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A Choice Theory Counseling Group Succeeds with Middle School Students Who Displayed Disciplinary Problems

* *This We Believe* Characteristics

- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
- School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
- Multifaceted guidance and support services

*Denotes the corresponding characteristics from NMSA's position paper, *This We Believe*, for this article.

Sara Meghan Walter, Glenn W. Lambie, & Evadne E. Ngazimbi

Middle school students are in a stage of transition to young adolescence that is characterized by unique developmental needs. While the majority of middle school students are able to manage this transition without problems, a significant number of students experience distress and disengagement during this time (Kruczek, Alexander, & Harris, 2005). This distress may be manifested in students' behavior in the form of disciplinary misconduct. According to teachers, misconduct in schools (e.g., cursing, grabbing, verbally abusing teachers, breaking school rules, and general disorder in the classroom) was more common than violent incidents involving weapons, drugs, or extreme, delinquent acts (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2004). Passaro, Moon, Wiest, and Wong (2004) noted that traditional discipline methods used by educators, such as time-out away from the classroom, have not been found to be effective in reducing problem behaviors. These authors stressed the need for a more "therapeutic intervention" (p. 504) for these students. In addition, the common practice of school suspension in response to school disciplinary problems also has not been found to be an effective means of addressing these students' needs (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005). For the concerned middle level educator, it is necessary to understand the prevalence and potential impact of school misconduct on a student's academic, career, and social development. Furthermore, by analyzing how schools are responding to students who present with discipline problems, implications may be drawn for educators as to how to effectively support these students.

Improvements have occurred in school safety over the last decade. The violent crime victimization rate in United States public schools declined from 48 per 1,000 students in 1992 to 28 per 1,000 in 2003 (NCES, 2004). However, the same NCES data indicated that 87% of middle schools reported at least one incidence of violence, and 29% reported at least one incidence of serious violence. Schools with higher reports of student misconduct and discipline problems were also more likely than schools that report fewer problems to experience violent and seriously violent incidents (NCES, 2004). The majority of public schools (54%) reported taking serious disciplinary action for classroom disorder (Miller, 2003). Middle schools were more likely to experience fighting incidents among students, bullying, verbal abuse of teachers, and widespread disorder in the classroom than high schools or elementary schools (NCES, 2004). These findings emphasized the importance of seeking effective and empirically-based approaches and interventions to assist these young adolescents.

The purpose of this article is to provide middle level educators with an orientation to the

theoretical constructs and tenets of Choice Theory (Glasser, 1998) as both a preventive and remedial framework for supporting the development of students exhibiting school disciplinary behavioral problems. The following three topics are addressed: (a) issues relating to school disciplinary problems, (b) the theoretical constructs and tenets of Choice Theory as a guide for group counseling or other educational interventions in school, and (c) a case example illustrating the application of this approach by a middle school counselor. This article is aligned with *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association, 2003), which states that effective middle schools facilitate a learning environment that is supportive and safe for all young adolescents. *This We Believe* (2003) goes on to advocate that "successful schools for young adolescents provide multifaceted guidance and support services" (p. 32).

Issues relating to school disciplinary problems

Students who exhibit behavioral patterns that result in frequent disciplinary actions at school are at risk for a host of additional problems involving their peer groups and future behaviors. For example, Dishion, Nelson, and Yasui (2005) found that student perception of peers' rejection and antisocial behavior in sixth and eighth graders was predictive of gang involvement. In a comprehensive study in Finland, young adolescents who exhibited delinquent behavior, for which milder behavioral problems were often precursors, were significantly more likely than other youth



to show signs of depression (Ritakallio, Kaltiala-Heino, Kivivuori, & Rimpela, 2005). Finally, school dropouts were significantly overrepresented in the United States prison population (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005), suggesting a link between school attrition and delinquent behavior.

Middle schools are challenged to implement effective methods of addressing behavioral problems of students. Christle and colleagues (2005), noting the lack of effective techniques used by school personnel to promote compliance in the schools with high suspension and dropout rates, found that school administrators and other personnel lacked effective behavioral management skills. Approximately 50% of the public schools in the United States reported that their ability to limit or reduce violent behavior was hampered due to insufficient teacher training in classroom management (NCES, 2004).

Glasser (1998) wrote that our widespread dependence on reactions, threats, and punishment has consistently been unsuccessful in improving students' behavior and academic achievement. Although many schools have adopted alternatives to traditional out-of-school suspension, suspension has been a common method for managing discipline problems in schools. Of the 54% of schools that took serious disciplinary action for classroom disorder (Miller, 2003), 83% of those actions included suspension for five days or more (NCES, 2004). Beck (1997) suggested that instead of fostering a sense of belonging that is often lacking in students with discipline problems, suspensions make it difficult for students to participate in school activities or social interaction. Thus, the current practice of suspending students may be further contributing to their educational failure.

The research has suggested that at-risk middle school students do not believe their needs for belonging are met in school (Beck & Malley, 1998). Additionally, the importance children place on school declines when they reach young adolescence (Davis & Lambie, 2005). During middle school, students begin the practice of changing classes, and it is then that incidents of fighting increase over levels found in elementary schools. In fact, the number of classroom changes the school has in a typical day was the only school organization and management practice associated with the level of violent incidents in the school (Miller, 2003). Although this may be, in part, a reflection of an increased amount of unsupervised time and difficulties some young adolescents have with transitions, it may also indicate that the lack of belonging to a group or class has an alienating effect on students. Further, many schools choose to adopt zero-tolerance policies in

response to certain infractions, which encourage extreme and unreasoned responses, such as extended suspensions, and thus further deteriorate any sense of belonging the student may have (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001). Therefore, many middle school organizational and disciplinary practices may contribute to students' lower levels of belonging and, thus, increased poor behavior, producing a negative cycle of an administrative reaction to student behavior that then results in further disengagement and misbehavior.

Loyd (2005a) asserted that many researchers support the concept of the association of unmet needs and disruptive behavior. Because a student's need for belonging in a school may affect his or her behavior, it is important for school personnel who handle student disciplinary problems to be familiar with theoretical frameworks that address this area of young adolescent development. Choice Theory (Glasser, 1998) acknowledged the significant power of the need for belonging in motivating students in school. Choice Theory explains that young adolescents make ineffective behavioral choices in an attempt to fulfill their basic needs (Loyd, 2005a). Reality Therapy, Choice Theory's clinical application, has been found to be successful in reducing discipline problems and inappropriate behaviors (Passaro, Moon, Wiest, & Wong, 2004). Johnson (1985) suggested that Choice Theory principles may be applied in middle schools by giving students opportunities to choose projects and to feel power and control by giving them choices and options as well as maximizing opportunities for student involvement and input. Applying these principles resulted in students viewing school as a more desirable place to be (Johnson, 1985). Additionally, Passaro and colleagues (2004) reported that at-risk middle school students who were supported with a Reality Therapy intervention in an in-school support room showed a 42% improvement in their average daily behavior ratings as well as a 12% decrease in the total number of out-of-school suspensions over the course of an academic year.

Choice Theory principles focus on the attitudes and behaviors that are particularly problematic for the at-risk student. For example, one characteristic that is associated with students who have been identified as "at risk" is having a high external locus of control (Levin, 1992). Choice Theory focuses precisely on the issue of helping the student to develop personal responsibility, thus shifting toward a higher level of internal locus of control. Research has suggested that Reality Therapy techniques may be effective in producing changes in students' locus of control orientation (Holleran, 1981; Loyd, 2005b), allowing students to see how their own actions may affect their personal outcomes. Further, Loyd (2005b) suggested that educators employing Choice Theory teach "students to satisfy their needs in appropriate and effective methods," which "may help decrease disruptive and destructive behavioral choice, and may increase behavioral choices that effectively satisfy their needs" (p. 10).

Choice Theory

Choice Theory (Glasser, 1998) has been used in a variety of educational settings. The name "Choice Theory" evolved from its original name "Control Theory," which was developed by William Glasser and evolved from his successes with Reality Therapy. Glasser stated that people have control over their own behavior and, therefore, responsibility for the outcome of their behavioral choices (Howatt, 2001). Further, Glasser suggested that students have the forces within themselves, as opposed to external influences, to control their behavior.

Choice Theory asserts that humans perceive the world and choose behaviors based on the reality that exists in their own minds. Furthermore, individuals set their own goals and are not seen as victims of circumstance; rather, people have the opportunity to choose goals and make changes in their lives. Thus, Choice Theory may be seen as an empowering philosophy (strength-based), as it is the individual alone who may create the world he or she desires.

According to Glasser (1998), people are internally motivated by five genetic needs: (a) survival, (b) love and belonging, (c) power, (d) freedom, and (e) fun. Behavior is seen as purposeful and driven by these needs that all people share. Although all individuals have these needs, the strength and importance of these needs vary.

Within Glasser's approach, students' behaviors are their best attempts at satisfying these needs, getting them closer to the ideals for these needs that are in their "quality worlds."

Quality world

Glasser (1998) wrote that all people have developed a group of specific pictures in their minds of the people, ideas or systems, and things that represent or portray their basic needs. The quality world is created after birth and is continually re-created by the individual throughout life. For a middle school student, the need for power might be represented by a picture of a certain piece of expensive electronic equipment (e.g., Xbox, PlayStation 3, cell phone) or a particular position on a team (e.g., the quarterback or pitcher). If students are primarily driven to satisfy their need for power, these pictures would dominate their quality worlds. Choice Theory asserts that people (relationships) are the principal components of our quality worlds and that these are the people we most want to connect with (Glasser, 2001).

Total behavior

Some of the basic axioms of Choice Theory relate to behavior. Glasser (2001) explained that (a) all we do is behave, (b) all behavior is chosen, and (c) all behavior is "total behavior," which is comprised of four components: acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology. An individual has direct control of the acting and thinking components of total behavior and indirect control over the feeling and physiology components. According to Glasser, people choose certain actions and thoughts, which then result in certain feelings and physiological reactions. For example, a student may not choose to perspire while running a race but does choose to run, which then results in the body responding physiologically by perspiring.

This perspective has implications for the role an individual may play in affecting his or her own feelings. The language of Choice Theory is connected to intervention, and Glasser goes so far as to change traditional illness labels into verb forms. Depression becomes *depressing*, or *choosing to depress*. Not only does this change in the use of language denote the learned, active component of any total behavior, but it instills optimism and self-efficacy in the individual by implying that, since these behaviors are chosen, he or she is free to make a different, better choice and that he or she has power to turn misery around.

Reality therapy

Reality Therapy may be seen as the implementation of Choice Theory, where the educator teaches students the basic tenet of Choice Theory: *the only person I can control is myself*. The educator emphasizes what the students may choose and how different choices may bring them closer to the people that they need in their lives. Reality Therapy is present-oriented, because revisiting the past supports students' attempt to avoid facing the real problems of the present. The focus is on changing current behaviors so that students may meet their needs more effectively.

Stages of choice theory

The first part of the Reality Therapy process is setting the stage for the conditions that lead to behavioral changes. Glasser (2001) stressed that the relationship between an educator and a student is crucial to effective outcomes. The relationship should be transparent and time should be devoted to expressing empathy and developing rapport and trust. This safe and satisfying relationship forms the base from which students may evaluate the other relationships in their lives and how to get what they want more effectively. According to Glasser, supporting young adolescents includes teaching them about total behaviors and helping them to realize that they are choosing the behaviors they are exhibiting. The educator asks if what the student is doing is bringing him or her closer to satisfying his or her needs and assists the student in exploring

different possibilities and choices. The educator serves to convey hope and to empower the students, to help them realize a sense of optimism and to advocate for them when they engage in responsible decision making.

Glasser (2001) advocated that Choice Theory is strong in terms of its preventive power. Students are educated in the theory, which becomes a framework for a set of life skills that can guide the student beyond counseling. Students' understanding of needs and their power to make behavioral choices that effectively satisfy these needs contributes to improved functioning in the future. The theoretical tenets of Choice Theory are applicable to nearly all aspects of a student's life and may be helpful in different settings and life stages. As students make effective behavioral choices and model responsibility for themselves to others around them, other people may be influenced and positively affected. Corey (2004) suggested special relevance for Reality Therapy in group work with children and adolescents in school settings.

The middle level educator's role with students who have disciplinary problems

The developmental needs of young adolescents have implications for the programs and services middle school teachers and counselors deliver (Akos, 2005), and these needs, specifically the need for belonging, should be a primary focus of middle school counseling programs and other educational interventions (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005). With their practices, educators may seek to maximize school connectedness by working to provide a social environment that meets middle school students' core developmental need for belonging. Beck and Malley (1998) underscored the need for the school's involvement in meeting an individual's belonging needs. Other significant developmental needs of these students include (a) opportunities to demonstrate competence, (b) acceptance by peers, and (c) opportunities for autonomy (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Because peers become much more influential during this time in their development (Kruczek et al., 2005), counseling and teaching young adolescents in groups are strategies well suited to promoting student belonging through positive peer interaction. When group participants are carefully and purposefully selected, group counseling and learning activities may provide students who lack appropriate behavioral skills the opportunity to learn from students who are perceived as having these skills. Dalbech (1981) suggested that middle school students are more likely to be receptive to comments about how to establish responsible behavior from peers than from adults.

Case example illustrating Choice Theory's application with group

The following case example offers a description of a group led by the first author in her capacity as a middle school counselor in an urban, primarily African American, parochial middle school. Referrals from teachers for students who presented with general behavioral problems that resulted in frequent disciplinary action by the school comprised a significant portion of the student load. She was faced with the task of serving these students in a way that not only effectively influenced as many students as possible but also met the developmental needs of these students.

The students on the referral list for school behavioral problems exhibited some common characteristics: (a) most were low achievers academically; (b) they spent a significant portion of their time both in class and in individual counseling wanting to blame, criticize, and complain; and (c) they had serious complaints about the school climate. In fact, school climate issues were often brought up by the students in the school, even those who were successful academically and seen as peer leaders. Students complained that the school facilities were inadequate and that the school offered few opportunities for fun and recreation. The school did indeed have few resources; there were no sports teams, extracurricular clubs, or field trips for any of the grades. Students reported feeling little sense of connection to the school. This was exacerbated by the fact that students lived long distances from the school and traveled to school in the morning with their parents or caregivers who worked in nearby city settings.

Counseling groups in this school were traditionally problem-oriented; students who were found to be appropriate candidates for group counseling were typically placed in groups with a goal of addressing problems common to all the group members. Rather than forming a group of students on the referral list specifically to address their behavior problems, the counselor formed a "leadership group," based on the principles of Choice Theory and learning teams described by Glasser (1998). Specifically, the group was to be given a broad task and maximum autonomy over the scope of the group goal and the process of achieving the outcome. The stated purpose of the group was to give students with the common perception of a negative school climate the opportunity to be active and influential in making a tangible improvement to the school.

The group was also designed to address the specific social and emotional characteristics described by Osher and Fleischman (2002) as crucial for success, especially in urban, minority schools: (a) fostering caring connections, (b) providing positive behavioral supports, and (c) building social and emotional skills. The group consisted of six members. Three students who had been referred for behavioral problems were included, as were an equal number of students who were identified as academically successful and positively viewed by peers and teachers. Dalbec (1981) used a similar practice of grouping students with behavior problems with successful students. Akos (2005) also suggested that middle school counselors should seek to capitalize on the developmental importance of the peer group by "utilizing mentors to help shape positive identities" (p. 97). The group consisted of 10 meetings and the content of the group is described in the following three phases.

Phase I (group meetings 1–3)

The initial group meeting consisted of an activity meant to help establish a trusting relationship between the students and counselor. Glasser (2001) described this relationship as primary for successful counseling outcomes. Their first task was to contrast how the work to be done in the group would be different from a typical classroom experience. They talked about confidentiality and its significance on the group process and the comfort level of the students. They also talked about counselor and student roles, emphasizing that this group would be different than other projects in school, in that the students would be responsible for determining the direction and outcome of the group.

In this group they started out by discussing the qualities of a leader. The students were amazingly insightful and offered comments to the counselor their teachers would have been surprised to hear. Some examples included: "A leader brings out the best in other people." "A leader serves others." "A leader sets an example and inspires others." "A leader keeps on trying and doesn't let obstacles get in his way." "A leader listens to others and includes everyone in decisions." The counselor wrote down these statements on a large poster and left it tacked on the wall during group sessions.

During the next session, students were encouraged to share examples of people they thought of as leaders. One of the female "success" students shared her belief that her father, who had been fatally shot by another man during an altercation when she was six years old, was a leader; she is inspired by his spirit to do her best and treat other people well. The other students were touched by this disclosure. It seemed to propel the group toward a deeper level of cohesiveness. Providing the opportunity for students to effectively satisfy their need for belonging enabled the group to proceed to the active work in the following sessions.

After the students had reached a consensus on the qualities of a leader, they were given the opportunity to decide as a group how they would go about making the first attempts at improving the quality of the school climate; this recognized the students' need for power and control over the learning process. At first, the students disagreed; however, after considering the different ideas, they offered respectful feedback and were able to reach a consensus on an idea, which was to organize and host a fun social event for the middle school. The counselor told the students that it would be up to them to come to agreement on the idea and to take the necessary steps, such

as getting school approval, fundraising, and planning to implement the idea.

Phase II (group meetings 4–8)

The most challenging part of the process was agreeing on an idea for a task or activity that would contribute to an improvement in the school climate for the students. Many suggestions were rather dramatic and extreme, and there were some conflicts. However, it did not take the students long to realize, themselves, that they could follow the statements they had just generated that were written on the poster. Soon, they agreed to a diplomatic process for generating ideas. They took this process seriously and decided to get the opinions of classmates who were not in the group. They quickly agreed to devise a questionnaire to distribute and generated ways of dividing the tasks, such as photocopying, asking teachers for permission to hand out the survey, and making a secret ballot box for the surveys.

During the next session, the students read and tallied the results of the school survey. The student body had voted on a dance. The students realized that before they could proceed with their plan, they needed to have the permission of the principal. Since this was an activity that the school had never before offered, the students felt they would have to carefully present their idea and anticipate his possible objections. Two of the students volunteered to be on a sub-committee to take the plan to the principal, where they reviewed the social and emotional purposes of the group, and he supported their plan.

The students were so thorough in their planning that they devised a permission slip for students with a "code of conduct" on the paper. Students and their parents or guardians had to sign the slip as an admission ticket for the dance. They developed a plan for dealing with discipline problems, sold the idea of a \$10.00 entrance fee to the students, arranged for food, included the student body in the selection of music, designed clever skits performed during morning announcements to inform the other students of the dance, and bought decorations. The counselor's role during this process was primarily to observe, support, and listen to their reports on their progress.

Although many students lived far away and had transportation issues and challenges with paying the entrance fee, almost all of the middle school was at the event. There was not one incident of misbehavior, and none of the chaperones ever had to discipline the children. When parents and caregivers came to pick the students up, they were so engaged in watching the children have fun that they got involved in the party and stayed to have cake and chat with each other. The chaperones finally had to announce that it was time to clean up and go home.

Phase III (group meetings 8–10)

During the final group meetings, students had the opportunity to process the experience of the group and the planning and implementation of their idea. Students shared (a) what they thought about the event, (b) what they did that worked, (c) what they would do differently if they were involved in a similar project in the future, and (d) how they felt about their input and contributions to the process. The group members were quick to praise and recognize each other for their contributions. We talked about group dynamics and what they learned about their own work styles and the work styles of others, as well as points during the process when they felt frustrated or concerned that it would not turn out as they hoped. Finally, the group was concluded by allowing the students to share individually what the process had meant to them. One of the students who had been referred to the counselor summed it up best: "What I liked about this group was that we got the choice about what to do. We got to pick out something that interested us. There wasn't anyone trying to control us every minute, and that's why it turned out so good."

Implications for middle level educators

During the group process, teachers reported that they observed improvements in the behavior of students on the referral list who were participating in the group. Specifically, several teachers remarked that the students seemed to be more engaged in their subject classes. None of the students were subjected to school disciplinary interventions during their participation in the group. Furthermore, the "success students" who participated in the group often sought me out during their free time to talk about their progress and ideas. These students presented themselves as more engaged, enthusiastic, and happier than before the group started. After the dance, a parent approached me and told me that she had responded to an earlier school needs assessment survey by indicating that she would like to see the school do more to make school more enjoyable for the students. She remarked on how glad she was that "someone had listened to her."

The successful outcome of this counseling group was facilitated by the acknowledgement of the students' developmental needs described within the framework of Choice Theory (Glasser, 1998, 2001). By providing a safe environment where students could satisfy their need for belonging, fun, and power within a group and by giving the students choices regarding tasks, students made behavioral choices that effectively and appropriately satisfied their developmental needs and led to positive educational outcomes. Additionally, in working with this group of urban, African American students, it was crucial to have awareness of the multicultural aspects of the group members. It is important for an educator who adopts a Choice Theory framework to be aware that ethnic minorities may feel that environmental forces, such as racism and discrimination, are operating against them and not to imply that students' choices will necessarily overcome these obstacles (Corey, 2004). As when operating within any theoretical framework, educators must also remain aware of their own values and cultural backgrounds and learn about the values and social forces that impact the cultures of the students with whom they work.

We acknowledge that careful selection of the group members was crucial to the success of the project. Certain students with more extreme behaviors or less developed social interaction skills would not have been suitable for inclusion in the group. In addition, it was important to assess for the presence of active peer conflicts among the students during the group selection process, as this may have made it difficult for students to focus on a group task. It is also important for the educator to act as an advocate when systemic issues in the school make it difficult for students to implement responsible choices. There are certain methodological issues that arise when researching the effectiveness of various intervention techniques with this population. Educators who decide to offer a similar Choice Theory group intervention, either as a counselor or other educator, may use accountability measures such as parent and teacher behavior checklists, discipline referral counts, grade improvements, or self-concept scores. These measures may generate data that can be used to advocate for these types of services for middle school students. However, students are parts of larger systems, such as their families, their peer groups, the larger school system, and their communities. Any of these systems may influence a student's behavior, and the intervention itself may not necessarily be the catalyst for the observed student change. Nevertheless, this case example was offered as a possibility for middle level educators to support students with disciplinary problems within a group context based on principles supported by both theory and research.

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Sara Meghan Walter, a middle school counselor, is a doctoral candidate in counselor education in the Department of Child, Family, and Community Services at the University of Central Florida, Orlando. E-mail: walter_meghan@hotmail.com

Glenn W. Lambie is an associate professor of counselor education at the University of Central Florida, Orlando.

Evadne E. Ngazimbi is a doctoral candidate in counselor education in the Department of Child, Family, and Community Services at the University of Central Florida, Orlando.

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