

# Group Work

## Practice Ideas

### Achieving Success Everyday: A Group Counseling Model for School Counselors

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An emerging body of research shows group counseling as an effective method for delivering counseling services when addressing child and adolescent needs in school settings (e.g., Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Brannigan, 2007; Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007; May & Housley, 1996; Phillips & Phillips, 1992; Prout & Prout, 1998; Zinck & Littrell, 2000). Accordingly, group counseling interventions help large numbers of students identified by their teachers and parents as having personal/social issues, as well as academic difficulties (Gladding, 2003; Zinck & Littrell, 2000). Group work with adolescents continues to be a challenging and important area for counseling researchers. As a result, scholars should work diligently to develop further understanding of group treatment for children and adolescents (Truneckov & Viney, 2007) particularly within a school setting.

#### Achieving Success Everyday (ASE) Group Model

Given the focus on academic development in schools (ASCA, 2005), school counselors can best assist students by implementing group counseling models that simultaneously address personal/social and academic development (Brigham & Campbell, 2003; Steen & Kaffenberger, 2007). The primary purpose of ASE groups is to enhance students' personal/social development while helping them to improve academic-related behaviors that contribute to success in the classroom (e.g., attending to tasks, completing assignments, asking questions). A unique contribution of the Achieving Success Everyday (ASE) group model (Steen, 2007) is the intentional integration of academic and personal-social development using psychoeducational and counseling components. Using the ASE group model, counselors teach students strategies to address their personal/social concerns and their academic difficulties. Counselors also help students identify and build on their internal assets (e.g., achievement motivation, school performance) while drawing on external assets (e.g. caring supportive adults, high expectations) available within the school and surrounding community.

Achieving Success Everyday (ASE) groups integrate goals to improve students' academic and personal/social development.

These goals may be selected from the ASCA National Standards for School Counseling Programs (ASCA, 2005).

Examples of academic goals are:

Students will:

- Increase learning behaviors
- Achieve school success
- Improve academic self-concept
- Acquire skills for improving learning

Examples of personal/social goals are:

Students will:

- Learn to communicate feelings
- Learn strategies to advocate on behalf of self
- Learn to identify internal and external assets
- Learn to deal with events that provoke negative emotional responses

#### Group Development in ASE Groups

The ASE group model consists of six phases: assessment, review, acquaintance, challenge, empowerment, and support. These phases develop across the lifespan of the group with specific phases occurring during the beginning, middle, and ending stages of the group's lifespan (See Table 1). The assessment phase occurs prior to the beginning of the group whereas the review and acquaintance phases occur at the beginning of the group. The challenge and empowerment phases occur during the middle of the group. The group concludes with the support phase. The group phases are presented sequentially although they may overlap. Each session of the group is comprised of an introduction, a personal-social component, an academic component, and a closing.

The **assessment** phase occurs prior to the start of the group and is instrumental in selecting the potential group members. During the assessment phase, the school counselor gathers information from teachers, parents, and the student for use in assessing the student's academic and personal/social strengths and difficulties. This information may be collected using surveys or at faculty meetings, parent information meetings, or parent-teacher conferences. School

**Table 1. The ASE Group Model**

Phases	Leader's Goals/Tasks	Across Group's Lifespan
Assessment	Gather pre- and post- data from teachers, parents, and students; identify students' strengths and areas for improvement.	Pre-screening and as needed.
Review	Identify and review the group's purpose, ground rules, individual goals; co-create ground rules.	Early stage.
Acquaintance	Develop cohesion. Model appropriate behaviors.	Early and middle stages.
Challenge	Help students with self-exploration by facilitating constructive confrontation of unwanted behaviors, negative thoughts, and inconsistencies. Emphasize incorporating feedback from others in this process.	Middle and later stages.
Empowerment	Teach information and skills to overcome difficulties and build on strengths; acknowledge the role of environmental factors and systemic oppression in students' difficulties.	Middle and later stages.
Support	Help members support each others' goal accomplishment; identify internal and external resources for support; complete post- surveys, and facilitate termination.	Middle and later stages.

In the **acquaintance** phase, the school counselor facilitates connection amongst the students to provide a cohesive environment. The counselor encourages all students to begin actively participating in the group process and helps them to discuss positive self attributes in meaningful ways. One strategy to increase students' comfort in sharing in the group is exploring uncertainties regarding confidentiality. As the group progresses from the beginning stage to the middle stage, school counselors should spend a few minutes at the beginning of each session helping students reconnect with each other. However, over time, it will become less necessary to do so as members become more familiar and willing to engage one another.

Also during the acquaintance phase, the school counselor should model appropriate interpersonal skills and help students learn how to communicate effectively. School counselors can use engaging activities to encourage students to connect and communicate with each another. Some feasible activities include sentence completion exercises, pair-and-share (i.e., pairing up with another member and then sharing the information with the entire group), or a team drawing activity where students in groups of two or three collectively work on an art project that represents aspects about them. These activities will promote safety and self disclosure among students by highlighting their similarities with one another and

counselors may choose to design their own surveys or to use instruments that are available in the literature. As an example, the Learning Behaviors Scale (LBS) (Myrick, 2003) can be used by counselors to identify student strengths and weaknesses that can be addressed during the group intervention. Some statements from the LBS include: "student participates in class," "student follows directions," and "student starts assignments." Teachers and other school personnel rate students using a Likert scale (i.e., very often, often, sometimes, seldom, and very seldom) to highlight behaviors to which the school counselor should attend during the group. School counselors should use the data to identify those most in need of services and to help construct the actual group goals, objectives, and lessons.

The **review** phase primarily takes place during the early sessions of the group. The school counselor reviews the group's purpose and goals, ground rules (e.g., confidentiality), and helps students identify individual goals. The school counselor may also review data collected from the assessment phase and share the results with the group members. These data can be used to drive discussions about the purpose of the group's meetings, the potential benefits, highlight that students may be experiencing similar difficulties, and normalize their concerns.

examining their differences.

During the **challenge** phase, school counselors teach group members productive ways to clarify or confront their own unwanted behaviors and those that they recognize in other members. To facilitate constructive confrontation, school counselors will need to model and teach students how to give productive feedback (e.g., stroke-sting-stroke). In this phase, school counselors also should help students explore their feelings of the feedback about their behaviors. Counselors should use their group leadership skills to confront or challenge inconsistencies, negative behaviors and thoughts, and students' misconceptions regarding issues raised during previous sessions.

During the **empowerment** phase, school counselors should focus on providing students with knowledge, strategies, and skills to deal with academic and personal/social obstacles. Empowerment is defined as a process of increasing personal, interpersonal or political power in order for an individual to take appropriate action to improve their lives (Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Empowerment is used to help students identify and cultivate personal strengths and take initiative to overcome personal challenges. School counselors can help students recognize their potential to make changes in their lives that they may not have

noticed before. School counselors also help students recognize and explore their internal and external assets. In addition to utilizing asset building activities, school counselors should help students brainstorm unique and creative ideas to overcome their personal or academic challenges.

In order for school counselors to facilitate student empowerment, they must recognize the role that environmental and societal presses (e.g., poverty, institutional racism, stereotypes, and negative and unhealthy school climates) play in children's lives. Furthermore, empowering children necessitates that school counselors see students from a strength-based rather than a deficit perspective; that is, they must identify the strengths in all children regardless of gender, class, race, religion. Hence, school counselors who effectively empower children have a positive view of children and work diligently to confront their own biases and stereotypes.

The **support** phase is used to bring closure to a group. During the support phase, the primary focus is on helping group members support each other as the group draws to an end. School counselors should facilitate a discussion about students' initial goals established early in the group, how their goals may have changed, and whether they had accomplished their goals. They should also encourage students to give feedback about areas of growth observed in one another. School counselors also help students identify supports and resources within and external to the group to help them accomplish their goals. They should lead students in discovering resources available within the group (e.g. acceptance, enhanced self-esteem), within the school (e.g., a supportive adult in the school), and within their family and community (e.g., positive role models, youth or community groups). Counselors can brainstorm with students how they may draw on these resources for support as they work toward their goals and as the group terminates. A discussion of external resources during group sessions and at the conclusion of the group can help increase long term positive results for students (Steen & Bemak, 2008). Finally, as the group comes to a close, school counselors should help students explore and celebrate their accomplishments.

### Group Evaluation

Evaluation is another critical component of group work within schools and should be built into the group proposal to ensure that the groups' goals and objectives can be properly assessed. School counselors should assess the group's effectiveness in accomplishing the purpose and goals of the group intervention.

### Diversity Issues in Groups in Schools

Racial and cultural issues are endemic to schools and many students confront structural inequalities that threaten to undermine their best efforts at school success. Relative to students attending affluent schools, children from poor and minority households are more likely to:

1. confront low-teacher expectations as well as racial, ethnic, and class-based biases (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008),
2. have access to fewer accelerated courses and programs (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007),
3. experience overrepresentation in special education (Blair & Scott, 2002) and underrepresentation in gifted education

4. attend under-funded schools with inadequate resources (Kozol, 1991), and
5. experience disproportionate levels of suspension and expulsion (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002).

Yet, the prospect that students would remain disaffected by these differences seems untenable, primarily because schools operate as a microcosm of society and these issues erode students' social and psychological well-being (Cholewa & West-Olatunji). School counselors must be cognizant of these issues and be prepared to initiate and/or respond to concerns that arise within the context of group work. The counselor's preparation and training in group work and ability to respond authentically to student concerns may bridge potential ruptures and schisms that originate in school or within the community (Brinson & Lee, 1997). In other words, group work is one mechanism that can be used to foster students' academic, career, and personal/social development.

### Case Example: A Cross-Cultural Group for Eight Graders with Poor Academic Performance

An example of an application of the ASE model to addressing poor academic performance is presented here. The example includes the background and development of the group, its purpose and goals, and a sample session. For a complete example of this proposal please see Bryan, Steen, and Day-Vines, (2009).

A middle school counselor was presented with 42 eight grade students on her caseload who failed two or more core subject areas at the conclusion of the 1st marking period. These students were from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds (White, Latino, African American, etc.) and in some cases the population included students from lower socio-economic statuses. The Achieving Success Everyday (ASE) group model was the preferred method because of the focus on academics that occurs along with attention being given to personal-social development. The school counselor also decided to integrate Culturally Relevant Bibliotherapy (Day-Vines, Moore-Thomas & Steen, under review) in the group activities because of the racially and ethnically diverse group members as well as the potential for engaging students in literacy initiatives.

### Assessment Phase

First the school counselor collaborated with the administration team to decide how to collect additional student data. Based on the administration's recommendations, the school counselor met with the eight grade teachers and provided a counselor-created survey asking questions about students' learning behaviors and their academic and personal successes and difficulties. The school counselor also interviewed each of the students and had them complete two surveys created by the counselor to pre-assess students' academic achievement and personal-social development needs. After meeting with the students individually, the school counselor divided the 42 students into seven groups with six students each. The school counselor will meet for 45-60 minutes with each group for six sessions.

## Group Purpose and Goals

The purpose of this group is to promote students' academic and personal-social development utilizing culturally relevant bibliotherapy. The students will increase learning behaviors, improve academic self-concept, and improve overall GPA. Students will also learn communication strategies, self-advocacy skills, and internal and external assets that are available to them.

## Sample Session Outline: Review Phase

**Session Name/Topic:** Ground rules and goal setting

**Objectives:** To generate a list of ground rules, to define short and long term goals, to discuss the number of group sessions.

**Materials Needed:** Poster Board, Markers, and Dreams, by Langston Hughes

### Introduction/Review:

- Ask students to discuss: (a) why they thought they were attending the group, (b) would they be interested in working together to become better students, and (c) would they be interested in learning strategies to deal with different issues students encounter.

### Personal/Social Component:

- Brainstorm with students ground rules that all members would be willing to follow.
- Be sure to stress and explore the issue of confidentiality. Encourage the students to discuss their experiences with their parents and teachers in a general manner. Generate a list of generic responses group members can use to ward off classmates outside of the group who inquire about why they are attending.

### Academic Component:

- Have volunteers orally read the poem entitled Dreams, by Langston Hughes.
- Have students summarize the poem and share their reactions to the poem. What kinds of dreams do our students in this school and community have? Be sure to help students evaluate the merits of their dreams and expand their dreams.
- Ask other questions such as: What kind of dreams do you have? How will you get there? What are the next steps to take to achieve the goals? How are you going to get help from others? What are you going to do to enlist the support of others?
- Explore the definition of goals. Describe the difference between short term and long term goals.
- Discuss the poem's content in relation to goals and goal setting.

### Closing:

- Inform the students the number of sessions the group will meet.
- Have the students share one new insight that they had within the group today.

## Conclusion

The ASE group counseling model is one example school counselors can use to address the needs of underachieving students within educational systems. It is my hope that practitioners and researchers will continue to develop group counseling models appropriate for the unique needs of professional school counselors and the students they serve.

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