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The Lessons of Meta-Analysis: Does Group Counseling with Children and Adolescents Make a Difference?

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The Lessons of Meta-Analysis: Does Group Counseling with Children and Adolescents
Make a Difference?

Hoag, M.J., & Burlingame, G.M. (1997). Evaluating the effectiveness of child and adolescent group treatment: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 26, 234-246.

Group counseling interventions are an important component of the delivery system of comprehensive developmental school counseling programs, so documenting the impact of group counseling is imperative. Knowing what types of group interventions are most effective for specific issues/problems and for specific student sub-populations is also critical. Since researchers often seek to simplify the intervention context in order to increase the internal validity and power of the research, it is helpful to synthesize the findings of a number of studies in order to address many questions that are of interest to school counselors. Historically, narrative literature reviews have served this purpose. Increasingly, meta-analytic review procedures are being used because these procedures can result in a more detailed and precise understanding of factors related to effectiveness.

Meta-analytic reviews start with a number of studies that permit the computation of effect sizes for the intervention. The effect size (ES) reflects the distance between the experimental group's mean and the control group's mean, thus demonstrating the impact of an intervention. Once effect sizes are computed for all outcomes, studies can be compared and contrasted on a number of potentially interesting variables (counselor variables, client variables, types of outcomes, settings, etc.). Reviewers can ask important questions like, "Are older students more likely to benefit than younger students from a particular intervention?" The questions that can be answered by the meta-analytic review depend on the number, strength, and range of studies being reviewed.

Methods

Hoag and Burlingame (1997) conducted a meta-analytic review of the effects of group counseling for children and adolescents. In order to be included in the review, studies needed to meet several criteria including: the population studied must be children or adolescents; the study must involve a group treatment (broadly defined); and, the study must be experimental or quasi-experimental. A total of 56 studies published between 1974 and 1997 were included. Most (almost 74%) of the studies took place in schools. One fifth of the studies employed school counselors as the group leaders and 25% of the studies employed a mixture of school counselors and other school-based professionals (e.g. school psychologists, school social workers). The most common issues addressed by the groups were behavior problems, social skills, and divorce adjustment.

Results

The overall ES of the studies was .61 with a range of -.04 to 2.99. **In general, group interventions were found to be effective but a large range of effectiveness was noted.** The overall ES of .61 would be considered moderate, and indicates that the average child or adolescent served by a group intervention was better off than 73% of those in control groups.

Several interesting and potentially important findings were also apparent. The only client variable found to be reliably significant was socioeconomic status, with **middle class students (ES = .79) profiting more than working class students (ES = .29) from group interventions.** In general, **group interventions that were delivered in clinics (ES = 1.13) had a greater impact than interventions delivered in schools (ES = .53).**

Group interventions were shown to reliably improve a wide range of outcomes including disruptive behavior, anxiety, adjustment to divorce, cognitive performance, social skills, and self-esteem. There were no differences in treatment effectiveness among these outcomes.

Implications

These findings provide compelling evidence that group interventions are effective for children and adolescents. While clinic-based group interventions seem more successful, school-based interventions are also valuable. Group interventions can produce a wide range of positive outcomes related to effective school behavior and performance.

In general middle class students seemed to profit more from group interventions than working class students. Additional research is needed to understand the reasons for this finding and ways group intervention can be made more effective for working class students.

Critical Perspectives

The Hoag and Burlingame (1997) meta-analysis demonstrates the potential power of this technique to synthesize a broad literature base and extract key generalizations. While many of the studies included in this meta-analysis included school counselors as group leaders, and hence yielded important information on the effectiveness of school counseling interventions, most of these studies were published in journals that are not frequently read by school counselors. Even the studies that did not employ school counselors (and which also were published in diverse sources outside the professional school counseling literature) made important contributions to our understanding of the effectiveness of school-based group interventions. The school counseling profession would profit from additional interdisciplinary meta-analyses that address important questions of effectiveness (e.g. the impact of prevention programs).

Careful scrutiny of the Hoag and Burlingame (1997) study also points out why it is crucial that school counseling researchers who are familiar with the issues facing the profession use meta-analysis and utilize the interdisciplinary literature related to our field. While Hoag and Burlingame categorized outcome measures according to a logical schema, they failed to look at clusters of outcomes that would be particularly significant to the school counseling profession. For example, a school counseling researcher would have immediately recognized the importance of breaking out studies using outcome measures related to academic achievement to enable the estimation of effect sizes in this area. Meta-analyses conducted by people who are familiar with the current professional issues and perspectives should yield the most cogent results.

Given the power of meta-analytic review procedures to answer questions about effectiveness, more school counseling researchers need to be using these techniques to analyze outcome studies, and school counselor education programs ought to teach students to read meta-analytic reviews.

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