

Interpersonal Process Group Counseling for Educationally

Marginalized Youth: The MAGNIFY Program

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Abstract

Youth mental health is an area of profound disparity between the demand and supply of services, particularly in schools that serve students at risk of school dropout. This article describes the conceptual foundations and implementation of *MAGNIFY*, a program that provides free group counseling to small alternative schools with students who have a history of behavioral problems in school or have been labeled at risk of dropping out of school. *MAGNIFY* is a non-structured program that uses school counseling graduate students to facilitate weekly school-based interpersonal process groups and is financially supported by local businesses and donors. Program components, finances, limitations, and implications are discussed.

Keywords: school-based group counseling, alternative education, school counseling, youth mental health

Interpersonal Process Group Counseling for Educationally Marginalized Youth: The MAGNIFY Program

Youth mental health continues to be an area of profound complexity in which a large disparity exists between the demand and supply of services. Recent estimates suggest that one in every four youth have a diagnosable mental disorder (Merikangas et al., 2010), while only one third of youth with a mental disorder receive treatment (Merikangas et al., 2011). Left untreated, mental and emotional disturbances can inhibit a youth's ability to maintain social connections and significantly increase their risk of school dropout (Brooks-Gunn, Guo, & Furstenberg, 1993). This connection is particularly troublesome given the negative outcomes associated with school dropout, including: high rates of unemployment, poverty, and future health disparities (Pleis, Ward, & Lucas, 2010). The connection between youth mental health and school dropout is not surprising, as many youth who are at risk of school dropout experience emotional trauma and family difficulties (Farahati, Marcotte, & Wilcox-Gok, 2003; Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011). Moreover, students with unaddressed mental health concerns have higher levels of truancy, tardiness, and behavioral problems in school compared to their peers (Foley & Pang, 2006). In their review of the factors predicting school dropout, Becker and Luthar (2002) identified student mental health as a significant indicator of students' ability to succeed in high school and persist until graduation.

Despite the adoption of alternative programs, the high school graduation rate continues to fall between 65-70% nationally, with approximately one third of youth failing to complete their high school education (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011). A

disproportionate number of youth in alternative educational settings find themselves experiencing significant psychological distress, most often due to environmental circumstances beyond their control (Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011). Students in alternative schools are more likely to be in households that experience significant turmoil and stress (Tsang, 2004), more likely to abuse substances (Clark, Ringwalt, Shamblen, & Hanley, 2011), more likely to engage in violent behaviors (Foley & Pang, 2006), more likely to have contemplated and attempted suicide (Lehr, Moreau, Lange, & Lanners, 2004), and are most often referred to alternative schools because of a lack of academic progress (Mullen & Lambie, 2012). In her review of alternative education in the U.S., Aron (2006) recommended that successful alternative schools not only set demonstrable goals that tend to the educational needs of students but also the social and emotional needs of students.

Mental health professionals, such as professional school counselors, are needed in alternative school settings more so than traditional school settings given the plethora of concerns students are working through (Mullen & Lambie, 2012). One of the most efficient modalities for offering assistance with student social and emotional concerns is interpersonal process group counseling (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). This form of counseling offers the opportunity for a counselor to meet with multiple students at once while providing student group members the chance to receive interpersonal feedback from their peers.

Echoing the need for mental health services for youth, recent literature has called on school counselors to become more engaged in providing counseling services in K-12 schools (Slaten & Baskin, 2014; Lemberger & Hutchison, 2014). This call to action is

accentuated with the recent emphasis on the efficacy of counseling and psychotherapy interventions for youth, including its benefits on academic related outcomes (Baskin, Slaten, Sorenson, Glover-Russell, & Moreson, 2010). Gall, Pagano, Desmond, Perrin, and Murphy (2000) reported that students who received treatment for mental health concerns had a significant reduction in absenteeism rates by 50% and tardiness rates by 25%. As one of the primary methods of service delivery for school counselors (Forsyth, 2009), group counseling has been shown to be at least as effective as individual interventions (Baskin et al., 2010).

In light of the overwhelming amount of outcome research demonstrating the benefit of mental health services for youth in schools, we developed an initiative to provide group counseling services to alternative schools: *MAGNIFY*. *MAGNIFY* is a program aimed at providing free group counseling to small alternative schools with students who have a history of behavioral problems in school and have been labeled as at risk for dropping out of school. *MAGNIFY* uses graduate students in school counseling and counseling psychology to facilitate weekly interpersonal process groups in an effort to empower students to move forward by first being accepting and aware of oneself. The group facilitation process assists students in developing social-emotional skills while addressing their mental health needs.

The specific mission of the *MAGNIFY* program is to reach youth in under-resourced schools, which tend to be comprised of students who have high social and/or emotional needs. Because of the at-risk nature of the student population and often complex individual dynamics associated with helping these students academically succeed, many alternative schools have a significant need for services aimed at helping

students with their mental and emotional health (Aron, 2006). Given the limited resources, the accessibility for effective and efficient interventions is an on-going problem.

School-Based Group Counseling

Group counseling is a pillar of the counseling profession and has been researched by scholars and utilized by practitioners for decades (Lomonaco, Scheidlinger, & Aronson, 2000). Group counseling seems particularly adept for addressing the mental health needs of youth. By utilizing the significant role peer groupings have in shaping youth identity, group counseling provides a unique experience for youth to observe their peer group *in vivo*. Youth members have the opportunity to learn about interpersonal dynamics and help normalize their experiences through the feedback and stories of other group members (Portman & Portman, 2002). Scholars have identified the effectiveness of group counseling for youth in treating a range of mental disorders, including depression and anxiety (Harrowitz & Garber, 2006; Mychailyszyn, Brodman, Read, & Kendall, 2012; Stice, Rohde, Seeley, & Gau, 2008), trauma (Layne et al., 2008; Wanlass, Moreno, & Thomson, 2006), and emotion regulation (Augustyniak, Brooks, Rinaldo, Bogner, & Hodges, 2009; Prout & Prout, 1998).

Group interventions have been shown to be particularly efficacious for youth in schools (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Rossello, Bernal, & Rivera-Medina, 2008; Stice, Rohde, Seeley, & Gau, 2008; Webb & Brigman, 2007). A meta-analysis by Baskin and colleagues (2010) found that school-based group interventions were as efficacious as individual interventions, calculating a significant effect size of $d = .44$. For

students with troubled backgrounds, school-based group counseling can provide a stable environment during the potentially difficult years of adolescent development (Veach & Gladding, 2007). For low-income, immigrant, and racial and ethnic minority students, the school setting might be the only context where professional mental health services are readily accessible (Coleman, 2004). Given such benefits and the added convenience for youth of receiving services at school, it is no surprise that approximately 80% group counseling for youth are based in the school setting (Corey & Corey, 2006; Forsyth, 2009). As an efficient and economical alternative to traditional one-on-one counseling (Akos, Goodenough, & Milsom, 2004), school-based group counseling works within the limited resources in school while reaching an increasing number of students in need of mental health services. Realizing the potential benefits, many schools have adopted group counseling as a resource to address the unique needs of students at risk of school dropout (Vera & Reese, 2000).

Although the evidence for the effectiveness of school-based group interventions continues to build, the question remains of which group modalities best meet the needs of students suffering from specific mental health issues (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007). Determining which approach to use can be difficult for school counselors, particularly because research regarding empirically supported group interventions for youth is relatively new (Oswald & Mazefsky, 2006). Often, school counselors are conflicted whether to adopt a structured approach or a non-structured approach in their group interventions. Bauer, Sapp, and Johnson (2000) compared the efficacy of a structured, cognitive behavioral group counseling intervention to a less-structured, supportive group counseling intervention for rural high school students with a GPA

below 2.0 and a history of disciplinary referrals. At the end of the trial students in the less structured intervention had a decreased number of disciplinary referrals whereas students in the structured, cognitive behavioral group demonstrated increased academic self-concept. Utilizing a non-structured, yet goal-directed approach, interpersonal process groups allow youth to discuss current issues or pressing topics while using the group format to learn about interpersonal responses (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Emphasizing the group process and mental wellness, a variety of approaches have been developed for working with youth at risk of school failure (e.g., Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005; Wanlass, Moreno, & Thompson, 2006).

MAGNIFY Program and Services

Although other scholars and practitioners are clearly utilizing group psychotherapy with youth (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007; Prout & Prout, 1998; Stice, Rohde, Seeley, & Gau, 2008; Webb & Brigman, 2007), the MAGNIFY program is unique in its ability to provide counseling services to schools at no cost to the school, train graduate students in facilitating groups with at-risk youth, and raise financial support to fund the graduate students facilitating the groups. MAGNIFY attempts to address the social and emotional needs of marginalized youth by providing weekly therapeutic process groups within the school setting. Group counseling provides youth a unique opportunity for interpersonal learning and can be a mechanism for personal growth and self-empowerment. Alternative schools are typically under-resourced and understaffed (Aron, 2006) and rarely have school counselors or other mental health professionals that work in the building. By bringing mental health services into the school, MAGNIFY cultivates a school culture of self-expression,

communication, and self-knowledge that, when internalized by students, are associated with increased academic outcomes (Baskin et al., 2010). As a mental health resource, MAGNIFY has the potential to be replicated in schools and training programs across the country. By outlining the program goals and structure, we hope counselor educators and school counselors alike might consider implementing programs like MAGNIFY in their local communities.

Program Components

Program goals. MAGNIFY is a social-emotional, small group, counseling program built for educationally marginalized youth. The program is designed to empower and encourage students to reach their potential through self-awareness, self-acceptance, and the development of interpersonal skills. We believe that most motivated goal-directed behavior happens after youth have the opportunity to be aware of themselves and accept themselves. The MAGNIFY program offers an opportunity for this process to take place through a non-structured approach, allowing youth to lead their own process. More specifically, this is achieved through three goals the program has for the youth it serves:

- *I am* – Many youth in the program have been either explicitly or implicitly told by adults in their life that they have little value, thus resulting in feelings of shame and self-loathing. We hope to help these students embrace who they are as individuals and utilize their natural gifts and talents to achieve, while also acknowledging shortcomings or areas of weakness.

- *I can* – through discussing individual developmental assets (Benson, Scales, Syvertsen, 2011) and positive strengths that each youth has (Rich, 2003) we attempt to increase youth self-awareness of their abilities and strengths.
- *I will* – Through discussions about self, we empower youth to think about their future directions and how they can achieve their goals with the innate strengths and assets that they already possess and acknowledge through self-acceptance and awareness.

Group structure. MAGNIFY consists of weekly 1-hour interpersonal process group sessions that last for the duration of the academic year (2 semesters; approximately 32 sessions). These sessions are conducted at the school site; often serving as a class period and in some cases have counted towards course credit for group participants. Taking into consideration students' needs, teachers and school administrators select students to participate in the groups, and participation is voluntary. As recommended by Corey and Corey (2006), groups are compiled to be relatively homogenous, often segregated by gender and grade level. The size of groups range from 4-7 students, and each group has a corresponding facilitator. During the most recent academic year, the program was piloted with middle school students. The group size was adjusted for these youth as it appeared smaller groups were more beneficial to the students: 3-4 youth per group.

The group format follows a similar structure to Yalom's approach to interpersonal process groups, allowing for groups to fluidly move through group stages and not always in a linear fashion (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Over the course

of the academic year, groups generally move through the three stages of group process described by Yalom & Leszcz (2005): The initial stage, second stage, third stage. The initial stage is marked by the development of a primary task or purpose, group members being hesitant to share and searching for ability to trust others. Further, group rules are identified to make participants feel safe and secure to share in group. MAGNIFY groups begin with facilitators discussing the purpose of the program and learning about group members through discussion and team building activities that require students to self-reflect. Student participants co-construct group rules with the facilitator and each group has their own uniquely constructed set of group rules.

The second stage general involves group conflict and can sometimes be referred to as the “storming” stage of group development. Group participants have to wrestle with interpersonal conflict in group sessions and work at resolving issues amongst each other in order for the group to move forward. In the MAGNIFY program this stage generally begins during the second semester of the program. Student participants typically take a longer time to develop rapport and self-expression than what is typically suggested for process groups (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). This is most likely due to the amount of participants that experience issues with trusting others and having a significant amount of interpersonal conflict in their lives. Once the “storming” stage of group begins, participants are encouraged to engage with one another in healthy interpersonal feedback and conflict resolution.

The third and final stage of group is development of cohesion. The cohesiveness involves group members solidifying trust amongst each other,

developing intimacy and depth in relationships, and feeling confident in being able to form trusting relationships outside of group as well. During the final eight weeks of MAGNIFY is when we generally see student participants becoming cohesive in their groups. Students report becoming more self-aware during this time and in turn more aware of others perspectives and social/emotional factors impacting their school and community.

In addition to this group format, financial resources are set aside from the operating budget to allow for community activities in which student members of every group come together to have a shared activity. This typically happens once per semester and youth are empowered to offer suggestions regarding these activities. Most recently, MAGNIFY funded a field trip for student participants to attend a non-traditional campus visit. The visit lasted for a half day and included information about 2 and 4-year postsecondary education, presentations about financial aid and admissions, discussion with current university students that graduated from an alternative high school, a campus tour, and lunch provided on campus. After lunch, students met in their process groups to discuss the trip, what they learned, and how it may impact their future career decision-making.

School setting. Currently, MAGNIFY works with 4 local alternative educational settings, providing 8-10 groups per academic year and reaching approximately 40-50 youth. These schools vary in their presentation and available resources. For example, one of the alternative schools implores a non-traditional educational approach (e.g., self-paced work, collaborative classroom environment), 6-7 professional staff members, and a separate campus while two of the schools are

highly under-resourced, with only one teaching staff member per school who serve 30-40 youth in a single classroom. At all locations, space for group work can often be an issue and inconsistent. The MAGNIFY program has adjusted to accommodate space issues in order for the program to continue running. Of the youth being served since the beginning of the 2012-13 academic year: 90% reported experiencing family discord; 80% qualified for free and reduced lunch; 20% indicated that they were currently pregnant or already teen parents. In addition, many participants reported to our facilitators that they had been involved in the juvenile justice system and others reported experiencing significant past trauma.

Administrators at all four school locations have ongoing communication with the MAGNIFY program director and graduate assistant throughout the academic year. In particular, when there are reporting issues or significant concerns about group members, administrators and MAGNIFY staff will consult about these concerns in order to develop the best plan for youth group members. Further, administrators meet quarterly with the program director and graduate assistant to ensure that groups are running smoothly and that there are no logistical concerns.

Group facilitators. The program is comprised of 6-10 facilitators who are graduate students in school counseling and counseling psychology programs at a local large university in the Midwestern United States. The majority of the facilitators are in the early years (e.g., first or second year) of the graduate school training. In addition to the clinical training, facilitators are paid hourly for their involvement in MAGNIFY. Potential facilitators respond to a call out from the faculty director of the program in July of every academic year. Facilitators must be willing to commit at

least 2.5 hours per week (1 hour of supervision, 1 hour of group, half hour of prep) and complete training with the program director in order to participate.

Facilitator training. The training of facilitators involves two half-day trainings with the director as well as other experts in the area of group counseling and at-risk youth. Training includes a review of the program, program history, professionalism, tour of participating schools and personnel, paperwork for hourly employment with the university, and other logistics for group facilitation. The second half of the training is focused on an introduction to group psychotherapy and group dynamics, understanding the needs of youth at risk, and educating facilitators on planning for group through the utilization of resources provided to all facilitators (e.g., group work resources, access to thought-provoking videos, poems, music). The most widely utilized resource is group workbook developed by Peterson (1993). The resource provides a variety of topics and ideas for psychoeducational topics for working with youth. In addition to the training that takes place prior to the group process, graduate student facilitators meet with the program director weekly for group supervision. This is an opportunity for the facilitators to debrief about their experience, process their experience, and obtain assistance and feedback from the program director.

Financial support. Since the 2011-2012 academic year, the MAGNIFY program has been financially supported by national foundations, alumni of the college of education from the host-university, and local businesses. Administrative support of this program has been made possible from the generous contributions of staff members within the college of education that believe in the mission of the program. Specifically, the director of advancement in the college has been generous

with her time in helping to market the program to notable alumni and foundations that have contributed to the college of education in other ways in the past. In collaboration with the first author of this paper, we drafted a website, flyer, and general marketing materials describing the program and the benefit to the community. Further, we created a strategic plan for potential future funding and direction for expansion of the program. The current funding and support helps to meet our operating budget of seven group facilitators, one training consultant, one half-time graduate assistant, the director, and a small budget for materials.

Implications for Professional School Counselors and Counselor Educators

The purpose of the current paper is to outline a program that provides free school-based interpersonal process groups for educationally marginalized youth in the community, while also training and funding counseling graduate students. More specifically, our goal is to work with these youth in schools that are under-resourced and who do not currently have counseling services of any kind. Although others have researched the importance and impact of group counseling services with youth (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Prout & Prout, 1998; Stice, Rohde, Seeley, & Gau, 2008; Webb & Brigman, 2007), the current paper illuminates the potential for utilizing these services as a way to contribute to the community at large and train future professional school counselors in working with a high needs population. Further, the MAGNIFY program emphasizes a non-structured interpersonal process approach to the group dynamic that is consistent with previous outcome research (Bauer, Sapp, & Johnson, 2000; Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005). While emphasizing the development of social and emotional skills, the process groups have also discussed

topics of multiculturalism, critical consciousness (Freire, 1971), and issues brought forth by the group members.

The vast majority of students in alternative high schools or other alternative educational formats have little or no counseling services or mental health professionals that are allocated to the school. The incidence rate of psychological distress is much higher amongst these students due to a myriad of factors that are more common amongst alternative school populations (e.g., truancy, discipline issues, family turmoil, trauma, teen parenting, poverty) and yet these students receive few services (Aron, 2006). Future professional school counselors have the opportunity to develop skills working with this population and the opportunity to grow as group facilitators. Programs such as MAGNIFY help provide needed services at no cost to a school while also providing financial support and training for graduate students.

As a school counseling training mechanism, the program responds to Singh and colleagues' (2010) call for counselor training programs to be more engaged in social justice in the community. This is accomplished through seminar training prior to beginning group facilitation in the fall, topics include: youth at-risk, poverty, multiculturalism, and information on utilizing advocacy skills. In addition to the pre facilitation seminars, graduate students meet weekly with the director to discuss on-going concerns related to social justice and troubleshoot issues related to advocacy for group members. MAGNIFY supplements school counselors' training to successfully implement group counseling in schools. This opportunity can provide a valuable training experience, particularly for school counselors who have reported feeling under-prepared

for working with youth after leaving their master's program (Riva & Haub, 2004; Steen, Bauman, & Smith, 2008). Some scholars (e.g., Akos, Goodnough, & Milsom, 2004; Paisley & Milsom, 2007; Steen et al., 2008) have argued that school counselors do not receive the proper training necessary to implement groups in schools. Research on group counseling training suggests that the majority of group training experiences occur with adults (DeLucia-Waack, 2000; Riva & Haub, 2004; Steen et al., 2008), with little involvement of children or adolescents. MAGNIFY demonstrates how counselor training program can integrate counselor education and the provision of services while also advocating for the mental health needs of underserved youth.

Limitations

Alongside the many benefits of the MAGNIFY program are limitations. One of the biggest limitations in working with youth who are at risk of school dropout and have been marginalized by the educational system is the consistency by which they show up to school and in turn the MAGNIFY program. Youth at risk and experiencing marginalization are often the students who are chronically truant and providing motivation for these youth to engage in school is often a challenge. This also hinders the interpersonal process group dynamic when group members do not consistently come to group, often slowing the group process and group stages (Corey & Corey, 2006; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

Secondly, MAGNIFY is confined by a number of administrative limitations. For example, group facilitators are recruited to participant voluntarily. Therefore, the total number of facilitators may fluctuate given the incoming graduate student cohort size and availability in graduate students' schedules. Fluctuations in the total number of

facilitators translates to changes in the number of MAGNIFY groups, which often means less students able to participate in the program. In addition to limitations in the number of facilitators, budgeting restrictions can inhibit the expansion of the program.

Another limitation to conducting group work with this population is the difficulties associated with conducting meaningful quantitative research in order to demonstrate the efficacy of interventions like MAGNIFY. The nature of marginalized populations is that they are few in numbers and thus when attempting to conduct quantitative analyses, the power to run many statistical analyses is often lacking and prohibits accurate results. For a small program like MAGNIFY, it is difficult to quantify outcome results with accuracy.

Future Research

Currently, the graduate students participating in the MAGNIFY program along with the director are in the process of collecting qualitative data from youth who have completed the year-long program. The team is interested in gaining a greater understanding of the impact the program has on the youth and their experience with the MAGNIFY approach in general. Additional outcome research is needed for counseling interventions with youth in schools, as there continues to be strong work done in schools with little documentation and empirical research on student outcomes (Baskin, et al., 2010). Future research should be conducted through partnerships between researchers and working professional school counselors. As scholars, we should spend more time with practitioners in the school to illuminate the counseling intervention and prevention work being done in the schools. Additional

programming and/or replication of the MAGNIFY program is needed across the country for youth who are consistently underserved and neglected by the school system at large.

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