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At-Risk Ninth-Grade Students: A Psychoeducational Group Approach to Increase Study Skills and Grade Point Averages

The purpose of this article is to describe a large-scale psychoeducational study skills group for ninth-grade students whose academic performance is in the bottom 50 percent of their class. The ASCA National Model® (American School Counselor Association, 2005) was used as a framework for development, delivery, and evaluation. The authors found that a small-group counseling intervention strengthened studying behaviors as measured by pretest-posttest design. Additional results include promoting school counselor visibility and increasing and improving school counselor relationships with students, parents, and other stakeholders.

The No Child Left Behind Act has raised accountability standards in schools, with the objective of closing achievement gaps and increasing student performance overall (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), and makes federal funding contingent on schools ensuring that at-risk students are able to succeed academically (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Students whose performance is significantly below average are often labeled "at risk." The National Center for Education Statistics (2002) found that the dropout rate of at-risk students is twice as high as their achieving peers. Still, at-risk students are not given needed support and are not being selected to receive remedial services (Education Trust, 1999, 2001).

This article presents a developmentally appropriate group model and promising pilot data for at-risk ninth-grade students based on research promoting study skills and personal/social development. The study skills program focused on three areas that research has indicated contribute to improved academic performance: (a) cognitive and metacognitive skills such as goal setting, time management, and study skills; (b) social skills including listening and teamwork; and (c) self-management skills including motivation (Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Wang, Haertel, & Wahlberg, 1994). The program targeted these areas assuming that improving study skills would result in increased grade point averages (GPAs) and greater connectedness to peers, teachers, school counselors, and the school as a whole as evidenced by increased contact and communication among all stakeholders.

The ASCA National Model® (American School Counselor Association, 2005) was used as a framework for the development, delivery, and evaluation of the program. The small-group format permitted students to meet standards in the academic, career, and personal/social domains. Also, each theme of the ASCA National Model was expressed—leadership, collaboration, systemic change, and, most notably, advocacy. Data were collected before, during, and after the groups documenting the impact of the program on students' study skills and GPAs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Small-Group Counseling

Group work may be an effective means of counseling at-risk students and ASCA has endorsed group work as an important component in a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2005). Group work is efficient, effective, and multifaceted (Akos & Milsom, 2007), an ideal method of meeting the needs of at-risk students. Group counseling allows students to develop and maintain connections to others while exploring factors that influence achievement. ASCA's national standards for school counseling programs provided the specific academic, career, and personal/social objectives for the groups (ASCA).

Transition to High School

Masten and Coatsworth (1998) identified developmental tasks of adolescence including transition to secondary school, academic achievement, involvement in extracurricular activities, forming close friendships, and forming a sense of self. They suggested that positive self-attributions and intrinsic motivation help adolescents achieve these developmental tasks. Other researchers have found that the transition to high school is a challenge for many students. Reinhard (1997) described ninth grade as the

pivotal grade for determining whether a student will graduate, and transitioning to a new school was the most cited factor for dropout (Roderick, 2003). School counselors were called upon to assist students during this time to prevent students from dropping out, support academic achievement, and foster connectedness to school (Akos & Galassi, 2004a, 2004b; Barber & Olsen, 2004). For these reasons, the authors designed a program that addressed the needs of ninth graders, and targeted each ninth-grade student in the bottom half of their ninth-grade class to participate in the program.

Study Skills Interventions

Researchers have conducted meta-analyses of interventions for high school students designed to enhance student learning in order to identify components that resulted in improved study skills (Hattie et al., 1996; Wang et al., 1994). Both meta-analyses found that cognitive and metacognitive skills enhanced students' learning. Based on research findings, this program was grounded in cognitive-behavioral theory. In addition to targeting specific studying behaviors, such as goal setting and time management, group leaders engaged students in conversations about the reasons that study skills are important in and outside of school. A diagram was co-constructed by students and leaders to demonstrate the feedback loop of thoughts, behaviors, and attitudes about school and their relations with student performance. Each group meeting addressed real-world applications of study skills, and students demonstrated increased understanding of what study skills are and how they are used throughout life.

METHOD

Purpose and Objectives of Study

The study skills program was developed by a second-year school counselor and a second-year counseling graduate student in response to a need at a medium-sized, suburban high school in the Southeast in which the school counselor was employed and the graduate student was a school counselor intern. The demographic makeup of the students at the school during the 2006-2007 school year was 85% Caucasian, 8% African American, 3% Hispanic, 1% Asian, and 3% multiracial. The purpose of the program was to address the needs of ninth-grade students identified as at risk for failing to achieve academic success in high school. The overarching goal of the study skills program was twofold: (a) to address the students' academic needs, and (b) to form relationships with students and their families through increased contact and communication that could persist throughout high school.

In addition to current research, curricula and materials from *What Do You Really Want? A Guide for Teens* (Bachel, 2001), *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* (Covey, 1998), *Up from Underachievement* (Heacox, 1991), and *Counseling Today's Secondary Students* (Hitchner & Tifft-Hitchner, 1996) informed the program's specific objectives. The program's objectives were for students to learn goal setting, time management, the purpose of homework, test-taking strategies, test-anxiety reduction strategies, study skills and learning strategies, and organization skills. In addition to addressing these objectives in a psychoeducational format, school counselors engaged students in discussions designed to increase their understanding of the importance of using study skills and positive attitudes toward school to achieve academic and personal success. One discussion included asking students to share their thoughts and feelings toward school. The school counselors made the connection between thoughts and feelings and resulting student behaviors. For example, several students thought that school was boring, and felt tired, resulting in their sleeping in class. Sleeping in class resulted in poor grades. The school counselors explained that if students changed the ways they thought and felt toward school, their behaviors would change as well.

Group counseling allows students to develop and maintain connections to others while exploring factors that influence achievement.

Participants

Ninety students out of 101 initial participants completed the study skills program during the second semester of the 2006-2007 academic year. The school counselors, in consultation with the school principal, targeted all ninth-grade students whose academic performance was at the bottom 50 percent of their class as measured by GPA. They agreed that every student, including those already receiving special educational services, be offered the opportunity to participate in the program; thus, no exclusionary criteria existed, and no control group existed.

Because the freshmen students did not have a high school GPA at the beginning of the study, students who participated during the third quarter were selected by the counselor-leaders based on whether they had failed one or more eighth-grade competency tests. Students' first semester GPA data became available during the third quarter, and fourth-quarter participants were selected from lowest GPA upward. The authors found this method of selection successful at targeting the most at-risk students during the third quarter and the others during the fourth quarter. As mentioned, 101 students were invited to participate. Once students were selected, a letter was sent home to parents explaining the purpose and goals of the group. Written parental consent was obtained in order for students to participate.

The groups met during the school day and stu-

dents attended study skills group for one class period a week for 6 weeks in lieu of a non-academic course in which they were enrolled. Most students missed either life management skills or physical education class. The teachers of these courses were consulted to gain their cooperation and support of the program.

Group Format and Composition

The program was implemented in a mixed-gender, mixed-race group format. During both quarters, seven groups met six times each, and they were composed of no more than 12 members, with two counselor-leaders. During the second administration of the program, two additional school counselors ran groups. Another school counselor co-led with each author. Bringing in the other school counselors served multiple purposes: It reduced burnout, introduced fresh ideas and energy, and increased all school counselors' visibility, demonstrating that each counselor in the school was a leader and advocate for students' achievement.

Many teachers approached the school counselors and commented on the improved achievement, behavior, and peer interaction of students who attended study skills groups.

Group Procedures

The groups met in a small room, which decreased distractions and helped foster group cohesiveness. The first group meeting focused on goal setting. Subsequent meetings focused on time management, homework, study skills, test-taking strategies and test-anxiety reduction, and organization, respectively. Each meeting had a cognitive and behavioral component, and students discussed their thoughts, attitudes, and barriers to achievement around each topic.

Communicating with parents, teachers, and administrators prior to, during, and after the program was essential and had multiple benefits. Prior to beginning the program, school counselors and administrators explained the purpose of the program at a staff meeting and elicited feedback. While meeting, teachers verbally communicated support for the goals and objectives of the program. In the days following the staff meeting and throughout the third and fourth quarters, teachers told the counseling staff how much they appreciated the program and its goals. No teacher expressed dissatisfaction or concerns about the groups, including the teachers from whose classes students were pulled. Moreover, many teachers approached the school counselors and commented on the improved achievement, behavior, and peer interaction of students who attended study skills groups.

Evaluation Measures

A pretest-posttest design was used to measure the effectiveness of the study skills program. A worksheet titled "How Do You Study?" (Lee & Pulvino, 2002) was given to students at the beginning of the second group session, and again at the last group session. The worksheet organized students' responses into time usage, persistence, organization, conscientiousness, note-taking skills, reading, and test-taking skills based on a 5-point, Likert-type scale (1 = *almost never* to 5 = *almost always*). Sample statements from the worksheet include "I study on a regular basis," "I review my notes after a class," "I am careful on exams," "I understand what I read," "I complete my written assignments on time," "I go to classes well prepared," and "I daydream in class" (Lee & Pulvino). Students' responses from pretest to posttest were compared to determine the effectiveness of the study skills program at addressing each of the seven criteria.

A formative evaluation solicited verbal feedback during the last session from participants in the program. Participants were asked what they liked most and least, and what they found most and least helpful. Feedback was used to enhance subsequent groups.

RESULTS

A paired-sample t test explained the mean difference between students' pretest and posttest scores. Ninety students' pretest and posttest scores were analyzed. Higher scores indicated more study behaviors. Posttest scores for the time-usage subscale (M = 15.01, SD = 3.76) were significantly higher than pretest scores (M = 13.19, SD = 3.45), t (83) = –5.173, p < .001. Posttest scores for the note-taking subscale (M = 16.87, SD = 3.25) were significantly higher than pretest scores (M = 15.92, SD = 3.53), t (84) = –2.661, p < .01. Posttest scores for the exam-preparation subscale (M = 17.09, SD = 3.14) were significantly higher than pretest scores (M = 15.86, SD = 3.17), t (84) = –3.276, p < .01. Posttest scores for the reading subscale (M = 15.64, SD = 3.58) were significantly higher than pretest scores (M = 14.38, SD = 3.90), t (83) = –4.692, p < .001.

Posttest scores for the organization subscale (M = 15.55, SD = 3.05) were significantly higher than pretest scores (M = 14.71, SD = 3.10), t (82) = –2.526, p < .05. Posttest scores for the persistence subscale (M = 15.92, SD = 2.97) were significantly higher than pretest scores (M = 14.12, SD = 2.97), t (82) = –5.560, p < .001. Posttest scores for the concentration subscale were not significantly higher than pretest scores. Posttest scores for study skills on average (M = 103.92, SD = 27.98) were significantly higher than pretest scores (M = 96.27, SD = 26.48), t (89) = –4.64, p < .001. Thus, the results indicate that students reported using significantly more study skills by the end of the program (see Table 1).

Table 1. *T* Test Analysis Summary

	Pretest		Posttest			
Measure	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***T***	***N***
Time usage	13.19	3.45	15.01	3.76	–5.173***	84
Note taking	15.92	3.53	16.87	3.25	–2.661**	85
Exam prep	15.86	3.17	17.09	3.14	–3.276**	85
Reading	14.38	3.90	15.64	3.58	–4.692***	84
Organization	14.71	3.10	15.55	3.05	–2.526*	83
Persistence	14.12	2.97	15.92	2.97	–5.560***	83
Concentration	16.64	3.51	15.94	3.77	1.731	83
Study skills	96.27	26.48	103.92	27.98	–4.64***	90

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

In order to evaluate whether the effectiveness of the study skills program translated into students' increased success in high school classes over time, counselor-leaders analyzed participants' GPAs at the end of the year. Overall, analysis of variance tests revealed no significant mean differences in participants' GPAs pre- and post-group; however, the analysis may have been conducted too soon for post-group intervention and no control exists for comparison.

When analyzed individually, several students' GPAs increased significantly. The following students, high school juniors, have success stories that demonstrate the positive impact of the program (names are fictitious, and GPAs are weighted):

1. "Sandy" is a student enrolled in the community/technical college course of study who participated in the fourth-quarter study skills group. Her ninth-grade first-semester GPA was a 2.0 and her second-semester GPA increased to 2.25. During Sandy's ninth-grade year, she struggled to be successful in honors English, world history, and biology. In the 10th grade, she continued taking honors courses to prepare her for college, and her grades improved. Her 10th-grade semester GPAs continued to improve (3.14 and 3.28). Her fall 2008 GPA in her junior year was 3.28.
2. "Tania" is a college/university-bound student in the exceptional child program. Her first-semester ninth-grade GPA was 2.0, and her second-semester ninth-grade GPA decreased to 1.5. During her 10th-grade year, Tania's grades improved to a 2.42 and 2.57 each semester and her fall 2008 GPA, as a junior, was 3.83. Her improvement is particularly significant given the unexpected death of a sibling last year. Because Tania participated in the study skills program, she and her family developed a relationship with her school counselor who provided support and resources to Tania and her family upon the death of her sister, and Tania was able to achieve continued academic success.
3. "Josh" also demonstrates a dramatic turnaround in achievement. He entered the study skills program as a student preparing for community college/technical school. He was enrolled in remedial math and English courses and had a first-semester ninth-grade GPA of 1.5. His second-semester GPA increased to 2.0. During the last group meeting, Josh thanked the co-leaders for facilitating the group experience, stating that it was "very helpful." During Josh's 10th-grade year, his grades improved dramatically (3.14 and 3.28) and he chose to pursue a college/university course of study. His English teacher stated he was the "most turned around" student. Josh even took an online geometry class over the summer to acquire the needed number of math credits for his new program of study. During the fall of 2008, Josh, now a junior, was enrolled in a challenging course of study including chemistry, algebra II, physical science, U.S. history, English, and Spanish II. His fall 2008 GPA was 3.0.

Improved communication with students also was evident. Based on the feedback from the third-quarter groups, fourth-quarter groups used fewer worksheets and were less structured, providing participants increased opportunity to discuss their attitudes about school. Also, school counselors devoted more time to discussing ways to reduce test anxiety, which

emerged as a top concern of participants.

The school counselors used stakeholders' responses to develop and modify specific goals for individual students and to continue working with students, as needed, post-group. For example, the parents of a student-participant asked his school counselor to continue working with him post-group regarding his lack of concentration. Also, an assistant principal identified a 10th-grade student and asked her school counselor to use the group lesson plans with her in individual counseling. When appropriate during group, teachers' comments were introduced for discussion. Throughout the program, some teachers and parents contacted the school counselors to discuss students' participation. School counselors' responses were informative yet confidential in nature. Generally, communication with teachers and parents was positive as care was taken to establish trust with all stakeholders. The positive communication with parents and teachers resulted in productive conversations about specific ways that parents and teachers could reinforce their students' learning.

Not only were the school counselors successful at increasing their visibility within the school, they also were able to communicate their role in student achievement to parents.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

The study skills program was implemented with a twofold goal of addressing at-risk ninth-grade students' academic needs and forming relationships with students and families that could persist throughout high school. It is the authors' opinions that both goals were met. The results of this study demonstrate that the use of study skills improved dramatically after group participation. Despite the statistical evidence that GPAs did not significantly increase by the end of the participants' ninth-grade year, the school counselors recognize several participants who are no longer "at risk" for underachievement and dropping out. The GPAs may have been measured too soon post-intervention to see improvements, and no control group exists for comparison.

The school counselors implemented the ninth-grade study skills program again the following school year. The counselor intern was no longer at the high school, and a first-year school counselor joined the second author in implementing the program. The school counselors obtained similar results. Students' posttest scores on the "How Do You Study?" (Lee & Pulvino, 2002) questionnaire increased; however, overall, their grade point averages did not increase. Also, teachers and administrators continued to support the program; however, school counselors had the impression that more positive change occurred when students and their parents were committed to the group goal.

Based on four cycles of the program, the school counselors identified the following implications. First, study skills alone are not enough to improve academic achievement as measured by GPA. The second author concluded that "it takes a village," and the participants who experienced the most turnaround were consistently supported by family. The program has proved to be an integral way to establish relationships with parents and ninth-grade students.

Also, during the 2008 program, the school counselors experienced decreased group attendance because students were absent from school. By running the groups during the day, the school counselors attempted to meet the needs of students who otherwise may not be able to participate before or after school; however, when students failed to attend school, the program could not be successful. It is recommended that school counselors explore ways to address attendance issues among at-risk students in order to increase the likelihood that similar programs will be successful.

Additionally, self-selection to group may result in improved grades and will provide a control group of those who choose not to participate. It was evident that each group was composed of both invested and disengaged students. The group dynamics that emerged from the mixed-motivation groups appeared helpful to all; however, it is possible that including only those students interested in the program would have yielded more significant increases in grades. Also, inviting juniors and seniors who participated in the program to discuss the importance of academic achievement may be beneficial. Finally, infusing the groups with motivational interventions and techniques, such as motivational interviewing, also may increase academic achievement.

Opening communication with students and parents was a significant outcome of the program. Not only were the school counselors successful at increasing their visibility within the school, they also were able to communicate their role in student achievement to parents. Other school counselors may use this information to inform their own school counseling program as they develop responsive services to meet the needs of at-risk students. The school counseling program in this study aligned with the ASCA National Model (2005) and was an effective way of meeting these students' needs. Also, by developing and implementing the program, the school counselors were able to demonstrate leadership, advocacy, and collaboration. ▮

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