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A Creative Strengths-Based Group Counseling Intervention for African American Boys

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this article is to provide an overview of a strengths-based group counseling intervention based on the *Achieving Success Everyday Group Model* which was implemented with African American third-grade boys who needed to attend summer school in order to transition successfully to fourth grade. The intervention resulted from the partnership between a counselor education faculty member and a small charter school's school-counseling supervisor in the northeast U.S. The group leaders' and participants' reported experiences indicating reinforced basic reading and writing skills among students. Finally, based on the feedback implications for training, practice, and research are provided.

KEYWORDS

African American males; school group counseling; social justice; strengths-based; creativity in school settings; creativity in counseling

Students in urban schools, particularly those who hold racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds and live within impoverished communities, must contend with any number of challenges within and outside of the school walls. Further, new evidence of inequities is emerging as a result of the health and social pandemic of 2020 (Yip, 2020). Many students are losing out from this pandemic, but African American children are slated to lose one-third of pre-pandemic reading gains and half of their math gains, furthering existing disparities in achievement caused by systemic racism (Yip, 2020). For instance, due to limited investment in African American communities and schools historically, African American children are more likely to attend schools with fewer economic resources, less technology, weak internet access, and outdated tools to support remote instruction (Reardon & Owens, 2014). These inadequate resources exacerbate the negative impact on schools attempting to make efforts to provide meaningful educational experiences during these trying times (Camera, 2020).

Although African American children can perform successfully within all types of schools, they thrive when school personnel are willing to adopt culturally sustaining and antiracist practices (Holcomb Mccoy, 2022) and promote creating an environment conducive to growth and development even within under-resourced schools (Ozer et al., 2010). Adapting social justice advocacy (Ratts et al., 2015) and relational cultural philosophy (Jordan, 2018) enables counselors to understand the challenges young people face as often being the result of outside pressures beyond their control. Functioning from such

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an authentic growth-empowering lens (Ticknor & Averett, 2017) is important to ensure that difficulties are not slated as deficits in the children, but rather a result of a history of oppressive educational and community environments (Ieva et al., 2021).

Bringing students together could increase motivation amongst them and their peers through scholastic peer pressure, common belief systems concerning achievement, behaviors and dispositions stimulating academic success within the classroom, discipline, and expectations from school staff, especially around teaching and learning. To address social-emotional and academic issues students may face, school counselors can use group counseling interventions (Steen et al., 2022). Despite the need for groupwork among African American boys (Hines et al., 2020), there is a gap in research exploring creative group interventions that are growth-fostering as well as strengths-oriented in their approaches. The use of creative interventions in a variety of settings and populations like groups (Molina et al., 2005), schools (Chibbaro & Camacho, 2011), and children (Verrilli & Keim, 2013) show an increase in growth and self-understanding, which may improve quality of life. Previously, creative interventions utilized with children have included videos (Verrilli & Keim, 2013), bibliotherapy (Lopez & Burt, 2013), and ArtBreak (Ziff et al., 2012). Additionally, because school counselors generally are overwhelmed with the existing demands, partnerships with counselor education programs in the local community may be advantageous to the school administration (Bryan & Henry, 2008). At the same time, such partnership may also benefit counselor-trainees in master's programs with the opportunity to gain diversity-competent, creative group work practice within a specialized population or setting (Prasath et al., 2021, 2022). Therefore, the purpose of the current practice-based paper is to provide a brief overview of the creative partnership between counselor education and school administration and an example of a creative, strengths-focused group counseling intervention and strategies for group leadership in working with African American boys in elementary school.

Creative partnership: counselor education and elementary school

This partnership embodies a spirit of collaboration. It is impossible to meet the vast needs of African American children in our communities without partnering with local champions serving these students. In this case, the partnership described includes a counselor education faculty member and a small charter school. This partnership started when a school counselor and alumni of the university reached out to the counselor education faculty to help them manage a large caseload, meet the demands of her school administrators and other stakeholders, and create a comprehensive developmental school counseling program from scratch. The counselor educator, an African American male with extensive group counseling experience, was sought out for assistance. This counselor education faculty member initially served in the capacity of a consultant for a few months. After spending time in the school, it was discovered group work with some boys the school deemed most at-risk was necessary. At the end of this year, the counseling faculty and the supervisor devised a plan whereby volunteers from the university master's program who were interested would help serve some of the boys who needed to take summer school in order to pass to the next grade level.

The school counseling supervisor at the school identified the students needing the most academic and socio-emotional support and provided detailed descriptions of the areas in

which the boys needed improvements. These identified boys needed to attend summer school to make up for the time they lost due to the issues they faced during the regular school year. On the other hand, the counselor education faculty member provided ongoing consultation, supervision, and pro-bono group counseling support with the help of counselor-trainees who were also taking a group counseling course during the summer session.

The team assembled by the counselor educator considered all the information provided by the school staff but developed a group counseling intervention viewing the third-grade African American boys' backgrounds as strengths and their challenges as a result of issues beyond their control. The core guiding principle behind all interventions was to enact student-centered and collaborative growth-fostering opportunities. The group intervention was designed to be flexible and creative during its development, implementation, and evaluation. For example, the preservice school counselors, during an early screening and preparation meeting, asked the boys to share things they liked or had an interest in and worked diligently to create an intervention applicable to these specific interests. Doing so helped to promote a collaborative nature which fostered the development of cohesion and allowed space for the boys to feel empowered and invested in the group. Therefore, the goals of this program were different from any other existing programs in the school because typically, school programs predominantly focus on promoting specific academic subject areas and are facilitated by certified teachers.

One manner in which this group counseling intervention embraced social justice and relational-cultural strengths-focused philosophy was by challenging the deficit-based notion that the problem behavior exhibited by the students considered at-risk was solely the result of their own individual personality flaws and, therefore, it is their responsibility to seek change (Prasath et al., 2021). We approach this with an understanding of students' marginalized experiences in school including, social location (e.g., race, class, & gender), educational access, curriculum programming, pedagogies, school culture, health policies, and out-of-school responsibilities all together contribute to the dysfunctional system around them (Chudgar & Luschei, 2009; Davies & Maldonado, 2009; Oakes, 2005). Therefore, when the emphasis is placed on positive aspects of student effort and achievement, their best enduring qualities, as well as their character and psychological strengths, there is inherent motivation to adapt, overcome, change, and succeed (Prasath et al., 2021). Thus, in such engagement with students' strengths there can be a paradigm shift in their perceptions, leading to a totally new construction of reality about one's selves (Vereen et al., 2020). Below we present the development of the group counseling intervention, participating students' and group leaders' characteristics, as well as the creative group interventions utilized with the third-grade elementary school African American boys.

Development of the group intervention

This partnership allowed the counselor education faculty member and the master's students to screen some of the elementary students identified for the intervention by the school. All students could benefit from new and innovative group counseling interventions; however, it would be important to discover specifically what would be useful in this particular case. As discovered during the screening session, the African American boys were interested in being engaged in fun activities not directly focused on their academics. The counselor education faculty helped the master's students to learn about the requisite skills to work

with the boys most in need of services regardless of their race, ethnicity, or gender as long as they were open to receiving and adjusting to the boy's feedback.

This intervention consisted of two pre-group meetings, four intervention sessions, and one post-group meeting. First, the counselor educator and the master's students met with the eight boys for approximately 40 minutes prior to the start of the actual intervention. The initial meeting was used to conduct a screening and preparation meeting. The team spent this time getting acquainted with the boys, discovering their level of interest in participating in this intervention, and finding out what activities or topics would help to make the time spent together more attractive. Please see Appendix A for the group interview form.

Once the information was gathered, the intervention was developed. Due to the summer school schedule, six group meetings were planned, with the first two sessions mainly focused on preparing boys for the group, helping them connect with each other, and collecting the boy's preliminary data. They completed a pre-assessment (see Appendix B), an adapted version of the Dweck Growth Mind-Set Survey (2007). This survey had three parts with approximately five questions in each section. The language was easily understandable and very brief. One part was entitled "Questions About Smartness." The other parts were called "Questions About Effort" and "Questions About School" respectively. Further, we provided the boys with an opt-out form. The charter school district supervisor-maintained responsibility to ensure the boys had permission to participate in this group intervention. The opt-out form was used in case any parent or family member objected to their child participating.

After these two pre-group meetings, one pair of co-leaders met with the third-grade boys each week for three weeks during their summer session and led them through the group intervention described below. In between each session, the counselor educator provided supervision with both pairs of co-leaders to discuss how the sessions were unfolding, areas needing improvements, challenges faced, and things going well. We decided since the co-leaders alternated it would be important for all of us to meet, to debrief each session in order to ensure there was some consistency and continuity.

After the master's students conducted the weekly sessions, a post-group meeting was conducted wherein the boys completed the Dweck Growth Mind-Set Survey post-assessments with the help of the group leaders to ensure they understood what was being asked. In order to evaluate important aspects of this group intervention, the authors used the Critical Incidents Questionnaire (CIQ; Kivlighan & Goldfine, 1991; please see appendix D). The specific purpose of using CIQ was to determine what stood out in the intervention to the participants. All the group leaders, counselor educator, and district supervisor were present to discuss their feedback and experiences in this group.

Participant characteristics

The young participants were all African American elementary school boys. While we did not intentionally choose this sample of boy participants, the charter school counseling supervisor made it clear, this group of eight boys was categorized among those who would be deemed as most at risk in their school. We also learned some negative stereotypes these boys would be associated with. For example, it was conveyed by the supervisor, the boy's teachers believed they were hyperactive; they were described as unable to sit still in their seats and attend to their teachers. According to their teachers, these boys did not care about

their schoolwork. Therefore, in total, there were eight African American boys in the third grade who were identified as needing this group intervention prior to transitioning to the fourth grade. Only five boys participated, as the other three boys failed to consistently show up for any number of reasons. The boy's ages ranged from 9–11 years old. Some of the issues expressed to the faculty member and the master's students concerning the boys during earlier discussions included social, emotional, and academic struggles. These young boys were described as needing motivation and strategies for fostering healthy friendships and other relationships. Other concerns for these boys leading to difficulties in their basic reading and writing skills included their low attendance rates, poor grades, and disciplinary referrals for disruptive behavior in the classroom.

Group leaders

Four master's students from the Group Counseling course volunteered to facilitate the group. All four students identified as female and international students. Their country of origin is as follows, two were from mainland China, one from Cameroon, and one from Korea). Although English was not their first language, they were all proficient in English. The groups were co-led by two of the students at a time, and they took turns leading the sessions based on their schedules. As mentioned, they received weekly supervision from the counselor educator.

Group intervention

The group intervention was based on the Achieving Success Everyday group counseling model (ASE Model; Steen, 2011). The ASE Model's specific emphasis in this project included a) fostering cohesion and setting goals, b) exploring their strengths and interests, and c) building on their resiliency helps to counteract the negative stereotypes hindering their success. We primarily used interactive activities to accomplish this.

Session-1: goal setting activity

The purpose of the first session was to foster cohesion among the boys and help them set short-term goals. There were three objectives for this session: a. To define short-term goals, b. To discuss strategies to help them achieve their goals, and c. To offer suggestions to other members to help them achieve their goals. The items needed for this session include one large-sized paper cut-out star for each group member (See Appendix C for an example), index cards, yarn, glue, and dark-colored pens/markers.

The group leaders initiated the first group session with a general discussion on short-term goals. This discussion included why goals are important and how they help in accomplishing one's hopes and dreams. Next, the group leaders passed out large-sized paper stars to each boy with their names on them. The star was large enough to write one personal or academic goal. The group leaders helped the boys write their goals on the star. The group leaders continued by discussing ideas necessary to accomplish one's goal. Following this discussion, the boys were given two index cards. These cards were cut in half and each of them used one half of the card to jot down one step to accomplish their goal. The boys generated a minimum of four steps to accomplish their goals. These steps

were arranged and glued as a ladder leading up to the star, notating their goal. Next, each boy read, with the help of the group leaders, their goal to other group members. The boys also shared the steps they saw as needed to accomplish their goals. Then, the group members gave feedback and encouragement to each other on what they had shared.

The group leaders concluded the session by exploring the content and processing information revealed during the session. Some questions posed included: Have you ever set goals before? What did you learn from your previous goals? Why is this current goal good for you? Where will you start? How will you reach your goal? When will you begin working on the goal? When will you know you achieved it? What obstacles might you encounter when you begin working on your goal? Who can help you? What will you do if your plan does not work? What did you learn today? What surprised you? Give a compliment to another group member. Do you have any questions for the group leaders?

Session-2: what is in the envelope

The purpose of session two was to explore the boy's strengths and interests. There were three objectives for this session: a. To identify one's strengths, b. To name one's interests as they relate to their strengths, and c. To give and receive feedback on their strengths. The items needed for this session were cards with words on them. Examples of words include book, candy, music, poetry, sour patch kids, rap music, etc. First, the group leader opened the discussion about what makes each of us unique. This discussion included identifying things we are good at and things we like about ourselves. Next, the group leaders allowed each boy to take a turn in picking a card out of the envelope with a word on it. The boys were asked to tell the group members how they liked the word or how it could be related to them. After each boy took turns sharing with the group, the counselors provided an opportunity for the boys to reflect on what they thought about others' strengths and interests. The boys were encouraged to share what they learned about each other when discussing the similarities and differences in their strengths and interests.

The group leaders brought closure to the session by helping the boys discuss how they related to their fellow group members. Counselors facilitated the discussion by making connections between the boy's strengths, interests, similarities, and differences. Some example questions included: Name something that you learned new about yourself. What did you learn about someone else? How did you feel about sharing things about yourself? Give an example of something that made you uncomfortable, if any. How can your strengths and interests help you reach your goal? Give a compliment to another group member. Do you have any questions for the group leaders?

Sessions 3: seed planting part-I

The purpose of session three was to help the boys understand resiliency. There were two objectives: a. To demonstrate conditions necessary for success, and b. To explore strategies to overcome barriers, including negative stereotypes in school. The items needed for this session were live seeds, soil, containers, bold markers, water, soda, and plastic bags.

First, the group leaders placed the materials in the center of the circle. Then the group leaders explained that the materials would be used for experimenting with plant growth and development. The group leaders asked the boys to pick two containers from the circle. Next,

the boys were instructed to fill each container halfway with soil. Then, the boys dampened one pot of soil with water and the other pot of soil with soda. Once the pots were prepared, a teaspoon of seed was added to each container. The group leaders helped the boys label the pots with either water or soda and both were placed where sunlight would appear. The group leaders helped the boys reflect on this activity, which will continue into the next session. Some questions posed by the group leaders included: What does the plant need in order to grow successfully? What are some of the things you need to be successful in school? What might be preventing you from being the best student you can be in the school? Give a compliment to another group member. Do you have any questions for the group leaders?

Session 4: seed planting part-II

The purpose of session four was to help the boys have a deeper understanding of resiliency. The objective of this session was: a. To define resiliency, and b. To identify their internal and external assets contributing to their resiliency. The group leaders briefly reviewed the activities from session three. Next, the group leaders and the boys compared the growth of the plants in the different pots. Then, each boy sorted out their container and explained in their own way how successful or not their plants were in developing. The group leaders then summarized details explaining how living things grow. For example, the process occurring in living things to grow well are favorable weather, moist soil, sunlight, limited stress, moderate temperature, care and concern, attention to the needs of the plant, adequate watering, etc. Next, the group leaders introduced the definition of resiliency in a simple and concise manner. As shared by the counselors, resiliency can mean growing successfully even when facing barriers. Then, the group leaders explored with the boys what this meant in their own words in the context of their school experiences. The group leaders helped the boys use the plant growth comparisons to illustrate barriers to overcome to grow successfully. Some of the specific questions were: What strengths do you have that you can use to overcome the barriers you may face in order to accomplish your goals in school? Identify a peer and an adult in school who can help you when you face difficulty. Describe one behavior you would do differently in class that might lead to a better outcome. Name a few adults in your life who can offer assistance and support in meeting any academic or emotional needs. Give a compliment to another group member. Do you have any questions for the group leaders? The session closed with the boys being informed the next time they met would be their final meeting to reflect on their overall experiences in the group.

Findings

The findings presented below include a mixture of information from both boys and group leaders. This sample of data suggests the intervention was successful for some of the young African American boys. One item from Dweck's Growth Mind-Set survey and the data collected from the CIQ highlighted aspects important to either the boy participant or the group leaders are presented. First, the young African American boys' belief in their ability to change their current level of smartness increased over the course of the program. For example, whereas all participant boys agreed with the statement "You have a certain amount of smartness and there's nothing you can do to change it" at the beginning of the program, three of the four disagreed with this statement at the end of the program.

Next, when reviewing the CIQ the most frequently mentioned therapeutic theme in both the participant and counselor questionnaires centered on interpersonal learning. One young African American boy wrote about the program “help[ing him] control his behavior,” while another wrote about how he learned from other boys to “never hit anyone or even get mad.” This young African American boy showed a higher level of self-awareness by receiving feedback on their own behavior from other members.

From the CIQ, the boy participants and counselors repeatedly cited two activities as being the most valuable part of the group intervention: goal setting and seed planting. As one counselor stated, in the process of setting their goals by themselves, the boys were also “able to learn from each other when talking about how to accomplish their goals . . . sometimes, the idea from one kid inspired the other kid to think further and talk deeper.” One boy participant said he “learned about how to achieve goals” and “this help [ed him] improve [his] school experience by turning in all [his] homework.” This “goal-setting” activity appeared to help the boys talk with each other and share what was important to them.

The “seed planting” activity also promoted a lot of discussion among the African American boys. One of the boys wrote they wish they could spend more time on the seed planting activity in order to see how much their plants grew. A group leader related a story about how one of the very shy boys first voluntarily spoke to her because he was so excited about one of his seeds sprouting. Another counselor wrote, “through the experience, children learn[ed] how to relate daily choices and behaviors to school-related outcomes in general.” For instance, a boy said, in order to be a straight “A” student I have to do all my homework, listen to the teachers’ directions, ask questions, complete classwork, and come to school on time. These are necessary for me to reach my goals. Another group leader shared it seemed as though an activity such as the seed planting one helps boys to feel comfortable in the group, positively engage with their peers and counselors, and possibly relate abstract ideas to examples they can understand with their own experience.

Discussion

In the present study, the pre-service school counselors offered a culturally sustaining group intervention aligned with the ASE Model. When formulating a creative, strengths-based intervention group with children, some of the information shared is important to consider when implementing group practices.

Firstly, the content and structure of the group intervention were solely planned only after gathering the information about the participating students’ needs. The information gathering occurred in a series of meetings with multiple stakeholders, including the school counseling supervisor, teachers, and students themselves. From the conversation, the goals and objectives of each group meeting were determined. As a matter of fact, the number of sessions, the format of each session, and the nature of the experiential activities also transpired after an in-depth evaluation of their characteristics, their needs, as well as their collective preferences.

Secondly, the central purpose of the group meetings was determined to explore their strengths and interests and to use them to build on their resiliency and achieve their goals. In the process of tailoring the group intervention specifically to the aforementioned group members, we aimed to keep such a strengths-based framework at the core of the design. The

intentional focus was to make use of every opportunity to encourage and in doing so also challenge and counteract every negative stereotype and systemic barrier that might be hindering their success. For instance, while it was important to consider the specific feedback from teachers who spent an entire year working with these boys, we wanted to be intentional about building on the positive attributes they did hold. The counselor educator explained to the master's students about these negative stereotypes, whether true or not, were not necessarily the young boy's fault or their sole responsibility to overcome. The faculty member suggested collaborating with these boys and helping them discover their strengths could provide more opportunities to mitigate systemic barriers. Therefore, considering each student is unique in their own right, and discovering what is culturally appropriate must not be taken lightly.

During the intervention, the group leadership strategies at times appeared very successful, and others were less effective. One strategy included drawing a quiet boy in by calling on him. Another strategy used is to request a peer to summarize what he may have heard another group member say. These techniques worked in one session but may not have worked as well the next week. Over time the group leaders noticed this paradox happening, and therefore, they became more flexible and open to variety and change. Contrarily, the young boys consistently responded favorably when they received encouragement from the group leaders. The group leaders noticed the boys repeatedly demonstrated a positive response when they received verbal affirmations. Due to the boy's social and academic challenges, the group leaders met them where they were and hoped they would not be offended or embarrassed by some of the interventions and/or lesson plans typically geared toward younger kids. For example, for the boys who could not read and write well, the group leaders were sensitive when helping them accomplish these activities. These basic reading and writing skills were modeled for the boys in order to add another layer of development and to motivate them to keep trying.

In the process of designing and implementing the group, the group leaders, counselor educator, and school administrator encountered a number of challenges. Firstly, other obstacles necessary to overcome before the intervention started included scheduling, transportation, curriculum development, and not knowing the demographics (such as the number of students, their grade level, etc.) of the participants. Secondly, it was also not clear if the master's students would be able to fit this extra work into their busy schedules. Addressing these challenges early in the planning allowed the faculty and master's students to concentrate on what was important. The faculty member helped them get ready for the unexpected. The faculty and master's students agreed to regularly check in with the school counseling supervisor at the charter school to solicit feedback at the beginning and throughout the intervention. Similar information was also solicited from the young boys and discussed amongst the faculty and group leaders. This information increased the chances of the intervention actively engage these young boys week after week. Finally, once the sessions were implemented, other challenges emerged. For example, sometimes there were misunderstandings among the group leaders regarding the terminology or how the boys would express themselves verbally. The faculty member explored with the group leaders the importance of listening without judgment while also balancing when it would be appropriate to clarify the boy's spoken grammar (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005).

Implications for collaborative practice

There are a few implications from this work tied directly to the partnership described in this article. First, the partnership developed between the counselor educator and the charter school administrator was instrumental in fostering a positive and supportive environment for these young African American males. The partnership offered mutually beneficial outcomes for both the elementary boys and the master's students. For example, while this intervention was sorely needed for more than just the boys participating, we focused on the needs of the boys who identified as having the most critical need. Moreover, the group leaders gained valuable experience facilitating these group sessions with young African American boys while taking the group counseling course over the summer. Therefore, the young African American males benefitted from new relationships while the training and preparation were enhanced for these pre-service counselors who served as the group leaders in this intervention.

Secondly, a by-product of this partnership included the master's students learning to view these young African American boys as having multiple strengths and assets. At the onset, it was discussed despite these students fitting a certain demographic; it was imperative we let them describe to us what their needs were. While aspects of their race, ethnicity, and culture were not explicitly disclosed by the young African American males in each of the sessions, the group leaders intentionally viewed their status as African American boys as an asset, and not a deficit. This created a strengths-oriented environment over the course of the intervention.

Finally, the creative interventions employed in the group interventions were tailored to the young African American boys and their expressed needs. In order to best serve the young African American boys, group leaders consulted with the community partners to ensure the program did not perpetuate further oppression. In continued partnership with members of the community, school leaders, and students, we were able to creatively focus on what is important and relevant for the young African American boys' experiences. This approach, while time-consuming, cultivates relationships where collective actions lead to trust, leading to cultural sustaining and affirmation experiences.

Limitation and future research recommendations

The supervision provided by the counselor educator generated ideas for future research. For example, there were only four sessions. With more time, we could cover more content with the students and focus longer on building a therapeutic alliance. While we spent time fostering a positive relationship and trying to incorporate and reinforce academic concepts, such as reading and writing, the summer session prohibited us from working with the students as long as necessary. Additionally, due to time constraints, we did not utilize an appropriate mechanism in order to evaluate the outcomes of the intervention. Future research efforts must include a more robust research design. Specific aspects of the ASE model cannot be clearly articulated or inferred by the impact on the student's academic and social-emotional development. At the time of this study, the ASE model was still under development.

Conclusion

This article illustrated a creative group counseling intervention used by a team of master's students to serve four African American boys attending a charter school in a low-income neighborhood. The article shares some of the group leaders' and boy participants' experiences. This group intervention brought together African American elementary boys and pre-service school counseling professionals in order to facilitate a dialogue about students and their personal and academic struggles and successes. While the findings are not focused on the evidence of this work, it is clear both the boys and the master's students benefited from these experiences. We believe creative and culturally sustaining groups can facilitate growth and development with our nation's most vulnerable youth.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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