

Connecting the National Standards for School Counseling Programs with an Adventure-based Counseling Intervention

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Abstract

School counselors can utilize adventure-based counseling techniques to improve and enhance the delivery of their guidance curriculum for students in small or large group guidance. The purpose of this article is to provide a summary of how the *National Standards for School Counseling Programs* can provide outcome objectives for school counselors and students who participate in adventure-based counseling interventions.

Introduction

The National Standards for School Counseling Programs were created in 1997 (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) considers the *National Standards for School Counseling Programs* to be the essential foundation for the content of school counseling programs. The standards are outcome-based statements of what students should know and be able to do as a result of participating in a comprehensive, developmental school-counseling program and provide a “blue-print” for student development in three areas: (a) academic development, (b) career development, and (c) personal/social development. Three standards for each content area provide guidance and direction for school counselors to develop quality and effective school-counseling programs and intervention activities. Each of the nine standards is associated with a specific list of student competencies and learning outcomes that define the specific attitudes, knowledge, and skills students should obtain or be able to demonstrate as a result of participating in a school-counseling program

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Part of a school counseling program consists of the delivery of individual and group counseling and large and small group guidance activities (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). These activities are usually identified under the titles of *Guidance Curriculum, Individual Planning, and Responsive Services*. The primary purpose of these activities is to provide academic, career, and personal/social information and instruction to students. Large group guidance activities are usually designed to involve the largest number of students possible. Small group guidance activities are designed to meet the needs of specific students within the large group who might need more direct attention. Similarly, small group and individual counseling provide activities to specific students who might require more direct counseling. Adventure-based counseling (ABC) techniques can provide the school counselor with tools to enhance small and large group guidance efforts while directly linking the efforts to the *National Standards for School Counseling Programs* (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). ABC activities can provide an opportunity for students to investigate their thoughts and behavior in a group format.

Adventure-based Counseling

ABC describes a wide variety of approaches that encourage and facilitate the development of specific life skills for children and adolescents in innovative and engaging ways (Fischeeser, 1991). According to Fischeeser, participation in ABC is a prevention and/or intervention approach to working with students on life skills issues such as communication, group problem-solving, interpersonal skills, and group co-operation. ABC programs have proven to be especially useful with children and adolescents at risk for delinquent behaviors (Lieberman & DeVos, 1982; Sakofs & Schuurman, 1991). Moote and Wodarski (1997) described this population as typically consisting of youth 13-17 years old who are dealing with various combinations of behavior, psychological, sociological, economic, cultural, academic, or family problems. These target areas are of special concern to school counselors, regardless of their educational environment.

ABC uses traditional psychosocial and educational theories involving individual, group, and family counseling, but differs from traditional counseling. These differences include the setting, the use of real and perceived risk, additional required skills, additional ethical considerations, and emphasis on processing and metaphor, and transfer of learning to the psychological, educational, sociological, physical, and spiritual benefits (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002).

Typically, adventure-based programs take place in the outdoors with two common elements: (a) a break with the familiar and, (b) an element of risk (Cashwell & Nassar-McMillan, 1997). ABC does not adhere specifically to one model but recognizes three aspects of the human experience: (a) behavior (doing), (b) affect (feeling), and (c) cognition (thinking). The primary goal of ABC is improving one's self-concept through group interaction that focuses on trust building, goal setting, challenge and stress, peak experiences, humor and fun, and problem-solving (Cashwell & Nassar-McMillan). However, the key to change for students involved in adventure-based approaches is basically the same when using more traditional treatment approaches – during the intervention, students risk trying something they are sure they cannot be successful (Hinkle, 1999).

ABC programs use the group modality as the primary arena for change. This has several benefits, such as: (a) it is theoretically consistent with adolescents' emphasis on group membership and socialization, (b) it allows participants to engage in appropriate risk-taking social situations that may be encountered outside the program, and (c) skills learned in this context may then be generalized beyond the program setting (Fischeeser, 1991). Successful solutions to these problems depend upon the extent to which group members cooperate, trust, and communicate with one another. Additionally, these exercises are designed to teach lessons to the participants that they can directly relate back to their individual lives (Scott & Shoffner, 2001).

The goal(s) of the group facilitator is to allow group members to monitor themselves and attempt to resolve their own problems without interference from outside forces. The leader attempts to facilitate the discussion and keep group members on the task at hand but to stay out of the way of the discussion as much as possible (Glass & Meyers, 2001). Led by the facilitator, processing of activities by group members becomes the "bridge" from exercise to insight. Effective processing with groups involves skills in helping members translate their thoughts, feelings, and reactions associated with a particular exercise in the context of the experience shared by all group members. The learning that is intended to take place through the exercises may be lost on the group members without proper leadership from the facilitator, and would, therefore, limit the impact of the exercise (Jacobs, Masson & Harvill, 2002).

The experiential component of ABC usually involves a physical activity that is non-competitive and relies on group dynamics for completion (Glass & Shoffner, 2001; Wells, 1990). Activities build upon one another and increase in difficulty allowing the group to be consistently challenged. This requires group members to examine and improve their social skills and abilities to work together to successfully complete the activities (Scott & Shoffner, 2001). This also allows the facilitator to give the group challenges that help them work on areas on which the facilitator feels they should work.

Ropes course experiences are often integral to adventure-based programs. The ropes course is generally comprised of high elements, low elements, initiatives and games. High elements are belayed activities (requiring ropes, safety harnesses, and other equipment) in which there is a level of individual, perceived risk. The emphasis for the participant is accomplishing individual goals and confronting fears. Low ropes elements, initiatives and games tend to stress group goals. Emphasis is on group trust, assuming responsibility for someone else, and group problem-solving. According to Glass and Shoffner (2001), the processing of activities becomes the bridge from exercise to insight. Effective processing with groups involves skills in helping members explore the thoughts, feelings, and reactions associated with a particular exercise in the context of the experience shared by all group members. Proponents of ABC consider the processing that occurs with individuals following an activity the cornerstone of the activity.

Connecting Adventure-based Counseling to the National Standards for School Counseling Programs

Many of the interpersonal skills as outlined in the *National Standards for School Counseling Programs* (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) and taught as part of a developmental, comprehensive program to students can be heightened and intensified through participation in adventure-based activities. Adventure-based concepts using an existing low ropes course or “props” for games and initiatives can allow the school counselor to connect directly with the *National Standards for School Counseling Programs* (Campbell & Dahir). Games and initiatives are group problem-solving activities that are used on a ropes course or in an open space such as a gymnasium and require participation of all members to complete an assigned task. Through activities that are fun, challenging, and energizing, students often are not immediately aware of the concepts to which they are being exposed. Additionally, some groups may not complete the initiative “successfully,” allowing the experience to be processed as a group issue (Moote & Wodarski, 1997).

ABC games and initiatives have been used for years by adventure-based facilitators. Many of them have been “passed down” through colleagues and in-service trainings or can be found in ABC training books (e.g., Rohnke, 1984, 1989; Rohnke & Butler, 1995; Scholel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988; Schoel & Maizell, 2002). Modifications to traditional activities can be made as needed to accommodate group of students. Additionally, many props can be bought at retail stores and are inexpensive to purchase.

After participating in each activity, students participate in process groups, which are led by the school counselor. Linkages between what students discover about themselves, the group’s actions, and school behaviors may be emphasized. The paragraphs below offer examples of possible outcomes of an ABC intervention and suggest connections between the outcomes and the *National Standards for School Counseling Programs* (Campbell & Dahir, 1997).

Learning to be Effective Members of a Group

Learning to become effective members of a group relates to the intent of Academic Development Standard A to help students learn both in school and across the lifespan, Career Development Standard C contains the student competency *Apply Skills to Achieve Career Goals* and the following learning outcome: learn to work cooperatively with others as a team member (Campbell & Dahir, 1997, p. 27).

By learning to be better members of a group, students work toward meeting two related *Achieve School Success* competencies: (a) *take responsibility for their actions*, and (b) *demonstrate the ability to work independently, as well as the ability to work cooperatively with other students* (Campbell & Dahir, 1997, p. 21). Personal/Social Development Standard A describes the student competency, *Acquire Self Knowledge* and the following learning outcomes: (a) demonstrate cooperative behavior in groups and (b) identify and discuss changing personal and social roles.

Working in a group and learning how to do so successfully is a direct connection between many of the common ABC intervention activities and school-related issues. Through activities such as “The Inch Worm,” “Bottoms Up,” or utilizing “Trolleys,” students can learn to meet the demands of a given task. Fear of failure can be discussed and reasons explained when students do not try or work as hard as they may should.

Teamwork skills are developed and learned through ABC activities such as “Circle the Circle,” “Hoop Relay,” “Trust Fall,” and “Everybody Up,” which directly relate to students getting along with others at school. By participating in these ABC activities, students have opportunities to work on teams, try hard all the time, help each other, trust others, and make efforts to be cooperative. Through processing of these activities, the school counselor can apply their skills to suggested improved behaviors. Over time, and with the school counselor’s guidance, students can explore ways in which they are getting along better with other people at school, showing more leadership, and encouraging other people.

Getting Along With Others

Personal/Social Development Standard A includes the corresponding student competency, *Acquire Interpersonal Skills*, and has the following learning outcomes: (a) respect alternative points of view, (b) recognize, accept, respect, and appreciate individual differences, (c) use effective communication skills, and (d) know that communication involves speaking, listening, and nonverbal behavior (Campbell & Dahir, 1997, p. 29).

After participating in ABC activities such as “Italian Golf,” “Group Juggling,” or “The Meuse,” students can discuss examples of their efforts to get along with others, including learning to listen to other people and knowing when to trust another person.

Anger Management and Improved Social Skills

Personal/Social Development Standard A, describes the student competency *Acquire Self-Knowledge* which has the following learning outcomes listed: (a) distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, (b) identify personal strengths and assets, (c) develop a positive attitude toward self as a unique and worthy person, and (d) identify values, attitudes, and beliefs.

Personal/Social Development Standard B, describes the student competency, *Self-Knowledge Applications* and the following learning outcomes: (a) identify alternative solutions to a problem, (b) develop effective coping skills for dealing with problems, and (c) know how to apply conflict resolution skills applies directly to conflict and anger management. Through ABC activities students can recognize when they have become frustrated, recognizing when someone else is frustrated and knowing when to leave the person alone, and learning how to handle their anger appropriately to avoid trouble at school. Activities such as the “Human Ladder,” “All Aboard,” and “The Spider Web” are challenging activities, which can provide a safe amount of stress and frustration to participants. Students can improve their social skills by making conscientious efforts to improve their attitudes with each other, learn how to make their own and cooperative decisions, learn to think positively, and learn to trust other people.

Conclusion

One of the outcomes of school counseling programs is helping students learn new coping strategies and skills that allow them to modify their thoughts and behavior to positively adjust to new situations. Utilizing ABC initiatives as intentional guidance and counseling activities can provide students with opportunities to self assess, reframe their thinking, and discover significant relationships between purposeful, experiential activities outside of class and their level of school success. Students can begin to perceive their role in their own development and begin looking at their responsibility for that development.

ABC techniques can provide the school counselor a set of experiences for identified students, which directly correlate with *The National Standards for School Counseling Programs* (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). Additionally, these experiences can provide students additional opportunities for insight into self-perception regarding motivation, decision making, goal setting and problem-solving often not available to them by traditional school counseling interventions. School counselors should begin to investigate the advantages of including ABC interventions as part of their guidance curriculum activities.

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