

Reimagining Groups: A Phenomenological Investigation of Affinity Groups in Schools

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Abstract

This study provides insight into the role of affinity groups within educational environments focusing on the perspectives of school counseling practitioners who facilitate these groups. Affinity groups, designed to bring together students with shared identities or interests, serve as spaces for supportive dialogue, learning, and empowerment. The research study utilizes a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological approach to capture the subjective realities shaped by participants' unique intersecting identities and social contexts. Through in-depth narratives gathered from consenting school counseling practitioners, the study addresses key questions about the definition, operationalization, and implementation of affinity groups in educational settings. The analysis identifies six consistent themes: affinity groups at the Tier I level, evaluation, connection, agency, stigma, and safety. Participants' individual stories enrich the exploration of these themes, shedding light on the varied experiences within affinity spaces in educational environments.

Keywords

group counseling, school counseling, affinity groups, affinity groups in schools

Introduction

Affinity groups, generally defined as identity-based groups or brave spaces (Myers et al., 2019), have gained significant attention in educational and community settings in recent years. Affinity groups are intentionally designed with membership based on shared characteristics, interests, or a common goal (Blitz & Kohl, 2012). Originating in corporate spaces (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2022), the educational community is beginning to adapt this concept as educators and students strive for normalcy in postpandemic school culture. Many schools are dedicated to healing forward from the effects of COVID-19 and negative legislation in many states targeting LGBT+, Black and brown youth, and multilingual students. Critically conscious school counselors, those with a sociopolitical awareness and understanding of racialized paradigms (Burgess et al., 2021), are contributing to this healing by implementing strategic interventions, such as affinity groups, to support students while removing inequities and systemic barriers that exist in schools (Ieva et al., 2021). This article explores how affinity groups are being defined, described, operationalized, and implemented in K-12 settings based on school counselors' experiences facilitating these groups in schools. Further, we postulate the idea of utilizing affinity groups as a way to promote social justice while supporting students socially, emotionally, and academically.

Operationalizing Affinity Groups in Educational Spaces

Within educational environments, affinity groups bring together students who share common identities, experiences, or interests, providing a supportive space for dialogue, learning, and empowerment (Parsons & Ridley, 2012). Affinity groups outside of school settings often ground these types of groups in critical pedagogy (Anyon, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), and social identity theories (Annamma & Morrison, 2018), which emphasize the importance of recognizing and validating diverse identities. Whether in school or community settings, affinity groups provide opportunities for collective learning, identity exploration, and empowerment (Steen, Vandetta, & Ieva, 2022).

Essentially, affinity groups show promise because they hold the potential to offer a counter-narrative to traditional educational and community spaces by fostering inclusivity and addressing systemic inequities simultaneously. Steen (2009)

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found that affinity groups for Black youth in a school setting using group counseling and culturally relevant literature could promote positive identity development and reading comprehension by creating safe spaces where students could explore their identities, validate their experiences, and build a sense of belonging. The results highlighted that the students increased self-confidence, self-awareness, and interest in and understanding of their cultural backgrounds. Such empowerment is essential for marginalized individuals who often face societal discrimination, stereotypes, and legislation targeting their identities. In today's schools, all students could benefit from these safe spaces (Ieva et al., 2021). For some students, affinity groups could be places where they build connections and process painful moments that they may encounter in their schools, communities, or home environments (Parsons & Ridley, 2012).

The Potential Power of Affinity Groups

In this new dawn of disrupting systemic racism in educational settings, culturally affirming interventions, like affinity spaces, are needed more than ever. Mayes and Byrd (2022) provided an antiracist school counseling framework that outlines how to love and protect youth and includes creating safe places where all student identities can be honored and celebrated. Furthermore, several authors have suggested that small groups can promote antiracist practices and racial healing engagement in schools, while cautioning that a gap exists in skills and training in school-specific group counseling preparation (Beasley et al., 2023; Ieva et al., 2021).

Research that attends to affinity groups in school settings is sparse, but the emerging research is promising. Chun (2016) found that affinity groups fostered a sense of community and social support among participants. Through shared experiences and the validating of identities, students formed strong bonds, which enhanced their social/emotional well-being. Other research highlighted student participants' reports of increased trust, empathy, and a network of supportive relationships within the group (Bristol et al., 2020). Affinity groups also promote critical consciousness and cultural competence (Edirmanasinghe et al., 2022), leading to improved academic performance among marginalized students (Ginwright, 2018). Although these groups provide great potential to meet the growing needs of all students, how the groups are facilitated in school settings is less clear. Therefore, school counselor voices are critical to understanding this phenomenon. The current study builds on the previous body of quantitative evidence gathered in an initial study by this research team (Beasley et al., 2023) to provide additional important implications for practice, research, and training.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to follow up with consenting school counseling practitioners to gather in-depth narratives from those

who reported facilitating affinity groups in schools. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How are school counselors defining and operationalizing affinity groups in educational settings?
2. Are school counselors implementing affinity groups in educational settings?
3. If so, how do school counselors implement affinity groups in educational settings?

Method

Coming from a social-constructivist worldview, we believe that participants' realities are subjective to their lived experiences of their unique intersecting identities and social contexts; therefore, we used a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological methodology allows researchers to gain a thick, rich description of each individual participant's experience of a particular phenomenon (in this case, school counselors' implementation of affinity groups in educational settings; Hays & Wood, 2011). This type of descriptive research uses an ontological approach acknowledging multiple versions of reality with a relatively small sample. In our study process, we implemented four steps of phenomenological research design as defined by Moustakas (1994): (a) epoche, which involves a self-reflective setting aside of prejudices, biases, and preconceptions to open the mind to the essence of the participants' experiences; (b) transcendental-phenomenological reduction, a "prereflective description of things just as they appear and a reduction to what is horizontal and thematic" (p. 91); (c) imaginative variation, which involves describing the essential structures of a phenomenon by seeking possible meanings through imagination, different frames of reference, and multiple perspectives; and (d) synthesis of meanings and essences, an "integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essence of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole" (p. 100). With a small sample size, we conducted semistructured interviews to gather the detailed essence of participant experiences before identifying emergent themes and further identifying superordinate and subordinate themes (Larkin & Thompson, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

We approached this study using intersectionality theory (Bowleg, 2008; 2012) based on Crenshaw's scholarship (Crenshaw, 1989) as a valuable framework that creates "social commentary of lived experiences for critical analysis, addressing hegemonic power relations in social structures and norms" (Chan & Erby, 2018, p. 1256). Intersectionality theory focuses on social inequalities that are perpetuated by institutions (such as public schools) and how these social inequalities impact individual identities (namely, students). Inherent in this theory is the idea that change is possible if these inequalities are

addressed at the institutional level (Carbado et al., 2013). Given that the present study expounded upon findings from a previous study exploring the implementation of small groups in educational settings through the lens of power, privilege, and intersectionality (Beasley et al., 2023; Ieva et al., 2022), we believe this framework best suits the current study in how it informs the collection and interpretation of data.

Participants and Procedure

Sample sizes for phenomenological qualitative research studies range from 2 to 15 participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). The sample for this study comprised four full-time, practicing school counselors. Inclusion criteria included: (a) currently practicing school counselor, (b) a master's degree in school counseling or equivalent, and (c) practicing in the United States. The participants represented all educational levels and had experience practicing in elementary, middle, and high schools. All four of the participants identified as women, with experience ranging from 1 year to more than 25 years. Three of the participants identified as White, non-Hispanic, and one as Black/African American. Each of the participants is currently practicing in a public school.

We were very purposeful in recruiting a small but widely representative sample of school counselors. We employed convenience sampling strategies, mainly recruiting from the social media platforms of professional school counseling organizations, state organizations, and interest groups. Geographically, the sample was well distributed with representation from Georgia, New Jersey, California, and Illinois. Participants were guaranteed a \$50 Amazon gift card after completing the virtual interview. Each participant provided up to three date/time preferences so that at least two members of the research team could participate in each interview.

Data Collection

Permission was granted from one university's institutional review board before data collection. Each semistructured interview was conducted by at least two research team members. The interviews ranged in duration from 35 minutes to 60 minutes. After gaining the participant's verbal permission, the virtual interviews were recorded using a HIPAA-compliant Zoom account, securely stored, and only available to the research team members. Interviews were then electronically transcribed by Zoom. Transcription was verified by the research team and personally identifying information was removed from the transcript prior to data analysis.

Interview questions were developed based on related literature, the study's research questions, and findings from the previous study conducted by the research team (Beasley et al., 2023). During the interviews, we asked participants 19 semistructured, open-ended questions. Four of the questions were descriptive in nature, eight were process oriented, and seven of the questions explored the content of participants' affinity group

experiences. Based on each participant's answers, we asked corresponding probing questions. Using a semistructured interview protocol is common in phenomenological studies in the counseling field (Brumfield & Christensen, 2011). In the interviews, remaining flexible and engaging in relevant probes is important to gain clarity and gather a rich description of the participants' narratives (Hays & Singh, 2011).

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

In this study, we established trustworthiness by means of researcher triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hays & Singh, 2011). Triangulation entailed having more than one researcher investigate the accuracy and confirmability of the analysis. In this case, all three researchers worked together for several months to accomplish triangulation.

To initiate the data analysis process, the three members of the research team engaged in three rounds of individual review of each data source: (a) initial reading of transcribed interviews with notations while simultaneously listening to the audio recording; (b) second reading to develop the open coding process; and (c) third reading to organize patterns with a coding process. During the data analysis process, the research team met together several times as a group after coding the first round of interviews to discuss potential pattern codes and to begin linking initial themes. The research team then met again after coding the second round of interviews to finalize pattern codes that would culminate in the superordinate themes.

Reflexivity

The research team is part of a research collaborative and has been meeting weekly for the past 4 years. As a group, we have discussed and explored our own identities, power, privilege, and influence on our families and the communities in which we live and work. These transparent conversations about critical issues of equity and social justice have influenced our research and scholarly pursuits, with the common goal of developing, promoting, and studying culturally affirming, equitable, and inclusive spaces for all students in schools.

The first author is an assistant professor of counselor education and supervision at a university in the state of Georgia. As a White, cisgender, heterosexual female, she continues to explore, examine, and critique her own intersections of identity and how she influences her community and the preservice counselors she teaches. Prior to entering higher education, she served as an elementary school counselor for 6 years. As a school counselor, she specialized in implementing small-group counseling in educational settings. Now, as a professor and researcher, she continues to do extensive research and training surrounding culturally affirming schools, educator social/emotional learning, and group counseling in schools.

The second author identifies as a cisgender female, LGBTQ+, mother of two neurodiverse children, educator (pre-K–12 and higher education), and counselor, who is White and

on a constant journey of reconciling and utilizing privilege. Her passion for counseling and developmental education comes from group exploration during her 24 years in education as a teacher, school counselor, and academic. As a full professor, she currently teaches group counseling to school counselors, higher education professionals, and school psychologists and co-authored a group textbook with the third author on culturally sustaining group counseling.

The third author is a full professor within a counselor education program and is a certified pre-K–12 school counselor who formerly practiced at the elementary level for 6 years and the high school level for approximately 4 years. Much of his school counseling programming and interventions focused mainly on classroom lessons and small groups in elementary school and small groups in high school. These group programs and interventions aimed specifically to help students from minoritized backgrounds be successful in the classroom and feel connected in school settings. Currently, he teaches group counseling to preservice school counselors and clinical mental health students and continues to examine his own race (Black) and gender (male) and the impact these intersections of identity have on the training and implementation of groups in school settings with children and adolescents.

Research Findings

The premise of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of school counselors' experiences when describing affinity groups, and if and how they implement these groups. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How are school counselors defining and operationalizing affinity groups in educational settings?
2. Are school counselors implementing affinity groups in educational settings?
3. If so, how do school counselors implement affinity groups in educational settings?

We used semistructured individual interviews, which provided an environment for participants to share about their experiences concerning affinity groups in school settings. The participants were also afforded opportunities to talk about the possibilities that affinity groups could offer in supporting students in school settings. Our coding initially resulted in a number of codes from which to dialogue and expand in gaining a collective understanding from analyzing both the Zoom audio recordings and written transcripts. To gain more salient themes, we needed to collapse this body of codes as a form of second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2014). After this coding cycle, we met and discussed individual codes and associated notes until six consistent themes emerged: affinity groups at the Tier 1 level, evaluation, connection, agency, stigma, and safety. The sections below explore these themes with quotations that provide participant experiences to aid in illuminating the themes. Table 1 presents a culmination of

data gleaned from the participants that allows a comparison between traditional groups offered in school settings and a new understanding that was generated and envisioned from this research. This table is presented following the first theme because it provides examples of how the research found in this study is transformational.

Theme 1: Affinity Groups Can Occur at the Tier 1 Level

In analyzing each participant's narrative, researchers quickly noted the importance of epoche as we interpreted and coded the data. As counselor educators who all teach group counseling courses and have significant experience practicing in school settings, we had to set aside our own lenses of what group counseling looks like in schools and how school counselors are trained to implement groups. Table 1 illustrates the differences between traditional group training at the graduate level and how our participants described implementing affinity groups in schools.

Group counseling courses in higher education typically introduce groups as a very structured and methodological mode of delivering psychoeducation to students in school settings. In this study, school counselor participants spoke about implementing these structured groups in the traditional sense of Tier 2 of multitiered systems of support (MTSS), a framework that provides increasing support for students with varying needs. However, our participants defined their affinity work in a completely separate way from the traditional Tier 2 groups. For instance, Participant 1 described the difference in her traditional small groups versus her affinity work:

I have groups for Tier 1 where anyone's welcome. And it's kind of more of a lunch time scene. Then my Tier 2 [group] is when I really work with teachers on who would be a good fit, or some parent requests, or just through data with our surveys that we do to see who we really need to talk to and group together to put some interventions in place. My Tier 1 [group] is open for everybody, and I sometimes don't even care about parent permission, because they're coming at lunch, and they can just come, join, and, you know, be seen with whoever. My Tier 2 [group] is when I'm pulling them from class targeting because of a certain issue that's happening.

Participants described their Tier 2 groups as meeting once per week during the school day. The affinity groups were much less structured and did not occur during instructional class time. Participant 3 described the meetings as being unstructured and informal:

Depends on the club, depends on the season, so I would say the Fishing Club doesn't meet much in the winter, but they're meeting at least once or twice a week in the spring. We have our GSA [Gay Straight Alliance] meets I want to say, almost once a week. It depends on the club, depends on the season. It depends on what they're preparing for.

Table 1. Redefining Groups: Training vs. Practice.

Group characteristics, planning and implementation	Traditional group preparation and graduate training	Groups in school settings/practice
MTSS Tier	Tier 2	Tier 1
Primary goal(s)	Intervention/prevention	Connection/universality/interpersonal learning
Number of students	10 or less	Any number
Number of sessions	Typically 6–8	From one session to entire school year
Curriculum	Best practice, evidence-based, structured	Flexible, varied, based on student/staff input
Facilitator	Counselor(s)	Counselor(s), staff, or students
Student recruitment/selection	Staff, parents, data identified	Students self-select, peer referrals
Leadership skills and facilitation	Highly structured, conservative, predictable	Creative, inclusive, unpredictable
Evaluation	Formal: pre-test, post-test, tied to outcome measure(s)	Informal: Student feedback, exit tickets, N/A
Parent permission	Yes	Varied
Topics	Based on student needs, skill deficits, etc. Examples include grief, anxiety, and social skills	Based on personal identity. Examples include LGBTQ or racial pride foci, various hobbies, students' interests
Frequency	Typically once per week	Bi-weekly, weekly, monthly, quarterly
Type	Closed	Open
When	During instructional time	Before school, during lunch, after school
Title	Group counseling	Clubs, sessions, named after the topics for discussion (e.g., Fishing Club)

Throughout all of the participant narratives, the separation of affinity groups from traditional group counseling was a salient theme. The differences in how participants implemented these two different types of groups were innumerable, from how many students participated, how often groups were held, when groups were held, group topics, student selection process, and even the goal of each group. We discuss some of these distinctions as additional themes in this section.

Theme 2: Evaluation—A Flexible Endeavor

When analyzing the school counselor participant responses, we noted that they discussed evaluation very ambiguously. Initially, school counselors mentioned that they did not use evaluation for their affinity spaces, but upon further probing, they described evaluating but not in a formal manner. Participants spoke about asking students for feedback forms, having exit tickets, and having reflective discussion. These qualitative modes of inquiry are evaluative in nature, but do not fall under evaluation in the traditional sense of giving pre- and post-tests or measuring differences in proximal outcome data. The school counselors justified this informal mode of evaluation because these groups were attended voluntarily by students who self-selected or were recruited by peers; most of the study participants stated that the main goal was not to evaluate these programs but to hold spaces where students could feel connected.

To illustrate the ambiguity and inconsistency in evaluation of groups, Participant 1 expressed belief that they were facilitating affinity groups at Tier 1 and Tier 2 levels. However, they stated:

I only evaluate Tier 2 groups. I have pre- and post- data for only my Tier 2 targeted groups; all my Tier 1 stuff, that's a drop in and come as you are whenever they want. I have no evaluations at all for Tier 1. We just talk.

Participant 2 explained that how they evaluated groups was informal. For instance:

They were more informal. But what we did try to do, because our school principal was always one who wanted us to provide feedback, and to justify them being out of class for a specific amount of time, we always wanted to be able to provide the feedback, based on saying that this is how the student or the students benefited from the group. And so we did simple survey questions. Most of them were open ended, like, "Would you come back again?"

This participant further explained that they did ask questions such as:

"If you attended a group again, what is it that you would like to see differently?" So that you know we can work on our own self-evaluation to make sure the next time that we run the group we would be including them as a part of that process.

In contrast, Participant 4 stated: "What I do is I do a pre- and post-test. I know kind of what my goals are in the groups that I want to run with students." In addition to the pre/post-testing, this participant reported using observation to determine any positive impact on students' behavior:

I used, you know, the actual like the pre- and the post-[test]. But then for some students I use observation. I did one group with the students with social skills. So then I would observe their social skills

and try to also put that, in my evaluation, also I would observe in the classroom. Sometimes I would be out on the playground doing it with them at recess. Sometimes I would be in the lunchroom observing them.

Theme 3: Connection—The Goal of Affinity Groups

Throughout the data review process, the most notable word ($n = 37$) was *connection*, used by all participants and researchers while summarizing participants' responses for clarification. When discussing the ways in which groups are formed, all participants indicated that the purpose of utilizing affinity groups was for connection. Although connection is an intended result of group process, connection as the goal is a departure from the traditional ways of utilizing group counseling in schools as an intervention that teaches skills and promotes *universality* (Yalom & Crouch, 1990). Universality is defined in the literature as a therapeutic factor through which group members realize that others share similar thoughts, feelings, and issues. Participant 1 stated: "I really think my goal for these groups is connection. So it doesn't matter what the activity is, as long as they're connected it works for me." Participant 2 echoed similar thoughts: "I think groups are a great way for kids to connect with each other." Participants mentioned that when they form their groups, their decision-making process is based on connection. However, some participants noted that in some cases, students self-select to attend the groups and in other cases school personnel and parents identify and refer students to the school counselor.

Connection was also discussed as more than just an interpersonal connection, but also as a conduit to resources. When thinking specifically about a specific LGBTQ+ group, Participant 3 described: "Rainbow Club is all about developing trust and connection, and potentially other supports and role models." Participants also mentioned connection as a way to get students to feel comfortable, be vulnerable, and take risks.

Theme 4: Agency—Affinity Groups as a Mechanism to Promote School Counselor and Student Agency

Agency is defined as the sense of control that one feels and the capacity to influence one's own thoughts and behavior, have faith in one's ability to handle a wide range of tasks and situations, and to be flexible in the face of conflict or change. This theme is used to describe both the school counselors' agency and student agency. When participants were asked about resistance or conflict in running affinity groups, half replied that they do not ask for permission and do not feel that they would encounter pushback from administrators and the community. The other half stated that they avoided asking in case of resistance.

A goal of school counseling programming is to empower student agency. One way participants discussed this was through allowing students the opportunity to self-select to these groups, rather than the school counselors inviting them to join specific groups. Students' self-selection, in addition to

amplifying student voices, promotes student agency. An example of this is from Participant 2, who described an outcome of one of their groups:

Our Rainbow Club was a really good experience. Last year, when we raised all that money through the bake sale, we were able to give the money to our librarian, who was unable to buy books. A list of books for age-appropriate LGBTQ stories and things like that. So that's all available in the library now, which I feel like made those students feel heard, and I thought that was really neat. So that was a good, that was really fun. And now some of them are in middle school. and they've like taken off with the Rainbow Club in Middle School, and it's even more popular, and so you know it's I'm proud of them.

Theme 5: Stigma—Removing the "Group Counseling" Stigma to Increase Participation

Another notable theme gathered from the participant narratives was the inclination to call affinity work something other than "group counseling." Although we did not directly ask about stigma or student's interest in participating in groups, each of the participants referred to the stigma associated with counseling and mental health. Some of our participants called their groups "clubs" or "sessions." The study participants justified this nominal change as a way to avoid the stigma they see around students seeking mental health services. Participant 3 candidly said, "It's a lot easier to get a kid to come to a 'club' than a 'grief group.'" One participant even noted the motivation of students to attend a "club" meeting versus a "group session." For example: "Sometimes with the groups, they aren't feeling it. And that's ok. But they always want to go to their clubs on Friday." Upon further analysis, we identified two ways the stigma manifested.

First, stigma existed within the community. Participant 2 recalled her own experience:

I'll tell you from my experience, especially because a lot of my experience is in an inner-city urban school district. So, it's certainly difficult, because of the stigma that's associated with mental health issues in the African American community, to get people engaged in a group that would technically be considered for someone who has depression, anxiety. So again, we try to limit that and make our groups almost per basis, so that everybody could benefit from them. So we did stuff like coping strategies and social skills, and maybe stress management, to help facilitate some of that type of process.

Calling affinity groups "sessions" helped mitigate the stigma from the community by normalizing these skills for all people, not just those with mental health challenges.

The second form of stigma came from a negative view of self. When students are selected to be in groups, they may fear what their peers think of them. This may cause students to not

come to group or have a negative view of self because they have been selected for one. Participant 2 chooses not to use the term “group” explaining that:

I don't think that you should necessarily call a group an “anxiety group.” I do think that you should maybe focus on some type of coping strategies or something, so that you can help to ease a person's anxiety, and you can maybe even discuss or talk about ways anxiety can prevent one from using effective coping skills. But I think sometimes, especially for people who are not familiar with mental health, and because of the stigma that's associated, when you use that as an anxiety group, if it automatically can deter people from expressing an interest in the group, even if they know they could probably benefit from the group.

Along these same lines, Participant 3 described the stigma that some students feel when they are attending a group:

Groups are usually done during the school day, which means we're missing lunch or we're missing a class, that's an issue for some students. It's the “Oh, my God! I don't want to get up and have everybody wonder where I'm going” issue.

Participants seemed to believe that calling affinity groups “sessions” or “clubs” tended to mitigate the stigma of being a member of a group and normalize student attendance in group spaces.

Theme 6: Safety—Sociopolitical Context as a Driving Force for Affinity Topics

In their responses, the school counselors described how to maintain personal, professional, or emotional safety for themselves or for the sake of their students. Responses from all the participants included descriptions of avoiding or hesitating in developing and facilitating certain affinity groups, including those focused on race, gender, and/or sexuality, because these could fuel conflict within communities. To illustrate, Participant 1 mentioned that the community was very queer affirming and therefore they facilitated groups that centered the LGBTQ+ community, and this was welcomed. On the other hand, this participant described how difficult it would be to run a race-based group, but did share that they ran a group for students who may identify as first-generation college students.

To further demonstrate the theme of safety, Participant 2 shared related remarks, even though the racial demographics of their school were largely African American and within an urban area, whereas Participant 1 was located in a largely suburban community and the majority of the students were White. In both cases, the school counselors worked in ways that strived to, as Participant 2 stated, “keep it light and not have to worry about the pushback.” Participant 2 shared that they could offer a group on postsecondary options that consisted mainly of African American and Hispanic students because the

demographics in the school warranted this. Further, Participant 2 noted that they would have a police officer as a guest speaker but that this person was also a member of the community:

The area that the school is in, and because it's a high crime area, we felt that there was a need for that; we've had a police officer come in before, who grew up in the neighborhood, who went to the same school who was able to witness some of the same experiences, but because of a family background, you know, had a different type of career. This person shared things that you should not do when you encounter the police. He was a good example because he has a successful police career, and is able to better relate with them. So we've done things like that as well, like providing life skills like these kinds of survival skills in some ways.

Several participants described how the labeling of the groups could also be useful in creating an environment that is welcoming and informative. For example, Participant 2 explained:

So what we like, for example, just even in our advertising, you know, we would say things like, “Are you interested in sharing ways to help other students function on an everyday basis? If you are part of this group, these are the things that we'd like to help support you with.”

Put another way, they stated: “I don't think that you should necessarily call a group, say, an ‘anxiety’ group. ...This [appropriate] labeling can help protect students, I think, and protect them from what others might say outside of the group.”

To get a sense of how to create a safe environment for students in sessions, we asked participants how they respond to conflict within sessions. Participant 1 described a direct approach:

I try to stop the accusations and the fighting pretty quickly, and I say to everybody, “Let's talk about this,” and I usually use I statements and make them feel like they are able to talk about what the situation is making them feel, and things like that.

Discussion

In this study, we set out to gather insights from both seasoned and novice school counselors regarding how they operationalize affinity groups in schools, whether or not they were implementing affinity groups in educational settings, and, if so, how they implemented these groups in said settings. When drawing upon the literature, prior unpublished studies we have conducted, and our collective expertise, our assumptions were that this study would provide answers to the research questions listed earlier and other insights that may have yet to be considered. Although the findings in this study are illuminating, other questions have emerged, such as: “Should these groups be referred to as ‘affinity groups?’”, “Are MTSS tiers the best way to categorize group work in schools?”, and “In what ways did our own identities shape interviewee responses?” We next

discuss the six themes that our qualitative investigation yielded in the current study, which provide implications for preparing school counselors to implement groups in ways that are accessible and build on the strengths of the school and community members.

One question used in the protocol to solicit data was how school counselors defined affinity groups. The manner in which affinity groups were defined varied for each participant and we found no consensus in the definition. School counselor participants did not have a clear definition of affinity groups in schools, but their interviews yielded a plethora of information that allowed us to better operationalize what affinity groups look like in schools and how these spaces differ from traditional group counseling. Table 1 demonstrates that affinity groups are unlike traditional groups in a variety of ways. For example, in traditional groups, the school counselor is expected to be the facilitator and groups run for 6–8 weeks with approximately 10 members. Affinity spaces can be facilitated by anyone—staff or student—are ongoing, and have no limit on participation.

This lack of clarity on the definition offered opportunities to imagine possibilities. For instance, educational researchers have described a comprehensive list of strategies counselors and other educators could pursue within their schools (Parsons & Ridley, 2012). This list includes:

- (a) conduct a racial climate assessment to obtain useful data about students' school experiences; (b) facilitate positive identity exploration, self-awareness, pride, and self-esteem through books, games, discussion, and structured play activities that connect students to each other; (c) provide students with the opportunity to discuss topics of race, identity, and diversity in a safe space that will enable students to develop their voice; (c) encourage and develop leadership skills; (d) develop accurate language and vocabulary to describe themselves and others; and (e) increase the school's ability to recruit and retain families and teachers of color. (Parsons & Ridley, 2012, p. 1)

In our study, the participants explained repeatedly that the groups in general and those relatively acknowledged as affinity groups provide a regular, positive, connected, and welcoming environment for students who may be but are not necessarily marginalized or isolated at school. Others researchers have found, using an ethnographic case study, that a racial affinity group affected participants by becoming a place for learning and healing by collectively cultivating a critical, humanizing, and healing space while navigating various positions within socially toxic education institutions and organizations (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). That case study gave an example of the benefits to the school personnel. The participants in the current study support this prior study by discussing how and why critical affinity spaces for schools are necessary to fuel healthy supportive and connected relationships that could increase the chances for personal, relational, and educational growth.

Further, the suggestions of participants in the current study, as noted in Table 1, underscore a disconnect with the research in

group literature around affinity groups in practice (Beasley et al., 2023). At this point, the research findings provide more aspects to consider. Accordingly, affinity groups could be part of the solution even if the school counselors did not always tackle controversial issues directly. It would be helpful for school counselors to know how to explain to others the work they are doing and to develop strategies to address difficult topics despite the current sociopolitical climate. Groups are powerful and implementing variations of affinity groups can offer students an opportunity to learn from one another and grow.

As noted in an earlier study (Ieva et al., 2022), what is being taught in school counseling preparation programs does not align with what is actually occurring in school settings. Adding to the confusion is that, after probing, participants in the current study changed their answers about certain terminology used to identify concepts like affinity groups, evaluation, evidence-based curriculum, or the skills they are using. In reflecting on the question, "In what ways did our own (the researchers) identities shape interviewee responses?", we suspect that the school counselors are confident in how they function in a school setting, but the manner in which they describe their efforts does not connect to what they may have learned in graduate school. We assume they may have been hesitant to share this because of our positions of power and influence within academia and/or our racial and gender identities. However, preparation programs are not the only sources responsible for this disconnect. Flagship professional organizations associated with school and mental health counseling teaching, research, and service (e.g., Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, American Counseling Association, American School Counselor Association) need to catch up to what school counselors are actually doing in practice (Ieva et al., 2021).

Implications

Several implications emerge from this study. First, when it comes to group counseling practice, school counselors' comfort level makes a difference in whether or not they actively facilitate small groups (Steen et al., 2021; Steen et al., 2022). Every participant in the current study described how they avoided the subject of race and, when they did address it, did so indirectly to avoid conflict. Even the Black school counselor participant who worked in a predominantly African American neighborhood explained that acknowledging and addressing racial tensions directly would be controversial. School counselors with more support may feel more comfortable engaging in this work, but to gain this support, counselor education researchers, practitioners, administrators, and policymakers need to work together to create school communities that foster positive identities. The challenge is for group facilitators to create an environment that allows for multiple perspectives and fosters dialogue among diverse identities within the current sociopolitical climate of the educational system.

Second, much room exists to expand group counseling definitions in school settings and within school counseling research and practice. Hence, we must (re)define affinity groups in schools. To reiterate, the school counselors described how affinity groups fall into both Tier 1 and Tier 2 spaces. Participants alluded to Tier 2 small groups being too restrictive. Probing and spontaneous dialogue between the researchers and participants suggested that “affinity,” which in many ways is synonymous with “universality,” is not the only way to define this work. In both Tier 1 and Tier 2 affinity groups, facilitators must consider intersectionality when planning, implementing, and evaluating groups, recognizing that students may hold multiple identities. Scholars and practitioners must avoid assuming homogeneity within an identity group, because this potentially reinforces stereotypes and limits individual agency.

Third, school counselors hold personal and professional agency when facilitating affinity groups and would do well to embody cultural humility and to employ culturally sustaining practices. Facilitators should be aware of power dynamics and ensure that all voices are heard and respected. Creating a safe and inclusive environment is an iterative process that requires facilitators to engage in constant self-reflection of their own racial identity development, both outside of sessions and while actively listening to participants in sessions. Through this process and using inclusive language, facilitators can validate student experiences rather than dismiss them. By adopting intersectional approaches and culturally affirming facilitation practices, affinity groups can create transformative spaces that empower individuals and foster inclusive learning environments.

Conclusion

Affinity groups in education and community spaces have shown great potential in promoting identity development, empowerment, community building, and educational achievement. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate whether school counselors are implementing affinity spaces in schools, and if so, how are they going about creating these spaces in educational settings. The results indicated that school counselors are implementing affinity spaces, but not in the traditional sense that small-group counseling is taught by counselor education programs. The differences in traditional group training and the implementation of affinity groups in practice are vast, yet equally valid and important when delivering interventions to meet the needs of all students. Participants in this study believe that the most important need for all students is to feel connected and engaged in their school community. Therefore, researchers, educators, and policymakers must find new ways to answer the ongoing call from facilitators to support their own interpersonal development and systemic change efforts to cultivate inclusive excellence within group spaces conducted in school settings.

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