to support their stance. Thirteen of fourteen participants returned the member check. The tables show a compilation of the participants' agreement or disagreement with these themes. Comments from the members are included in this results section.

Table 2 summarizes the themes that emerged from the first component of the grand question "How do experienced middle school group leaders *approach* psycho-educational groups?" Table 3 summarizes themes that emerged from the second

component of the grand question, "How do experienced middle school group leaders *experience* psycho-educational groups?" The interview questions, emerging themes, and subthemes appear in the first two columns for both tables. The third column of both tables represents a summary of the responding participants' agreement or disagreement with emerging themes. These responses are a form of peer debriefing that will help determine ontological or educative authenticity. Detailed explanations of the themes follow each table and include example statements from the participants to support the emerging themes and comments that surfaced in the member check.

Table 2

*How do experienced middle school group leaders approach psycho-educational groups?*

| Interview Question | Emerging Themes and Subthemes | Consensus of Responses |
|---|---|---|
| *Why run groups?* | 1. Meeting student needs<br>a. Universalizing<br>2. Groups are part of a comprehensive program<br>3. Effective and efficient use of counselor's time | 1. All agreed<br>2. All agreed<br>3. 12 agreed, 1 disagreed |
| *Can you describe how you establish groups?* | 1. Establishing a presence in the school<br>2. Referral Process<br>a. Screening<br>3. Content and duration of group | 1. All agreed<br>2. All agreed<br>3. All agreed |
| *How have you been able to convince administrators & teachers?* | 1. Being an educational leader and building relationships<br>a. Connecting group work to academic success. | 1. All agreed<br>a. 12 agreed, 1 disagreed |

## Why Run Groups?

**Meeting student needs through groups.** The first major theme that emerged was the participants' conviction that they were meeting the needs of their students by providing group counseling. Developmentally, adolescence is a time of social, emotional,

and academic change and discovery for middle school students. Kay's response to the question exemplifies the comment most participants provided: "Why not run groups in middle school? I think developmentally it's probably the most difficult time for children. The cognitive, physical. emotional, social changes…it just makes sense to have that component be very much a fixture in what we do." Adolescence is a time when students need to verbalize their concerns and know that they are heard. Students attempt to meet those needs in various ways—acting out, shutting down, and often self-destructive behaviors. All of the participants believed that counseling groups allow school counselors to guide students in constructive conversations and help students both communicate their ideas to others and listen to other students' concerns. They reported that the group process allowed students to help each other and find confirmation in their own abilities. They believed that through helping each other and contributing to the group, students developed a sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Participants believed that group members could practice skills in a safe environment as they worked through their issues. Neet said, "it gives us a chance to work with a smaller, more intimate, more focused group of people. I see it as the catalyst because as the kids talk about their particular situation, they're able to really help each other."

***Universality.*** Helping students understand that they are not alone, that their experiences and deepest concerns are similar to others can beneficial and cathartic. Universalizing fears and frustrations can aid in accepting self and others (Yalom, 2005). This concept is very important to the group process in middle school. Many participants stated that students often felt their problems were unique and so big, that no one could understand. While Yalom considers universality as one of the twelve therapeutic factors

necessary for group success, it is even more significant for adolescents as they struggle with developmental issues. As these young adolescents move through their intellectual, physical, emotional, and social growth stages, they may experience feelings of isolation, fear, and self-doubt (Forte & Schurr, 2002; Scales, 2005). All of the participants believe that small group experiences allow students to universalize their concern and that this was an important reason for conducting groups in middle school. Jacqueline echoes a common response heard from all of the participants:

> I find that when the kids are talking to each other, the benefit of them giving feedback to each other is a lot stronger than just me giving them feedback. I think that at middle school age they start listening to their peers and they care a lot about what their peers have to say. And also they know that they are not alone with some of the issues that they raise. I think that's a very important factor.

The students' notion that they were alone with their thoughts and feelings often caused them to feel like they did not belong. Most participants viewed the group experience as a way for some students to feel a sense of belonging, and a way to reach students who seemed isolated. Shelly said, "I just think that groups are an important preventative tool. I think it's especially good for kids who are on the fringes and need something to sort of boost their self esteem and feel part of the school."

**Part of a comprehensive counseling program.** While eight of the participants were either ASCA members or members of their state counseling association, only five of the participants referred to the ASCA national model as a reason for conducting groups. Though these participants firmly believed in the effectiveness of groups, they also mentioned that their county/district supervisors required group work as a part of the

comprehensive counseling program. The participants who did not refer to the ASCA national model reported that small groups were either a holistic way to serve students or an important part of their counseling program. Billie reported that groups can affect the entire school community, "It absolutely changes the climate of the school, it teaches kids how to be empathic, it teaches kids how to care about each other, it's absolutely incredible. Just to watch kids go through it and watch kids change."

While all participants acknowledged the importance of group work, they spent different amounts of time conducting groups. When asked how much of her counseling program is composed of group work, Kay responded, "Well, we don't follow the time distribution that ASCA recommends per se, but well I would say 40% of my time is spent doing groups, which is nice." Neet adds, "I think groups are a major part of what I do. Sure, we have individual and classroom guidance, but I believe in a comprehensive school counseling program, and some students do better in a group vs. individual counseling."

**Effective and efficient use of counselor's time.** Thirteen of the participants believed that groups were an effective and efficient way to reach students, with only one disagreeing. Kij reported, "We simply get a lot accomplished in small groups, whether it's the social emotional piece or it's the study skills group or whatever…. I think it's easier to get feedback from kids, easier to build trust." Roni had a more passionate response:

> I think it is probably the most effective way for students at this age to relate and to learn some new skills. It's also the most efficient way to do it because you can see a number of students that you would end up seeing one-to-one anyway, but now

> that seeing them in a group setting you have the dynamic element between them that they are truly learning from each other and you can see a number of kids in one period….This year I, personally, saw 21% of the student body in groups.

While Kay agreed groups were a good counseling tool, she did not believe groups should have a higher priority than other school counseling delivery models. She contended that groups are but one intervention and often included individual work with students, "While I agree it is an efficient use of time, I also do individual follow up with students, so groups alone are not always enough. Students are my priority; I still meet with a lot of students individually." This participant's practice of individual follow-up visits with students during and after the group sessions ended, was a common theme among these participants.

**Describe How You Establish Groups?**

**Establishing a presence in the school.** All of these school counselors believed that it was easier to conduct groups when they made their presence known throughout the school. Sue states, "groups are much more effective if that counselor, and we're talking school here and it's only my opinion, if that school counselor has made her presence known with these kids." Making your presence known meant frequent contact with teachers, administrators, and students. Participants spoke of being visible in the halls, cafeteria, bus lanes, classrooms, and unofficial meetings. They took every opportunity to leave their office and connect with students, teachers, and administrators. Their visibility throughout the school enhanced the initial classroom guidance session. This first classroom guidance session gives students the opportunity to learn details about the counseling program and counseling services. Since many school counselors keep the

same students on their caseload throughout the students' middle school experience, the introductory lesson is an important opportunity for school counselors to begin developing relationships with the students. Participants reported that the initial meeting also allowed the school counselor to demonstrate classroom management skills to the teachers and to inform them of the counseling services offered at the school.

While some school counselors gave teachers an overview of counseling, this in-depth classroom presentation often had a more lasting effect. Most participants believed that the combination of classroom guidance (especially the introductory lesson) and visibility were an important opportunity to begin building trust with students and teachers. Sue was emphatic about the importance of classroom guidance to her group work:

> You can't have good groups unless you're in the classroom doing guidance, you got to make connections with them some way. Whatever issue I take into the classroom as a whole that relates to all eighth graders then I'm establishing those relationships by sharing and talking. If I can connect with them and share the heart, so that I am a real person, then when they come to my office or they've been recommended for a group, my relationship is established.

**Referral process**. The participants agreed that student referrals came through a variety of sources. These included teacher and administrator referral, parent referrals, and student self-referrals. Participants reported getting referrals in team meetings, via emails from parents and teachers, and at student/parent conferences. Some participants reported meeting with the elementary school counselor and school psychologist to obtain information not available through the usual data sources. This collaboration often allowed

the middle school counselor to act proactively or to be aware of potential signs of distress that might otherwise go unseen until a relationship was established. Tennis Pro stated that the entire school was a resource. She emphasized that being actively visible aided in identifying students in need. “I look for opportunities, I listen for people to do or say things that I know are not healthy, and I watch for grades.” Because middle schools use a team approach, collaboration with teachers about student difficulties occurs on a regular basis. In addition to referrals, this collaboration was a method of initially screening students.

A common source for group membership was self-referrals. Roni explained the process she uses, “When we do our first intro to the counseling program, we have a PowerPoint we show and talk about group counseling and self-referrals. During the month of September, we take all the referred names and individually screen each one.” The most common method of screening students was to meet with the student before group selection, send home a permission slip if the students was interested and allow the student to participant if he/she returned the permission slip. Kasey interpreted returning the permission form as more than showing responsibility; she believed it gave students control:

> If they don’t bring the permission slip back, we don’t call them in a second time and say where is your pass. We take that as the student didn’t really want to say no to me to my face, but by not turning in the slip that gives the child a way to say no.

All of the participants believed that groups should be voluntary and not mandated by parent or administrators. Voluntarily returning the form was an important part of the screening process for the participants and showed the student's level of commitment.

***Screening.*** Most of the participants reported that the screening process was essential to meeting student's needs and for group chemistry. The participants varied in their preference for individual or group screening. Some believed that meeting students in groups of three or four allowed them to see student interactions and further determine compatibility. They reported that often a student's actions were very different individually than they were when around other students. Many pointed out that not all students benefit from the group experience and screening is important in potentially making that discovery before beginning the group.

Participants used the screening process to determine the best combination of students based on personality, group themes, and the student's issue intensity. About one third of the participants who use the screening process explain general group rules and group procedures, talk about sharing with others and interacting in a group setting, and develop a contract with students. Billie reported that she did not screen but let the agreed upon rules control participation in group. "If I'm having some issues with someone in the group or someone talks too much, or one is dominating, we have rules. And if you don't follow the rules, we're probably not going to let you stay."

**Content and duration of groups.** Determining the content for the group varied among the participants. Some participants identified the initial group goal from patterns found in referrals, needs assessments, and observations. Kija distributes assessments to parents to identify the topics they feel are important. She believes that this involvement

increases parental support of group counseling and makes tracking down the informed consents easier. She then asks for input from teachers and administrators for referrals and topics. She and the other counselors come to a consensus to determine the main topics and use the lists of referred students to begin the process of screening and establishing groups. Jacqueline reported a similar process but also included the school social worker and school psychologist:

> At the beginning of the year we get together with all the counselors and the school psychologist, we make a big chart with the different names of kids and the categories to put the kids in, and we kinda look at the information we get and decide what we need. Then we decide who's going to conduct what group and when. We talk about the different kinds of kids and who would be a good fit or not a good fit in the group. So sometimes the kids in my group are not actually on my case load, but if it's a group I'm running we'll put them in.

A few participants establish generic groups that cover a number of concerns but with a central theme (e.g. empowerment groups, transitioning groups, girls or boys group, etc.). Sue finds groups with generic topics are useful, "I don't always find that issues cluster themselves into a group topic with enough students." She divides students into generic groups and develops "certain goals that I think will be beneficial to the student's specific concerns or issues."

Participants further refine group goals through member consensus in the first meeting. As individual goals surfaced or became clear, the participants reported flexibility in addressing them; however, all were quick to state the need to keep members focused on the group goals established through consensus. Some themes were standard

for all of the participants to include regardless of the agreed upon goals or group topic. The themes that participants believed were important in all groups included respectful and responsible behavior (often one of the primary reasons for student referrals) and communication skills (including listening and critical thinking skills). While the majority of the participants conducted groups of 8 to 10 weeks in duration, five of the participants believed that some students benefited from groups that spanned a much longer period. Three of those participants routinely conducted groups that spanned the entire school year**.** The typically these extended groups involved students with little support at home and were struggling with extreme family issues, very low interrelation skills, or a loss of a loved one.

**How Have You Been Able to Convince Administrators and Teachers?**

**Being an educational leader and advocating for groups.** All of the participants took a leadership role in and made their case for groups and their program. They actively participated in the academic planning, climate building, and school improvement planning. Over half of the participants were on a leadership team at their schools. Jackie's statement sets the stage for the theme of leadership and relationship building:

> Our district supervisor put it best, she said you have a bag and you can fill it with rocks and let them pour the sand in around them or you can let them pour the sand in and then you put your rocks in. If you put the rock in first you will get more of what you want and need. Then you fill in the sand—that is the non-counseling items—around it.

All participants developed a collaborative relationship with their principals and assistant principals. Roni began her plea for groups in her job interview with the principal. She

made the case for small groups, “They asked me how I envisioned the program, and I told them that one of the things that would be important to me is to be allowed the opportunity to do group counseling.” As a teacher, she had worked in a program as a co facilitator with a social worker to help students with drug and alcohol abuse issues. She says, “Because of the research I had and the experiences as a teacher, I envisioned having one day where we would do nothing but group counseling. I see that as a more proactive or productive way of changing human behavior.” Her argument was convincing and she devotes one day a week to group counseling. She is extremely proud of the fact that counselors at her school see group work as a method for reaching a large segment of the student body. “When I count up all the groups we do including peer helpers, we’re serving between 27% and 30% of the student body.”

Alan was trained as a social worker but has been a school counselor for six years. He believes that you have to advocate for your position and the students’:

> In grad school for social work, we are not suppose to just let things stay at rest when we feel there’s a social issue that needs to be pushed. I’ll push back. I’ll say, ‘This is what the kids are entitled to, this is what the system says they are entitled too, and what parents expect. Sometimes you have to balance that with keeping your job and being a valuable employee, and I’ve been lucky. I haven’t had to do too much of that.

Not all of the participants took this direct approach. These participants believed that principals see the value of group intervention because of the results they see after the intervention. Jackie reflected what others said, “Once you can show the success with one [group], they are a little more excited about seeing another one.” Neet makes the point

that the administrator or teacher may not have had a group experience, or may not have had a successful one. She believes that you have to teach them or show them the power of the group experience. She gave an example from a grief group that she conducted. When the group was completing their last session, she had them do a balloon release to send messages to their loved ones. She told the administration what she was doing and invited them to witness the celebration. The students all released the balloons and then spoke about how they had worked through the loss and the support they had from the group. She recalls:

> I just remember that and how the administrator looked at me like this was the most rewarding feeling. They didn't realize that we just don't sit and talk all the time that I use other resources as well and that the members of the group facilitate. They are the ones that really do the work, and they [administrators] gave support then. I think by them having a moment of participation they got into it.

A few participants recalled that their administrators came to them seeking assistance for students, and asking if groups might be useful for the student. Helen states, "I'm getting ready to begin a group in another week, my administrator is offering 'What about this student?' or 'I just talked with this student's parents yesterday, would you consider that person?' So they are definitely on board with it." Collaborating with administrators as groups were forming and following up by showing them the results data and pointing out the benefits of groups were ways to get cooperation from administrators. While this strategy worked with administrators, teacher cooperation was more difficult to secure.

Like the majority (10) of the participants, Alan reports encountering teacher resistance at his school, “A bigger barrier is teachers, because they don’t want their instructional time interrupted.” However, when he became a part of the leadership team with his principal (often left in charge of the duties of the principal), he found that he had the influence to advocate for groups. “I don’t sit there and argue with teachers. If I think they are right we’ll compromise, but in the end if it comes down to what I believe is right for the student, I’m taking the kid to counseling.” While many school counselors were a part of the school’s leadership team, most preferred to take a more collaborative and relationship building approach to the problem of teacher resistance to groups. Most participants began with an understanding of the pressures of responsibility that teachers are experiencing. This pressure is a result the accountability the felt for their students’ success and the need to prepare their students for the state mandated tests required by NCLB (NCLB, 2002).

Most participants attributed their success in convincing teachers and administrators of the importance of groups to the relationships they developed. Kasey said, “I believe truthfully that it begins with the relationship with the teacher. If I have a good relationship with you, then I am more likely to be able to get into your classroom or get a student out for group.” The majority of the participants echoed this sentiment and added that linking group work to student academic success was also critical.

Participants advocated for the use of groups as an intervention used by Student Support Teams (SST) and the Response to Interventions (RTI) process. SST is a team composed of the student’s parent(s), teachers, counselor, administrator, and a school psychologist who meet regularly on the students and offer strategies for students who are

having academic failures. The process used in SST is RTI. RTI is an early intervention method to assist student who are having difficulty learning. It consists of a multilevel school based prevention system, a careful screening process, progress monitoring, and is anchored by data driven decision making by the SST team (NCRTI, 2010). Being an advocate for the student during the SST meetings was another way to gain agreement for conducting groups from teachers, administrators, and parents. The strategy of involving parents, teachers, school psychologist, social workers, administrators, and school counselors provides an opportunity to explain and promote the value of small group counseling. It helps that the list of strategies in RTI and SST include small groups as an intervention to support students. Shelly relays that because of their relationship building and educating the SST members of the virtues of groups, she has to do very little persuading at the meetings:

> A lot of times problems will come up in that meeting and they'll "say is there a group for this student?' or 'he could really use a group'. We've gotten a lot of positive feedback, there's not a lot of convincing that's going on. I think people here understand that kids need support…and that if they are emotionally healthy, they will do well academically. They definitely get that here.

***Connecting group work to academic success.*** Showing the relationship between group work and a student's academic success was a major argument for group justification. All of the participants combined group purpose with a collaborative approach and attempted to reinforce the link between students' success in school and their emotional health. Neet explains her approach this way:

> I try to (1) define what group work is (2) talk about how it's beneficial to the student, and (3) use it when we have SST, when we have parent conferences, to be part of that team and actually allow them to see how to use it as an intervention. I don't want them to see what we're doing in group as separate from the instruction. I want them to see how it builds upon their instruction and how it's going to enhance that child in their classroom.

Kay disagreed that groups should always relate back to academics. She referred back to the ASCA National Model, which includes career and personal/social areas as two of the three domains school counselors should consider. However, in her member check she concedes that she is somewhat conflicted, "I guess an argument can be made that in some way, all groups are conducted in school and circle back to some relationship to academics indirectly."

All of the participants used their leadership and advocacy skills to convince teachers the value of taking students out of class for groups, but they did this in a variety of ways. Most of the participants' schools had some form of extended learning time (ELT) built into the school day. Nearly half of the participants used this time to conduct groups because ELT is a support class apart from the four core classes. Shelly observed that using this time garners more support from the teachers. "The other piece of it is we have a time during the day that is carved out for this purpose. It's called extension time, so we're not really pulling them out of classes we're pulling them out of extension time." Kay's principal was one of four principals who specifically stated that ELT was a time that counselors could use for groups:

> We don't take students out of class. We have lunch time which is about 35 min. and we have two hours in the middle of the day that you call student support, where the students have study hall in small groups, and this is for everyone (all grade levels), so we can take students for group during that time period, a 40 min period when we run our groups. The expectation is, we have teachers asking us, when are you going to run that *g*roup? Our administrators will say, 'What groups have you started?' I mean they value it.

Another group of participants found that they gain more flexibility using a rotating schedule that takes students out of a different class each week. These participants convinced the teachers and administrators that allowing students to miss one subject in 6 to 8 weeks may allow the student and teacher to have better classroom experiences throughout the year. Critical to this strategy is the counselor's involvement in helping students to remember to make up any class work missed.

Some of the school counselors used the screening process to establish the link between academics and groups. Roni explains her process by first making it clear that students have the right to say no or yes to becoming a group member. Neither administrators nor parents can mandate that a child participate in a group, but if the child chooses to participate, she must maintain her academic responsibilities. "When they choose to join, we have them sign a contract that they understand that they must first go to their classroom teacher, turn in homework, and that teacher will have a pass waiting for them." This process of collaborating with the classroom teacher to encourage completion of work missed could be seen in various forms from about half of the participants. These school counselors used collaboration with the teacher to monitor the

student's academic and behavioral progress throughout and after the group intervention. Maintaining an open dialogue had the added benefit of encouraging the teacher to try different approaches to enhance the strategies students learned in the group sessions.

The second part of the grand question addressed how the participants *experienced* the group process. The sub questions used to prompt the participants and the emerging themes are summarized in the chart below. Most of the themes were common to any group experience, and varying leadership styles accounts for some of the disagreement.

**How Do You Get the Students to Move to Change?**

**Building trusting relationships with and among the group members.** Building trust with students at the young adolescent stage can be difficult, but all of the participants agreed that building trust with the students is critical. The participants

Table 3

*How do experienced middle school group leaders experience psycho-educational groups?*

| Interview Question | Emerging Themes and Subthemes | Description |
|---|---|---|
| *How do you help your students change what they do? How do you get the students to move to change?* | 1. Building trusting relationships with and among the group members<br>a. Student responsibility was critical<br>2. Moving students to change<br>a. Counseling intuitively (from the gut)<br>b. Connecting the dots using counseling skills to challenge and invalidate negative thoughts<br>3. Using groups to help student success in school | 1. All agreed<br>a. 1 disagreement<br>2. All agreed but with conditions<br>a. All agreed<br>b. 1 disagreed with invalidating thoughts<br>3. 1 disagreement |
| *Describe how you manage your relationship with the group.* | 1. Seeing self as group facilitator and/or group leader<br>2. Counseling in the "Here and Now"<br>3. Using Individual follow-ups with students | 1. All agreed, but diverse on which role dominated<br>2. All agreed<br>3. All agreed, but differed on rationale for follow-ups |
| *What thoughts and feelings do you experience while you* | 1. Feelings run the gambit<br>a. Feeling worthy and responsible<br>b. Feeling drained/overwhelmed and | 1. All agreed<br>a. 9 agreement<br>b. not all experienced |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *lead groups?* | exuberance<br>2. Planting Seeds | each of these<br>2. All agreed |
| *How do you know if what you are doing is working?* | 1. Evaluating groups through formal and informal means<br>a. Planting Seeds revisited | 1. 9 agreed and with differing assessments<br>a. All agreed |
| *How have your past group experiences impacted the way you lead groups?* | 1. Lived experiences<br>a. Life experiences<br>b. Being a past group member<br>c. Experiences leading groups | 1. All agreed<br>a. 7 agreed<br>b. 9 agreed<br>c..9 agreed |
| *How has the experience of this interview been for you?* | 1. Allowing for an opportunity to verbalize and reflect on conducting groups Affirming, tough and difficult to articulate. | 1. Responses varied |
| ***Participant's reaction to the interview process (Authenticity)*** | **1. Since the interview how have you changed or adjusted your thinking about how you approach groups?**<br>**2. After reviewing the themes that emerged, what insights did you gain that might influence how you approach groups?** | **1.Responses varied**<br>**2.Responses varied** |

spoke about being authentic with students and creating a safe environment for openness and sharing. Alan articulates his approach to building trust and describes the difficulty building trust with some students:

> You have to take a very loving, compassionate, and empathic position with the kids, their family, and the community you are working in. If you don't, if you are not coming from that place, nothing else matters. If you can't find it in yourself to want these kids to be healthy individuals in what most people, would say is emotional health, then forget it, forget the whole thing. And that's challenging sometimes, some of the kids we work with are not very loveable, they're not likeable for sure. So, it's really difficult sometimes to put on your professional

> hat, and your human hat, and sort of rise above it. And there are some kids that I absolutely have no game with what-so-ever. Like they think 'this guy is not going to understand me, has nothing to do with me and my life, and I'm not gonna try to connect with him'. But you have to build a relationship with the kids, and I find that it's an art, not everybody can do that with 'tweens' (you know young teenagers) or teenagers even, not everybody can build that trust and relationship.

Building relationships among and with the group members was also important to all of the participants. They accomplished this in various ways, but they all agreed creating a safe environment with ground rules that students helped to develop was key. While some participants were directive in their approach, all emphasized that allowing students to talk and or be silent was very important. Neet explains, "I just try to establish a safe sharing environment for the kids, where they can just talk, get it out, and support each other. And sometimes they won't talk **….**a great deal of growth can happen when silence is present." All of the participants insisted that respectful behavior in the group was critical, and as Kay pointed out, "sometimes 'respectful behavior' is the reason they are in the group, they 're learning to make good choices." Jackie and her assistant principal looked at the number of discipline referrals and realized that all the referrals included disrespectful behaviors. "It wasn't a matter of they were fighting or anything, but that it was disrespect. They just don't know how to …what we call in group 'the common courtesies'. They didn't know how to be courteous to one another." All of the participants stressed the importance of group rules, and the time it took to establish them. Jackie recalls the challenge of working with these young students, " Some of them need constant reminders, but you just keep going over it [rules and respect] and hope that it

becomes ingrained in them enough, that by the end they get it and can take it into the classroom." This led to another major theme connected to moving students to change which was helping students to recognize their responsibilities in group sessions and in the school.

***Student responsibility was critical.*** Promoting student responsibility, both inside and outside of the group, was very important to participants. Participants believed it was especially important to hold students accountable for upholding group rules, making up work missed from class, getting to group sessions on time, and getting back to class on time. Ideas arose when talking about change and student responsibility. Tennis Pro said her method of promoting changes in students and encouraging students' acceptance of responsibility is helping students to see the consequences of their choices. She begins by introducing them to a mantra and has them recite it when they begin to stray:

> The mantra I use is 'Stop and think about the consequences of your actions' because all of them have choices. The neat thing about a group is they see where they are and they have choices. And these choices would get them to somewhere they would like to be better. These choices could keep them wallowing in whatever is going on right now. And you have the choice. It's not something I can do for you, but this group can certainly support you in whatever you choose to do. And we're not going to sit around and judge you, we're not in your shoes.

Neet helped students take responsibility by encouraging them to identify and commit to their goals. She has them determine their goals at the beginning of group by allowing them to decide what they want to work on over the course of the group sessions and write it down. She then folds up each student's goal statement and puts it in a jar, in the last

group session she returns their goal statement, and the group processes each member's progress toward the goal.

While the facilitation styles differed with various approaches, all of the participants allowed students to take responsibility for their change. However, during the member checking process, Kay cautioned, "Change is facilitated by the group leader, group members, and the group member. It is a combination of factors, not one isolated person, or factor that creates change."

**Moving students to change.** The question that directly asked about the use of a theoretical approach was removed from the interviews because the research team believed the first few participants' responses indicated that they became more reserved or intimidated. The research team negotiated a different question that received clearer information about the participant's approach to group. However, this resulted in many participants not directly stating a theoretical stance. Only about a fourth of the participants specified a theory, when responding to the revised question—'How do you move the students to change?' Three participants reported using Choice Theory and one reported using Solution Focused Theory. Kasey who uses Choice Theory firmly believes that you cannot force change. She believes you model the appropriate behavior and confront the inappropriate. She embraces Choice Theory because it allows the students to take responsibility for their actions, "The way you change behavior is to ask students to begin to think about the behaviors they're using and if it's working and if not are they willing to do something different and then just help them do that."

Although the other participants seemed to be reluctant to identify a specific theory, all of the participants agreed in their member check that having a theoretical

foundation was important to group work. Jacqueline did not state a theoretical approach in the interview but stated on her member check form, “I have moved to more cognitive behavior in my work both in groups and individual. … I do work on relationship building so I guess I use Rogerian too, I don’t know if I use only one thing.” Based on their responses to the question of change and their unanimous agreement in the member check, this participant’s statement may reflect the position of the majority of the participants’ theoretical orientation.

***Counseling intuitively (from the gut).*** While the participants all spoke about the importance of well thought-out or planned sessions, they learned to be flexible as the groups progressed. Connie has a general plan but believes it is important to keep the groups organic. “I will gage the information from what we did in that particular session and then I will know how to continue on for the next week…I have my session and then I go back and process everything.” However, they all agreed that they use their intuition to help guide them through the group experience. The participants used their “guts” or instincts as they observed the interactions in the group, and used this as they practiced their counseling and observation skills. They were constantly looking for clues in verbal and non-verbal reactions from group members. As they processed this information, interventions were developed and enacted on the spot. Connie reports how she uses her observation skills, “I still have to really monitor. Are they each doing some work or are some of us stuck or resistant to what’s going on? So I’m really looking at where each person is, and sometimes I’m trying to build connections.” Jackie said that she uses her intuition and skills of observation to monitor how the group is going so she can help them connect:

> I have to try to remember that even though I have my experience, they are living in different time, different situations. And I have to try to remind myself to make it real for them (with different scenarios) and how can I connect this to something that they understand, to make it real for them, if I can connect it, then I think they get it. So for me that feeling is sometimes, am I on track or am I not on track with them? You know I'm lookin' for that light bulb moment that flash in somebody's eyes, that I got it, I'm trying to read them and see if I'm what I'm saying is making a difference.

The cues and emotions that the school counselor detects often determine the activity or direction of the group. Shelly explained that she bases her decisions to do an activity or discussion on the energy level of the group. "There's always the option, you know, 'this isn't going the way I'd hoped it would go you guys need something else' …and then we do it! It's really kind of fluid; you just go with what's going on."

***Connecting the dots, using counseling skills to challenge negative thoughts.*** While some of the participants took an approach of invalidating and challenging the students' negative thoughts and feelings, the participants who used challenging as a large part of their approach spoke about first making sure they had established a trusting relationship with the group members. Billie stated it this way:

> The first thing is to develop the trust. And I don't change them, I tell them they're the ones doing all the work. I'm just there to listen. There's usually key questions that I ask, and I'll call a spade a spade. I'll call a kid on something, and I'll say 'this is what I see happening here and I'm wondering if you're sabotaging that

> relationship on purpose.' And then go that way. And I'm really intuitive too and that helps.

A majority of participants used questioning, probing, and linking to help the students move toward change, but took a more egalitarian approach. Many of them called it "helping them to connect the dots". Neet explains her process, "My role, I explain, is to act as a facilitator and channel their sharing, channel their conversations, help them connect the dots, but not to connect the dots for them… I tell them that they have the answers inside." Most participants agreed, but in her member check response Kay made it clear that she was not comfortable with the word 'invaliding' and believed it may not be developmentally appropriate for this age group. "Although I use CBT with some students, that is not always the issue or the appropriate approach to use … Finding solutions, a solution focused approach with students, helps students feel good about themselves and helps them experiment with new behaviors."

**Using groups to help student success in school**. Almost everyone agreed that groups should support academics and that all group topics in school could relate back to a student's ability to succeed in the school environment. Helen believes that helping students to learn respectful communication with teachers and other students is a good first step in the process of succeeding in school. Roni said that students who struggle with topics like living with alcoholic parents, divorce, or poor self-image have difficulty concentrating, handling stressors, or retaining information. Tennis Pro stated that it is all connected:

> The body never lies. A child's behavior never lies. If there is something wrong, it will show up in their academics most of the time. Likewise, if there's something

> wrong academically, it will show up in behavior. And we do essential questions all the time and my essential question is how can the skills you've learned affect your academic progress? So we work on that skills, but if you know how to use an "I" statement or a "You" statement, how will that help you academically? And try to help them get to their higher thinking levels so that they can actually use what I'm talkin' about. What we're talkin' about in group.

**Describe How You Manage Your Relationship with the Group.**

**Seeing self as group facilitator and/or group leader.** All of the participants used group rules—usually with student input—and basic counseling techniques to manage group interaction. Participants used a variety of methods to establish norms and expectations including redirecting, confrontation, use of activities, and a structured format (usually at the beginning session(s) of the group). Participants were divided between whether they saw themselves as a group facilitator (less directive) or a group leader (directive). Helen said she believes that part of the role of facilitator involves modeling for the group members how to communicate their feelings and thoughts. She says, "I think I need to be a participant in that 'go around' too so that I can say and identify my feelings and give a little detail about why I am feeling how I am that day." A number of participants used self-disclosure and modeling to demonstrate to members how to express themselves. Many used the techniques of modeling and self-disclosure to start an activity or facilitate the dialogue. Roni points out that getting adolescents to talk to each other when an adult is in the room can be difficult, and becoming too directive is also difficult to avoid.

> The hardest thing I have each year is teaching them the group dialogue with each other. I'm just there to facilitate the next step, and I have to do the good old "WOW" moment a number of times when a teachable moment is just slipping right by. Sometimes I have to look at the group or go very dramatic and go "WOW". Wow did anybody else hear what he just said?" "Who has some feedback for this? I'm just kind of blown away right now." And the kids will start jumping in and I believe that hardest thing with groups in my mind is teaching them that it's not that the kid talks and adult answers.

Alan offers some insight for building trust and encouraging students to talk. Many of the groups he conducts include students with disabilities, and group work is mandated in the student's individual educational plans. He works with other students who have difficulty trusting adults and peers because of their neighborhood or home environment. He uses activities to facilitate the dialogue:

> I have many group activities I can bring in and we will do something because they can't stand the anxiety of just talking. I have a lot of groups like that it just brings up too much anxiety to just sit there with a loving adult and their peers and just talk. They'll do anything to avoid it, so I use some emotional type games where you have to pick a card and answer a personal question, and some are more benign. Like it will be a game that connects everybody and they start interacting with each other and with me, and then they'll become more comfortable, and they'll open up.

Other techniques included modeling, use of expressive words like 'Wow' and animated prompts, and 'go rounds'. Some participants experienced the opposite problem

in their groups. Alan reports that his students are very talkative and he has to work at maintaining order. He notes that some counselors allow students to interact almost to the point of chaos and then the counselor processes that with the group members. That technique does not work for him. He, like many of the participants, uses rules and stays attuned to the mood of the group to direct the conversations. Kasey was one of those group leaders that does not use a lot of rules to control her groups. She stated an opposite approach, "I don't think I have to manage it, I think I create the environment…. I'm fairly outgoing and positive with students, so I don't think it's about managing, it's about letting it unfold. And let it open as a flower." All participants believed they were facilitators in the group process but became more directive or less directive as the situation required and as the group developed. Most felt that their role flowed between the two approaches-often within a single session. Connie gives an example of that process. "I can be directive at times and then sometimes I have to pull back so that the group can move along through its stages of the session….I watch the non-verbals and pull back because I may be talking too much." Jacqueline gives an example of a more directive approach to manage the group:

> There are other times when I know there are kids who have some serious things that they want to bring up and they want to talk about and if the other group members are interrupting a lot or acting disrespectful or interrupting the group process, that's when I might say "let's slow down a little, So and So looks like they really want to say something let's listen to what they have to say so we can give them some feedback.

Three of the participants talked about having to remove students from the group because of inappropriate behavior or because they breeched confidentiality. These participants believed that while all students could benefit from a group experience, the group setting is not appropriate for all students. Some students need to work through their issues until they are less intense, then group may be right for them. Neet explains how she handed a situation with a misplaced student, "I would have them leave the group, and I'll call the parent and tell the parent that the group setting is not the appropriate setting for them, and then I'll offer alternatives for the student such as individual counseling."

**Counseling in the here-and-now.** The here-and-now experience was a major theme that emerged when participants talked about working with their groups. Being in the here-and-now is being present with the students. All of the participants reported counseling in the here-and-now was very important to them. While they may have used different terms (e.g. "being there with my students", "in the moment") they reported that counseling in the here-and-now was critical for early adolescent group members. Roni's statement is emblematic of the responses from participants:

> I guess it's always like I'm right there! That I'm into the moment and into the conversation with them. I almost feel like sometimes I have two parts of my brain. The one part you are feeling and you're there with them and you're experiencing. But the other part you're thinking, "How can I make this more productive and useful? How can I make this an experience that will be helpful for more than just the one person who's doing the sharing right now? Where can I build those connections and where can we make this possible and agent of change again?

Alan added a twist to this theme by explaining the work he does to remain in the here-and-now. He states, "I try to stay in tune emotionally to where the kids are at that moment…I have to center myself, I have to breathe, I have to remember to stay in the moment, and to really be present with the group."

**Using individual follow-ups with students.** All of the participants reported following up with the individual group members during and after the span of the group sessions. Because of the short length of the group sessions (usually 30-45 minutes), responses to the content or intensity of the group session sometimes necessitated immediate follow-up. In the school setting, students leave group sessions and immediately go back to the classroom. If the reaction to the group session is difficult for the student, a school counselor might be concerned that the student might not be able to function in class after the group session. Participants followed-up for various reasons: to work with a student who exhibited inappropriate behaviors in the group sessions, to work with students in need of more support, or to encourage a student who might not have fully processed a session. Billie stated in her member checking response, "Following up was not just about management, but about helping the child figure out the 'real issue' affecting his/her group interaction." Jackie used follow-ups frequently to give additional attention to students who might find it difficult to go back to class. She watches for verbal and non-verbal responses to determine if she needs to give the student further attention. "Something they may say or something about their demeanor during the group that I think they just need to talk to me one on one. There's something they want to say, but are really not comfortable with the group knowing."

Participants did not restrict themselves to immediate concerns or a formal setting when they followed-up on students. Many reported they often did not call them into their office, but used impromptu times to give encouragement. Roni's response was typical,

> I treat them the same all the time. I might check in and say, "How are things going? or are things doing any better here? I give a lot of hugs too, I do a lot of 'high fives', I'm in the hallways a lot, I talk to them at the lockers, I'm just really highly visible.

These participants used contact outside of group to reinforce relationships with students. They believed that the short time frame (six to eight weeks) sometimes required more contact with the student. Kay suggested, "Having those relationships outside of group and forging those relationships between group members and me, it takes time. I think just now with the groups I'm running, I'm beginning to have an idea of an approach that works best."

**What Thoughts and Feelings Do You Experience While You Lead Groups?**

**Feelings run the gambit.** A variety of feelings generated from this question, e.g. feelings of elation, worthiness, deep responsibility, feeling drained and overwhelmed. These feelings were deep seated, and could be heard during the interviews. The emotional reactions seemed to stem from counseling in the here-and-now.

Some said groups were the best part of their day, Billie expressed it this way, "Watching kids work together, watching kids support each other, we laugh together too it's not always serious; I can't even tell you how it touches my soul." When she sees a group member make a breakthrough, she continues, "I mean inside of me I'm just

jumping up and down and going YES! And I'm also really thankful of the gift that God has given me." Kasey also spoke of emotional reactions while conducting groups:

> Sure I did I have tears coming. Now I didn't lose it, but when someone touches my heart I don't stop the tears. I don't say you can't cry because you're in a group. Now I don't get to where I can't function, but when you touched my heart you touched my heart. If I have tears, I have tears. I laugh in the group I may say yeah! it just depends on the situation. A lot of times I am very excited because I know we are making a difference and that what we are doing light bulbs are coming on.

Regardless of the emotions expressed, all of the participants were committed and their responses were positive.

***Feeling worthy and responsible.*** The participants' responses conveyed a deep sense of regard for their students and group work. All of these participants expressed feelings of worthiness and a sense of responsibility to the students. Some participants felt humbled, others spoke of the mixture of emotion and responsibility they felt when the group members began to trust enough to share their feelings. Sue shared, "Well what I experience is that sense of worth, and value, it is making a difference and it is a good thing and we are equipping them hopefully with tools that they can use for the rest of their lives." Kay reflected on an epiphany she had:

> You know I don't know exactly when it was, but at some point in my career as a counselor, I had the realization of what a privilege it was for students to share with me things that were so personal, and how awesome that is. You know things that they haven't shared with their parents, that whole thing is so awe inspiring to

> me. And in a group setting to get to that point where they can make a disclosure, they feel comfort level and support and safety. Where you go WOW! I didn't expect that but way to go! For a student to have that kind of insight or to be able to see their part in a particular area… It just amazes me when you have kids from such diversity. Even though on paper we [the school] don't look like we're diverse ethnicity wise or SES wise, everybody is different, they have different home lives, and they see things differently.

The weight some of these participants felt during and directly after the group sessions often led to other emotions and physical reactions.

***Feeling drained and overwhelmed.*** Kija commented of the affect of feeling accountable for the group's progress, "I guess the feelings are probably more intense when you feel that things are not going well, it's very gratifying when you think, boy that was good, that's why I do this." Many participants agreed that after group sessions, feelings of exhilaration occurred when the groups progressed and they see breakthroughs, but they also experienced feelings of exhaustion when the groups did not go as well. Participants spoke about the amount of energy expended to stay focused, sense the mood of the group, follow moment by moment occurrences, think about how to respond, and how to tie all this information into group goals and individual goals. Kija states that because she practices group by always sensing and empathizing with the group members she expends a lot of energy. Here, she makes a comparison with single group leadership and co-leading groups:

> Well that's why groups are draining for me. Because I...you know…I don't know sometimes I wish I could turn the volume down a little bit. After I have a group I

> like to come to the office and process it. Ideally, I love it when there can be two of us running a group so you can process it with the other person, or when one person is talking the other person is observing, I think that is the ultimate. It's great to share, but I don't know, I guess I'm just not aware of the thoughts I'm probably more aware of the feelings during the group and then after the group I would probably think about it. I wonder how did it go…. It's probably harder when you think oh that didn't go well.

In the member check, Kay and Billie disagreed with the idea that group work was draining, Kay states, "Processing after groups is important in planning for the next group and the needs of individuals and the group as a whole. I love groups. I do not experience those feelings." Billie reports, "My exhaustion was not from amount of energy expended on my part, but of being the 'vessel' the groups filled with their issues." Roni who spoke of feeling overwhelmed at times devotes an entire day to running groups. Her experience may speak to the toll that workload takes:

> Some days it's overwhelming. It's really hard to let the kids go out that door and then grab the next folder for attendance and think about the how do I need to rearrange the chairs for the next group and get the next set of rules up and go because it's just too much. And there are times when I go to the other counselor and say "Please can I debrief for just two minutes? This one really hurts!" It just like I need…It sucks you out dry sometimes. it's so much. When he's there for those two minutes it's like "Let me dump, let me regurgitate."

**Planting seeds**. When things did not go as planned in the group sessions, or when results were difficult to see, the feelings were modified by the sense that group work is often about planting seeds. While some used different terms, many expressed the idea of

planting seeds for future growth. Sue expresses the sentiment heard from many of the participants:

> When they really need so much, I think that maybe that discourages people to not do groups because they feel like I don't have enough time to fully do all that we need. A lot of it is just planting seeds you know. You hope the seeds are going to bring forth, and prosper, and do what you really want.

In fact, a number of participants shared stories of returning students who sought them out to comment on their positive group experiences. Helen illustrates with a story of correspondence from a former group member.

> I can't remember all of this but I had an email on my school account earlier this year from a young man that would be a senior this year. And he is not in our high school that he would have fed into now, so he's in another area, a fairly distant area of the metro area. So for some reason he went to our school's website and found my name and emailed me directly to say "hi do you remember me?" 'I was the kid who...' and he told me a little about where he is as a senior in high school. He ended that email with "I remember how I got to help others in that group." That was so powerful to me because as a senior he is remembering back at least eighth grade or maybe even further because I don't remember what grade level he was in when I had him in a group. So there's that opportunity that often is built in a group not only to gain help but to give help to others in others in the group.

**How Do You Know if What You are Doing is Working?**

This interview question often brought the response, “I wish I did.” or “That’s a good question.” Then the participants would begin by stating different means of determining group effectiveness.

**Evaluating the group process through formal and informal means.** During the group sessions, participants observe verbal and non-verbal signs from the group members. Helen reported using her counseling skills to observe and evaluate the changes in student interactions in group to determine if the process is working. She says, “If I am trying to teach them communication skills, I’m hoping that within the group dynamics I would be able to see them interact with each other in an appropriate way, and not a derogatory or demeaning way.” Kija also uses a qualitative form of evaluation as she observes the group members, “I use metaphors a lot in group, and I think when I’m in a group if the kids start talking that way back to you, you have a pretty good idea that they get it.”

Most participants used informal evaluations of the students and relied on feedback from teachers, administrators, parents, or the students to gauge the quality of the results of group. Kay explains the myriad of sources to gain information for assessing group progress and group success. Having practiced in and outside of the school setting, she brings a perspective some of the participants did not experience. Here she shares the advantages of practicing in schools:

> Well I think the benefit in the school vs. in communities is that I have so many places to gauge data. An example would be, if it’s an academic focused group, I have access to grades online to view progress. Self-report is reliable, but a grade is a grade, there may be changes a student is making that don’t reflect in the

> actual grade. So the student can be a source, the teacher, or the parents. I'll send out every week "this is what we did in group, do you see any changes" to reinforce what we do, also letting our teams know. And then I use an excel spreadsheet to graph what they do academically, behavior wise. Like I said I have the behavior chart, the teachers give me feedback here too, and I also notice interactions in other settings.

The majority of the participants reported getting feedback about group members from teachers and administrators. Often done informally, some participants used surveys to gather data from teachers, administrators, parents, and the group members. Neet reports that teachers often come to her and expound on the progress students have made. "Teachers come to me and say 'this kid is really improved I don't know what you are doing in that group' …they are improving in the classroom. Then I know that change has occurred." Kija takes it a step further and uses a formal school climate survey and a program that summarizes pre-test/post test data from group members. Yet another participant who uses formal data collection to determine group effectiveness sometimes uses researched based assessment tools:

> With some groups we have a pre and post test, the "CDI" (Children Depression Inventory), and there are some other scales that are researched based so we are confident in the results. The other ways of knowing is what we hear of behaviors from teachers and we could get better at collecting data from them. We are not quite there yet.

Participants used a variety of methods to assess how their groups are progressing, but all used some form of assessment. Some used simple reflection questions given to the

group members during the last sessions. Others use check-ins and check-out, where members verbally express how they are doing often using the technique of scaling (e.g. allowing the members to select a number on a scale of 1-10 to express where they feel they are at the moment). Finally, participants report that student enthusiasm is a good measure of group success. Roni adds in her response to the question, "I have kids that they are so invested in this that they hurry down there and if some kids are late they will say, 'Why were you so long?'" Shelly's was adds a very simple note, "They keep coming back!"

***Planting seeds revisited.*** Helen stated the attitude expressed by many participants, "I just choose to tell myself that I'm not always going to know the outcome of my efforts. But I feel like I am planting seeds and those seeds may not come to fruition until time down the road." Tennis Pro also believes that group work can have long term benefits:

> Honestly, I can only believe that 10 years down the road, 2 weeks down the road, next month, there will be a time when the experiences we have in any situation, but for sure in a purposeful situation like a small group, will click into place or meet the need in a certain situation,… Even though I may not see a difference right now, but it's all building blocks to being successful or happy or productive in their lives.

**How Have Your Past Group Experiences Impacted the Way You Lead Groups?**

**Lived experiences.** This theme emerged in three parts: life experiences, past experiences as a group member, and experiences leading groups.

***Life experiences.*** The participants conveyed that lived experiences are naturally a component of group facilitation. Their lived experiences helped shape how they interpret

and practice what they do. Alan responded that all of his experiences contribute to his growth as a group leader:

> In one sense, I could say there is experience, and there is only experience. I mean that is the main factor of my life period, even outside of my job. I mean learning from my experience and trying to be in the moment and use what I have to be in tuned with learning is really one of the main purposes of my life. I mean every time I sit down to do group I do something different, every time. I fail at something, which is an opportunity to do it differently and try something else. I succeed at something, which is an opportunity to say wow; this thing is really working, so I want to try to keep this in the repertoire. So I think that everything, it's a constant growing learning experience, it's an art.

***Being a past group member***. Half of the participants expressed that their experiences as group members shaped their work as a group facilitators, and enhanced their processing of group interactions. Kay's response is indicative of that half of the population, "Actually I don't believe the experience of running groups has impacted me as much as my participation in group experiences myself. I have done maybe 13 years of being in a training group with psychodrama. That has had a more profound effect."

Neet drew on her lived experiences and her experiences as a group member to help her work through the challenges of group. She believes her group experience have helped her understand herself and her group members' silence and use that silence as a tool:

> I think maybe past life experiences, maybe past group involvement myself personally, and past groups period! I learned to take a lot of that judgment and pressure off myself as counselor and allow silence to happen and let it be what it is. Once I got past the fear and saw silence as being really a tremendous catalyst for change. Then I felt better about that. It just came with experience; it just came by taking those risks and building confidence in myself as a facilitator, and not putting any pressure on kids to participate in group. Letting them know that every piece of the group is important.

***Experiences leading groups.*** As participants conducted more groups, they changed or adjusted the way they organized groups. The majority of the participants found that as their experience grew, they found themselves moving from a structured approach to a more open, and student focused approach. Helen reports that she was worried about having only fifty minutes to get accomplished what she wanted. Then she began to see the value in allowing the students to lead and communicate with each other. "I've begun to think that just the opportunity to give the child a chance to verbalize what's on their mind is huge because that reinforces the importance of verbalizing your concerns, your issues, and your problem. You can't keep it inside." She believes middle school students are reluctant to talk about concerns and by allowing them to share their ideas with others, she has provided an outlet for students who might otherwise develop more serious problems. She continues,

> So I guess I've come to feel like the group may not have to be so structured to be powerful and beneficial but we can have some unstructured time because that allows you to get the idea and practice the idea of 'maybe I need to talk about

> what's bothering me'. …I guess I'm trusting the group members more, the individuals to develop some of the skills of verbalizing.

Experiences also allowed the participants to trust themselves. Jackie said that as her experience grew she was more comfortable sharing her story. Jackie believed that by using self-disclosures, she was able to share another point of view and develop a bond with the group members.

> My comfort levels in the sense of realizing that my experiences, feeling like "I can't tell them that because they'll hold it against me. Realize now that sometimes sharing with them those experiences allows them to see that I'm a human being just like them. I've dealt with trials and tribulations and that this too shall pass. Whereas at first it was like I have to use as example of someone else, now I realize I can use myself as an example. That's a big difference.

The majority of participants reported recognizing the power of talk and the power of silence. They learned to relax, be non-judgmental, and let the students take ownership of the group. Participants expressed that their past group leader experiences moved them from a more structured approach (with lesson plans and strict time frames) to a more open approach with the students as the focus. For a few participants—when they were beginning to conduct groups—the fear of losing control or the uncertainty of the group process drove a more structured approach. Tennis pro says of her first years, "when I first started I really wanted a guide. I wanted a curriculum…It was hard for me, and part of that was probably anxiety of doing things new and wanting very badly to do things that help." Others took a more directive approach because of the limited amount of time. Sue explains this and believes that being very structured in the beginning is important.

> I think from the early stages of doing group and learning that the key is you've got to be organized. You've got to really know where you are going with the group, you can't just wing it. And say well, the topic is divorce. You've got to have a plan, cause you've only got them for six lesson for six group sessions… See I learned a lot as I begin to do and experiment and knew that this was so valuable. I felt like they needed it at this age and that that was important so I was going to give it my best shot. The six lessons I had were going to be gold nuggets.

Jacqueline reported that her experience has led her to value the importance the group's composition. She recalled setting up a group composed entirely of students with ADHD. "It is usually not a successful group and it's very tiring and frustrating." Over the years, she learned to be more selective and balance the group composition more carefully. She accomplishes this by knowing the students before they come into the group setting. She was particularly candid about her mistakes with students who had serious emotional or substance abuse issues. She comments on incorrect placement of students in group:

> I did that in my early years and it's also not a good idea. They tend to reinforce the negative behaviors, and that was not successful because it was hurting the other kids by recreating the dysfunctions that they had. So I think balancing group carefully and it helps knowing about the kids before they are in the group setting.

Shelly reported that she learned to use a good mix of activities. She points out that, "I've learned that a combination of talking and physical activity works well with a lot of kids, and keeps the dynamics healthy, …they learn how to cooperate together, follow the rules of the game, and it's a mood lifter."

**Participant's Reaction to the Interview Process (Authenticity)**

The final check in evaluating constructivist research processes is the authenticity criteria (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). There are four authenticity criteria that can be met—ontological, educative, catalytic and tactic. Ontological authenticity represents the participant's emic experience improvements or expansion through the interview process. Educative authenticity refers to the participant's understanding and appreciation of the views of other participants. Catalytic authenticity results when the evaluations of the participants' constructions spark action and decision-making.

One method for addressing the authenticity criteria is through interview questions that solicit the participants' feelings about the interview. The last interview questions—"How was this experience for you?" and "Is there anything you feel I may have missed that you would like to add?"— were constructed to allow the participants the opportunity to reassess their ideas and thoughts. These questions elicited a variety of emotional responses. All of the participants felt the experience was affirming, and enjoyed the opportunity to share their passion for group work in schools. Three participants reported that they found it difficult to recall all the details of an experience, and that reliving the experience resurrected strong emotions. Two participants stated that they enjoyed the opportunity to reflect and further process their ideas about group. Tennis Pro responded to the last question by stating that she started the process of reflecting immediately after I asked her to participant. She explains, "it made me wonder if maybe we didn't need to do this more often and see where we've been and where we're goin' and what we do that we like a lot or need to get rid." Neet also enjoyed the interview experience, "It was fantastic because …it was like your life flashing before your face. And so many of my favorite and

least favorite came to mind, and my most effective ones came to mind. So it gave me a chance to really reflect".

A second method for addressing authenticity criteria is through member checks and probing questions. The participants' comments to the member checks—discussed previously—aided in gaining educative authenticity. I embedded two questions in the member check document to explore the participants' emic experiences and expansions. I gave them three tasks to complete for the member check. First, I instructed the participants to answer the first question—"Since the interview, how have you changed or adjusted your thinking about how you approach groups?" —before reviewing the summary of emerging themes. Secondly, I asked them to review and comment on the emerging themes. After they completed this process, I asked them to answer the last question—"After reviewing the themes that emerged, what insights did you gain that might influence how your approach to groups?"—as their final step. The following is a summary of their responses. I conclude the results section with my responses to the process of interviewing and analyzing the data. As a practitioner of groups in my middle school, I allowed myself to become part of the data by recording my reactions and influences in memo form. That summary follows the participants' summary of responses.

**Since the interview, how have you changed or adjusted your thinking about how you approach groups?** Nine participants responded to this question and two reported they would make no changes to their approach to group counseling. Seven of the participants responded that either they had adjusted their approach to group, or they were encouraged to think about what they would do differently. Kija said, "I have thought more about why we run groups and their part in the larger picture of the school culture".

Helen said that she gained a “stronger conviction” for groups, and she will conduct more groups next school year echoed this. Two of the participants said that they would change the timing when they will begin conducting groups to earlier in the school year. Two participants said that they would change how they evaluate their groups and one of those said they would begin following-up with their students. Roni who conducted groups that lasted the entire school year reported that she recognized part of the benefit of groups is kids connecting to kids. She saw that while this is a benefit, it might stifle some kids. “I need to work on exiting students. I need to work harder at helping them recognize when it’s time to exit the group. They have to form connections outside of group.”

**After reviewing the themes that emerged, what insights did you gain that might influence how your approach to groups?** Eleven participants responded to this question. Billie reacted to the question by stating her displeasure with the number of school counselors and social workers who did not have teaching experience. She believed that necessary to emphasize, and effectively communicate with teachers, parents, and students. The remaining ten participants responded reported on other affects the experienced from the process.

Five participants stated that they felt validated by the themes that emerged, and believed “the exercise made me think more of why we conduct groups.” Three participants said they enjoyed learning from the other participants and wanting to try different group topics in the next year. Roni said, “One of the research participants appears to be doing a group with students who have attendance issues. It’s a great idea which I have never considered.” Three participants reported that they would work on

improving their skills as a group leader, and two participants spoke about improving their understanding of their theoretical approach. Roni also reported a struggle she was having:

> I also thought about whether or not I truly use a single theory in groups. I really don't. In individual counseling, I use a great deal of brief therapy—probably most school counselors do. I follow the Corey and Corey model of group work and stages of group counseling but truly don't rely on one theoretical perspective. I'm not sure that's a bad thing, but I'm feeling guilty about it as I write this. In grad school, many professors stressed the need to identify and practice one theory. It just doesn't feel like one theory fits all people or all situations. If we have different learning styles and differences in our cognitive abilities, doesn't it make sense that some theories are a better match at connecting with different students/clients?

Two participants spoke about the importance of follow-up and vowed to improve the process, and the outside auditor commented that, "Follow-up is important but overlooked. Counselors need to think through this as a component or extension the group."

In sum, these participants were excited about group leadership in middle schools and exuded that enthusiasm in the interviews. Their eagerness to share with and understand other middle school counselor's views was evident in the large number of participants responding to the member check (thirteen of the fourteen participants responded). Their confidence and skills grew as they experienced conducting more groups, and gained trust in students and the group process to help students move towards change. They used their relationship abilities to influence teachers and administrators to include groups as an intervention for student's personal and academic growth. The

experience of reflecting on and talking about their experience in facilitating groups in middle schools was beneficial and a catalyst for growth. Roni said of the member check experience, "It actually feels a little bit like I've just been a group participant. It allowed me to view the group work I do as connecting to what other middle school counselors around the country are doing."

As a practicing middle school counselor and group leader, I was influenced by the participants' stories in this study. Over the course of the months interviewing the participants I found myself using silence as a tool and became more aware of my leadership style. Perhaps the most significant change I experienced since the interview and analysis of the transcripts has been connecting informally with the students. I have seen an increase in student self-referrals, and an influx of students wishing to become group members. Because of the influx, I have had to rely more heavily on the screening process to select the best participants for group. Finally, I have increased my involvement with teachers and administrators to build stronger or collaborative relationships. From reading my memos, I see a change after my eleventh interview towards a more active educational leadership and group advocate role. Overall, my group leadership experience has been positively impacted by this investigative process.

## Discussion

Consistent with other findings, the participants in this study reported both external and internal barriers to conducting groups. The major external barrier revealed from the literature is resistance to groups from teachers and administrators. Internal barriers are the school counselors' belief that they do not have the time or expertise to conduct groups

(Dansby, 1996;Sisson & Bullis, 1992; Steen et al., 2007. Uwah et al. 2009). The participants in this study found ways to overcome these obstacles. It is important to point out that these participants were constantly evaluating and developing their group leadership skills. They seemed to be intrinsically motivated to improve themselves, their craft, and the group experience. All of the participants actively sought out conferences and workshops to broaden their knowledge of group work. This passion for group work and self-improvement of leadership skills may account for their success in establishing and conducting groups in their schools.

The theory that emerged from this study illustrates that these middle school group leaders employed relationship building skills, educational leadership, and experiences to effectively implement groups as a part of their comprehensive school counseling program. The theory is graphically displayed in figure 1.

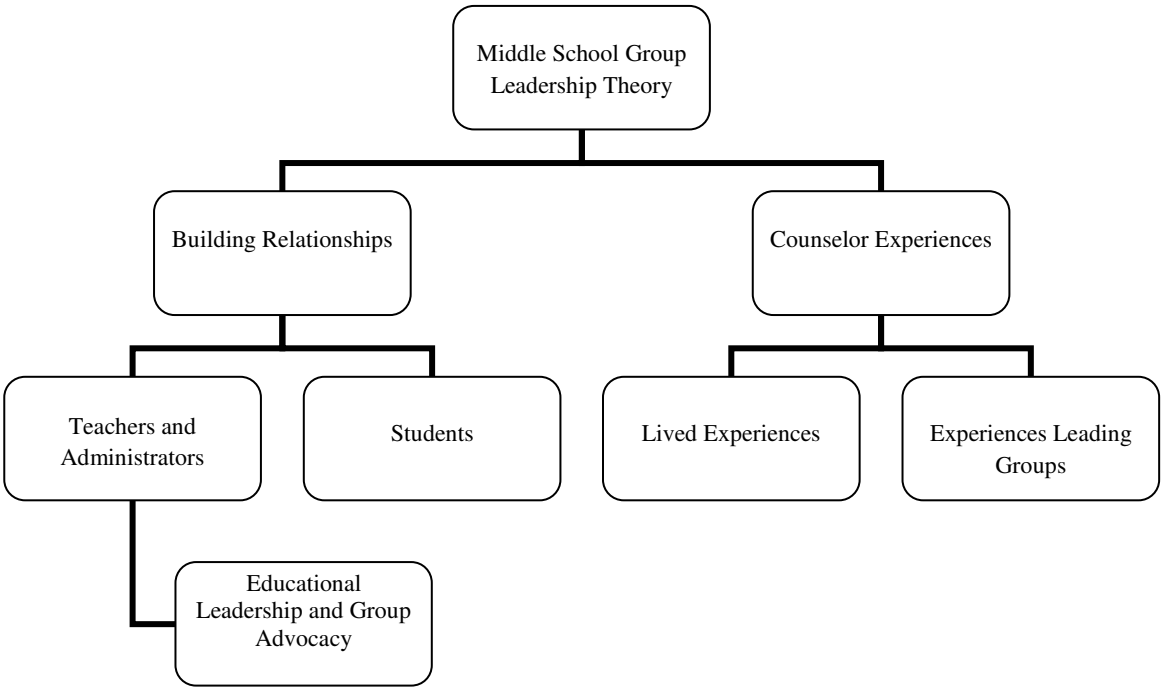


*Figure 1.* Theory of Group Leadership in Middle School

**Building Relationships with Teachers, Administrators, and Students.**

Participants in this study believe that building relationships and partnerships with teachers and administrators is instrumental to the successful implementation of a group program in schools. These participants used a variety of strategies to build and cultivate relationships. Strategies included conducting needs assessment surveys (parents were included to foster support for groups), teaching classroom guidance lessons, maintaining high visibility, consulting with teachers and administrators, and responding quickly to teacher's and administrator's concerns. These strategies are consistent with the ASCA national model and existing literature that suggests school counselors collaboration with all school stakeholders (i.e. parents, teachers, administrators, and students) as the first steps in planning for groups (ASCA, 2003; Brigman & Goodman, 2001; Conyne & Mazza, 2007; Delicia-Waack, 2006).

All of the participants understood the challenges and pressures that teachers experience, and many of the participants used classroom guidance as an opportunity to exhibit competence in the classroom and initiate a relationship with teachers. Because of the confidential nature of individual and group counseling, classroom guidance is often the only time an administrator or teacher can observe school counselors at work. Many of the participants believed that demonstrating their competence in the classroom encouraged solidarity between themselves, teachers, and administrators.

Perhaps the most important reason for classroom guidance was the opportunity to connect with students. Participants used classroom guidance as a tool to gain understanding, initiate relationships with the students, and inform students of counseling services. The relationship that develops in the first classroom guidance lesson can

establish avenues for students to self-refer or to refer others for counseling services. Participants also noted that an equally important benefit of conducting classroom guidance is the ability gain an unfiltered view of students' interaction in a classroom setting. Many participants reported that viewing students in the classroom setting aids them as they structure their groups and develop group topics. Their stance underscores the importance of classroom guidance in establishing groups and is consistent with the ASCA model and literature examining group work in schools (ASCA, 2003; Brigman & Goodman, 2001; Conyne & Mazza, 2007; Delicia-Waack, 2006).

Another important strategy for establishing trust and relationships with both teachers and students is visibility throughout the school. Whether it was in the school cafeteria, at the bus stop, or in the hallways, participants believed that being visible, observing and connecting with students, and being actively involved in the daily workings of the school creates a climate of openness with students and a feeling of camaraderie with administrators and teachers. While the ASCA model does not support school counselors' involvement in non-counseling duties (i.e. hall duty, bus duty, or cafeteria duty), the school counselor's presence at these locations—and at times relieving a teacher or administrator of their school duties—is vital in creating opportunities to assess the school climate (ASCA, 2003). It also gives the school counselor a working understanding of the systems within the school. Understanding the systems or ecology of the school is critical to working within that system and being able to conduct a group program (ASCA, 2003; Dansby, 1996; Conyne & Mazza, 2007).

Being visible allows the counselor to be more readily accessible to students. It also provides the school counselor with the opportunity to see students in their school

environment—outside the classroom—which gives context to student behavior. In addition to gaining valuable information, informal relationships can form and alliances can develop that can quickly transition to a therapeutic alliance once the students join a group. Participants worked on their relationships with students before, during, and after the group sessions, and they believe fostering these relationships is important to the group process, the therapeutic alliance, and the maintenance of learned skills after the group intervention ends.

**Being an Educational Leader and Advocate for Groups.**

Participants established themselves as educational leaders in the school and used that position to promote, advocate, and demonstrate the importance of groups to administrators and teachers. Ten of the fourteen participants had formal educational leadership positions, and analysis of the remaining four participants' data showed that they conducted themselves as educational leaders in an informal capacity. Janson, Stone, and Clark (2009) suggested that many of the influences school counselors exert on the school climate are a result of leadership without seeking recognition. Leadership shared among school professionals is an effective method for accomplishing goals. They called this 'distributed leadership' and believed that the 'unsung hero' type of educational leadership is what many school counselors practice. The four participants without formal leadership roles are examples of this type of leadership. Neet convinced administrators of the importance of groups by allowing them to experience the closure activity of a grief group. Billie used research and persuasion to convince her administrators of the value of devoting an entire day to group work, and Shelly used her leadership and knowledge during SST meetings to include groups as an intervention. The ASCA model clearly

supports their efforts and states that, “School counselors become effective leaders by collaborating with other school professionals to influence system wide changes and implement school reform” (ASCA, 2003, p.24).

Many educators who support school counselors as educational leaders advocate a leadership style that espouses equity in education for all students (Amatea & Clark, 2005; DeVoss & Andrews, 2006; Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Janson, et al., 2009). All but one participant in this study directly connected group work to academics and student success, and that participant saw group work as an indirect connection to school success. Participants worked to help students use their group skills to improve their behaviors outside of group.

As educational leaders, the participants used persuasion and outcome data to advocate for groups in their schools. They used their leadership position to work within the system to find opportunities to conduct groups without adversely affecting the time students were out of class (i.e. using ELT, creative and rotating scheduling, and insisting that students make up work missed during group). From their position on committees and administrative teams they were able to help shape the structure of school day (i.e. the use of a single day devoted to groups, influencing the use of ELT, or homeroom time). Participants noted that even though they had some of the same data as teachers and administrators, their position as a school counselors and educational leader gave them a broader perspective (i.e. course prerequisites, data from student’s records, longer range graduation requirements, and family background information) that allowed them to view the student holistically. This gave them an advantage when advocating for the students

and giving insights for the use of groups as an intervention during conferences, consultations, and student support team (SST) meetings.

**Using the Influence of Experience: Lived Experiences, as a Group Member, and as a Group Leader.**

Lived experiences influenced how the participants approached and experienced group sessions. They incorporated the experiences using techniques such as modeling, self-disclosure, and storytelling. Ten of the fourteen participants were former teachers and used that background to help students adjust their thinking to the education system.

Some of the participants were influenced by people in the field of group work (i.e. other group workers or renowned practitioners of group work). Two of the participants spoke of the using props after seeing and working with Ed Jacobs and his impact therapy concept. Four of the participants use choice theory, and they commented on Glasser's workshops as influences in their use of choice theory. Others talked about experiences working with other group leaders. Some participants recalled being affected by their life experiences. Jackie spoke about her recollections of her life as a young girl and the obstacles she had to overcome, and Connie spoke of inspirations she gained from her pastor. Drawing on lived experiences and knowledge helped the participants understand their group members. In every case however, the participants cautioned that they were careful not to let their experiences obscure the students' experiences.

As their knowledge of the group process grew and they practiced group leadership skills, they made changes in the way they structured groups, began to trust the group members more, and adjusted the flow between content and process. The most significant changes were in leadership style, trusting group members, and trusting the group process.

Nearly all of the participants spoke about the growth process from directive leader to non-directive leader. As they conducted more groups, they gained confidence and developed their skills as a group leader. They reported that by processing after each group session they learned from their mistakes and successes. By evaluating their process, they discovered that trusting group members and the group process allowed the groups become more productive. This is consistent with Akos, Hamm, Mack, and Dunaway (2007) who advocate for using peers in groups to help influence a more rapid change in groups at the middle school level. As confidence and skill levels increased, they experienced more dynamic and successful group sessions. For these participants, being a group leader was a constant learning process that evolves from group to group and moment to moment. They believed leading groups is an art that consists of intuition and group leadership skills.

Participants believed that flexibility is important; they reported moving between leadership styles during a single session. Because of the short duration of most group sessions (six to ten weeks), participants were more directive in the beginning sessions and allowed the members to lead as the group progressed. They emphasized that when working with adolescents, the developmental level of the students and the group composition often drives the leadership style required.

Six of the fourteen participants had been participants in counseling groups. They said that their experiences as group members informed their approaches as a group leader. The participants reported that working on their own issues as group members allowed them to be freer to help their students in group, and they had a better

understanding of the group process because of their experiences. The influence of experiences on group leadership development is consistent with the findings of Rubel and Kline's (2008) study.

All of the participants reported counseling in the here-and-now is essential to their group leadership. In the member responses, all of the participants said counseling in the here-and-now is at times exhausting and invigorating. Being in the here-and-now with their students and knowing that the sessions were only going to last six to ten weeks intensified group leader's feelings, but they understood the therapeutic power of the here-and-now process. This is congruent with Yalom's (2005) view of counseling in the here-and-now: "the effective use of the here-and-now requires two steps: the group lives in the here-and-now, and it also doubles back on itself; it performs a self-reflective loop and examines the here-and-now behavior that has just occurred" (p.142.)

A final lesson learned from the experience of conducting groups was that the evaluation of member's success in group often did not appear until after the group disbanded. Planting seeds was a common refrain from the participants because many reported hearing from past group members that they remembered the skills taught in group and were using them in their lives. This feedback, considered by some to be more important than the immediate feedback from data, revealed the potency of the group experience. These results are consistent with Uwah's, et al. (2008) findings that feedback from past group members was a powerful reinforcement for participants' continuation of group work.

**Additional Finding**

The topic of multicultural awareness was not directly addressed in this study. The ethnicities of the participants were not revealed to the research team until after the coding process. Most participants spoke of the needs and concerns of their individual students without making direct references to culture, SES, or ethnicity. Contrary to Hoag and Burlingame (1997) or Kulic, et al. (2004) these results suggest that the participants in this study did not find the SES or ethnicity of students a factor for success in group. This may be due to the relationships they built with the students; it may be their approach, which was very open and respectful; it may the therapeutic alliance established; or it may be that they did use different strategies and we missed them. It is important to note that the overriding goals for all group members were to help them become successful in school, take responsibility for their choices, and hold them accountable for a respectful and safe group environment.

In sum, the participants in this study were able to overcome the barriers reported in previous studies on group work in schools (Dansby, 1996; Sisson & Bullis, 1992; Steen, et al., 2007). The methods they used to destroy internal and external barriers to conducting groups in schools are rooted in the conviction that groups are an effective means for helping students overcome problems that inhibit their success in school. They built relationships with students at every opportunity, were visible throughout the school, and developed camaraderie among the teachers. They created a therapeutic alliance with group members using reciprocal intimacy in a safe and encouraging environment. These steps in developing alliances with the students allowed the participants to counsel in the here-and-now. This appears to be an important factor in the success of their groups. Finally, the participants used evaluations and follow-up with students to extend the group

experience. By building relationships with teachers and administrators, becoming an educational leader, and using their experiences to inform the group process, these participants developed a flourishing group practice in their schools.

**Implications for Middle School Counselors**

As evidenced by the participants in this study, group counseling can be a viable part of a comprehensive counseling program. The following suggestions are offered to assist middle school counselors in overcoming barriers to group work in schools. First, previous literature on groups in schools suggests three major barriers to group work: teacher/administrator resistance, time constraints, and the group leader's competence (Dansby, 1996; Sisson, & Bullis, 1992; Steen, et al., 2007). The dismantling o the first barrier, teacher, and administrator resistance begins with building relationships with all of the stakeholders. Relationships can be built through competent practices, educational leadership, understanding of the systems at work in the school, and connecting group work to student success. Participants avoided the second barrier through flexible scheduling, rotating scheduling, or the use of an extended learning time.

Secondly, studies have found that the third barrier—reluctance on the part of school counselors to conduct groups—is due to their lack of confidence in the group experience (Sisson & Bullis, 1992; Steen, et al., 2007; Uwah et al., 2008). Participants in this study indicated that experience in conducting groups is the best method of overcoming this fear. This is consistent with Rubel and Kline (2008) who found that expert group leaders improved their techniques from the experience of leading groups. In addition to practices learned in their counseling course work on groups, the participants used their experiences (i.e. lived experiences, group member experiences, and group

leader experiences) to inform their group work. They developed relationships with the students to accelerate the therapeutic alliance, practiced self-disclosures and counseling in the here-and-now, and used the students' out of group information to improve the therapeutic alliance and group success. They had a deep understanding of influences students faced outside the group (i.e. family, home life, neighborhood, and school) and appeared to have included cultural considerations.

Finally, participants' reaction to the study revealed that school counselor group leaders need a support system to consult, debrief, and recharge. While many participants reported being able to talk with their colleagues after a session, conversation was usually very quick and solution oriented. The demands of maintaining a comprehensive counseling program do not leave much time to reflect upon the group process. Participants reported that the study allowed them time to reflect upon past group experiences, revisit past strategies, recount failures, and celebrate their successes. The responses of these participants reinforce the need for middle school group leaders to have a place to talk with other group leaders to confirm, share, and grow. If these experienced group leaders benefited from the sharing that occurred from this study, new school counselor group leaders might also benefit. Such interactions may be effective in lessoning new school counselor's inhibitions and increasing their comfort levels in leading groups.

**Implications for Counselor Educators**

Five points may be of interest to school counselor-training institutions. First, these participants did not report courses in educational leadership. They developed an integrative educational leadership styles while on the job, and took a distributive

leadership approach in that they led from behind the scenes, and shared leadership with other professionals in the school. Given the increasing demands on teachers, administrators, and school counselors to be accountable for student success, courses in educational leadership might be helpful to new school counselors.

Since teaching is not required of school counselors in many states, a course in the systems at work in the schools would also be helpful in negotiating time for groups and connecting to school success. For instance, two of the participants reported that after reviewing how other school counselors were using groups, they would include attendance as a topic for group. Because they did not have classroom experience, they initially were not able to see the connection of attendance to academic success. Second, many participants used the ecological systems approach that Conyne and Mazza (2007) suggest and is supported by the ASCA national model. This approach was critical in gaining the support of teachers and administrators for conducting groups. Providing an understanding of the systems at work in schools may be useful for school counselors when matching the goals of the school to present an informed argument for small groups as an intervention for student success.

Third, these participants are highly motivated and dedicated to advancing group work in their schools. As school counselor educators select students for their programs, a procedure for determining potential leadership skills and a desire to conduct group work may be useful in choosing potential successful school counselors.

Fourth, the participants reported that their confidence and group leadership skills improved with more group leadership experience, and as they grew as group leaders,

their desire to conduct more groups increased. It might be helpful for counselor education programs to utilize more site supervisors who are conducting groups in their schools. This would aid school counseling students in developing group leadership and group organizational skills, and encourage more group work in schools.

Finally, perhaps the most important aspect of the theory that emerged is school counselors' skill in building relationships within the school. While school counselors are taught interpersonal skills, the skill of fostering relationships with teachers and administrators to form partnerships may be useful for new school counselors as they develop their comprehensive school counseling program. Understanding the need to develop student relationships outside of the counseling office is an important concept for new school counselors to embrace. The influence of peer interaction on the success in groups sessions, makes forming an alliance prior to group a powerful tool (Akos, Hamm, Mack, Dunaway, 2007). While the concept of building relationships into partnerships appears simple, these participants reported that it took them a few years to develop the skill that they practice continually. School counselors in training would benefit from learning the skills needed to develop working relationships with teachers and alliances with students.

**Limitations and Direction for Future Studies**

In grounded theory, the intent is not universal generalization but a theoretical generalization grounded in the results of the limited sample size (fourteen) and purposefulness of the selected sample. Therefore, the theory presented is not absolute but may be considered transferable if certain conditions are observed. While participants

were selected to cover large geographic areas, all of the participants came from suburban or urban settings. The context of this study is limited to middle school. Elementary and high school counselors face different challenges because of the developmental stages of the students and because of educational differences for each level. This can be seen in the assessment requirements NCLB has established for the three different groups (NCLB, 2002). If the reader observes the context of these hypotheses, transferability of the theory is possible.

I intentionally sought out middle school counselors who were considered experienced and successful group leaders by their peers. My intent was to gain from these experienced group leaders insight into how they were able to successfully conduct groups in their schools. The intrinsic motivation of these participants, their passion for group work, and their fervent belief that groups are beneficial for middle school students who are struggling with academic and social/emotional challenges were powerful ingredients to their successful group programs. These participants were referred because of their perceived group leadership skills and passion for group work at the middle school level. This is consistent with purposeful sampling in grounded theory (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Charmaz, 2006).

Another limitation was in the gathering of data. While I did provide participants with the opportunity to comment on the emerging themes, I did not have repeated extended interviews with the participants. Given the rich responses from the participants to the last question in the member check document—*After reviewing the themes that emerged, what insights did you gain that might influence how your approach to*

*groups?*—future research might include a focus group or group discussion with the participants. The nature of the academic school year and the developmental nature of the middle school student require that the middle school counselor adjust strategies throughout the year. This study conducted interviews over a four-month period in the second semester of the school year. A longitudinal study of one or two years might provide a more complete view of the experiences of the middle school group leader.

The participants agreed their experience conducting groups improved their group leadership skills. As their experience and confidence evolved, so did their desire to conduct more groups. This study was limited to middle school counselors with at least five years of experience, and their combined average years conducting groups was twelve. Experience conducting groups stems from either group work conducted during practicum and internship or simply plunging into conducting groups once on the job. Further studies of counselor's progress in their first two years as a school counselor might give insight into group work practices and challenges. While this study did not examine co-leadership of groups, one participant spoke about the comfort of conducting groups with another counselor. Investigating co-leadership of groups in school might provide insights for new school counselors.

Finally, the participants in this study reported that they enjoyed discussing their work as group leaders, and benefitted from reading the emerging themes in the member check. Many reported being encouraged to conduct more groups after participant in this study. While only Alan received ongoing supervision, the responses from the other participants indicate that they would welcome more supervision. Most school counselors take one course on group work and may receive another if they pursue more advanced

degrees. While they are required to conduct groups during their practicum and internship, it is unclear that middle and high school counseling students receive supervision in groups from their site supervisors. Supervision of group work is essential to the training of group leaders in clinical and school counseling (ASGW, 2000; ASCA 2003, ACA, 2005; Yalom, 2005). Since the research points to few middle and high school counselors conducting groups, it seems probable that few middle and high school counselor supervisors are supervising groups (Wiggins & Carroll, 1993; Dansby, 1996; Akos et.al., 2004; Steen et al., 2007). An increase of supervision of group work at the counselor education level may help to solve this dilemma. However, research into how school counselors could receive group supervision once on the job is needed. A study of the support systems school counselors have developed and supervision they experience may give insights into how school counselors can be encouraged to include or improve group work in schools.

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# APPENDIZES

## APPENDIX A

## GROUP LEADERSHIP OF EXPERIENCED MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSLEORS

Grand question: *How do expert middle school group leaders approach and experience psycho-educational groups?*

Questions for participants (Questions derived from Rubel and Kilne, 2007)

1. Why do you conduct groups? (How important is group to your overall program? Why?)
2. How have you been able to convince administrators and teachers to allow you to conduct groups?
3. Describe your process to establish a group in your school (e.g. How are group participants selected? How are group topics determined? When are groups conducted? ).
4. How do you help the students change what they do or How to you get the students to move to change? As you are engaged with the students in the group, how do you decide what to do, what informs/drives your decisions?
5. How do you determine what you want your interventions to accomplish?
    a. How do you know if what you are doing in group is working?
6. Describe how you manage your relationship with the group.

a. Describe how you manage your relationship with individual group members.

7. What thoughts and feelings do you experience while you lead a group?
8. How has your experience(s) impact the way that you lead groups?
9. How was the experience of this interview for you?

*10. Now that you have reflected back on your work, what changes will you make in your group work?(Question deleted after fourth interview)*

## APPENDIX B

Georgia State University
Department of Counseling and Psychological Services
Informed Consent
Title: Group Leadership of Experienced Middle School Counselors

Principal Investigator: Robert E. Rice – Student PI
Dr. Catherine Chang – Faculty PI

I. Purpose:
You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to investigate how middle school counselors approach and experience groups. You are invited to participate because you are a practicing middle school counselors with at least five years of experience conducting groups in a middle school setting. A total of 12 participants will be recruited for this study. Participation will require approximately from one hour and 15 minutes to one hour and 45 minutes of your time over from December 2009 to March 2010.

II. Procedures: If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be interviewed individually for 45 min to 1 hour with a possible follow-up interview of 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews will take place at Georgia State University (GSU) or at a secure place convenient to the researcher. You will be audio taped and the taped interviews will be transcribed. Your name will not appear on any written record of the interview, a pseudonym of your choosing will be used on the written data. The key to the pseudonym will be kept in a separate secured location from the rest of the records of this study. The remaining records will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office.

III. Risks:

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

IV. Benefits:

Participation in this study may be of benefit you personally. You may enjoy the opportunity to talk about your professional experiences in an uninterrupted environment. Overall, we hope to gain information about how middle school counselors approach and experience group work in the school setting..

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to

be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

VI. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. We will use a pseudonym of your choosing rather than your name on study records. Only principal investigators will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP) and/or the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the sponsor). The information you provide will be stored in the researcher's locked filing cabinet. The pseudonym key will be stored separately from the data on a firewall and password protected computer. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

VII. Contact Persons:

Contact Robert E. Rice or Catherine Chang, PhD if you have questions about this study. Robert E. Rice may be contacted at (678) 874-8227 or rrice3@student.gsu.edu and Dr. Catherine Chang, may be contacted at (404) 413-8196 or cychang@gsu.edu If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research study, you may contact Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject: We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be audio or video recorded, please sign below.

_____

Participant Signature Date

_____

Principal Investigator Signature Date

_____

Student Principal Investigator Signature Date

# APPENDIX C

## Demographic Sheet

1. Name_____ Gender_____ Ethnicity_____
2. Years as middle school counselor_____ Other counseling experience(s)_____

   _____
3. Years conducting Groups_____ Number of groups in past year _____
4. Are you conducting a group(s) now? _____ Number? _____
5. Type and/or Theme of groups conducted _____

   _____

   _____
6. Average number of participants per group? _____
7. Make-up the groups conducted by ethnicity and/or gender _____

   _____

   _____
8. Name of your School _____ Urban or Suburban (Circle one)
9. How do your students get to school? _____

   _____
10. Demographics of school –

a. Ethnic breakdown by percentage - African American ____, Latino/a _____, Asian_____

White_____ Bi/Multi heritage_____ Other _____

b. Percentage by SES (Free or reduced lunches use AYP data) _____.

c. Gender – Female _____ Male _____

11. Number of students in school by grade 6th _____ 7th _____ 8th _____

12. What duties do you have Counseling _____

_____

13. What non-counseling duties are you assigned?_____

_____

14. Your Case Load - Total number of students and division (i.e. grade, team) _____

_____

# APPENDIX D

## GROUP LEADERSHIP OF EXPERIENCED MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSLEORS

**Looking at the themes from Grand Question**

I would like you to pay particular attention to the themes document and indicate in the "your comments" column whether the entry was salient for you or not. Add any comments you believe would be helpful in representing you. The themes are arranged by question and in order of importance as I understood from your collective interviews.

There is a question I would like for you to address before you begin reviewing the themes. This question refers to your thoughts since the interview. Have you made or plan to make any adjustments in your approach to groups as a result of your experience or reflections since the interview process.

There is one question at the end of the document. I want to know if you found new or validating information from the emerging themes.

**If you looked at the transcript, was it accurate? Yes_____ No_____ if no why_____**

**Before you begin looking at the themes, please answer this question: Since the interview, how have you changed or adjusted your thinking about how you approach groups? Answer in box.**

| **Answer:** |
|---|

**Grand question is:** ***How do experienced middle school group leaders approach and experience psycho-educational groups?***

First part of Grand question - *How do experienced middle school group leaders approach psycho-educational groups?*

**In the "Your Comments" column, you may simply put agree or disagree. OR/and Any comment you wish to make here would be welcomed.**

| ***Interview Question*** | **Emerging Themes** | **Comments** | **Your Comments** |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***Why Run Groups?*** | **In order of importance** | | **Agree/Disagree/Comment** |
| | Providing Needed Attention and meeting student needs (Universalizing) | Groups allow students to verbalize concerns, meet new people, and feel a sense of belonging. The group process allows students to help each other (Which is developmentally appropriate for adolescents). Groups allow counselor to universalize issues for students. | |

| | | | |
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| | Effective and efficient use of counselor's time. | Many stated that it was an effective and efficient way to address the needs of their students. Groups were an effective way to work with students who have serious issues that cannot be addressed through classroom guidance and were too time consuming for individual counseling. | |
| | Groups are part of a comprehensive program (ASCA Model). | 75% felt that groups either were part of a comprehensive counseling program (ASCA Model) or were part of a holistic way of delivering counseling services. Four participants reported that their area supervisors required groups. | |
| ***Can you describe how you establish groups?*** | | | |
| | Identifying as a school counselor | Two participants self identified as therapists and 50% of the participants practiced outside of the school setting. Yet the participants made a distinction between school counselors and therapist, with school counseling being considered less intensive work. | |
| | Establishing a presence in the school. | Developing a presence and establishing relationships with the students aided in students' willingness to enter groups and helped the member/leader initial relationship building. | |
| | Using referrals as a means for student selection. | Students were selected for groups through counselor observation or referrals (parent, admin, and teacher). While some | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Screening was an important part of the selection process. | used needs assessments, the referral process was most widely used.<br><br>Screening was stated as important for 60% of the participants (even those whose students were mandated for groups). Screening included individual or group conversations, research, and consultation with other counselors. | |
| | Topics were determined by consensus. | Topics were determined by counselor observation and teacher/administrator input, but were further developed by the students in the groups. | |
| | Respectful behavior was high as a goal. | Regardless of the topic, helping the students make decisions and communicate respectfully was a primary goal. | |
| | Deciding group makeup and length | Participants varied from gender specific and grade level specific groups to a variety of mixed groupings. It often came down to whether there were enough students to form the group. Participants were in conflict between members wanting to continue beyond the typical 8 weeks, often resulting in yearlong groups. Several participants conducted groups lasting the longer than one year. | |
| ***How have you been able to convince admin & teachers?*** | **Using leadership and advocacy skills** | Counselors advocated for groups through relationship building, teaming, and leadership skills. | |
| | Showing leadership in the school | This was not implicitly spoken, but seemed to emerge as a theme. Most of you worked directly | |

| | | | |
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| | | with your principals or assistant principals to influence school climate with the importance of groups. | |
| | Creating a teaming atmosphere with administration and teachers through teamwork and modeling. | Participants made efforts to establish a team ("we are all responsible for student success") climate with teachers and administrators. Most participants emphasized the importance of establishing a working and supportive relationship with the teachers. This resulted in students being released from class and in securing the teacher's support for maintaining/tracking/ and evaluating the student's progress. Another strategy used my some participants was to demonstrate to the teachers (through classroom guidance activities) their competencies and the benefits that counselor could bring to the classroom teacher. | |
| | Using Groups as an intervention to promote student academic success. | Middle school counselors used their leadership and advocacy skills to present groups as an intervention for a variety of issues that "stopped students from learning" to include: discipline issues, academics strategies (i.e. RTI documentation), and attendance concerns. Everyone saw the need for groups to relate back to academics. | |
| | Connecting group work to academic success and being mindful of | Convincing administration seemed less of a problem than | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | teacher/student contact. | convincing teachers. Many participants reported that teachers and administrators "expected" that groups would be conducted. There was a pattern of connecting group work to academics. Every participant showed respect for teacher/student time in class by either conducting groups in non-academic periods or rotating group scheduling to avoid multiple class absences. While this was often driven by the participant, several participants reported that principals had emphasized to teachers that groups would be held during the non-academic periods. | |

**Looking at the themes from Grand Question**

Second part of Grand Question - *How do experienced middle school group leaders experience psycho-educational groups?*

| Interview Question | Emerging Themes | Comments | Your Comments |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***How do you help your students change what they do? How do you get the students to move to change?*** | | | |
| | Building trusting relationships with and among the group members was essential. | Building relationships among and with the group members was important. This was accomplished by: Creating a safe environment with ground rules that students helped to create, allowing students to talk and or be silent, promoting student responsibility both inside and outside of the group, and insisting on respectful behavior in the group. | |
| | Student responsibility | Participants believed | |

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| | was critical. | that change was ultimately the responsibility of the group member. They held their students responsible for upholding group rules and making up work missed while out of class. | |
| | Counseling intuitively (from the gut). | The participants used their guts or instincts as they observed the interactions in the group. They were constantly looking for clues in verbal and non-verbal reactions from group members. From processing these observations, interventions were developed and enacted. | |
| | Connecting the dots using counseling skills to challenge and invalidate negative thoughts. | While some of the participants took an approach of invalidating and challenging the students' negative thoughts and feelings, a large number of participants used questioning and probing to help the students "connect the dot". | |
| | Using groups to help student success in school | Everyone saw the need for groups to relate back to academics. Respectful communication with teachers and other students was a recurring goal. | |
| | Using a theory | While only a few (3) counselors directly spoke to a theory (Choice Theory), many participants spoke about students being responsible for their decisions and made this a major part of the | |

| | | | |
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| | | group intervention (using challenging 'tough' questions). There seemed to be a reluctance to identify a specific theory. | |
| ***Describe how you manage your relationship with the group.*** | | | |
| | Seeing self as group facilitator and/or group leader | The participants were divided as to whether they believed themselves a group facilitator (less directive) or a group leader (directive). Most felt that their role depended on the situation and often flowed between the two. | |
| | Using Individual follow-ups with students | Participants followed-up with difficult students to further manage group interaction. This follow-up strategy was used by about one third of the participants interviewed. | |
| | Modeling and self-disclosure was important for adolescents. | A large number of the participants used modeling, self-disclosure, and encouragement to manage the interactions in the group. There seemed to be a consensus that boy adolescents needed more activities to get to the talking stage, while girl adolescents were more open to discussion without many activities. | |
| | Counseling in the "Here and Now". | Being in the 'Here & Now', being present with the students seemed to be a major factor in how these participants managed | |

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| | | the group. | |
| ***What thoughts and feelings do you experience while you lead groups?*** | | | |
| | Feeling worthy and responsible. | The majority of the participants experience feelings of sincere responsibility when they conduct groups. | |
| | Feeling drained and overwhelmed. | After group sessions, participants expressed feelings of exhaustion because of the amount of energy needed to stay focused, sense the group and think about what is occurring, how to respond, and how to tie this all into group goals and individual goals. | |
| | Planting Seeds | While some used different terms, the idea of planting seeds for the future was expressed by many of the participants. | |
| ***How do you know if what you are doing is working?*** | | | |
| | Evaluating the group process through formal and informal means. | Only a few of the participants (about a third) used a formal pretest posttest to evaluate the group experience. Most used informal evaluations of the students and relied on feedback from teachers, administrators, parents, or the students to gauge the quality of the group. | |
| | Planting Seeds revisited | Many counselors stated that you often don't know if the intervention worked. The idea of planting seeds means that results of the group intervention may not be readily available. In | |

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|---|---|---|---|
| | | fact, a number of participants shared stories of returning students who sought them out to comment on their positive group experiences. | |
| ***How has your past group experiences impacted the way you lead groups?*** | | | |
| | Life experiences | Experiences as teachers, other counseling experiences, and work and lived experiences influenced these participants in their group work. | |
| | Being a past group member | Half of the participants shared that their experiences as group members shaped their work as a group facilitator. Many expressed that lived experiences are naturally a component in group facilitation. Those experiences can enhance the processing of group interactions. | |
| | Becoming more trusting of group members. | Participants reported recognizing the power of allowing students to verbalizing and the power of silence. They learned to relax, be non-judgmental, and let the students take ownership of the group. | |
| | Moving from a structured approach to a more open and student focused approach to groups | Most participants expressed that their past group leader experiences moved them from a more structured approach (with lesson plans) to a more open approach with the students as the focus. Fear of losing control and uncertainty of the group process | |

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|---|---|---|---|
| | | drove the more structured approach However, because of the time element, a few saw more structured approaches as a means of 'getting more accomplished' and keeping the students focused. | |
| ***How has the experience of this interview been for you?*** | | | |

**Last question: After reviewing the themes that emerged, what insights did you gain that might influence how your approach to groups? Answer in box.**

| **Answer:** |
|---|