
Planning Psycho-Educational Groups for Schools

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The purpose of this discussion is to support the creation of a viable psycho-educational group planning format that maximizes ethical considerations, applies group development, and exemplifies leader best practice. This structure is proposed for a fixed number of sessions on a particular topic and could be applied to almost any topic or age group. While it could similarly be applied to open groups with variable populations and even classrooms, the immediate application of this material was for small, closed groups of limited duration.

Need for the Group Counseling

While CACREP suggests that counselors should spend 25% of their clinical time (1994) in small group counseling while interning, suggesting a similar ratio of small group to overall school

counselor clinical time, one study indicates that the recommendation is not being met. In one “mid-sized” school district, high school counselors’ activities were painstakingly analyzed, and “no counselor reported doing any group counseling” (Curcio, Mathai, & Roberts, 2003). In spite of the efficiency (Corey, 2004; Gazda, Ginter & Horne, 2001; Gladding, 2002; Shapiro, Peltz & Shapiro, 1998) and the efficacy (Boutwell, & Myrick, 1992; Dinkmeyer, 1969; Praport, 1993; Tobias, & Myrick, 1999) of group counseling, it did *not* appear to be occurring. The school environment, like any other setting, is fraught with time challenges. Designing a group experience, along with getting parental permissions, recruiting a group, and implementing it, limits the possibility of small groups occurring.

Earlier in the history of groups, a therapist and a group of interest parties could meet together for 45 minutes or more without an agenda and a meaningful session would unfold (much like Yalom’s fascinating description in *The Schopenhauer Cure*, 2005). But schools today are pressed for increased accountability with No Child Left Behind and must justify activities and produce results. An open-ended, unstructured group is difficult to defend. Groups that have been designed with a specific topic in mind can be justified. In this article psycho-educational groups were studied in Middle Georgia and a particular activity in counselor training seems to be making a significant difference.

The Survey

As school counselors in Region 7, Middle Georgia, were beginning their 2005-2006 year, between August 10 and September 8, 2005 they were contacted and asked: a) if they knew of any counseling small groups that were conducted at their school in 2004-2005, b) who arranged and led the groups that happened, and c) what the group topics group were. The null hypothesis for

this study said that no difference would occur between counselors who were trained in planning included template in this article and those who were not.

One hundred seventeen schools were contacted by telephone. Sixty-three were elementary or primary schools; 22 were middle schools; 16 were high schools; and 16 were specialty schools, e.g., alternative schools or academies. Seven schools (usually alternative schools) did not have a counselor at this time; five of the schools did not return telephone calls to provide the requested information; one counselor was out on sick leave; three were uncomfortable providing the information; and 12 had new counselors who could not answer the questions.

Compared with the Virginia study (Curcio et al., 2003), where no counselors were meeting with small groups, Middle Georgia appeared to be a hot bed for small group activities. Of the 89 counselors who responded, an amazing 70 of them had lead small groups, which had met at least four consecutive times, the previous year. Forty-nine of the 70 (70%) counselors who lead small groups the previous year were trained in the planning model discussed here. About half of the 19 (47.4%) counselors who did not lead groups were also trained with this model—supporting the idea that doing or not doing groups is equally probable. A Chi-square analysis of this frequency of small groups occurring for FVSU and non-FVSU graduates generated an $\alpha = 8.10$, which is considerably greater than the 3.84 necessary for

Insert Table 1 about here.

significance (beyond .005 of 7.88). The null hypothesis is therefore rejected: a significant difference is occurring between these two groups of graduates.

These results in Middle Georgia could be associated with the creation a six-session psycho-educational small group program while they were at Fort Valley State University. (See Appendix A for a listing of the topics that were covered in these groups.) In addition to the processes, theories, and ethics of group leadership, these counselors left their master's program with a completed six-session small group lesson plan based on the format recommended in this article. They consequently implemented psycho-educational small groups in their school settings.

These results lend credibility to the thesis presented here: if counselors do not have the plans to perform a psycho-educational small group, when they start to work as a school counselor, then they will probably *not* arrange, recruit, and implement them. If they have completely this process and have at least one series of psycho-educational small group sessions planned, then they are more likely to utilize them and plan other groups to address psycho-educational topics.

The Planning Matrix

This six-session model suggests a minimal structure for bringing together a small group of people around a particular topic and allowing an opportunity for the benefits of group development to enhance the topic. In order to develop the concepts behind a successful group, a planning matrix has been provided that allows for inclusion of the most important issues:

Insert Table 2 about here.

- The focus of the sessions is titled and the ideal population named.
- Sessions are subtitled in a manner to describe their foci, preferably in an interesting manner.

- The teaching process for each of the sessions is detailed to avoid repetitive activities and to structure the sessions in a manner to stimulate interaction among the members.
- The first and last sessions include specific activities that are essential to the successful beginning and ending of psycho-educational groups.
- The topics are deliberately kept cognitive and general in the first two sessions and are more expressive and personal in sessions four and five.
- Session four often explores self-talk, cognitive issues, which permeate emotional, behavioral, and social events. This work is more abstract than earlier sessions but can be powerful.
- The fifth session might be developed around specific interactions that have been provided by the participants on 3 X 5 cards in the first session. Role-plays utilizing these problem situations provided by the group members ensure that the sessions will address the topics that the participants desired while applying the information and skills from earlier sessions.
- In the final session the topic of planning for the future will allow group members to consolidate what they have learned into an on-going strategy after the group has ended.

This structure is prescriptive in nature but should be considered as merely a starting point. Much like jazz musicians who know the chord progression and tune, the magic is in what is done with the planning. If the planning on the matrix is not done well, then the group experience will be compromised regardless of the strength of the topic, the leader, or the individual sessions.

Group Development

As the arrow on the right indicates in the diagram, earlier sessions should talk in general about the topics and avoid forcing members to disclose about the specifics of their experience too soon. “Have you seen *someone* who is angry [or whatever the group’s topic]” is preferable to “What is it like when *you* are angry?” Were they to disclose about themselves, that is their choice. The leader will want to monitor what is being said and be prepared to prevent the person from sharing too much, too soon. Later sessions, particularly four and five, can include more personal information since the group should have developed increased trust and safety by then.

The initial interactions in the group should focus on cognitive information, e.g., definitions, discussions of patterns, and education on the topic and progress to include more social and emotional material in the later sessions. Some have found it useful to think in terms of *ankle deep* wading through emotional topics in the first session; *knee deep* considerations in the second session; *waist deep* explorations in the third session; floating and swimming are reserved for the fourth and fifth sessions (*over the head*). The final session might have moments that are in the deep end but should return to the shallower end to assist in individual and group closure. Uncovering substantial information in the last session, or at the end of any session, complicates members’ and the group’s sense of closure, i.e., the feeling that they have completed a significant amount of work during the group. (See Tables 2 and 3.)

Insert Table 3 about here.

The First Session

As is the case with any small group, the first meeting of the group must accomplish several agenda while initiating the topic that is being discussed. Other issues related to the purpose of the group should be included, but these issues must also be covered:

- *Present confidentiality*—“What is said here, stays here.”
- *Explain how to leave the group*—“If you need to leave the group, I would prefer that you come to the group and explain why you need to leave.”
- *Review the purpose of the group*—“This group, as you and I have already discussed, will explore [name topic, e.g., adjusting to transitions like divorce]. Over the next several weeks, we will look at [name the weekly topics, e.g., Possible Reactions to Change, Logistical Issues, Financial Issues, Emotional Issues, What Do You Want? Facing Problem Situations, and Planning Your Future].”
- *Have the members meet each other*—“We are going to be spending time together over the next weeks, and you will find that the people around you have wonderful resources that could be helpful to you and you have resources that could be helpful to them. Maybe we could go around the circle and introduce ourselves. But as you give your name, say what [animal, color, or car] you see yourself as and why.”

Insert Tables 4 and 5 about here.

The temptation is to allow these important process issues to consume all the group time in the first session, but yield not to temptation. The group members need ideas and problems solved,

they and should get more than just the warm feelings of an accepting atmosphere, although they should receive those feelings as well. See a blank lesson plan in Table 4 and an example in Table 5.

Most first sessions in a psycho-educational group will offer definitions and generalities that will frame the discussion for the next several weeks. In the example of a divorce adjustment group, four to six cameos could be discussed, e.g., can't live without you, revenge, protect your heart, find another person, and learning from a bad trip. The more appropriate style could be offered last. While the leader and the structure of the session avoid overly personalizing the first session, group members will project their issues onto the cameos and possibly even respond with "that's me." Leaders can utilize this information in future sessions.

The discussion in the first session could also be an opportunity to have the group members write several problem situations that they would like to have better responses for on a card. This card can be turned in the first day, the leader can direct the future sessions toward addressing these topics, and the fifth session (in a six session structure) can involve role-plays of these situations where the information and skills from the earlier sessions are applied. This activity is the climax of the sessions.

Other first sessions might present the content in a way that defines the topic and allows general discussions of "people's reactions." A stress group might define "stress" and events that cause it. A stress test could be taken and talked about in general: "People who score under 100 have relatively little stress while people over 300 have a lot." Members might be paired off with someone "they feel comfortable with" and discuss which third (low, medium, high) they scored in without having to share their score with the entire group. A children's group on friendship

could have cameos of bullies, shy people, and people who have the courage to meet others. Communication skills could be outlined.

Homework assignments are often an intricate part of the process to encourage application of the information. Even in the first session homework assignments can be pressed for.

At the end of the group session every week, I would like for everyone to commit to a plan of action during the coming week. Think of a particular behavior that you would be willing to do and how many times during the next week you would be willing to perform that activity.

I recommend that group leaders avoid the one-size-fits-all homework assignment, e.g., “Everyone should journal five out of seven days this week,” in favor of the members focusing on something that they believe will help them accomplish what they were desiring when they came to the group. The model that is being adapted here comes from Glasser (2000). Time to commit to homework becomes an expected part of the group process and members are held accountable for their behavior with discussions of homework in the beginning of the next session.

The keys to the first session include making the group safe for everyone on the emotional level, doing diligence on the four topics that initiate the group, and giving the members some general ideas that will guide them in the future groups. With a specific homework assignment to work on, the first session has been well-started on numerous levels. Getting all of these topics covered in limited time requires planning and focus.

The Last Session

Like the first session, ending the group has special challenges because numerous issues must be covered. In general the counselor would probably have the group members look back at what

they got from the group, look forward to applying their development in the future, and say “goodbye” to each other. (See an example in Table 6.)

Insert Table 6 about here.

- *Looking back*—“As you look back at our weeks together, what would you say that you have learned?”
- *Looking forward*—“When you leave the group today, what can you do with the things you have learned, to address the issues that brought you to the group in the first place?”
- *Saying “goodbye”*—“I would like for each of you to have the opportunity to say something to the people who have made this journey you.” Then the leader can offer a structure for doing this activity.

In addition to these process topics, a brief teaching on creating effective plans or time management could provide members with tools to do “looking forward” better.

The two of most popular ways of bringing the social-emotional issues to closure involves the affirmation sheet of paper (usually placed on the person’s back) and the “cool seat” (unlike the “hot seat” that puts people on the spot and often gives them negative feedback). In the first, markers (usually colorful) are provided and sheet of relatively heavy paper is taped to the back of each person, including the group leader. Group members are to write something they appreciate about each person on the sheet. The leader needs to prepare mentally with several affirmations for each person and has the option of writing several statements on a sheet of heavy paper taped on each person’s back utilizing different colored markers. Since members are also writing on

others' sheets, they will not usually notice the leader writing more than one comment on some members' sheets. The sheets are removed and read by the person in the group without comment. After everyone reads their list, individuals can comment on their reaction to the process, but no one is allowed to minimize or disagree with the "gifts" they received. This activity is effective with any age group as long as they can write. Younger students might place stickers on the heavy sheet instead of writing.

The "cool seat" is more effective with older people and groups where they have had more than a minimal number of sessions. In this structure one member at a time sits in the chair in the middle of the group while the other members one at a time whisper affirmations in the person's ear from behind them. The moment is intimate and powerful for most people. After everyone has given and received, the group is reformed and the experience discussed. Again no one is allowed to cast aspersions on what they were given.

Whether or not the group will be able to function at the Working or Performing Stage of Development will not only depend on the leader's planning but also on the group's reaction to the structure. Some groups will be ready for deeper, social and emotional, issues in a couple of sessions while others may never reach that point. However, the leader can plan a process that would maximize the opportunity for members to explore appropriately more personal and emotionally risky topics.

Summary

This study suggests that small groups are more likely to occur when a structured, multi-session, psycho-educational lesson plan has been created while counselors are in their master's programs. Without an already existing process on paper and the knowledge of how to design psycho-educational groups, starting a group from scratch is too much to add to an already busy counselor

portfolio. If a topic is chosen that has immediate applicability to the school and the proposed process incorporates group dynamics and ethics into the prearranged lesson plans, the resulting small group is more like to occur and therefore possibly have an impact on the performance of the school. In Middle Georgia the counselors who had gone through the described planning process implemented small groups at a rate beyond their non-trained counseling peers.

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**APPENDIX A:
LISTING OF PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL SMALL GROUP TOPICS
HELD IN MIDDLE GEORGIA IN 2004-2005**

| Topic | Frequency |
|---|------------------|
| Friendship/Social skills | 19 |
| Anger Management | 16 |
| Family/Divorce | 15 |
| Behavioral Issues | 9 |
| Study Skills | 9 |
| Boy/girl/developmental issues | 8 |
| Peer Mediation/conflict resolution/ Tolerance/ team building | 8 |
| Grief | 6 |
| Self-esteem/self-concept | 6 |
| Academic | 4 |
| Transitions: New Students, Back from Alternative School | 3 |
| Military Deployment | 2 |
| Other: | |
| How to Deal with Bullies | 1 |
| Drugs/alcohol | 1 |
| Attention Deficit Disorder | 1 |
| Teen Pregnancy | 1 |
| Career | 1 |

**CHI-SQUARED TABLE FOR GROUP MATRIX PLANNING
AND GROUP USE IN 2004-2005**

| | Have Planned with Group Matrix Total-58 | Have Not Planned with Group Matrix Total- |
|--|---|---|
| Held group(s) in 2004-2005- Total 70 | 49 | 21 |
| Not held group(s) in 2004-2005-Total 19 | 9 | 10 |

Table 1. Frequencies of counselors in Middle Georgia who were trained using the Group Planning Matrix suggested in this article and the number of counselors who actually held psycho-educational groups in 2004-2005.

GROUP PROJECT PLANNING MATRIX

Title _____

Target population _____

| Session # | Topic Title | Teaching Process: How are you going to get them to talk with each other? |
|-----------|--|--|
| 1 | (Defining the terms) <i>Don't forget the four starting agendas.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subdivide the group into dyads to identify the issues with which they are most familiar. Do 3 X 5 card to be role-played in session five. <i>Have them talk in general about the topic.</i> |
| 2 | (Exploring the topic, e.g. triggers or consequences) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brainstorming aspects of the topic, e.g., "What causes stress?" |
| 3 | (Detailing solutions, e.g., breathing exercises or deep muscle relaxation) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce solutions, e.g. stress reduction exercises. Work in teams to respond to external issues and apply solutions. |
| 4 | (Self-talk: what are the cognitive components of this issue. For example, I tell myself, "I can't do it.") | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pair them off and have them choose which statements apply to themselves, e.g., "I take everything personally." <i>Have them talk about themselves concerning the topic.</i> |
| 5 | (Application of the insights and skills to the originally defined issues) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do a role-play with the initially stated (first session, 3 X 5 card) issues applying the skills learned in the previous weeks. |
| 6 | (Create a Plan) <i>Don't forget the three ending agendas.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commit to a specific plan for the next three months applying what has been learned in the group. |

Emphasize Cognitive Issues; Stay General



Emphasize Social & Emotional Issues; Personalize Topics

Table 2. A suggested Planning Matrix to assist the design of a psycho-educational group.

GROUP PROJECT PLANNING MATRIX (APPLICATION)

T³ – Terrific, Tough Tigers: Becoming the Eye of the Tiger (For elementary students)

| Session # | Topic Title | Teaching Process |
|-----------|--|---|
| 1 | What are terrific or terrible tigers? <i>Intro - purpose, rules, leaving group, confidentiality, contract</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write on 3x5 card problem/situations that hinders academic success • Handout with discussion/skit |
| 2 | Homework/time management Members will apply SQ3R to their weekly plan. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use Ideal week to monitor homework time & use of SQ3R • Subgroups to develop weekly plan. |
| 3 | Accountability: Getting Help to Do What You Say | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will use a behavior chart to evaluate actions described in scenarios. |
| 4 | The Goal: Cooperation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion – in pairs evaluate misbehavior, categorize misbehavior, share quality world |
| 5 | Putting the Pieces Together | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role-play – Members to apply strategies to situations listed on 3x5 cards or submitted by teacher/parents. |
| 6 | Terrific Tigers on the move determining their future <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Share what each member has learned</i> ▪ <i>Share how each members plans to apply new knowledge</i> ▪ <i>Affirm each member before saying goodbye</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to quality world – career goals • Commitment to chart/contract to improve school behavior |

Table 3. A Planning Matrix for a psycho-educational group helping elementary students to become more responsible. The school mascot is the Tiger. (A copy of this entire program can be acquired by contacting the senior author.)

LESSON PLAN: _____

Goal: _____

Outcomes:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

_____ **Warm-up activity:** _____ Needed materials: _____
Time _____

_____ **Review (if any):** _____ Processes: discussion brainstorm art role play
Time _____ handout paper'n'pencil

_____ **Teaching Point:** _____ Process: _____
Time _____

_____ **Main Activity:** _____ Process: _____
Time _____

_____ **Reinforcing Activity:** _____ Process: _____
Time _____

_____ **Discussion and Summary:** _____
Time _____

_____ **Homework (SAMIC3):** _____ Commitment: _____
Time _____

Table 4. A Lesson Planning sheet for a psycho-educational group.

LESSON PLAN 1: Becoming a Terrific Tiger

Goal: To introduce the group and teach effective homework techniques.

Outcomes:

1. Members will be able to repeat group rules.
2. Members will list two to three problems they are having that keep them from being successful at school.
3. Members will begin able to plan for homework success: repeat what SR3R is and name a time and place at home for studying.

10 mins. **Warm-up activity:** "What is a terrific tiger?"
Time

Needed materials: 3 x5 cards
Processes: Round-Robin

As students arrive, each participant will complete two to three cards listing problems that hinder school success.

School mascot is a tiger. Students will each get a chance to share, "What does a tiger like that is good in opinion?" Counselor will summarize students' responses, linking as many responses as possible. "What would a terrible tiger be like?"

0 mins. **Review (if any):**
Time

Processes: n/a

10 mins. **Teaching Points: Homework Shoebox**
Time

Process: Hands-on Lecture
Materials: shoebox & school supplies list

Provide students with a list of items needed for homework shoebox: pencils, pens, dictionary, paper, marker, colored pencils, glue, and scissors. Draw a floor plan of your home.

15 mins. **Main Activity:**
Time

Process: Discussion/Joke
Materials: paper n pencil/crayon/pen

Where could someone study in your house? When would be the best time to be in that place studying? How much time would they need? In math, english , history, science, or toher subject(s).

Tell the joke – *How do you eat an elephant? One small bite at a time!* (Counselor will link joke to a person's ability to change their behavior, students' goal and being a T³.)

5 mins. **Homework (SAMIC3):**
Time

Commitment: verbal

Students will state where they will store homework box and where they will complete their homework. Might have one student demonstrate coming home from school with assigned homework, using homework box and storing it safely.

Table 5. The first lesson plan for a psycho-educational group helping elementary students to become more responsible. The school mascot is the Tiger.

LESSON PLAN 6: Determining My Future

Goal: To teach members to celebrate and apply their six-week journeys.

Outcomes:

1. Members will share at least one thing that they learned.
2. Members will share how a plan that applies their new knowledge to the next 90 days..
3. Members will affirm each group member.

2 mins. Warm-up activity:

Time

Processes: Discussion

Needed materials: Scored Charts/Contracts

Group members will state one thing that they are particularly proud of that they have been able to accomplish since the group began.

3 mins. Teaching Point:

Time

Process: Lecture

Today we will look back and see what you have learned, look forward and see what you want to do over the next weeks to keep making progress , say “Good by.”

15 mins. Review (if any):

Time

Processes: Discussion and Application

Group members will review progress with contracts, share what was learned and how it will be used. Group members will summarize their progress with charts (behavioral contracts), share what was learned and how it will be used.

10 mins. Main Activity:

Time

Process: Modified Cool Chair

Each member will take a turn sitting in the center. Other members will stand to the members right side and say positive words about the person, how the people has helped/inspired or speak words of encouragement to the person.

5 mins. Homework (SAMIC3):

Time

Commitment: personal contract

Members will make a public declaration of their career goals and their plan to reach their goals for the next 90 days.

Table 6. The last lesson plan for a psycho-educational group helping elementary students to become more responsible.