

# **ATTENDING to BASIC NEEDS: IMPLEMENTING REALITY THERAPY IN SCHOOL COUNSELING PROGRAMS to ENHANCE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT and CAREER DECISION-MAKING SKILLS**

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## **Abstract**

The primary purpose of this manuscript is to examine the potential impact the implementation of reality therapy in school counseling programs can have on enhancing academic achievement and career decision-making skills. The status of academic achievement for P-12 students in the U.S. will be reviewed in terms of pertinent literature. This will be followed by a review of reality therapy, the core tenets of the American School Counselor Association's National Model, and the significance of academic achievement and career decision-making skills. Lastly, implications for training school personnel and suggestions for additional research are explored.

*Keywords:* basic needs, reality therapy, ASCA National Model, academic achievement, career decision-making skills

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The status of the academic achievement gap for students in P-12 schools has been a major concern in education for some time (Achievement Gap, 2017). The achievement gap in education refers to the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. The achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized test scores, course selections, dropout rates, high school graduation rates, and college completion rates, among other success measures. It is most often used to describe the performance gaps between African American and Hispanic students, at the lower end of the performance scale, and their non-Hispanic white classmates, and the similar academic disparity between students from low-income families and those who are from higher income families (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011).

In principle, the public has been behind closing the achievement gap. Trend data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that attempts to eliminate the gap have been numerous (Achievement Gap, 2017). These efforts have included reducing class sizes, creating smaller schools, expanding early-childhood programs, raising academic standards, improving the quality of teachers, and encouraging minority students to take higher level courses (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011).

The gap seems to have narrowed somewhat in recent years; however, there continues to be large disparities between African American and white students and between Hispanic and white students in the U.S. (Achievement Gap, 2017). Therefore, the problem that our public education system has not adequately responded to continues to negatively impact academic performance for minority students. With every passing year, the damage continues to mount. This is a problem that needs more attention. The lower rates of high school graduation lead to less employment, higher rates of incarceration, substance abuse, ill health, and intergenerational poverty (Washington State Legislature, 2008).

The implication of these data seems to be that different approaches must be considered to decrease the achievement gap in P-12 schools. All children should be supported and encouraged to achieve the education they need to find meaningful and well-paying jobs, to

thrive in colleges and universities, and to participate fully in this nation's economic and civic life (Wilkins, 2006). Therefore, because of the documented effectiveness of reality therapy in schools, this method of counseling and psychotherapy is proposed for implementation in school counseling programs to enhance academic achievement and career decision-making skills.

## **Reality Therapy**

Reality therapy is a method of counseling and psychotherapy that was developed by William Glasser (1965). The Institute for Reality Therapy, now called William Glasser International, founded in 1968, promotes the teaching of reality therapy applied to psychotherapy, counseling, schools, agencies, and management (Wubbolding, 2000). In 1968, Glasser wrote *Schools Without Failure* which described how to use reality therapy in classrooms. This led to the creation of some 200 Quality Schools which use reality therapy and focus on attaining a higher level of quality in the areas of academic achievement, career development, and personal/social adjustment.

Choice theory is the underlying theoretical basis for reality therapy. It explains why and how we function. This approach states that human beings are motivated by five genetically encoded basic needs that drive us all our lives. These needs are innate, not learned; general, not specific; and universal, not limited to any specific race or culture. They are survival, love and belonging, power or achievement, freedom or independence, and fun (Glasser, 1998). This approach emphasizes that shortly after birth and continuing all through life, individuals store information inside their minds and build a file of wants called the *Quality World*. This somewhat imaginary world consists of people, activities, situations, beliefs, and possessions (Wubbolding, 2000). People are the most important component of each Quality World and these are the individuals clients care about and want most to have a relationship with. According to this approach, everything we do is chosen and every behavior is our best attempt to get what we want to satisfy one or more of our basic needs (Glasser, 2001). When basic needs are met at school, students behave better, learn more, and see education as valuable and important to them (Glasser & Wubbolding, 1997).

Reality therapy provides the delivery system for helping individuals take more effective control of their lives; a basic goal of this approach is to help them learn better ways to fulfill their basic needs. Reality therapy focuses on present behavior. The core of the counseling process involves challenging clients to evaluate their behavior; strong emphasis is placed on client responsibility. Essentially, we choose all we do which implies that we are responsible for what we choose. Clients achieve success by learning more realistic behavior. Therapy can be considered a mentoring process in which the therapist is the teacher and the client is the student (Corey, 2013).

Wubbolding (2000) developed the acronym *WDEP* to describe key procedures in the practice of this approach. Each letter represents a cluster of appropriate skills and techniques for assisting clients to take better control of their lives. Grounded in choice theory, the system assists people in satisfying their basic needs. Wubbolding has expressed these elements in a way that makes them easy to remember, for instance: *W*=wants, needs, and perceptions; *D*= direction and doing; *E*=self-evaluation; and *P*=planning. The art of counseling is to weave these components together in ways that lead clients to evaluate their lives and to decide to move in more effective directions. The following paragraphs will provide summaries of research studies that emphasize the effectiveness of the use of reality therapy in schools.

For example, Edens and Smyrl (1994) conducted a study over a 6-week block of time on disruptive classroom behaviors. The purpose of the study was to assess the effects of Glasser's quality school objectives and the use of reality therapy as a means of reducing disruptive behaviors in a middle school physical education class. The study's sample was a seventh-grade class of 22 white, 19 black, and 1 Hispanic students; 26 were female and 16 were male.

As an integrated part of the physical education curriculum, students were taught the concepts of choice theory. Reality therapy was used to counsel the students whenever they demonstrated misbehavior. A significant element of the study was the opportunity for students to join in class meetings to discuss choice theory using worksheets containing hypothetical incidents. The recorders noted a total of 61 behavioral incidents during the 6-week time frame with 31 incidents during the first week and only three incidents during the last week. The authors concluded that teaching choice theory and using reality therapy have positive effects on students' behavior.

Similarly, the summer school program at Victor J. Andrews High School in Orland Park, Illinois focused on incoming students who had academic difficulties at the middle school level. The program goals addressed ways to help students make the transition to high school and enhanced the academic skills they needed to do quality work. The program included concentrated opportunities to learn the traditional subjects of math, science, reading, and English. Students learned the inner motivational components of choice theory and reality therapy in detail and practiced these methods under the guidance of supportive counselors and teachers.

According to John Hackett (1998), the program organizer, 4 years of data showed significant gains in math, comprehension, and vocabulary. Psychosocial gains in self-esteem, internal awareness, drive, strength, and stress management were measured by the Rosenberg Test of Self-Esteem scale and the Norwicki Locus of Control Inventory. The director also reported that the summer school program was highly respected by both parents and educators.

Moreover, Comisky (1993) investigated the impact of reality therapy with at-risk ninth-grade students. She measured the effect of reality therapy on students' self-esteem, locus of control, school achievement, attitude toward school, attendance, and classroom behavior. Researchers set up three groups of students, each receiving a different treatment over 14 sessions. One group received reality therapy alone. The second group received reality therapy counseling combined with a partial school within a school program. The third group, a control group, worked on career development.

Pre- and posttests that the students took revealed significant differences in achievement, self-esteem, attitude, and attendance. Reality therapy was most effective with students when used in the school with-in a school setting. This was a limited pilot program designed to address personal-emotional as well as cognitive-academic needs. In this partial school within-a-school program, the students were grouped together for English and Social Science classes and received special attention from a team of teachers, counselors, and administrators. The researcher concluded that a less coercive environment in which teachers can get close to students helped them to fulfill their basic need for belonging. The results were especially significant because the new reality therapy-based elements changed the system to make it easier for students to insert schoolwork into their quality worlds.

## **ASCA National Model**

In 2003, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) published the *ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (American School Counselor Association, 2012). The ASCA National Model was developed to guide school counselors in the designing, implementing, managing, and evaluating of comprehensive developmental school counseling programs. This model suggested that school counseling programs be systematically delivered using the four program components of guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and system support (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012).

Each component makes specific contributions to enhance academic achievement, career decision-making, and personal/social development for students (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). For instance, the Guidance Curriculum provides preventive, proactive lessons to promote positive mental health and enhanced academic achievement for all students. Well planned guidance lessons and activities that focus on goal-setting, study skills, time management, careers, relationships, self-discipline, anger management, decision-making, and the importance of acquiring a quality education help counselors to meet students' basic needs.

The Individual Student Planning program component provides all students with guidance and counseling activities to help them to positively assess, plan for, and then monitor and manage their personal-social, academic, and career development (Cohen, 2001). The activities are designed to help students focus on their current and future goals by developing life career plans drawing on the strength-based career development content embedded in the guidance curriculum. School counselors work closely with students on an individual basis as they explore and evaluate their education, career options, and personal goals.

The Responsive Services component provides individual and small group counseling, consultations, and referrals. The purpose of this component is to work with students whose personal circumstances are threatening to interfere with or are interfering with their personal, social, career, and academic development. Specific issues facing some students include academic achievement, career choice, child abuse, family loss, cross-cultural effectiveness, relationships, substance abuse, school attendance, and dropping out of school.

The System Support component consists of management activities that establish and maintain the total school counseling program. It is implemented through activities in the areas of research and development, professional development, public relations, community outreach, committee memberships, and program management. These activities support and enhance plans and projects in the other three program components.

## **Discussion**

The status of academic achievement for students in P-12 schools has been a major concern in education for over two decades (Braun, Wang, Jenkins, & Weinbaum, 2006; Campbell, Hombro, & Mazzeo, 2000). The effects of the achievement gap can be observed in the areas of standardized test scores, grade point averages, dropout rates, and college enrollment and completion (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; McDonough, 2005; Public Agenda, 2010). Attempts to eliminate the gap have been numerous and the gap seems to have narrowed somewhat in recent years; however, there continues to be large disparities between African American and white students and between Hispanic and white students in the U.S.

(Achievement Gap, 2017). Therefore, this problem continues to negatively impact academic performance for minority students. The lower rates of high school graduation lead to less employment, higher rates of incarceration, substance abuse, ill health, and intergenerational poverty (Washington State Legislature, 2008).

The indication of these data seems to be that different approaches must be considered to enhance academic achievement for minority students. Therefore, the implementation of reality therapy in school counseling programs is recommended because of its documented effectiveness in schools. The training for those who will deliver the school counseling program is extremely important. Reality therapy training is recommended because it emphasizes the importance of the therapeutic relationship which is the foundation for effective counseling outcomes (Wubbolding & Brickell, 1999). Client relationships are enhanced when counselors eliminate the seven deadly habits of criticizing, blaming, complaining, threatening, punishing, nagging, and rewarding for control. These toxins are replaced with the seven caring habits of supporting, encouraging, listening, accepting, trusting, respecting, and negotiating differences.

For this approach to be successful, a therapist must be the kind of person a client would consider putting in his/her Quality World (Glasser, 1998). Reality therapy trained counselors use their personal qualities of warmth, sincerity, understanding, acceptance, concern, openness, and respect for the individual to develop positive relationships with students (Corey, 2013). These characteristics allow counselors to function as advocates who instill a sense of hope in students (Wubbolding, 2009). Before focusing on academic achievement and career decision-making skills, reality therapy trained counselors work at involving, encouraging, and supporting students. These interactions help to meet the basic needs of love and belonging.

The implementation of the ASCA National Model is recommended for all school systems. School counseling programs and those who work within them are important; this has been strongly supported by Myrick (2003) who made a clear connection between school counseling programs and student academic achievement. He used a variety of examples to illustrate that developmental guidance programs positively impact student learning. In addition, a study by Gerler, Kinney, and Anderson (1985) revealed that underachieving students who received counseling improved significantly on the Self-Rating Scale of Classroom Behavior as well as in mathematics and language arts grades. Moreover, a study of Missouri high schools shows that schools with more fully implemented model guidance programs had students who were more likely to report that (a) they had earned higher grades, (b) their education was better preparing them for the future, (c) their school made more career and college information available to them, and (d) their school had a more positive climate (Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997).

The Individual Student Planning program component of the ASCA National Model was designed to allow school counselors to work with students individually on academic achievement, personal/social adjustment, and career development. It is imperative for each student to have personal one-on-one time with the counselor. It is from the basis of this personal and meaningful relationship that effective outcomes are likely to follow and become sustained. Reality therapy practitioners use attending behaviors, listening skills, suspension of student judgment, facilitative self-disclosure, summarizing, and focusing to create the type climate that leads to student participation (Wubbolding, 2000). The artful integration of these skills is paramount to a trusting and encouraging relationship between the school counselor and the student.

## The WDEP System

Reality therapy trained school counselors use the WDEP system to work with students whose academic performance is below average for their grade level. Each of the letters in the system represents a cluster of ideas and should be considered as a network of interconnected possibilities from which the counselor can choose (Wubbolding, 2000). Counselors start with the letter *W* and ask students what they *want* to accomplish in the counseling process. They ask students what they want for themselves, for their parents, and for the world around them. After some discussion, students are asked how hard they are willing to work to achieve their goals. This is followed by a discussion of the *D* component.

The letter *D* implies that the counselor discusses the overall *direction* of the students' lives as well as what they are *doing*. Students are asked what they are doing about studying, time management, and commitment. The session moves next to focusing on what students are thinking and how they are feeling at the time.

The *E* component is for *self-evaluation*. The heart of reality therapy is the use of self-evaluation questions. Students do not change behaviors, actions, thoughts, or feelings without first deciding that current behaviors are ineffective. At this point, counselors help students to judge, to evaluate the viability, appropriateness, and effectiveness of the statements made in both the *W* and the *D* components. The essential aspect of self-evaluation is a personal, inner judgment about behavior. Students are asked to do a self-evaluation of their wants, their thoughts, and their actions; they are also asked if there is reason to believe that they will reach their academic goals without making changes in behavior. Students will be more likely to change and consider a plan of action if they are convinced that their present behavior is not getting them what they want. Further, when students believe they have options, they will be even more motivated to choose other behaviors that will get them closer to what they want (Glasser, 1992).

When students are motivated to make changes, they move to the *P* element and work with their counselors to develop *plans* for change. To be effective, Wubbolding (2000) suggests that each plan should be simple, attainable, measurable, immediate, consistent, committed to, and controlled by the student (SAMIC<sup>3</sup>). After formulating the plan for change, the school counselor meets with the student regularly to review progress and provide support. When students are successful with their plans for change, their higher levels of academic achievement should help to meet their basic needs for power and achievement.

## The Individual Student Planning Program

The Individual Student Planning Program component also provides an opportunity for the school counselor to focus on careers and career decision-making skills. To help students with this process, counselors should tutor and encourage them to complete the Choice Theory Career Rating Scale for Children and Adolescents (Figure 1) (Mason & Duba, 2009; based on Glasser's Choice Theory Needs Rating Scale). Need Strength and Need Satisfaction ratings on the scale range from 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*) for each. A 10 on the Need Strength Scale represents a high need on any specific basic need and a 10 on the Need Satisfaction Scale indicates that this specific need is being completely satisfied. The basic needs of Love and Belonging, Self-Worth/Power, Freedom, Fun and Enjoyment, and Survival and Health are clearly identified on the scale.

Counselors are encouraged to be creative with the scale. They could start by asking students to choose one specific career of interest and review the required training, potential

salary, benefits, work schedule, and places of employment for their choice. Then, students may use the Choice Theory Career Rating Scale for Children and Adolescents to determine if their career choices will meet their expected adult needs related to marriage, family responsibilities, purchasing a home, family vacations, and personal or family emergency situations. When the Need Satisfaction rating is less than the Need Strength rating on the scale for any student, the counselor could inquire about which steps would be important and essential in moving the student's need satisfaction rating closer to the need strength rating. Group discussions and individual sessions should be available for students to talk about how their career choices meet their basic needs.

Another option would be to hold an annual career fair. Employees from the community can serve as representatives of any given career. After such a fair, students are asked to review a career choice in terms of required training, potential salary, and work schedule. This is followed by the distribution of various worksheets with cases related to circumstances that could arise in adulthood. The next step is for students to take the Choice Theory Career Rating Scale for Children and Adolescents to evaluate if such a career choice fits their expected adult needs. This is only one example of how creativity can be applied within a Choice Theory framework. Counselors and teachers are encouraged to consider others.

## **Summary**

In summary, although further research is encouraged to gain a more complete understanding of the reasons for the academic achievement gap in P-12 schools, it seems reasonable to suggest that it is time to consider different approaches to enhance academic achievement for students at the lower end of national performance scales. Findings from this investigation indicate that perhaps the problems with academic achievement for minority students have more to do with a lack of intrinsic motivation than with external factors. This is consistent with the findings of Ohrt who worked extensively with groups of students who were struggling academically and at-risk of falling behind or dropping out of school (Meyers, 2015). He and his team researched which elements were most predictive of students' academic success or failure and found that social and emotional factors played larger roles than GPA's and test scores. Consequently, it seems important for educators to focus on helping students in P-12 schools to meet their basic needs of survival, love and belonging, power or achievement, freedom or independence, and fun (Glasser, 1998). When basic needs are met at school, students behave better, learn more, and see education as valuable and important to them (Glasser & Wubbolding, 1997).

Therefore, with the understanding that school districts usually require in-service training for employees each year, it is recommended that school districts provide reality therapy training for all school personnel including administrators, counselors, teachers, and staff. When implemented in school settings, reality therapy focuses on changing the school environment along with enhancing academic achievement for all students (Wubbolding & Brickell, 1999). It is also recommended that professional school counselors learn to use the WDEP system of reality therapy and the Choice Theory Career Rating Scale for Children and Adolescents. Moreover, it is further recommended that all school districts implement the ASCA National Model school counseling program because of its documented effectiveness. These proposed changes have the potential to significantly enhance academic achievement for minority students in P-12 schools. Perhaps more important, there is reason to believe that these proposed changes have the potential to enhance academic achievement for all students while also creating a better educated and more equitable society.

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## Figure Caption

Figure 1. Choice Theory Career Rating Scale for Children and Adolescents

Needs and their Definitions	STRENGTH AND SATISFACTION RATING SCALE
<b>Love and Belonging:</b> The need for interpersonal contact, working together with others, and the potential for developing long term relationships and friendships. To feel wanted and approved of by classmates, as well as by authorities.	Need Strength <hr/> 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Need Satisfaction <hr/> 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
<b>Self Worth/Power:</b> The need for a sense of empowerment, competence, and opportunities for personal effectiveness in the school environment. A connection between one's personal sense of achievement and worthiness with similar experiences in the home, school, and community. Opportunities for leadership and management roles.	Need Strength <hr/> 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Need Satisfaction <hr/> 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
<b>Freedom:</b> The need for autonomy, independence, and limited restrictions in the school environment and in the home. Opportunities for spontaneity and change in all areas of one's life.	Need Strength <hr/> 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Need Satisfaction <hr/> 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
<b>Fun and Enjoyment:</b> The need for balance between work and pleasure. Sufficient opportunities for enjoyable and fun experiences within the context of school, home, and community.	Need Strength <hr/> 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Need Satisfaction <hr/> 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
<b>Survival &amp; Health:</b> Safe physical environment at home and school. An environment that is a supportive context for one's mental and emotional health. Family income that adequately provides for enhanced educational opportunities, personal self-care, leisure activities, and vacations.	Need Strength <hr/> 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Need Satisfaction <hr/> 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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