

Article 2

Using Career Counseling to Influence Minority Dropout Rates

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Dropout rates are high for all students; but among minority students, these numbers range from 50% for African Americans to 53% for those who are Hispanic (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Swanson, 2004). It has been suggested that a correlation exists between the high minority dropout rate and high stakes standardized testing as mandated by the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002; McNeil, Coppola, & Raddigan, 2008; Walden & Kritsonis, 2008). It becomes crucial, therefore, that counselors advocate for change in policies and implement programs to assist minority children.

In order that counselors understand suggested reasons for high dropout rates and their implications, the following section will describe the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002). Advocacy for specific improvements in the act are discussed followed by a specific program school counselors can implement to aid the career and academic development of at risk students.

No Child Left Behind and Advocacy

During the 1900s, education was a luxury only afforded by upper class families (Wise, 2008). By the 1960s, all children were being educated and the United States ranked first in the world in number of high school graduates. Since this time, however, the nation has dropped to 13th in the world when comparing number of high school graduates (Wise, 2008). It has also been noted that the make-up of the United States' population is gradually shifting from an Anglo majority population to one comprised of disadvantaged minority individuals (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002) was enacted with the intent of closing the achievement gap among Anglo and minority students and raising standards so all students could perform more competitively in the world market. To accomplish this, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002) requires that all schools administer annual standardized tests to measure student progress. By the year 2014, all students must be proficient in reading and math as measured by the aforementioned tests. Schools failing to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) in raising low-scoring students' results to proficiency face stringent penalties. Subgroups of students (i.e., economically disadvantaged students, students from major ethnic groups, and students with limited English proficiency) are reported upon by category. Despite the *No Child Left Behind Act's* (2002) intent that these measures improve learning for all students, research now exists suggesting a connection between the minority dropout rate and this policy (McNeil, Coppola, & Raddigan, 2008).

Several reasons have been touted for this phenomenon, the first of which may be complacency. A Center on Education Policy report concluded that the historical gap between Anglo and minority students decreased (Kober, Chudowski, & Chudowski, 2008). While this is encouraging, it is important to note that most of the increases were among elementary children. The report also does not consider the number of high school students who dropout and consequently will not take standardized tests. Counselors must advocate that

lawmakers consider consequences of policies on middle and high school students. While touting successes among elementary children, policy makers must be held accountable should they ignore minority dropout rates.

Second, dropout rates may have increased because minorities, who have traditionally performed below their peers on standardized tests, are now viewed as deficits to schools trying to attain 100% passing rates (McNeil, Coppola, & Raddigan, 2008). With many school administrators and teachers facing individual penalties for student failure (e.g., lack of tenure, lower pay, potential job loss), stakes for student test performance are high (McNeil, Coppola, & Raddigan, 2008). In an attempt to block low performing students from taking annual tests, educators are tempted to remove or retain large numbers of minority students so they cannot be reported in yearly results. The result is a large number of minority dropouts who may have finished school had a more accepting environment been established. Counselors must advocate that schools and students be rewarded for progress and success in addition to reaching criteria. Linn (2005) also suggests advocating for alternative measures of assessment in lieu of using only one particular test.

Finally, the high stakes environment leaves little time for the establishment of student/educator relationships. Students must experience a sense of belonging to the school and establish a relationship with at least one adult if they are to be successful (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Those at risk of dropping out of school are particularly vulnerable in a hostile environment and need caring, accepting schools (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Glasser (1999) further stressed the necessity of relationships by emphasizing the human's need for love and belonging. Secondary school counselors can therefore help offset negative aspects of the *No Child Left Behind Act* by facilitating relationships between teachers, mentors, and at risk minority students. The following program incorporates aspects of De Shazer's (1988) solution focused brief therapy and Glasser's (1999) reality therapy such that a caring environment is created and career maturity developed.

Description of Program

The program consists of four distinct components: mentorship, small group solution-focused counseling sessions, psychoeducational career lessons led by counselors and mentors, and implementation of solution-focused skills within the classroom. A description of each component along with program placement follows.

Program Placement

At risk secondary school students can be screened and placed into the program through teacher, parent, or principal recommendation due to failing grades, low state test scores, attendance, and/or behavior concerns. Students are placed into two groups. The first group consists of every student selected into the program while the second placement is into a small group of seven or eight students. In addition, mentors are matched to individual students based on similar interests, ethnicity, and gender.

Mentorship Component

Mentorship is especially helpful in establishing positive relationships in the school setting (Britner et al., 2006; Murray, 1997). Due to the aforementioned problems associated with the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002), at risk students are often treated as school deficits. It is not surprising, therefore, that many at risk students report experiencing criticism and never feeling accepted (Page, 2006). Mentors can counter these attitudes through unconditional positive regard and encouragement (Murray, 1997).

Volunteer adult community mentors are assigned to and meet with each student weekly. Mentors should be selected based on their ability to pass a background check (per local or state district policy), willingness to attend training sessions, and commitment to meet weekly with students. Consistency of meetings is crucial since abandonment by a mentor can negatively influence at risk students (Murray, 1997). Mentors listen to student concerns and offer empathy, support, and advocacy while modeling good behaviors and

decision making. For many at risk minority students, this may be the first time an adult has offered to listen without criticism, accept without condition, and instilled a rationale for perseverance. It is suggested that mentors consult with the school counselor at the conclusion of each student meeting. This enables school counselors to stay informed and assist mentors with any difficulties or issues not discussed in trainings. In addition, school counselors offer students an opportunity to discuss mentoring sessions before, during, or after small group counseling sessions.

Solution Focused Group Component

The small group concept uses solution focused brief therapy which allows students opportunities to share positive accomplishments, refocus thoughts on positive personal traits that led to past successes, exceptions to problems, and leadership skills (De Shazer, 1982; Metcalf, 1995). Solution focused brief therapy contends that students are able to create positive change by focusing on times when problems are not occurring (De Shazer, 1982; Littrell et al., 1995). By using solution focused techniques such as the miracle question, exception questions, complimenting, and scaling questions, these meetings focus on empowerment as opposed to victimization and thus may aid at risk students who need to overcome survival and social or emotional issues to attain career maturity.

Glasser (1999) indicates that humans want to be heard in order to fulfill a need for power. Small group sessions allow students freedom to share thoughts in an accepting environment. In addition, added peer support offers motivation to make positive changes and helps students rationalize behavior changes that lead to better academic achievement (Murray, 1997; Quane & Rankin, 2006). Weekly solution focused brief therapy sessions offer groups of seven or eight students the opportunity to change from a problem focus to a solution or positive focus.

The first session is an opportunity for students to become acquainted. Students bring pictures of family, pets, or fun events to the first meeting. After sharing these pictures with the group, students

are asked the miracle question, “If a miracle happened and suddenly everything in your life became perfect, what would be different?” The group shares thoughts and is asked to think about this question over the next week. The following meeting consists of a more in depth discussion of this question and students mark their level of disturbance on a scale numbered from 1 (the problem is in total control) to 10 (the student is in total control).

At the beginning of each subsequent session, students are asked to write a list of improvements and share with the group. Rather than dwelling on negative issues, students are asked questions such as, “What is going better this week?” When a student mentions something that is not going well, other students are taught to point out exceptions. For example, a student might say, “My grades are terrible this week.” Other students are asked to think of times when this is not true. Another student might say, “Your art teacher liked your drawing this week.” The school counselor (group leader) would ask an exception question such as, “Name a time when you had a good grade and tell us what was different when it occurred?”

Next, the counselor asks a scaling question such as, “On a scale from 1-10, with the number 1 meaning the problem controls you and the number 10 indicating that you control the problem, where are you? What would it take for you to move up the scale just one number?” This question empowers students because it places control in their hands rather than within another person or entity. In this respect, Naylor’s (1989) contention that effective dropout prevention programs help students resolve personal problems is imbedded into the session.

These sessions offer an accepting environment where student thoughts and ideas are valued. Naylor (1989) stated that the establishment of a caring positive environment was crucial in retaining at risk students. As a result, a sense of belonging to the group and consequently to school is an intentional byproduct of these sessions.

Solution Focused Strategies in the Classroom

Teachers are trained to focus on students’ positive attributes

in lieu of simply correcting students when they misbehave or fail. This changes the focus of the classroom from one of denigration to that of encouragement. Teachers write down times when students are performing well or have shown improvement. These lists can be given to the school counselor to share with students in small group counseling sessions or teachers can share the list privately with students when they are demonstrating misbehavior. As a result, the classroom focus is changed from that of students who must overcome behavior or academic problems to one of detecting positive accomplishments. This is important for at risk minority students since Bennacer (2000) and Pierce (1994) found that a focus on punitive measures increased a student's probability of dropping out of school.

Psychoeducational Group Sessions

Psychoeducational sessions are used to teach social skills, disseminate career information that leads to goal setting, create a sense of belonging to the group, support among all members, and as opportunities to participate in fun activities. Training in social skills has been shown to improve students' classroom behaviors (Gresham, Van, & Cook, 2006) and possessing a career goal has been suggested as a protective factor that leads to healthy student development (Fleming, Woods, & Barkin, 2006). The *ASCA National Model* (2003) states that school counselors work with students on three domains: academic, personal/social, and career. As such, career information and development are important parts of the program.

Students meet as one large group once a month to discuss career information and goal setting, learn social skills, participate in fun activities, and create a sense of belonging. Every other month, a different guest speaker from the community presents information about personal career development and skills needed for job attainment. On alternating months, students participate in fun activities such as field trips (tours of university campuses or job sites are especially relevant), or games (volleyball, croquet, or any number of other activities students might select).

The result is a program intended to offset many of the

negative consequences of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002) while instilling career development. The program replaces feelings of failure with a positive career emphasis. Feelings of rejection, failure, and boredom can be replaced with empowerment as students develop close relationships, attain a rationale for educational endeavors, and manage personal issues.

Conclusion

School counselors can advocate for policy changes within the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002) while implementing programs to both aid the educational endeavors and decrease the dropout rates of at risk minority students. The principles found in reality therapy (Glasser, 1999) and techniques from solution focused therapy (De Shazer, 1982, 1988) can be used to implement a strengths based approach to helping the career and academic development of students. Small group counseling sessions, psychoeducational career sessions, mentorship, and a solution focused intervention implemented by classroom teachers are program components that together form a school based career counseling program with the potential to reduce dropout rates among minority students. Advocacy for policy changes along with the implementation of this program will result in a better educated class of minority students with greater academic and career potential, maturity, and choices.

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