Group Counseling in Middle Schools: How Middle Level School Counselors Contribute to the Overall Development of Middle School Children

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Research on the implementation of group counseling in public schools has found some resistance from administrators and teachers. This article provides empirical support for the efficacy of group counseling in middle schools by middle school counselors.

Middle school counselors offer a myriad of services to middle school students (Baker, 1996; Schmidt, 1991), one of which is group counseling. Research has demonstrated that group counseling has important implications for the development of middle school students (Burke & Van de Streek, 1989; Campbell & Myrick, 1989; Gerler, Kinney, & Anderson, 1985; Keat, Metzgar, Raykovitz, & McDonald, 1985; Omizo & Omizo, 1988). However, a review of the literature on the implementation of group counseling in public schools has found resistance from school administrators and teachers (Bowman, 1987; Carroll, 1979; Cooper-Haber & Bowman, 1985; Lewis & Thomson, 1975; Mahler, 1975a). Reasons for this resistance include: (1) taking away instructional time from teachers, (2) lack of understanding the value of group work, (3) lack of financial resources for training, and (4) lack of clearly developed group counseling programs.

To address this resistance, middle school counselors must be able to articulate to administrators and teachers a sound

rationale for implementing group counseling in middle schools and offer evidence for how group counseling can contribute to the overall development of middle school students. Thus, the focus of this article will be to present to middle school administrators and teachers a rationale for the importance of group counseling in an effort to increase their awareness of how it contributes to the overall development of middle school students. In particular, this rationale will answer three basic questions: (1) what is group counseling in middle schools?, (2) why do it?, and (3) how can it be done?

What Is Group Counseling?

A review of group counseling literature demonstrates the existence of multiple definitions (Cohn & Osborne, 1992; Corey, 1995; Gazda, 1978; Lewis & Thomson, 1975; Mahler, 1975a; Osborne, 1982). From these definitions, several themes can be identified. Thus, group counseling can be defined as: (1) a dynamic and interpersonal process, (2) placing an emphasis on conscious thoughts and behaviors, (3) having a developmental focus, (4) primarily for individuals who are basically well-functioning, and (5) focusing on the individual's capacity to discover internal resources of strength.

Gazda (1978) differentiated between group processes of guidance, counseling, and therapy. He describes group guidance as an information-giving activity to assist students in making appropriate plans and life decisions, while group counseling is seen as growth engendering and oriented towards problem prevention and remediation. In contrast, Gazda considered group therapy to be primarily concerned with long-term treatment of severe emotional problems. This is not to suggest that group counseling is not therapeutic but that group counseling is for people who are basically well-functioning and do not have serious emotional problems (Hansen, Warner, & Smith, 1980).

School counselors are more likely to gain support from administrators and teachers if they delineate these differences as described by Gazda (1978). Administrators and teachers tend to conceptualize group counseling more along the lines of how Gazda describes group guidance. Counseling in general goes far beyond "guidance," and administrators and teachers need to have an operational definition of what group counseling is.

In particular, two operational definitions which further

support what group counseling is, and can provide middle school administrators and teachers with the necessary information they may need in order to understand the value of group counseling are from Osborne (1982) and Corey (1995).

Group counseling, according to Osborne (1982), can be thought of as a dynamic, interpersonal, and verbal process for normally functioning individuals. It involves a professionally trained counselor and a group of peers attempting to explore concerns and feelings to modify thinking related to self, others, and life. The aim of group counseling is to develop skills regarding decision making and developmental skills.

Similarly, group counseling, according to Corey (1995), can be thought of as both preventative and remedial, having a specific focus, and involving interpersonal processes. The focus is on conscious thoughts, feelings, and behavior, with content determined by the members. Members are well functioning persons with developmental concerns and/or temporary crises. The group is thought to create an atmosphere of trust conducive to exploring concerns.

Why do Group Counseling?

A review of the literature clearly demonstrates the need, significance, and efficacy of group counseling in schools, as well as its contribution to the overall development of the student (Berkovitz, 1975a; 1975b; 1987; Cohn & Osborne, 1992; Cooper-Haber & Bowman, 1985; Dinkmyer, 1969; Dyer, 1979; Larrabee & Terres, 1984; Lewis & Thomson, 1975; Mahler, 1975a; Natterson, 1975), in particular middle schools (Gumaer, 1993; Hagborg, 1993; Roland & Neitzschman, 1996). This literature can provide middle school administrators and teachers with a solid research base to strengthen their knowledge on how the availability of group counseling can contribute as one component to the overall development of middle school children.

Brigman and Early (1991) stated several reasons for making group counseling available in schools. The American School Counseling Association (as cited in Brigman and Early, 1991) considers group counseling a primary role of school counselors, and school counselors agreed when surveyed. Not only is group counseling more efficient than individual counseling, it is often more appropriate because students can develop supports for each other that are not possible in any other

setting. Group counseling also extends the reach of the middle school counselor by offering systematic counseling services for more students (Brigman & Early, 1991; Cantor, 1982; Carlson, 1987), as well as acting as a referral source and advertisement for individual counseling. Finally, the preventative nature of group counseling is stressed as a way of developing the life management skills necessary to handle concerns before they escalate into crises.

Specifically, group counseling with young adolescents has been shown to be effective in: (1) positively influencing school attitude and classroom behaviors of low-performing students (Campbell & Myrick, 1990), (2) motivating children to attend school (Keat et al., 1985), (3) positively changing self-perceptions of classroom behavior (Gerler et al., 1985), and (4) enhancing self-esteem and internal locus of control (Omizo & Omizo, 1988) and self-concept (Burke & Van de Streek, 1989) among children of divorce. In addition, such emotional concerns can interfere with the educational process of students (Berkovitz, 1975b), concerns that traditionally can not be addressed in cognitive-based classroom instruction (Dyer, 1979). Finally, group counseling in middle schools by middle school counselors is practical because of: (1) the availability to students, (2) the advantage of almost immediate access to behavioral data from administrators, teachers, and students, and (3) providing counseling services to students from families with marginal incomes who hesitate to go to a clinic, but may be willing to receive help when there is no question of financial obligation (Natterson, 1975). Therefore, there are many reasons why group counseling in middle schools should be supported by administrators and teachers as one integral component of the overall success and development of middle school students.

How can Group Counseling be Done?

The previous section of this article discussed the "why's?" of middle school group counseling, but middle school counselors need more than "why?," they must have a structured plan or program to present to administrators and teachers.

Using methods described by Cohn & Osborne (1992), Cooper-Haber & Bowman (1985), and Corey (1995), middle school administrators and teachers can gain knowledge of how their middle school counselors can develop a structured group counseling program. Combined, these three sources delineate

information related to increasing the knowledge of group counseling for administrators and teachers; presenting group counseling to students; selection of students; selection of group leaders; and characteristics of the stages of the group counseling process.

Overcoming Resistance

In order to overcome resistance to group counseling, Cooper-Haber & Bowman (1985) recommend assessing the school's available resources, including other possible group leaders, along with the school counselors, to assist in leading groups. They also suggest that school counselors might want to begin group counseling with skill-oriented topics such as improving study habits, getting along with grown-ups, conflict resolution, and career awareness.

After the successful implementation of these groups, school counselors might find it easier to implement more personally oriented topics which can impede the learning process of middle school children, such as family concerns, sexuality, and decision making. Secondly, they recommend enlisting support from the school staff through referrals, providing descriptions of groups and referral forms, and providing information about time and location.

Cohn & Osborne (1992) further suggest that an effective way to gain support is to present the goals, values, and process of group counseling to the staff. By answering their questions, middle school counselors can enlist support from areas of the school community. Moreover, support can be built by emphasizing the educational aspect of group counseling and demonstrating that the process is time-limited with specific procedures, techniques, and goals.

Assessing Needs and Determining Topics

With the support for group counseling secured, the middle school counselor can conduct a needs assessment with students by distributing a questionnaire to determine their interests and preferences for groups. After the results of the questionnaire have been tabulated, the school counselor can begin to specify which groups to address. Usually, groups can be divided into two broad categories: developmental/preventative and special concerns (Brigman & Early, 1991). Developmental/

preventative groups may include such topics as study skills, achievement, school success, problem solving, decision making, career exploration, and friendship. Special concerns groups may include grief and loss, divorce, suicide, alcohol and drug prevention, teen pregnancy, teen parenting, children of alcoholics, obesity, eating disorders, or any other topics suggested by students.

Selection of Group Members

Referrals for groups may come from a number of sources for a many reasons. Teachers may refer a student for behavior problems or low motivation. Administrators my refer students for truancy or a students' propensities for winding up in the principal's office. Students may even refer themselves. Or, it may be determined through the needs assessment that the middle school counselor believes the student could benefit from participation in an existing group. Because referrals can come from a variety of sources, pre-group screening of potential participants is necessary.

The type of screening done will depend on the type of group being conducted (Jacobs, Harvill, & Mason, 1994). For some groups, such as discussion and educational groups, screening may not be necessary. However, for groups where sensitive issues may be discussed, screening is necessary because not all groups are appropriate for all potential members and not all students are appropriate for group counseling.

Two types of screening available are the individual interview and the needs assessment. Although pre-group interviews may be time consuming, they are helpful for several reasons. The individual interview allows the middle school counselor to determine the appropriateness of a particular group for the student, to give information about the group, to gain commitment from the student, to identify students' goals, and to clarify expectations and answer questions (Brigman & Early, 1991).

For the middle school counselor who does not have the time nor the resources for an elaborate screening process, the needs assessment may serve as the selection tool. The previously distributed questionnaires concerning group counseling should contain a brief description, goals, expectations, and objectives for possible groups to be offered. When the data are tabulated, middle school counselors should collectively meet with all the

students that have expressed interest in a particular group. If there are more students than available spaces, the middle school counselor should assure students that several groups, on the same or similar topics, will be available at other points in the school year, or if need be, individual counseling is always available.

Lastly, Cohn & Osborne (1992) suggest that a final method for selecting group members is from student records with input from administrators and teachers. Students are then asked to attend an orientation where the middle school counselor presents the opportunity for students to volunteer for the groups.

Group Size, Duration, and Location

Since counselor-to-student ratios in middle schools are often very high, group size, group composition, the length, and the duration of the group must be considered. Cohn & Osborne (1992) recommend 7 to 9 students, in 45 to 50 minutes, with sessions lasting 12 to 15 weeks. However, group size, length, and duration should be based on the middle school counselor's perception of the individual needs of the group.

Cohn & Osborne (1992) further suggested that group sessions be staggered so that students do not miss valuable instruction in the same class every time, and that the physical arrangement of the room where group counseling is to take place is an important consideration. They suggested a room at least 12 feet by 12 feet in size, with hard-backed chairs arranged closely together in a circle so that group members remain focused and are discouraged from withdrawing from the group.

Group Process

Once the middle school counselor has accomplished all the preceding criteria, administrators and teachers can benefit from knowing how a typical group counseling process unfolds. This may include particular stages that the process passes through, characteristics of these stages, and perhaps some specific group counseling procedures and techniques that will be used during the group. Presented here are some of the more salient characteristics of the group counseling process that may help middle school administrators and teachers become familiar with what they can expect from their school counselors. Using Corey's (1995) four stages of group counseling, a brief description is offered.

Initial Stage-Orientation.

Key features of this first stage are: (1) developing a sense of trust within the group, and (2) learning the basic attitudes of respect, empathy, acceptance, caring, and responding. The middle school counselor's primary function in this stage is to help engender group trust by modeling the behaviors described above.

Transition Stage-Dealing with Resistance.

This stage is often characterized by feelings of anxiety and defenses in the form of various behaviors. Behaviors may include: (1) students wondering what other group members are thinking about them (i.e., acceptance/rejection), (2) students struggling with the risk of getting involved in the process, and (3) students observing the middle school counselor to determine if she or he is trustworthy. The middle school counselor's primary function in this stage is to intervene in the group in a sensitive manner, providing both encouragement and challenges necessary for the group members to face and resolve conflicts that exist within the group and their own resistances and defenses against anxiety.

Working Stage-Cohesion and Productivity.

The working stage features students bringing about desired behavioral changes through more in-depth exploration of significant concerns. If the group has successfully mastered this stage, students will: (1) have a high level of trust and cohesion, (2) interact with one another freely and directly, and (3) accept and consider, nondefensively and without judgement, feedback and confrontation. The middle school counselor's function at this time is to: (1) provide systematic reinforcement of desired group behaviors, (2) interpret the meaning of behavior patterns so that students gain a deeper level of self-exploration, and (3) focus on the importance of translating insight into action by encouraging students to practice new skills.

Consolidation and Termination Stage.

In this final stage, the students and middle school counselor work together in assisting students in transferring what

they have learned in the group to their outside environment by consolidating their learning, summarizing and pulling together loose ends, and integrating and interpreting the group experience.

Conclusion

In an educational environment where both middle school administrators and teachers are under considerable pressure and accountability to have students perform at the highest possible academic levels, group counseling for middle school students may not seem an immediate priority. The literature clearly supports the notion that middle school administrators and teachers are resistant to having students removed from important classroom instruction for the purposes of participating in group counseling services. However, there also exists literature that supports the efficacy of group counseling in middle schools as one component of increasing the overall individual, social, and academic development of middle school students. What we have attempted through this article is to: (1) increase the knowledge of both administrators and teachers of middle school students as to how the group counseling process can contribute to students' overall development, (2) provide empirical support for the efficacy of group counseling in middle schools, and (3) provide insight into one key component of the role and function of middle school counselors. Middle school counselors, as with school counselors at all levels, share with other middle school personnel a genuine interest in working together to increase the overall success of our middle school children.

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