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Article 8

Reflective Journaling With At-Risk Students

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Abstract

The focus of this article is to discuss reflective journaling as a group counseling strategy for working with at-risk students in educational settings. School counselors can use reflective journaling to further understand and support at-risk students in succeeding academically, personally, and socially. The following article discusses the benefits of using reflecting journaling and provides an overview of implications for the school counselor.

Keywords: reflective journaling, group counseling, at-risk students

Professional school counselors are called upon to be leaders in providing the services necessary for all students to succeed. One group particularly in need is the at-risk student. The school counselor can assist at-risk students by helping prevent behaviors that place students at-risk for harming themselves or others, as well as dropping out of school (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2011). Although no agreed-upon definition of at-risk students exists, behaviors such as lowered academic achievement, school absenteeism, inappropriate behavior towards others including bullying and physical violence (ASCA, 2011) are often observed in the at-risk population.

Many tools are available to the school counselor when working with students who are at-risk. One such tool which has proven to be effective and efficient is group counseling (Corey, 2012. Group counseling allows counselors to serve several students at one time as well as providing a unique setting in which peer interaction is integral to the therapeutic process. According to the needs of the students, group counseling can be tailored to meet many needs. Within the work of the group sessions, many techniques may be utilized, according to the structure and needs of the group. One such technique is reflective journaling.

Reflective journals are mechanisms used to capture, interpret, and analyze personal experiences in order to facilitate reflection, learning, and interpersonal development. Reflective journaling in the educational setting allows students to write freely about their internal thought processes and provides an opportunity for students to

"mull over ideas, uncover inner secrets, and piece together life's unconnected threads, thus creating a fertile ground for significant learning" (Hubbs & Brand, 2005, p. 61). In the educational setting, reflective journaling allows students to tap into their thought processes and to engage in critical thinking linked to emotional functioning. Reflective journals can serve as a counseling tool (e.g., progress monitoring, focus of group sessions) within the group counseling setting. The reflective journal is a highly flexible means to further personal development of at-risk students in the hands of the school counselor.

In this paper, we will review the literature as it pertains to at-risk children, group counseling, and reflective journals. We will also provide practice suggestions for the use of reflective journals. In particular, we will review the function and purpose of reflective journaling as well as a discussion of samples of reflective journals (e.g., Older, Wiser) that may be used with at-risk students to allow them to succeed academically and interpersonally.

Review of Literature

Students At-Risk

Students in the educational system who are considered "at-risk" have been a focus for numerous studies (Elias, Hoover, & Poedubicky, 1997; Lesley & Kelley, in press; Mann, 2013; Thompson & Kelly-Vance; 2001). A student with an at-risk classification serves as an indicator to counselors and others in the education system that these students are failing or near failing school due to environmental or personal obstacles in their lives. Such obstacles or barriers to learning that an at-risk student faces greatly reduce their chances of academic success compared to their peers (Elias et al., 1997). In other words, "being 'at-risk' means that, in some way, the odds are stacked against a person" (Mann, 2013, p. 3). The multitude of factors that lead counselors to describe students as at-risk can be categorized as socio-cultural, cognitive, behavioral, economic, political, physical, or a combination of these phenomena (Bailey, 2006; Elias et al., 1997). ASCA suggested that all schools and communities have students that are at-risk for school failure and that it is essential that school counselors can identify, prevent, and intervene when students display harmful behaviors that may lead to devastating implications for their education and future (ASCA, 2014).

Many adversities could place a student at-risk (e.g., poverty, family dysfunction) for poorer life outcomes than students who are not at-risk. Some of the many risk factors which students may face include physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, divorce, parental incarceration, substance abuse, depression, poor social skills, social links to dysfunctional peers, poverty, and poor mental health (Acoa, 1999; Mullis, Cornille, Mullis, & Huber, 2004). The student who has these and other risk factors is also in danger of experiencing lower levels of academic achievement and a higher risk of school failure and drop-out (Dryfoos, 1990; Nunn & Parish, 1992; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001). The adversities at-risk students may experience can make learning in the classroom difficult as they try to cope with challenging circumstances. ASCA (2014) suggested that as at-risk students are trying to cope with trauma in their life, they are more likely to engage in destructive behaviors such as absenteeism, undermining their potential academically, violence, and substance abuse. Furthermore, these harmful behaviors will likely have lifelong

implications such as low self-esteem, abuse, substance abuse, interpersonal problems, neglect, and being haunted by grief (ASCA, 2014).

In addition to the aforementioned traumatic experiences, students placed at-risk due to economic disadvantage have been of particular interest for researchers; poverty has been suggested as a prominent factor in placing students at-risk (Battle, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Haycock, 2006 Newcomb, et al., 2002; Tate, 2008). Those students in the educational system who are deemed economically at-risk are members of households that fall within the poverty parameters for free and reduced lunch outlined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). According to the 2014–2015 USDA's guidelines for poverty, a family of four can annually earn a combined income of $23,850 or below for the child to receive free lunches at school and $44,123 or below for the child to receive reduced price meals (USDA, 2014). Free and reduced prices meals are a valuable resource to aid in helping students from economically strained families learn and engage in the classroom. Despite the benefits of free and reduced lunches, those who are economically disadvantaged are often learning in classrooms that are inferior to their economically stable counterparts. At-risk students often suffer academic inequalities by attending lower quality schools that have inadequate funding, overcrowded classrooms, outdated resources and technology, and the least qualified and least experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Haycock, 2006; Tate, 2008). Furthermore, students in poverty are more likely to be unsupervised after school and have parents that are less involved in their education due to low-wage jobs requiring parents to work more hours to make ends meet (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Tate, 2008). Such economic disadvantages create many academic barriers which demonstrate that low socioeconomic status (SES) is a very powerful predictor for school failure and places students at a high risk for dropping out (Battle, 2002; Newcomb et al., 2002).

The research addressing at-risk students suggests they are a vulnerable population in schools that could greatly benefit from higher levels of support in the educational setting (Lesley & Kelley, in press; Mann, 2013). According to ASCA's (2014) national and state goals for improving academic achievement, school counselors have the responsibility of providing support and reducing learning barriers for at-risk students. Many studies specifically focusing on at-risk students have shown that utilizing various group counseling approaches (e.g., Mann, 2013; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2011) with high levels of social support and adult mentorship (e.g., Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998; Scheel, Madabhushi, & Backhaus, 2009) have shown to be effective in promoting positive personal and academic growth for at-risk students.

Group Counseling

School counselors engage in a myriad of activities within the educational setting (e.g., advocating for students, collaboration with teachers), including group counseling. ASCA's National Model identifies group counseling as a key component of an effective comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2012). Group counseling provides a highly flexible vehicle for school counselors to provide assistance to a variety of populations and for a variety of concerns. Due to their training and accessibility, school counselors are ideally suited to provide group counseling to at-risk students within the school setting (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2007). At all educational

levels, school counselors can tailor groups to meet the needs of the populations they serve at the appropriate developmental level (Corey, 2012; e.g., social skills, victims of violence, divorce). Group counseling is an efficient yet efficacious way of providing treatment, prevention, remediation, and information to several students at once (ASCA, 2014; Corey, 2012).

Group counseling also provides a unique setting in which benefit is not gained just from the school counselor, but also from other group members (Kramer, Bernstein, & Phares, 2014). Interactions among group members are seen as a part of the group process and provide benefits not available in an individual counseling setting (Kramer, et al., 2014). Group counseling allows children and adults alike to understand that they are not alone in their concerns and to feel a connection to others with similar struggles (Kramer, et al., 2014). The group setting also allows for appropriate social interactions to be reinforced and positive peer relationships to be formed (ACA, 2007). Group members are also able to provide support and advice that may be helpful to the other group members (Kramer et al., 2014).

To maximize the benefits of group counseling to students, the function, design, and implementation of group therapy will vary. Techniques used within the sessions will also vary. Cognitive-behavioral techniques (e.g., challenging irrational thoughts, homework) are used significantly more than other techniques, as they tend to be relatively easily implemented and are typically effective (Kramer, et al., 2014). One specific cognitive-behavioral technique that has been used within the school setting is reflective journaling, which encourages self-awareness and critical thinking about thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This technique is discussed in detail next.

Reflective Journaling

The foundation of reflective journaling is anchored in Kolb's experiential learning theory which maintains a holistic view of learning in which a student combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior to increase learning (Kolb, 1984). Reflection allows a student to revisit and reframe an experience in order to derive meaning from it. As students learn from reflecting on their experiences, students are likely to engage in self-discovery which may prompt a positive change in behavior or coping skills. Additionally, reflective journaling also fosters critical thinking, increases empathy, and promotes a deeper understanding of one's own experience and how it is interwoven into the experiences of others (Furman, Coyne, & Negi, 2008).

Students do not necessarily have to be the most skilled writers to find meaning in journaling. Its purpose is not the expectation of eloquence or rote memory; rather, journaling should be used as a tool to form new perceptions about events that occurred (Hubbs & Brand, 2005). Even the most mundane topics should not be off limits. Counselors should create a safe environment where students can feel free to express their innermost thoughts without fear of negative consequences. For example, thoughts, feelings, memories, experiences, and cultural interactions are all subjective conscious processes that are valid topics for reflective journaling. Students can be encouraged to write in their most comfortable medium from paper and pencil to electronics.

Current research suggests it is crucial for counselors to advocate for safe spaces for minority and at-risk students to write and discuss personal and social issues. These spaces for writing serve as powerful tools in enabling these students to have their voices

and identities affirmed (Muhammad, 2012). In Twomey's (2011) *The Pink Voice* writing project, at-risk girls participated in a school-based literacy project that focused on the social and cultural challenges of being a girl. The girls responded favorably to writing about their lives as it made them feel more connected to others, allowed for freedom of expression without being judged, and served as a foundation to further their understanding of themselves (Twomey, 2011). In another study, Lesley and Kelley (in press) created an after school writing group with the purpose of facilitating the writing development of at-risk adolescent girls. Results of this study demonstrated the need for a safe space for girls to examine and work through the oppressive "invisible patriarchal discourses of gender" (Lesley & Kelley, in press). Although the original purpose of Lesley and Kelley's writing group was to help at-risk girls develop their writing skills, much deeper and complex issues of gender, identity, and dating roles emerged through their writings. Reflective journaling serves as a window into the lives of at-risk students as these studies have demonstrated. Reflective journaling is great strategy for counselors to learn about students and help them work through their life struggles.

Implications for School Counselors

School counselors can use reflective journals as a tool to advance the development of all students. Reflective journals can serve as a counseling tool in individual counseling, classroom guidance, and group counseling. Reflective journaling practices are a means to note student progress and offer perspective, insight, and suggestions for further learning (Andrew, 2011; Stewart, 2010). For school counselors, the reflective journal "holds potential for serving as a mirror to reflect the student's heart and mind" (Hubbs & Brand, 2005, p. 61). School counselors can use the reflective journals to gain deep insight into their students or use the students' work as a springboard to start a conversation.

In particular, group counseling is an effective means for school counselors to assist at-risk students in achieving academic and personal/social goals. The use of reflective journals in group counseling provides a means for those participating in the group to first express their feelings and thoughts on paper then discuss the writing in a safe environment with trusted peers. Reflective journal writing as part of the group process allows group members to participate in self-examination leading to self-discovery, self-evaluation, and self-expression (Burnett & Meacham, 2002). L'Abate (2001) indicated that journaling can help individuals develop coping strategies, teach participants how to solve problems together, help individuals prepare for counseling sessions so the sessions are more focused, and increase the respondent's sense of direction and responsibility. Reflective journals allow the school counselor to assign journal topics that focus on the issues that are relevant to individual group members or the group as a whole, providing a way for the group participants to connect what is taking place in the group to the problems they are experiencing in their academic and personal life (Zyromski, 2007).

The use of reflective journals in group counseling is limited only by the creativity of the school counselor. The following provides a sample of possible reflective journal assignments that may assist at-risk students in achieving academic and personal/social

goals. In each of the journal topics below, the school counselor can tailor the assignment to fit the current dynamics of the group.

Older, Wiser Journal Assignment

In the Older, Wiser journal assignment, group members are asked to imagine a time and place when they are older and wiser. The assignment asks group members to consider what alternatives that older and wiser person would suggest that would help them with their current problems. It also asks the group members to think about what the older and wiser person would tell them that would be comforting and help them take care of and nurture themselves. This journal assignment allows the group member to contemplate alternatives where they are not overwhelmed with their current problems (Kress, Hoffman, & Thomas, 2008).

Letter From a Friend Journal Assignment

Group members are asked to write a letter from the perspective of a friend or family member who knows the group member well. If a group member cannot think of a friend who would write the letter, he/she can imagine what a friend might write to him/her. The letter the friend writes focuses on the strengths of the group member. This reflective journal assignment allows the group members to consider how other people view them and gives the school counselor insight into how the group member sees him/herself.

Accomplishment Journal Assignment

The school counselor talks to the group about what a good day might look like for the group members. The assignment then asks group members to think about a time when they had a good day. While thinking about that good day, group members are asked to write about their strengths and resources, accomplishments, and what is positive in their life when they are doing well. This journal assignment helps group members to recognize accomplishments, to see that they do have strengths that they can use to make changes, and may give them hope that they can make changes (Kress et al., 2008).

Goal Journal Assignment

Group members are asked to identify an academic or personal goal. In the journal, group members indicate how they can reach the goal, what actions are needed to reach the goal, and how they will feel when they reach the goal. Group members use the journal to focus on specific goals that they want to reach while participating in the group (Kress et al., 2008).

Conclusion

Due to the environmental and/or personal obstacles present in the lives of at-risk students, there is a particular vulnerability for experiencing many negative educational outcomes such as academic failure, absenteeism, dropping out, and inappropriate behaviors (ASCA, 2011). School counselors can be markedly effective in reducing these potential negative educational outcomes for the at-risk students. Group counseling is one method by which school counselors can provide services that are effective and efficient

and can target specific areas of concern for the at-risk student. Within the group sessions, the potential uses of reflection journals by school counselors are vast and have particular importance and usefulness. Reflective journaling has been shown to have many positive outcomes such as promoting critical thinking skills, self-discovery, reflection, problem solving, and interpersonal development. For the at-risk student, reflective journaling provides a safe space in which the student has the opportunity to untangle and work through their life struggles with the support of a school counselor.

School counselors have the ability to be an invaluable resource to the at-risk student. Reflective journaling can be one of the many resources available to help the professional school counselor to help support the at-risk student. Although at-risk students will face a variety of obstacles within their lives, school counselors have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to help ensure more positive student outcomes (e.g., achievement, interpersonal skills) for a better life outcome.

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