

School Counselors' Experiential Training in Group Work

Samuel K. Bore, Stephen A. Armstrong, and Ashley Womack

Texas A&M University-Commerce

Abstract

School counselors' perceptions of the efficacy and satisfaction of their experiential training in group work were investigated. An exploratory factor analysis (n = 304) revealed four salient factors: leader characteristics, leader responsibilities, child/adolescent group leadership and adult group leadership. A majority of participants indicated they were not satisfied with their experiential training and supervision in group work. A multiple regression analysis showed a statistically significant relationship between experiential training and utilization of psycho-educational groups in schools. Implications for school counselor preparation programs are discussed.

School Counselors' Experiential Training in Group Work

Group work is a vital component of a comprehensive school-counseling program (Balkin & Leddick, 2005; Villalba, 2007) and has been recognized as a tool to enhance productive learning and an effective intervention for all students including those with special needs (Balkin & Leddick). It is an essential service that counselors can use to address students' academic, social, and emotional concerns (Akos, Hamm, Mack, & Dunaway, 2007; Myrick, 2002; Sayder, 2008). According to Fleming (1999) and Waterstruss (2006), supportive group work environments are ideal for children to learn social and coping skills. Being with group members who share similar struggles provides children a unique experience of universality (Fleming; Steen, Bauman, & Smith, 2007) and allows for their social and emotional development to be nurtured (Bloomquist & Schnell, 2005) as their level of competence in interacting with others increases (Veach & Gladding, 2007).

Group work involves a confidential relationship whereby the school counselor, as the group leader, encourages members to focus on growth (Schmidt, 2008) and preventive or remedial matters with which they are concerned (Kulic, Horne, & Dagley, 2004). In particular, counselors can use groups to help students avoid, remediate, and manage a variety of experiences (Paisley & Milsom, 2007; Perusse, Goodnough, & Lee 2009; Villalba, 2007). Bloomquist and Schnell (2005) established that group interventions were effective in changing faulty cognitive thinking, increasing pro-social behaviors, improving self-regulation and emotional reactivity, and decreasing disruptive and aggressive behavior.

While school counselors have typically been involved in working with groups, the purpose of that involvement continues to change (Furr & Barret, 2000; Paisley & Milsom, 2007). Presently, school counselors are under pressure to be more accountable in guaranteeing academic and self-development success for all students (Johnson & Johnson, 2005; Littrell & Peterson, 2001; Steen & Kaffenberger, 2006; Webb, Brigman, & Campbell, 2005). They are expected to provide support for the increasing number of students with and without special needs and their teachers (Webb & Myrick, 2003). In addition, myriad responsibilities including parent and teacher consultations, student assessments, classroom guidance, test interpretations, and liaising with outside agencies for referrals consume much of school counselors' time and energy (Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005). Yet, the student/counselor ratio of 478:1 in most schools (Akos et al., 2007) makes it difficult for counselors to meet these expectations.

In spite of high student/counselor ratios, the responsibilities of professional school counselors must evolve in response to dynamic student concerns, societal demands, and professional expectations (Dahir, Burnham, & Stone, 2009; Paisley & Milsom, 2007). Currently, in response to the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), the environment wherein school counselors are practicing is wrought with demands for accountability (Brott, 2006; Steen & Kaffenberger, 2006). Counselors, like other education stakeholders, are being challenged to authenticate the impact of their counseling programs on student academic achievement and behavior (Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Dahir et al., 2009; Stone & Dahir, 2007). As the call for accountability of school counseling intensifies (Johnson & Johnson, 2005; Stone &

Dahir, 2007), school counselors, as group leaders, must assume responsibility for proving that their group work efforts result in measurable benefits to more students (Carroll, 2003; Stone & Dahir, 2007) in comparison to individual counseling (Akos et al., 2007).

Advantages of Group Work Over Individual Counseling

Although individual counseling is an appropriate intervention for some students, it is not always an economical use of a counselor's time and resources (Akos et al., 2007; Sayder, 2008; Schmidt, 2008). As Akos et al. (2007) observed, individual counseling is an inefficient and impractical way to reach all students. In fact, one-on-one counseling relationships do not exploit the human resources available to counselors through the expertise of students (Conyne & Mazza, 2007; Schmidt, 2008). Seeking to change only one student at a time via individual counseling jeopardizes counselors' efforts to meet the needs of more students (Conyne & Mazza, 2007). Consequently, school counselors should constantly explore effective strategies that facilitate potential development for all students (Schmidt). Group work is one such strategy that allows school counselors to reach more students and efficiently engage the helping potential of students for a range of concerns (Balkin & Leddick, 2005; Dennison, 2008; Furr & Barret, 2000; Schmidt, 2008; Shechtman, 2002). In addition, group work has been found to be 25% more effective than individual counseling (Parcover, Dunto, Gehlert, & Mitchell, 2006).

Unlike individual sessions, group work mirrors peer relationships in the real world (Akos et al., 2007; Balkin & Leddick 2005; Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007; Kulic et al., 2004) making it an appropriate service for students to acquire pertinent social skills (Evans, Axelrod, & Sapia, 2000) necessary for social and academic success (Akos et

al.; Schmidt, 2008; Webb & Myrick, 2003). Groups facilitate new insights atypical in individual work, boost social development, and promote social competencies (Bemak et al., 2005). Therefore, in this era when high stakes testing and academic productivity are emphasized at the expense of social skills, peer relationships, and social interactions (Perusse et al., 2009), small groups can be training grounds for social and moral development (Bemak et al., 2005).

In addition, small group settings can provide ample opportunities for children to learn how to resolve conflicts (Fleming, 1999; Myrick, 2002; Van Velsor, 2009). Although conflict can impede group progress and cohesion, its occurrence provides the opportunity for the development of group members' reasoning skills (Akos et al., 2007). Good group leaders skillfully turn conflicts into teaching moments for children to learn how to tolerate divergent perspectives. Students not only learn to negotiate, refine, and restructure their stances through peer discussion, but also how to handle life's stressors and take risks (Akos et al.; Van Velsor).

Although research has demonstrated the effectiveness of group work in schools (Akos, Goodnough, & Milson, 2004; Balkin & Leddick, 2005; Bloomquist & Schnell, 2005; Johnson & Johnson, 2005; Schechtman, 2002), its effectiveness and optimum utilization can only be realized if school counselors receive adequate pre-service training (Akos et al., 2004). This expectation puts pressure on counselor education preparation programs to devote more time to equip school counselors with sufficient group work skills (McDonnell, Toth, and Aldarondo, 2005). To maximize pre-service counselors' training for group work in schools, theory classes can concurrently be offered with experiential groups (Akos et al.).

Experiential Training in Group Leadership

Experiential training is learning by doing or learning from experience (Osborn, Daninhirsch, & Page, 2003). According to Georgiou, Zahn and Meria (2008), “the heart of experiential learning lies in reflectively observing concrete experience and actively experimenting with abstract conceptualizations” (p. 813). In this approach, master’s level trainees participate in an on-going group (Merta, Wolfgang, & McNeil, 1993) and are directly involved with the realities of their studies as opposed to just hearing, reading, or simply observing (Merta et al.; Osborn et al.; Pistole & Filer, 1993). The trainees are not only in touch with practical experiences, they also get constructive feedback and guided analysis on their practice (Osborn et al.). Experiential training in group leadership for school counselor trainees can occur in group counseling classes and during their practicum and internships (Akos, 2004).

Experiential training of group leaders goes beyond basic defining of group concepts and outlining of skills to practicing of specific skills in leading groups comparable to those the trainees will lead after they graduate (Furr & Barret, 2000; Gillam, 2004). Experience in leading groups normalizes the trainees’ anxiety and provides predictability on what to expect from the group process (Okech & Kline, 2006; Osborn et al., 2003). Moreover, the trainees are better able to comprehend client experiences (Ballinger & Yalom, 1995; Gillam, 2004) as they are exposed to common group work ambiguities occasioned by group dynamics and intricate interaction patterns among members (Furr & Barret, 2000).

Because a strong relationship exists between group knowledge and real group experience (Furr & Barrett, 2000), experiential training in leading groups enhances

school counselors' training as group leaders. Group concepts, awareness of group dynamics, and leadership skills are augmented when hands-on training is offered in tandem with class instruction (Akos et al., 2004). Accordingly, experiential opportunities through group membership, observations, group leadership, and supervision could be integrated into the group leadership training course.

Being a member of a group. One of the basic types of experiential training is being a member of a group. Participation in an experiential group offers unique types of learning to school counselor trainees (Armstrong, 2002) by tapping into students' energy and interests thereby producing emotional arousal that enhances the learning experience (Pistole & Filer, 1993). This experience not only promotes awareness of group dynamics but also provides trainees an opportunity to apply their newly acquired skills. Additionally, trainees have a chance to confront their own resistance and fears to self-disclose, work on personal issues (Merta & Sisson, 1991), cultivate more skill in offering and receiving feedback, and improve their emotional interaction with group members (Armstrong, 2002).

Observation. Before being exposed to experiential group leadership opportunities, school counselor trainees can begin with observing live groups in process in preparation to leading or co-leading them (Barlow, 2004). According to Wilson (2005), people acquire new knowledge and behavior by observing other people and events. In group work training, observation of an experienced group leader offers trainees the opportunity to vicariously learn group leadership skills (Ballinger & Yalom, 1995; Stockton & Toth, 1996) without the anxiety of premature responsibility. Through observation, trainees enhance their understanding of skills and process as they witness

how experienced group leaders employ their leadership skills in group facilitation (Van Velsor, 2004). In addition, in situations where a number of trainees observe simultaneously, they can further benefit by sharing their different viewpoints in a post-group discussion session (Ballinger & Yalom).

Leading groups. The best way to teach school counselors to lead groups is to give them a chance to experience and practice leading groups (Kottler, 2004). Experiential training in leading groups allows for trainees to master a variety of tasks as they experience group forces (Barlow, 2004). Along with learning to maintain the atmosphere of the group, they also practice how to give feedback on group members' contributions pertaining to completion of group tasks. Barlow (2004) suggested that this exercise is a lot simpler for those trainees who have prior experience as group members. In fact, Kottler (2004) did not believe anyone could be a group leader without first being a group member. He constantly asked his trainees, "how the heck do you think you're going to convince your clients to take risks, to be open and authentic and real, when you are unwilling to be so yourself" (p. 52)?

Hands-on training can include work with at risk students (Bemak, 2005) and diverse student populations (Davis, 2006). Traditionally, school counselors have stressed more structured and controlled groups and avoided emotionally challenging issues that would easily surface in less controlled group designs (Bemak, 2005). As a result, rather than rally and engage the group to establish group norms and collectively decide on the agenda, many school counselors strive to control group content, agendas, and themes for discussion. Such practices jeopardize group structures and impede students from working through fears, sadness, anger, or frustration. In contrast,

groups that involve members in setting agendas promote an internal locus of control and foster new behaviors, attitudes, and social skills (Bemak, 2005; Berg, Landreth, & Fall, 2006; Corey & Corey, 2006).

In addition, leading real groups allows trainees to grapple with common group challenges like confidentiality (Bemak, 2005). The irony of confidentiality in groups is that it cannot be guaranteed yet it is vital to building the much needed trust, cohesion (Van Velsor, 2004) encouraging interaction, and moving the group to the here and now (Wanlass, Moreno, & Thomson, 2006). It is good practice for group leaders to address issues of confidentiality at the very onset of the group (Berg et al., 2006; Van Velsor, 2004). Besides, they have to initiate discussions on confidentiality in different stages of group and whenever any violations occur (Berg et al., 2006; Corey & Corey, 2006; Yalom, 1995).

Supervision. According to Ballinger and Yalom (1995), without supervision, experiential training for group leaders is incomplete and insufficient. Supervision strengthens technical skills and cognitive learning of group leadership trainees (Soo, 1998). Therefore, while trainees are leading real children's groups, they would benefit from regular supervision from their instructors, mentors, or other experienced group facilitators (Van Velsor, 2004). Lack of supervision predisposes therapists to repeat their mistakes instead of learning from them resulting in frustrations and failure (Soo, 1998).

Through individual supervision, supervisors can address specific needs of novice trainees (Lambie & Sias, 2009; Van Velsor, 2004) as they focus on their specific learning needs to understand children and adolescents in groups (Soo, 1998). Further, supervisors can support school counselor trainees as they transition from individual to

group perspectives by helping them deal with initial apprehensions (Van Velsor, 2004). As future group facilitators themselves, school counselor trainees can learn to “manage chaotic interpersonal interactions, intense affect, boundary issues and group defenses” (Wanlass et al., 2006 p. 312). Besides individual supervision, group supervision presents exclusive advantages such as diverse perspectives, vicarious learning, and discussion of group process issues (Van Velsor, 2004).

Present Dilemma

While there is abundant research on theoretical information and its dissemination on group work and its effectiveness with children (Akos et al., 2007; Balkin & Leddick, 2005; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Hoag & Burlingame, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 2005; Schechter, 1997; Stone & Dahir, 2007), there is a paucity of research on best-practice guidelines for the experiential component of group work training (Childers, 1986; Fall & Levitov, 2002; Robinson, Jones, & Berglund, 1996). Although accrediting bodies such as the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and professional organizations such as the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) outline pertinent components and content areas for group work training, the stipulations do not detail how to render the theoretical information into skills (Furr & Barret, 2000). Furthermore, the volume of information on theory, process, and practice cannot be adequately covered in only one or two semesters (Gillam, 2004; Stockton & Toth, 1996).

Despite the challenge of training competent group leaders within one or two semesters, many master's level programs offer only one semester course in group work, which is limited to instruction in theory of group work and is lacking in experiential

exposure (Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Furr & Barret, 2000). While this single course satisfies the CACREP (2009) and ASGW (2000) objectives for group counselors to understand theory, practices, ethics, and skills associated with multiple types of groups, one group course is inadequate in providing the depth and breadth of necessary competencies to conduct groups (Akos et al., 2004; O'Halloran & McCartney, 2004). Moreover, one group work course cannot serve a dual function of providing an academic foundation for group leadership and the much needed hands-on experience.

Most school counselors only take one group counseling course in their master's training. They typically do not receive experiential training in group work because most introductory group counseling courses are designed to cover more basic information (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 2002). Consequently, most of them are ill prepared in pertinent group counseling skills such as cutting off, drawing out, holding and shifting the focus, and introducing and conducting an activity (Berg et al., 2006; Corey & Corey, 2006). In addition, most courses require trainees to only be a member of the class group with part of the class time being utilized for group processing (Jacobs et al., 2002). As a result, most experiential pre-service training focuses on skills pertinent to counseling adults in groups rather than those necessary for addressing issues affecting children and adolescents (Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Delucia-Waack, 2000). Besides, as Campbell and Brigman (2005) reported, the single group course that most school counselors took "may have been taken many years, even decades ago" (p.74).

Experiential groups expand counselor trainees' knowledge and understanding of the purpose(s) of group intervention (Akos et al., 2004). Such groups expose trainees to real group counseling challenges, ethical stipulations and concerns in leading groups,

and suitability of group intervention to a variety of issues. Thus, school counselors' adequate preparation in group work in schools is not only contingent upon the clear understanding and purpose of group intervention (Akos et al., 2004), but also on experiential training from leading groups with real clients (Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Jacobs et al., 2002).

The purpose of this study was to investigate school counselors' perceptions of the efficacy of their training in group work. Specifically, the study examined school counselors' perceptions of their experiential group work training and current practices in group work. The researchers sought to find out how school counselors perceived their preparation as group leaders because Schecter (1997), Schechtman (2002), and Johnson and Johnson (2005) suggested that group work should be the treatment of choice for school counselors if they were to serve all their students. With national student-counselor average ratios at approximately 478:1 (Akos et al., 2007), school counselors struggle to serve all of their students without the use of group interventions (Schechtman, 2005). In addition to the abovementioned descriptive investigation, the following questions were examined. First, to what extent are there differences in perceptions of group work preparation between school counselors from accredited/non-accredited counseling programs? Second, to what extent are there differences in perceptions of group work preparation between school counselors in elementary, middle and high school settings? Finally, what is the relationship between experiential training in leading groups and group work utilization in schools?

Method

This study utilized a cross-sectional, survey research design (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996; Heppner & Heppner, 2004). It is cross-sectional because it focuses on the major variables of the study at a specific period (Crowl, 1993; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996). It was hypothesized that school counselors who received experiential group training would be more effective and confident group leaders, perceive group work to be more valuable in schools, and utilize it more often to enhance or address students' social, academic, and behavioral needs.

Participants

The participants of this study were certified school counselors from several urban, rural, and suburban school districts in two states: one Southwestern and one Southern. The researchers contacted directors of counseling to ask them if they were willing to allow their school counselors to participate in the study. If the directors of counseling agreed to email school counselors in their respective school districts, the school district was included in the study. Approximately, 3500 school counselors in these districts were emailed and invited to participate in this study.

Historically, response rates in survey research are low (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998; Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 2008). However, because the email was sent by directors of counseling to school counselors, the response rate was expected to be higher than the typical response rate in survey research. Another factor that was expected to increase the response rate was the small amount of time (10 –15 minutes) required to complete the survey. In addition, an incentive was offered to respondents to raise the response rate.

Data Collection

Using www.surveymonkey.com, an electronic survey was utilized for data collection. According to Berry (2005), a mixed method of email and Web-based surveys reduces sampling bias because email is quite common and the Web reaches a vast number of individuals. Furthermore, while electronic surveys may require more actions such as securing servers, limiting non-sample participants' access (Berry, 2005), they are less costly, have higher response rates, entail accurate data entry and quicker turnaround time, enable tracking of surveys, minimize interviewer error, and allow format flexibility (Berry, 2005; Granello & Wheaton, 2004).

Instrumentation

A questionnaire was developed as the data collection instrument because an appropriate instrument was not available in the literature. Survey questionnaires are appropriate for collecting data from a large group of people (Mertens, 2005). Typically, surveys depend on the participants' self-reports regarding their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (Mertens, 2005). This study investigated school counselors' perceptions of the quality of their preparation to utilize group work techniques and their current practices with small groups in schools. The survey contained 34 items addressing questions about training and current practice. Responses were collected using a five-point Likert scale and open-ended formats (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996; Mertens, 2005).

To improve content-based validity, the researchers gave the survey to two professors of counselor education for review. One professor taught group work and the other taught school counseling. According to Goodwin and Leech (2003), content based

validity “is based on logical analyses and experts’ evaluations of the content of the measure, including items, tasks, formats, wording, and processes” (p. 183). It is conducted in order to establish how the test covers what it purports to measure. Suggestions and feedback from the professors were used to revise the survey before a pilot survey was conducted. External validity, which is typically low in survey research, was enhanced by procedures used to elevate the response rate. Survey research studies with low response rates have lower external validity (Heppner et al., 2008).

Pilot testing a survey implies trying it out with a small sample with similar characteristics (Mertens, 2005) to detect any anomalies to be remedied before the proper study is carried out (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996). Consequently, using the same procedures for administering the actual survey (Gall et al., 2006; Mertens, 2005), the instrument was sent to 30 school counselors (10 elementary, 10 middle, and 10 high school) from a metropolitan school district in a Southwestern state. They were asked to suggest clearer ways of rewriting ambiguous questions, ways of simplifying complex questions, and additional questions that they thought should have been included on the survey. Based on their feedback, items were added, changed, or deleted. In addition to pilot testing the instrument, Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients were calculated once a factor analysis was conducted.

Results

Through contacts with district counseling directors and one state director, approximately 3500 surveys were emailed to potential participants. The first researcher gained approval from the directors, then the directors emailed potential participants directly inviting them to respond to the survey. Determining the exact number of school

counselors who actually received the email to participate in the study was impossible, but 3500 is the best estimate available. Three hundred and six school counselors initially completed the survey but two of the surveys were not usable, which left 304 usable survey questionnaires after the initial email and a follow-up one were sent.

Of the 304 participants, the vast majority (88%) were female and 12% male. Over 81% of the respondents were Caucasian, 12% African American and 3% Hispanic. Regarding school level, 40% were elementary school counselors, 19% were in middle school and 36% in high school. While 42% of the counselors worked in rural settings, 35% and 23% worked in urban and suburban settings respectively. Over 75% of the participants indicated they attended non-CACREP counselor preparation programs.

In order to strengthen reliability and validity, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA). According to Heppner et al. (2008), construct validity—the degree to which measured variables represent hypothesized constructs—is strengthened through factor analyses. An EFA with a Varimax rotation ($n = 304$) revealed a four-factor solution based on visual inspection of a scree plot. According to Hatcher (2007), scree plots are more reliable when the number of participants is greater than 250. The four salient factors identified were named as follows with coefficient alphas in parentheses: leader characteristics (.918), leader responsibilities (.899), child/adolescent group leadership (.946), and adult group leadership (.875). These four factors accounted for 71% of the variance in the analysis. Generally, coefficient alpha values greater than .8 indicate a high level of consistency in the factor scores; therefore, the coefficient alpha values of the factors suggest adequate score reliability.

Descriptive Findings

Descriptive findings include several aspects of group work training such as opportunities to observe groups, lead groups, and receive supervision for group work. Specifically, school counselors were asked if they had opportunities to observe and lead groups of children and adolescents in addition to observing and leading groups of adults. Respondents were also asked how satisfied they were with their supervision and training, and those findings are presented.

Table 1

Percent of School Counselors Who Agreed with Statements about Group Work Training and Supervision

Statement	Percent
<i>Group Work Training & Supervision</i>	
Required to observe a group	60
Observed group work with classmates	41
Observed group work with other adults	26
Observed group work with children	16
Observed group work with adolescents	18
Required to lead/co-lead group	70
Was leader/co-leader of group of classmates	36
Was leader/co-leader of group of other adults	15
Was leader/co-leader of group of children	27
Was leader/co-leader of group of adolescents	26
Received supervision of leading groups	77
Received individual supervision of leading groups	21
Received triadic (two supervisees) supervision of leading groups	7

Statement	Percent
Received small group supervision of leading groups	28
Received large group supervision of leading groups	19
Required to tape record group sessions	42
<i>Satisfaction with Group Work Training & Supervision</i>	
Satisfied with amount of training in observing adult group work	43
Satisfied with amount of training in observing group work with children and adolescents	43
Satisfied with amount of supervision received in leading adult groups	41
Satisfied with amount of supervision received in leading groups of children and adolescents	48
Satisfied with amount of supervision received in leading groups with difficult adult clients	36
Satisfied with amount of supervision received in leading groups with difficult children and adolescents	38

Observing and Leading Groups

As Table 1 indicates, 60% of the respondents indicated they were required to observe a group as part of their training; however, most of them observed group work with adults rather than children. Only 16% observed group work with children while 18% observed group work with adolescents. Seven out of ten participants stated they were required to lead a group as part of their training and over one-third led a group with classmates. Approximately one-fourth of the school counselors reported they led groups of children (27%) and adolescents (26%).

Supervision

Over three-fourths of the respondents indicated they received supervision of their group work; however, only 21% indicated they received individual supervision. A slightly

larger percentage (28%) received small group supervision of group work. When asked if they were required to tape group sessions, 42% reported taping was required.

Satisfaction with Training and Supervision

Overall, school counselors in the current study did not indicate high levels of satisfaction with their group work training and supervision. Less than half (43%) indicated they were satisfied with the amount of training they received in observing group work with adults, children, and adolescents. Similarly, fewer than half (48%) of the participants reported they were satisfied with the supervision they received when leading groups of children and adolescents. A smaller percentage of school counselors indicated they were satisfied with supervision they received in leading groups with difficult clients. About one-third reported satisfaction with supervision they received in leading groups with difficult adults (36%) and children/adolescents (36%).

Data Analysis

The four factors derived from factor analysis were used as dependent variables to run one-way ANOVAs for research questions 1 and 2. An alpha level of .05 was utilized. Model assumptions including independence, normality, and homogeneity of variance (HOV) were examined and met. Surveys were directly emailed to participants and a cookie was attached to the survey to prevent participants from re-taking the survey.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore differences in perceptions of group work preparation between school counselors from accredited/non-accredited counseling programs. There were no statistically significant differences in perceptions of group work preparation among counselors from accredited and those from non-accredited

programs. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore differences in perceptions of group work preparation between counselors in elementary, middle, high, and K-12 school settings. Statistically significant differences were found among groups, $F(3, 203) = 3.56, p = .015$. Post hoc analyses revealed statistically significant differences between elementary school and K-12 counselors. Differences were also noted between middle school and K-12 school counselors.

Three multiple regressions were conducted to examine the relationship between experiential group work training and group work utilization in schools. The predictor variables used in the three multiple regressions were the four factors identified in the factor analysis: leader characteristics, leader responsibilities, child/adolescent leadership, and adult leadership. The criterion variables were the number of group sessions conducted in counseling group sessions, psycho-educational group sessions and task group sessions. Data assumptions were examined and verified.

The multiple regressions on counseling groups and task group sessions were not statistically significant. However, the relationship between the predictor variables and the number of psycho-educational sessions conducted was statistically significant, $F(4, 202) = 2.46, p = .047$. The effect size, $R^2 = .047$, was small and was interpreted to mean that the predictor variables explained approximately five percent of the variance in the dependent variable. Beta weights and structure coefficients were analyzed to determine which predictor variables contributed the most to the regression model. Both beta weights and structure coefficients indicated that child/adolescent leadership contributed the most to the model followed by leader responsibilities. Leader characteristics contributed the least to the regression model.

Discussion

According to Corey and Corey (2006) and Conyne, Rapin, and Rand (2006), observation of live groups by counselor trainees should be a part of the required core competencies in experiential training. Ballinger & Yalom (1995) and Stockton and Toth (1996) support observation of live groups as a chance for trainees to vicariously learn group leadership skills. Despite the documented importance of group leaders' group observation during training (Conyne et al., 2006; Corey & Corey, 2006; Ballinger & Yalom, 1995; Stockton & Toth, 1996), the findings of the current study reveal that more than one third (40%) of respondents were not required to observe a group during their training. The study also found that of the 60% of participants required to observe a group during training, only 56% did the actual observation. This finding suggests that a large percentage of school counselors, most of whom are required to lead groups at their work places, never had an opportunity to observe any expert conduct one during their training.

In addition to the lack of opportunity to observe skilled group leaders, the current study also found that 40% of participants observed groups consisting of their classmates. Findings of the study also indicate that a total of 66% of participants either observed their classmates or other adults' groups. Despite the fact school counselors' training is geared toward working with children and adolescents, the study found that only 33% of participants observed children/adolescent groups in their training. This finding is consistent with Campbell and Brigman's (2005) comment that school counselors' group work training focuses on adult group work skills instead of the more pertinent skills necessary for addressing children/adolescent concerns in group settings.

Furthermore, this finding may suggest that a large number of school counselors graduate from counselor training programs without training in how to conduct children/adolescent groups.

Experiential training on how to conduct children/adolescent groups would necessitate school counselor trainees leading or co-leading groups. According to Kottler (2004) and Barlow (2004), leading groups during training gives trainees an opportunity to be personally and effectively exposed and impacted by the dynamics of group phenomenon. The current study found that 70% of participants were required to either lead or co-lead a group during training. Although it is inconceivable that some programs can train group workers without exposing them to lead or co-lead groups, almost one third (30%) of respondents were not required to lead or co-lead a group. It appears that counselor education programs may not be meeting their students' needs for training in group work. In regards to trainees specifically leading groups of children and/or adolescents, the current study found that slightly more than a half (53%) of respondents led or co-led a group of children or adolescents. This finding suggests that almost one-half of the participants graduated without skills in leading groups of children and/or adolescents: their target group upon graduation.

If school counselors do not have the opportunity to lead groups in their pre-service training, they may lack the skills and knowledge needed to address the ethical issues that arise in group work such as screening participants, confidentiality and parental consent (Schmidt, 2004). Smead (2000) recommended that prospective group members should be screened and interviewed prior to participating in a group. Confidentiality in group work can be a challenge in any setting but school-based group

work can be even more complicated because counselors have a responsibility not only to students but also parents. In addition to obtaining participation consent, counselors are obligated to keep parents informed of students' progress. If these issues are not addressed under supervision during training, beginning school counselors may struggle to provide group work in an ethical manner.

While leading groups in training, Van Velsor (2004) proposed that school counselor trainees need regular group leadership supervision from experienced group facilitators. Such supervision strengthens cognitive learning and pertinent skills of group leader trainees (Soo, 1998). The current study found a large percentage (77%) of participants received supervision of group sessions they led or co-led in training. Although almost four-fifths of participants received supervision, slightly over one-fifth (23%) of participants did not receive supervision for their group leadership, which may have negatively impacted their development in group leadership. In addition, the quality of the supervision received is dubious because 58% of the participants indicated they were not required to record sessions of the groups they led or co-led. Given this finding, it appears that the quality of group work supervision for these respondents was questionable because self-report is of limited value in supervision. Thus, a lack of recording may have hindered supervisee development (Bernard, 1997).

This study sought to investigate participants' satisfaction of their group leadership training in the following areas: observation of adult and child/adolescent groups, supervision received from leading or co-leading adult and child/adolescent groups, and supervision received working with difficult clients and adolescents in training. In reference to participants' satisfaction in observation of adult groups, this study found

that a majority of respondents (57%) were dissatisfied with their training. This finding was somewhat surprising considering that most participants (67%) observed classmates or other adult groups. It appears that the participants in the present study expected more than they received in terms of observing groups during their experiential group training. This finding may indicate that school counselors in group leadership training not only realize the importance of observing groups as a part of training but also wish they had benefited more from it.

This study found that school counselors were slightly more satisfied with the supervision they received from leading children/adolescent groups as opposed to the supervision they received leading adult groups. While 48% of participants were satisfied with their supervision from leading children/adolescents groups, 42% were satisfied with the supervision they received from leading adult groups. Considering the fact that supervision strengthens acquisition of group leadership skills (Soo, 1998) it was unfortunate to discover that more than half of the participants were dissatisfied with the supervision they had received from the groups they led or co-led in training.

Group interventions enhance productive learning for all students including those with special needs (Balkin & Leddick, 2005) and decrease disruptive and aggressive behavior (Bloomquist & Schnell, 2005). The current study found the least satisfaction among participants in reference to the supervision they received working with difficult children and adolescents. Most of the participants 62% were neutral or dissatisfied with the supervision they received while only 12% of them were strongly satisfied with their supervision. This finding may suggest that school counselors may not be equipped to

handle such difficult students, and, as such, the present demand for school counselors to serve all students (Johnson & Johnson, 2005) may still be far from being realized.

Results of the current study indicated that there was a statistically significant relationship between experiential training in group leadership and utilization of psycho-educational groups in the schools. Of the four predictor variables identified in the factor analysis namely leader characteristics, leader responsibilities, child/adolescent leadership, and adult leadership, child/adolescent leadership training contributed the most with an effect size (R^2) of 0.047. This outcome suggests that the more satisfied respondents were with their experiential child and adolescent group leadership training; the more likely they were to conduct psycho-educational groups. Because psycho-educational groups are widely used in schools for both large groups, such as in classrooms, and small groups (Paisley & Milsom, 2007), it appears that leading children and adolescent groups during training may positively impact school counselors' utilization of psycho-educational groups upon graduation.

The 2009 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards require an experiential component through a 10-clock-hour small group activity over the course of one academic semester. This requirement, like all other CACREP standards, is only binding to accredited programs. In this study, it was surprising that only 25% of the participants graduated from CACREP accredited programs.

The disparity in numbers between those who attended CACREP and non-CACREP programs may have affected the results of the study. Question one of the study sought to establish differences in perceptions of group work preparation between

school counselors from accredited/non-accredited counseling programs. The findings of the study indicated that there were no differences in perceptions of group work preparation between graduates from CACREP and those from non-CACREP programs. It appears that the vast majority of participants in the study who graduated from non-accredited programs may have lowered the amount of variance to obtain a statistically significant difference. Besides, results suggest that school counselor trainees in both CACREP and non-CACREP programs took about the same number of group work courses.

Limitations

A survey instrument was utilized as the mode of data collection in this study. The use of surveys as the principal mode of data collection heralds with it the challenge of non-response (Bore, 2005). Besides, with self-report instruments respondents may not be truthful in their answers. One such instance in this study was with the items on acquisition of interpersonal skills and leader characteristics. Due to near perfect percentages, the researchers believed participants might not have been truthful with their responses.

The survey instrument was emailed to directors of counseling for several school districts in two southern states who in turn emailed it to school counselors in their respective districts. Therefore, although there was an official figure of 3500 counselors in districts of interest, the researchers did not have direct access to participants and could not establish how many of the 3500 counselors received the survey. In addition, the survey was sent out at a time when one of the two states was administering exams. Because counselors in that state were involved in test administration, their participation

may have been affected. In fact, fewer school counselors from this state participated in the study as opposed to the second state. Because the study surveyed counselors from two states only, the generalizability of the research results may be limited. It is unknown if counselors from other states would have responded differently to the survey.

Future Research

The present study raised a number of important points to be considered for future research. If this study were replicated with a national sample, external reliability would be improved. Given the lack of satisfaction with training and supervision in their group work preparation, it would be helpful to see if school counselors from across the country shared these perceptions. Second, a more balanced sample of CACREP and non-CACREP graduates would provide a more complete picture of group work preparation. The current study did not indicate a difference of perception from the two groups but CACREP graduates were underrepresented. Third, this study needs to be replicated with a more diverse group. While the largest minority group was African American accounting for only 12.2%, most of the participants were Caucasian (79.9%). Fourth, a qualitative study on experiential group leadership should be considered. A qualitative study would not only accord researchers a face-to-face interaction with participants, but would also give them a chance to ask specific questions and explore perceptions of group work preparation in more depth.

Conclusion

The findings of the current study indicate a majority of the respondents were not satisfied with aspects of their group work training such as being able to observe groups with children and adolescents prior to leading these groups. In addition, most

participants indicated they were not satisfied with the supervision they received in group work. These school counselors also reported they did not have enough opportunity to lead groups of children and adolescents during their pre-service training.

Given the importance of group work in the schools, it appears that counselor educators may need to provide more opportunities for school counselor trainees to observe and lead groups with children and adolescents. Counselor educators also may need to provide a higher quality of supervision of group work so that school counselors are better able to provide this important service to their students. As the call for accountability in guaranteeing academic and self-development success for all students intensifies for school counselors (Dahir et al., 2009; Johnson & Johnson, 2005; Stone & Dahir, 2007), group work appears to be the intervention of choice as it may allow counselors to reach more students to enhance and/or remedy their social, academic, and behavioral needs.

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Biographical Statements

Sam Bore is an assistant professor of counselor education at Texas A&M University-Commerce and a certified school counselor. He was a secondary school counselor for several years and he currently teaches school counseling. His specializations include group work in school settings.

Stephen Armstrong is an associate professor of counselor education at Texas A&M University-Commerce and a certified school counselor. He was an elementary school counselor for several years and his specializations include supervision and activity-based, developmentally appropriate interventions in the schools such as play therapy and sandtray.

Ashley Womack is a mental health case manager and a doctoral student at Texas A&M University-Commerce. In addition to coordinating mental health services in her agency, she facilitates psychosocial rehabilitation groups.