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Running head: THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MANDATORY GROUP

The Effectiveness of Mandatory Group Counseling in Middle School on Decreasing Incidents of
Violence and Increasing Student Academic Performance

Matthew Juda

State University of New York College at Brockport

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank several people for their assistance without whom I could not have completed this program. First I need to thank Teron Lewis, my partner, thank you for all your emotional support through this project and as I completed my Masters program. Dr. Thomas Hernandez, thank you for reading and re-reading draft after draft and always being willing to listen to my questions or concerns. Dr. Susan Seem for always being there as an advisor and a friend; thank you for caring enough to take an interest in me and for being my advocate.

Also, I would like to thank Toyia Wilson, Principal of the Northwest College Preparatory High School and Joseph Munno, Principal of John Marshall High School for allowing me to use their schools to conduct this research. Lastly, I would like to thank Sally Altobello for advising me through my internship and helping me get through this project, though at time she questioned whether she was actually helping me at all, sometime just sitting there and being with a person is all they need. To all of you, Thank You!

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Abstract

At the Northwest College Preparatory High School students are required to attend a group counseling period known as Advisory. It is purported that because of this group counseling the school will experience a decrease in violence and an increase in academic achievement. Using report card data, the passing rates by subject and by marking period were calculated. This study was conducted comparing the statistics for NWCP and John Marshall, the other school housed on the campus. The study shows a correlation between the mandatory counseling and a ten to fifteen percent greater passing rate by subject area and at the midway point in the school year.

The Effectiveness of Mandatory Group Counseling in Middle School on Decreasing Incidents of Violence and Increasing Student Academic Performance

In recent years there has been more testing in an effort to put in place higher standards for schools across the United States; this increase in standards has come from political pressure placed on the states by the federal government under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This legislation lays out benchmarks for States to meet in terms of student performance in Mathematics and English-Language Arts (ELA), as well as, requirements for all teachers to be highly qualified. The major implication for this legislation is that funding for schools and education is tied to how well they comply with the standards laid out in NCLB. Consequently, we have seen stricter standards for teachers and more testing of students.

Unfortunately, the trend in the Rochester City School District is that students are not meeting minimum standards academically, they are failing high stakes testing, and there is much violence and violence related absenteeism. According to a New York State Department of Education report in April 2006, the Rochester City School District is considered a District in Need in the areas of English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Graduations rates (NYS Department of Education, 2006). These two trends are troublesome to the district because if it does continue there will inevitably be a decrease in the funding provided by both the federal and state governments. The district has turned to decreasing suspensions by creating alternative interventions that have marginal effect on changing student behavior. Also, schools have taken to increased instruction in Mathematics and ELA by adding classroom time and offering after-school and weekend school in these subjects. Lastly, the district has recently started reorganizing schools to make more, smaller high schools in an effort to make students more accountable as they are now more visible.

John Marshall High School is a large high school in the Rochester City School District and has historically been one of the most underperforming schools in New York State. In fact it had one of the bottom ten graduation rates in the entire state. Starting with the 2006-2007 school year the campus has been divided into two high schools, the already existent John Marshall High School (John Marshall) and the newly created Northwest College Preparatory High School (NWCP). The two schools are housed within the same building but had separate classes, classrooms, and faculty. John Marshall is a comprehensive Regents High School, the NWCP is a small school with teamed teachers, smaller classes, and is a collaborative venture between the Rochester City School District and the College Board. Both schools offered the same classes, have extended day programs and weekend school for Mathematics and ELA; both schools had the same discipline policy. The most distinct difference was that at NWCP students were required to participate in a mandatory group counseling period called Advisory. The Advisory time is a required element of a College Board School. This mandatory group counseling is purported, by the College Board, to increase community in the school, help students connect to teachers and peers, and let students air their concerns so that they may focus on school. Consequently, the district entered into the partnership with the College Board with the expectations that this style school would increase test scores and decrease school violence. The purpose of this study is to examine whether the mandatory group counseling will cause measurable changes that are expected: increasing academic performance and decreasing violence.

Definitions

The Northwest College Preparatory High School is a small school located within the John Marshall Campus. John Marshall High School is the larger, established high school located at

the John Marshall Campus. Advisory is a mandatory group counseling period require for all student at the NWCP. Group counseling is counseling with a small group of students (10-15) and one advisor or counselor. Mandatory means that it is a required component of the program. Violence is defined as incidents that are required to be reported to the State Education Department, for the purpose of this study an attempt will be made to include any incident that involved students receiving disciplinary actions, suspension, as well as those incidents requiring teacher referral to an administrator. Middle school will refer to students in the 7th grade for the purpose of this study. Academic Achievement will be measured in terms of student grades and a passing grade constituting a D or better.

Review of Literature

This literature review will examine the issue of mandatory counseling in schools and the effectiveness it has on changing schools. First there is an examination of the issues affecting schools today: No Child Left Behind, Decreasing School Violence, the Urban Youth Experience, and Bullying. Second we focus on the middle school experience in examining the Growth, Change, and Development in Middle School. The review of literature turns to specifically counseling in middle school by examining the Role of the Counselor and Counseling in Middle School. Once counseling in middle school has been discussed there is a review of several styles or methods of counseling that have been employed in middle school: Group Counseling as an Intervention, Career Counseling as an Intervention, and the Benefits of Group Counseling. Finally, after providing the review of literature that covers the background to the research, the program being evaluated and the method of analysis will be discussed in the sections titled: Advisory at Northwest College Preparatory High School and Analyzing Group Effectiveness

Increasing academic performance in the classroom is a major focus for all schools. As stated before there is pressure applied to schools by the NCLB Act for schools to receive funding and even incentives for increased test scores. In fact schools have become so testing centered that they have changed schedules and increased instruction in areas of testing. For example, at both school examine in this study, middle school student receive twice as much instruction time in English Language Arts and Mathematics as they do in Science, Social Studies, and four time more than Spanish which are all consider core requirements by New York State. However, it can be seen at John Marshall that the programs are having little effect, those students who were high scorers continue to be and low scores maintain their low score. Nation wide studies have been conducted to see if the NCLB requirements are causing the desired change and the studies conclude that the achievement gap between racial groups has seen no change and that the scores are staying static (Report, 2006). In fact an Arizona State University study has concluded that the annual standards that the NCLB Act has set are unrealistic and under funded (Mathis, 2006). In addition, the ASU study continued to say that the NCLB has done the opposite of what it intended, it has decreased the scope of coverage of curriculum and therefore is making students more isolated and less interested in school by eliminating many of the aspects of school that they previously enjoyed and kept them engaged; we are setting our students behind even more in the global competition in an effort to get a step up (Mathis, 2006). A second study conducted by the Brookings Institution showed that students who do well on high stakes testing designed to measure student preparation under the NCLB Act report being less confident in their understanding of the subject and less happy in school overall (Viadero, 2006). Both of these conditions can be tied to the increase in the understanding testing “formats” to answer questions force fed to students to optimize points scores and therefore a decrease in academic knowledge

conveyed in the classroom setting (Viadero, 2006). The loss of confidence and happiness is purported to be related to a decrease in stimulation, the students performing better on tests have memorized methods of solving problems and therefore eliminating the need for creativity, innovation, and challenge (Viadero, 2006).

Studies and test results have shown that extreme measures taken by schools under guise of NCLB have failed to decrease the achievement gap, especially for urban students like those at John Marshall and the NWCP. Consequently, what can be done to increase achievement? According the Ruby (2006) in a controlled experiment using two groups of schools, one group that taught using the NCLB ideal for improving scores and the other group focusing on real world applications of curriculum and student directed content, students in the second group performed better on standardized tests than their counterparts in more concentrated programs catered to improving test scores.

Decreasing School Violence

More than ever, schools are concerned with increasing violence and are seeking solutions that will decrease the number of incidents of violence in schools. Why would it be important to decrease violence in schools? First, violence in school results in students being out of school for formal suspension or informally being sent home, and that means time away from learning. Anyone who has spent time in an urban high school would be able to tell stories of fights and violence. At the same time, schools have found methods of avoiding the traditional consequence of suspensions. Schools have implemented a wide array of interventions to cut down on suspension or circumvent the suspension process through alternative discipline methods. By decreasing suspensions, schools increase their funding by having more students in

the school. In fact according to a New York State Department of Education audit of schools across the state the number of incidents of violence in schools is under-report (Gootman, 2006).

At the same time that funding pressures schools to under-report incidents, parents and society expect students to be held accountable for their violent behavior. When anyone thinks of violence and fights in school the mind naturally travels to the resulting consequence of suspension, there is a natural connection for anyone who has been through public schools in the United States. However, there are still issues that need to be addressed with regard to suspension resulting from violence. Many middle school students view it as a break from school to stay home and relax. Middle school students do not have the foresight or mindfulness to understand the long term consequences or repercussion to fights and suspension. For some students the cycle of violence and suspension is just plain easier and preferred to actually being in school (Metcalf, 1995). Even when students become so violent that they are placed in alternative schools that take them out of the typical classroom setting, students view these programs as easier and less work and in reality the prospect of success from such programs is significantly lower than the traditional classroom setting (Metcalf, 1995).

The Urban Youth Experience

We focus on violence in the schools, but there is a need to consider the urban experience youth. It is important to understand what students are seeing outside of the school as their role model behavior. Students turn to their peers, their families, what they see on the streets, and through the media to model for them the appropriate ways to react to others. If the images the students are seeing outside of the school are reinforcing the negative behaviors that the school is trying to eliminate, the school is fighting a losing battle. Continuously viewing behaviors contrary to the exceptions of the school causes conflict for the schema of youth, especially those

in middle school who are just beginning to form what will be their expected social behavior model for the future. According to Henrich, Schwab-Stone, Fanti, Jones, and Ruchkin (2004) students who witness repeated violence are more likely to exhibit violent behaviors in schools, have lower academic achievement, and come from families with a lower level of parental support for the message of non-violence that the school preaches. In fact the single greatest factor to changing these things for the child was found to be a change in environment to one with support away from incidents of violence (Henrich, Schwab-Stone, Fanti, Jones, & Ruchkin, 2004). Similarly, Saizinger, Ng-Mak, Feldman, Chi-Ming, and Rosario (2006) determined that witnessing incidents of violence are more likely to have a negative impact and remain in the memory more clearly, up to a year later in early teens than any other incident. Another study showed that students who experience violence and harassment were more likely to concurrently and prospectively show large amounts of aggression and anti-social behavior in school (Rusby, Forrester, Biglan, & Metzler, 2005). Ozer and Weinstein (2004) interviewed nearly 350 students who had witnessed violence and found that many of these students expressed that they found it difficult to discuss the incidents they had viewed even though they had very clear memories of the incident and that the memories affected the way they functioned day to day.

Bullying

Another word for violence that has become prevalent in schools is the term bullying. Most students will experience violence in the form of bullying during some point during their schooling; however, step into a middle school and you will inevitably experience more bullying than any other time during a student's schooling. "Being a victim or a perpetrator of school bullying is the most common form of school violence" Young, Yun-Joo, & Leventhal, (2005). Middle school student from three separate urban middle schools serving primarily African

American students were surveyed by Farrell, Sullivan, Kliewer, Allison, Erwin, Meyer, & Esposito (2006) and reported that the factor that was the largest concern for them at school was physical and psychological aggression in the form of bullying. Though bullying is a hot topic for educators, many students perceive their schools as accepting to the violence known as bullying (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Many students do not think of bullying as inappropriate behavior, nor as violence and therefore it goes under-reported by students to administrators (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). According to Schafer (2005) bullying can have a torturous impact on students and can cause long term severe mental health problems. The same study found that the student reported as the bullies we found to have been the victim of violence, witnessed violence, or have few adult role models to show appropriate socialization skills (Schafer, 2005).

It is expected the viewing violence in the larger community will have a profound impact on a child, it is clear that there will be an exponentially larger effect on a child if the violence they witness, are a victim of, or are the perpetrator of, occurs within the walls of their school, a place that should be a safe place. At the middle school level exposure to violence can be seen reflected in future behavior due to the internalizations of the view behavior as acceptable (McGee & Baker, 2002). For some students viewing violence in school makes them feel uncomfortable to come to a place to learn and to be safe. Being different and not having a group to fit in often results in violent incidents when students are isolated as an outsider. Students who attend schools where there is ethnic diversity report that they perceive less violence and feel that they have less bullying because they find somewhere to fit in (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006). Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow (2005) conducted a comprehensive study of the effects of being the victim of peer harassment and found that being bullied, being victimized, results in psychosocial adjustment issues, an increase in complaints of physical issues, and academic

problems. Students exhibit a manifestation of psychosocial maladjustment through having problems with forming relationships with their peers because they find it more challenging to trust (Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005). Physical issues also arise from victimization in the form of complaints about feeling sick or pain which typically would allow them to miss time at school and therefore avoid any would be bullies (Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005).

With all of this violence in schools there are steps currently in place to try to bring an end to the violence that causes issues and problems for the victim, bully, and bystanders. In terms of schools the primary response is to send students out of school to get them out of the environment if they are going to fight to prevent them from continuing to hurt others in the building psychologically, emotionally, and physically. Some schools have moved to the use of both school and community counselors as a mandatory punishment alternative to suspension and have found success in the form of a lower recidivism rate for violent students (Canfield, Ballard, Osmon, & McCune, 2004).

Growth, Change, and Development in Middle School

One additional issue that helps set up the foundation for the violent behavior and lower than desired achievement that we see in middle school is the fact that students are growing, changing, and coming into their adult bodies during this time. During this time most students are trying to figure out their own bodies, what feelings and changes mean, and are confused in their own skin as they go through puberty. They are trying to figure out who they want to be and how they want others to see them. Middle-schoolers long to belong and be accepted by their peers (Hitchner & Tiff-Hitchner, 1996). Middle school years can be a time of isolation and confusion for many middle school students; it is a time when students compete in a pile-on contest fighting to be the person at the top of the pile of their peers. Groups have such a great impact on students

that they can actually affect the way that they view themselves (Hitchner & Tift-Hitchner, 1996). In middle school it is important to be able to set oneself apart so that one will be accepted by the in crowd. For this reason, students have the perception that learning and enjoying school is not cool and that if need be it is important to be able to show that you can stand up for yourself and your friends even if it comes down to fighting. Student report that they are more likely to be violent in response to having been the victim of violence (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003). Students who were victims, committed violence, or witnessed it also reported having a significantly lower view of school and its value and were more likely to participate in activities that perpetuated the cycle of violence (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003).

Role of the Counselor

To this point the discussion of this study has centered on the idea that schools do experience slipping academic achievement and performance as measured by standardized test scores. Also, violence is a part of urban schools and the urban environment. Both of these conditions have consequences and effects on not only students but the school environment as a whole. Effects on the entire school can range from changes the ability to cover curriculum to changes in discipline policy that result in increases in violence. So far solutions have focused on what can be done in the class room and from the perspective of administrators. However, there is one avenue that few urban schools consider or believe they have time to try: working with the expertise of the school counselor to conduct groups with students for any variety of purposes to cause changes in the school.

The school counselor has an often misunderstood role in the school. Administrators and teachers rarely understand the role that counselors intend to serve in the school. Middle school development happens in as many ways as there are students in the middle school. Middle school

counselors have a distinct, difficult role to fill to meet the needs of all of these students (Akos, 2005). The Search Institute identified 40 Developmental Assets that lead to healthy, well adjusted development and it has been found that the number of assets that students experience begins to decline as they proceed through middle school (Scales, 2005). The decrease in the number of assets that students experience has been linked to an increase in violence and isolation as well as decreasing performance in schools (Scales, 2005). Development being such a large part of early adolescents, counselors in middle schools ought to be well versed in these assets and make it a point to help students identify the areas in which they need extra support and assistance (Scales, 2005). A strong relationship with a caring counselor that is skilled in working with students and the changes they undergo during middle school has been found to be one of the strongest determinants student success academically and socially (Wigfield, Lutz & Wagner, 2005). Having a strong model for social behaviors and someone to vent to so that they can focus more on class and less on outside issues leads to increase in school performance (Wigfield, Lutz & Wagner, 2005). The middle school counselor needs to be able to adapt to the ever changing social and political environments that direct the flow in the middle school. The middle school counselor need to be sensitive to the feelings of middle school students that are mediated by the ebbing and flowing of their new and changing hormones and because of this emotions can change quickly and unexpectedly. It is the counselors role to help students learn about and control these new feeling in a way that will help them to be successful in the school setting (Akos, 2005).

For middle school students many new responsibilities and decisions will present themselves, the need to learn cause and effect, and choice and consequences, this is a new aspect of life that may cause pitfalls. It is this instruction and guidance through the process of decision

making that counselors must help middle school students develop (Akos, 2005). It is possible to tie all the issues with academics and violence in middle school to somewhere along the decision making process the student failed to choose the best path for success and if the counselor was utilized instead of suspension then it would more likely that the incident would not be repeated because the student could be assisted in rethinking the means that got them to the end that they had reached. In addition to their role within the walls of the school building, it is important for counselors, especially in urban environments, it have a paradigm shift from being just for counseling and scheduling to being advocates for their students. Counselors have the unique ability to see the big picture for each student and the school as a whole without being encumbered with classes or discipline (Bemak & Chung, 2005). It has already been stated that there is an achievement gap that can be seen in middle school between students of different ethnic backgrounds and the counselor needs to take on the role of the advocate for change in the larger system (Bemak & Chung, 2005).

Another major component of increasing student achievement is to get them to buy into the philosophy of the school. In order for students to behave and achieve well in class they need to want to do well. Teachers, parents, counselors, and administrator can want students to well and work for change but unless the student contributes nothing will occur. Counselors have the ability to meet with small groups or individual students to address common concerns of middle school students that may cause problems for them such as low achievement and violence (Sink, 2005). In working with students individually or in groups counselors have the chance to intervene and assist students with school concerns that would otherwise prevent them from achieving to the optimum level (Sink, 2005). In their study, Guzick, Dorman, Groff, Altermatt, and Forsyth (2004) determined that by getting students interest in school, involved with their

peers, and respectful of their school there is a strong correlation with positive adult social relationships and job success. It is essential for students to build this respect and interest in school through the assistance of their counselor (Guzick, Dorman, Groff, Altermatt, & Forsyth, 2004).

Counseling in the Middle School

As stated before, counseling both individually and in groups has been found to be effective tools to developing student interests and fostering achievement in historically underperforming middle schools. Middle School groups help students tell their stories, let out their frustration, and change their thinking to a problem-solving mindset thereby decreasing fights and allowing them to better focus in the classroom (Metcalf, 1995). One important aspect of starting and conducting groups in middle school is to be sure to describe it properly for example “an opportunity to discover yourself and from the others in the group” or “a time to share success and feel supported” otherwise it may be viewed by the students as the “problem group” (Metcalf, 1995). Groups, whether in the educational or corporate setting, allow members to be honest and open in a safe environment to deal with concerns that might otherwise be left to fester (Thomas, 2006). By conducting groups it is possible to understand that it is possible for these groups to have a strong impact on the function and behaviors in schools by allowing students a forum to deal with issues that might otherwise erupt into more extensive problems.

Group Counseling as an Intervention

Group counseling is not a new idea for middle schools but groups are historically conducted as a response to a problem, not as a preventative. Groups have been conducted to deal with bullying behavior or to work with highly at risk students. Groups to fix bullying problems have primarily focus on telling an adult when bullying occurs, educating students and faculty

about bullying, and working to develop a school wide understanding of acceptable socialization; these skills have been found to be most effective when implemented at the middle school level (Hirschstein & Frey, 2006). A similar program discussed by Lochman, Wells, & Murry (2007) involves similar topics but is designed with a series of groups with specific coverage topics that have correlating parent meetings. The premise of the program is that psychoeducational groups work for students but also require reinforcement at home which is assisted through the parent meetings. In addition to working with students and parents it is vital that teachers be trained in bullying prevention skills so that materials that are learned in the groups can be carried over into the classroom. It is suggested that teachers attend training in intervention skills, self-efficacy, and lectures to gain a wide range of useful knowledge about bullying (Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004).

Career Counseling as an Intervention

Having academic achievement and violence in school as a major concern for many schools, there are continuous efforts to determine what can be done to help students in these areas. Studies have shown that many student behavior issues in middle school are tied to issues surrounding the adjustment from elementary school to intermediate grades. It is suggested that career counseling is helpful in quelling transitional issues for high-risk middle school students by helping them focus on long term future goals and what is need to achieve them. Early career counseling in middle school is effective in helping students maintain their focus and increase academic performance (Trusty, Niles, & Carney, 2005). Systematic education in careers and requirements to meet career goals help at-risk students understand why school is important to value (Trusty, Niles, & Carney, 2005). Citing research to these ends, the College Board has directed all schools that it is involved with to include college and career education into it's

curriculum in some manner. At NWCP one of the components of their group counseling period known as Advisory is college and career education. Career testing and counseling are important for helping students develop an idea of future careers early in school so that they focus on their academics so as to prepare them with a rigorous program that is comprehensive provides them with a jump off point to work from as they enter higher education in pursuit of future educational and career goals (Osborn & Reardon, 2006). During Advisory students complete many career exercises such as, interest inventories, career research and presentations, and college research and presentations. The College Board reports that the inclusion of career and college education as a part of school curriculum has assisted students in by increasing concern about improving academically so that they can meet or exceed the goals they have set for themselves. Advisory with this type of education included has been shown to increase student concern which is indicated by increase in academic achievement in students receiving this education as early as middle school (Poliner & Lieber, 2004).

Benefits of Group Counseling

It is clear that School Counselors and Career Counseling can play a helpful role in schools when it comes to interventions that help to decrease violence and increase academic performance. However, both of these interventions can be done on a case-by-case basis and not cause major impact or disruptions on the school day. At NWCP there has been a mandatory group counseling period instituted school-wide, a step that to some may seem unnecessary and to some in education wasteful as it takes away from classroom instruction time, a prized element of schools. Kruczek, Alexander, and Harris (2005) have identified one major cause for a performance issue in education beyond an elementary level is the fact that the students have problems with transition from elementary school. High-risk students have been found to benefit

from working in group settings outside of school hours to learn skills and cope with issues related to transitioning to the new learning environment (Kruczek, Alexander, & Harris, 2005). One final use of groups that have been found to be effective are in working with students who are the victims of bullying. This type of groups has victims work together to develop problem solving skills and knowledge to face bullies (Hall, 2006). Hall (2006) found that as a result of these groups students who participated perceived less issues arising from bullying and experienced a lower fear that they would become the victim of bullying again in the future.

Advisory at Northwest College Preparatory High School

For the Rochester City School District, group counseling is a fairly new idea at the secondary level as it does not have a convenient place in the daily course schedule. However, as required part of their cooperative high schools like NWCP, students are required to participate in a group counseling experience known as Advisory. The College Board provides all advisors with a manual and training that guides them as to how to conduct a group. It is expected that advisory is a place for community building, academic advisement, and working on issues that are affecting student focus and performance (Poliner & Lieber, 2004). The advisory period is expected to have goals and measurable outcomes, content and themes, linking to other aspects of the schools, and accountability for students to participate and work with the group (Poliner & Lieber, 2004). Groups in the Northwest College Preparatory High School tend to lean toward a psychoeducational group. The students often work together on tasks such as examining the college application and admissions process and then take time as a group to process thoughts, feelings, and questions. At the same time if there is a pressing issue for one of the students or the school the group is not so structured that these issues are overlooked, rather, they spend time discussing and working as a group. Advisory is expected to have a set schedule and to have

mandatory participation for all students. The College Board asserts that the Advisory will result in increased community and focus in the classroom and consequently higher academic performance as well as a decrease in violence due to the time to deal with issues that would affect both built into the school day.

Analyzing Group Effectiveness

Once a group has been conducted, it is important to develop a means to evaluate the group the effectiveness to which it is reaching its goal. For the purpose of this study we are examining the Advisory Group, mandatory groups counseling that is conducted at NWCP. The study seeks to see if the group decrease violence and increase academic performance as the College Board purport that it will. It is vital to schools and school counselors to examine the effectiveness of a program that has been implemented because with limited resource and limited time on the part of the counselor it does not make sense to utilize a program for an extended period of time if the expected results are not occurring (Poynton, Carlson, Hopper, & Carey, 2006). Any evaluation methods or techniques ought to be planned before the program is implemented so that those conducting the program have an understanding at the inception of the expectations and how they will be measured (Poynton, Carlson, Hopper, & Carey, 2006). In some case the evaluation of the program is as vital to the program as actually conducting the group sessions themselves (Romasz, Kantor, & Elias, 2003). Evaluation should be ongoing so that the program can be changed to meet the need of the group and to ensure that it is working to meet the expectations by focusing on the underlying issues of the school that the group seeks to help (Romasz, Kantor, & Elias, 2003). When conducting research in schools, it is effective to use comparison groups to see if the control group, that which is not undergoing the program, is seeing the same effects as the manipulated group (Bauman, 2006). It is widely held that group

comparisons conducted between two separate populations is effective in evaluation of a program however it is also speculated that comparisons become more effective for evaluation the more similar the groups are (Bauman, 2006), consequently by conducting this study between two groups in the same school building but in different programs the results would be expected to be an accurate representation of the true usefulness of the program.

Method

Introduction

In recent years the Rochester City School District has made the move to create smaller schools at the middle/high school level. In an effort to do this, several campuses have been divided into smaller *schools within schools*. The school year starting in September 2006 marked the beginning of this arrangement at the John Marshall Campus. The school now houses the John Marshall High School and the Northwest College Preparatory High School. The goal is that through smaller schools, the district under the direction Dr. Manuel Rivera, believes that students will feel more connected and be held more accountable and therefore there will be a rise in the area of academic achievement and a decrease in school violence. This research was conducted within the John Marshall Campus in an effort to examine whether one aspect of the small schools movement, mandatory group counseling, which takes place at NWCP, was effective in meeting the goals set by the district.

Research Design

The research completed during this study was statistical analysis. The NWCP already incorporated mandatory group counseling into the school curriculum. This research examined the passing and failing rates of students at both schools over the course of the first semester.

Using student report cards, a comparison of passing/failing rates by subject and overall was conducted by marking period.

The material on the report card was tallied onto charts, the format and data can be seen in the data section of this research. Student grades were considered passing if the student received a *D* or higher in course. The letter grade of a *D* is equivalent to a 65%. For the information on Table 7: *Comparing Number of Core Courses Student are Passing at the end of the 1st Semester (in Percentage)* the students was determined to be passing or failing using the same criteria used by schools at the end of the year to determine the student passing a course. If a student was passing the majority of marking periods and the exam, in this case the midterm, they were passing. If a student was failing the majority of marking period and the exam, they were failing. If the student failed the exam but passed the majority of marking periods, the average of the numeric scores was calculated to determine passing and failing. If the student passed the exam but was failing the majority of marking periods, the average of the numeric scores was calculated to determine passing and failing.

Data collected on student passing/failing rates was converted into percentages from proportions. The data in percentage form was compared between the two schools.

In an effort to obtain the data on school violence a conversation was held with each principal. It was found that the number of referrals and incidents is not required to be reported to the New York State Department of Education and were not well documented and consequently would not included for the purpose of this report. Additionally, the number of incidents required to be reported to the New York State Department of Education is not maintained at the building level. To obtain this information a call was placed to the Rochester City School District Educational Statistics and Testing Office. The response from the EST Office was that the

information is only compiled and released on an annual basis and therefore it is not possible to get the information mid-school year and therefore the statistics on violence will not be included in this report at all.

Sample Population

At John Marshall and NWCP the students come from an urban environment, the majority of the students come from homes of poverty and receive free or reduced lunches. It is easy to assume that most of the students come from the stereotypical urban home with a single mother, many children, are on public assistance and guardians have little if any education beyond high school. In reality each student is an individual with individual background and experience and these things are a component of the person that they are (Brunson & Miller, 2006). It is also important to recognize that many teachers and school professionals were Caucasian and in the case of John Marshall and NWCP the majority population was composed of minority ethnic groups; most students on campus are African American. The African American experience and particularly the urban experience is one that no Caucasian person can truly understand (Brunson & Miller, 2006). The majority of African American youth exhibit a resistance to authority based on their experience, perceived belief, or parental education of the major authority they experience outside of the classroom, police officers; this resistance inevitably carries over into the classroom where students view teachers and school professionals as having the same role of “policing” them within the school (Brunson & Miller, 2006). It may be correlated that many problems within the school could stem from the perception of a pseudo-society that middle school students see outside the school.

The sample data came from first time seventh graders in both schools. The purpose for this was to examine how the programs at NWCP affect students. However, the students in the

ninth grade at NWCP attended John Marshall or other City School District high schools for seventh and eighth grades. The study also used the distinction of first time seventh graders because there was a large population of repeat seventh grade students at John Marshall. The experiment was controlled to ensure that all students identified in the data were untainted by prior high school influences.

Data Collection Instruments

For the purposes of this research the data on academic achievement was collected from mid-year report cards. These report cards contained no identifying data on students, names and identification numbers were removed. The report cards contained student grade level, courses, making period grades from the first, second, and third marking periods, as well as, the grade earned on the mid-term exam.

To collect data about levels of school violence as reported to the New York State Department of Education a contact was made to the Rochester City School District Educational Statistics and Testing Office. The EST Office stated that the information of school violence was not compiled or released until year end and therefore the data was not available for the purpose of this research.

Data Analysis

Data collected on academic achievement in both schools was converted into percentages from proportions. Once the conversion to percentages was completed a comparison of percentages between the two schools was conducted. The comparison looked at the difference in percentages between passing/failing by subject for each marking period, the passing/failing overall for each marking period, and the passing/failing rate at the mid-term mark in the year.

Results

Research Question

The primary focus of this research was to examine the passing rates and levels of violence comparatively between two schools, John Marshall High School and the Northwest College Preparatory High School, housed on the John Marshall Campus. The difference between the two schools is that NWCP has mandatory group counseling known as Advisory. It is purported by the College Board, who is partnering with the Rochester City School District in the development of the NWCP High School, that this Advisory time would result in increased student achievement and a decrease in incidents of violence. This research seeks determine if the Advisory period was effective in increasing academic performance and decreasing incidents of violence. The data was collected on academic achievement from report cards with no identifying information other than grade level and courses.

Tables and Figures

Table 1

Comparison of Student Pass/Fail Percentage by Subject for 1st Marking Period

Subject		John Marshall	Northwest College Preparatory
English	Pass	68.86% N= 115/167	58.67% N= 44/75
	Fail	31.13% N= 52/167	41.33% N= 31/75
Math	Pass	47.90% N= 80/167	61.33% N= 46/75
	Fail	52.10% N= 87/167	38.67% N= 29/75
Science	Pass	49.10% N= 82/167	57.33% N= 43/75
	Fail	50.90% N= 85/167	42.67% N= 32/75
Social Studies	Pass	52.10% N= 87/167	66.67% N= 50/75
	Fail	47.90% N= 80/167	33.33% N= 25/75

Table 2

Comparing Number of Core Courses Student are Passing for 1st Marking Period (in Percentage)

Number of Core Courses Passing	John Marshall	Northwest College Preparatory
0	19.16% N= 32/167	12.00% N= 9/75
1	16.17% N= 27/167	21.33% N= 16/75
2	15.56% N= 26/167	12.00% N= 9/75
3	23.35% N= 39/167	20.00% N= 15/75
4	25.75% N= 43/167	34.67% N= 26/75

Table 3

Comparison of Student Pass/Fail Percentage by Subject for 2nd Marking Period

Subject		John Marshall	Northwest College Preparatory
English	Pass	62.87% N= 105/167	58.67% N= 44/75
	Fail	37.13% N= 62/167	41.33% N= 31/75
Math	Pass	41.32% N= 69/167	62.67% N= 47/75
	Fail	58.68% N= 98/167	37.33% N= 28/75
Science	Pass	49.10% N= 82/167	52.00% N= 39/75
	Fail	50.90% N= 85/167	48.00% N= 36/75
Social Studies	Pass	39.52% N= 66/167	52.00% N= 39/75
	Fail	60.48% N= 101/167	48.00% N= 36/75

Table 4

Comparing Number of Core Courses Student are Passing for 2nd Marking Period (in Percentage)

Number of Core Courses Passing	John Marshall	Northwest College Preparatory
0	24.55% N= 41/167	21.33% N= 16/75
1	16.17% N= 27/167	18.67% N= 14/75
2	17.37% N= 29/167	9.33% N= 7/75
3	20.36% N= 34/167	12.00% N= 9/75
4	21.55% N= 36/167	38.67% N= 29/75

Table 5

Comparison of Student Pass/Fail Percentage by Subject for 3rd Marking Period

Subject		John Marshall	Northwest College Preparatory
English	Pass	54.49%	73.33%
		N= 91/167	N= 55/75
Math	Fail	45.51%	26.67%
		N= 76/167	N= 20/75
Science	Pass	32.34%	53.33%
		N= 54/167	N= 40/75
Social Studies	Fail	67.66%	46.67%
		N= 113/167	N= 35/75
English	Pass	47.90%	68.00%
		N= 80/167	N= 51/75
Math	Fail	52.10%	32.00%
		N= 87/167	N= 24/75
Science	Pass	38.32%	42.67%
		N= 64/167	N= 32/75
Social Studies	Fail	61.68%	57.33%
		N= 103/167	N= 43/75

Table 6

Comparing Number of Core Courses Student are Passing for 3rd Marking Period (in Percentage)

Number of Core Courses Passing	John Marshall	Northwest College Preparatory
0	26.35% N= 44/167	13.33% N= 10/75
1	18.56% N= 31/167	16.00% N= 12/75
2	20.36% N= 34/167	16.00% N= 12/75
3	16.77% N= 28/167	21.33% N= 16/75
4	17.96% N= 30/167	33.33% N= 25/75

Table 7

Comparing Number of Core Courses Student are Passing at the end of the 1st Semester (in Percentage)

Number of Core Courses Passing	John Marshall	Northwest College Preparatory
0	31.14% N= 52/167	20.67% N= 20/75
1	20.36% N= 34/167	17.33% N= 13/75
2	12.57% N= 21/167	4.00% N= 3/75
3	13.17% N= 22/167	13.33% N= 10/75
4	22.75% N= 38/167	38.67% N= 29/75

Analysis of Data

Since the primary means of measuring student success is to examine passing rates the result presented will be analyzed based on passing rates. However, the data for failing rate is presented in each chart and where inconsistencies occur, or need warrants, this data will be identified and examined.

Tables 1 and 2 identify information on the achievement of students in the First Marking Period. Table 1 shows that across the subject areas, with exception of English, the students at NWCP had a higher passing percentage than John Marshall. In English, the students at John Marshall had a passing rate of 68.86% or a difference of 10.19% higher than NWCP (58.67%). In all other subject areas NWCP students passed with a higher percentage: Math 61.33% (13.43% higher), Science 57.33% (8.23% higher) and Social Studies 66.67% (14.57% higher). Data in Table 2 identifies number of courses passed for the First Marking Period. NWCP had 34.67% pass four courses, a difference of 8.92% over the John Marshall student rate of 25.75%. NWCP had 20% pass three courses that was 3.35% less than the John Marshall student rate of 23.35%. NWCP had 12% pass two courses, 3.56% less than the John Marshall student rate of 15.56%. NWCP had 21.33% pass only one course, a difference of 5.16% over the John Marshall student rate of 16.17%. Lastly, NWCP had 12% pass no core courses, 7.16% less than the John Marshall student rate of 19.16%. Analyzing this data differently, if we consider the percent of students passing more courses than failing, passing three or four classes, there were 54.67% of NWCP achieving at this level or 5.57% more than the John Marshall rate of 49.1%.

Tables 3 and 4 identify information on the achievement of students in the Second Marking Period. Table 3 shows that across the subject areas, with exception of English, the students at NWCP had a higher passing percentage than John Marshall. In English, the students at John Marshall had a passing rate of 62.87% or a difference of 4.2% higher than NWCP (58.67%), this indicates a closing of the gap since the previous marking period. In all other subject areas NWCP students passed with a higher percentage: Math 62.67% (21.35% higher), Science 52% (2.9% higher) and Social Studies 52% (12.48% higher). Data in Table 4 identifies number of courses passed for the Second Marking Period. NWCP had 38.67% pass four courses,

a difference of 17.12% over the John Marshall student rate of 21.55%. NWCP had 12% pass three courses, 8.36% less than the John Marshall student rate of 20.36%. NWCP had 9.33% pass two courses, 8.04% less than the John Marshall student rate of 17.37%. NWCP had 18.67% pass only one course, a difference of 2.51% over the John Marshall student rate of 16.17%. Lastly, NWCP had 21.33% pass no core courses, 3.22% less than the John Marshall student rate of 24.55%. Analyzing this data differently, if we consider the percent of students passing more courses than failing, passing three or four classes, there were 50.67% of NWCP achieving at this level or 0.76% more than the John Marshall rate of 49.91%.

Tables 5 and 6 identify information on the achievement of students in the Third Marking Period. Table 5 shows that across the subject areas, the students at NWCP had a higher passing percentage than John Marshall for all subject areas for the third marking period. The passing percentages were: English 73.33% (18.84% higher), Math 53.33% (20.99 % higher), Science 68% (20.1% higher) and Social Studies 42.67% (4.35% higher). Data in Table 6 identifies number of courses passed for the Third Marking Period. NWCP had 33.33% pass four courses, a difference of 15.37% over the John Marshall student rate of 17.96%. NWCP had 21.33% pass three courses a difference of 4.56 over the John Marshall student rate of 16.77%. NWCP had 16% pass two courses, 4.36% less than the John Marshall student rate of 20.36%. NWCP had 16% pass only one course, 2.56 less than the John Marshall student rate of 18.56%. Lastly, NWCP had 13.33% pass no core courses, 13.02% less than the John Marshall student rate of 26.35%. Analyzing this data differently, if we consider the percent of students passing more courses than failing, passing three or four classes, there were 54.66% of NWCP achieving at this level or 19.93% more than the John Marshall rate of 34.73%.

Data in Table 7 identifies number of courses students are passing after Midterm Exams. NWCP had 38.67% passing four courses, a difference of 15.92% over the John Marshall student rate of 22.75%. NWCP had 13.33% passing three courses a difference of 0.16 over the John Marshall student rate of 13.17%. NWCP had 4% passing two courses, 8.57% less than the John Marshall student rate of 12.57%. NWCP had 17.33% passing only one course, 3.03% less than the John Marshall student rate of 20.36%. Lastly, NWCP had 20.67% passing no core courses, 10.47% less than the John Marshall student rate of 31.14%. Analyzing this data differently, if we consider the percent of students passing more courses than failing, passing three or four classes, there were 52% of NWCP achieving at this level or 16.08% more than the John Marshall rate of 35.92%.

Comments on Consistencies and Inconsistencies

In examining the data across the charts there are several consistencies that can be seen. First, looking at number of courses passed, NWCP consistently had more students passing all four core courses while John Marshall had more students failing all four core courses (Tables 2, 4, 6, and 7). Also, NWCP had more students three or four courses than John Marshall did for all three marking periods as well as midway through the year (Tables 2, 4, 6, and 7). Tables 1, 3, and 5 showed that the students at NWCP passed Math, Science, and Social Studies at a higher rate than their counterparts at John Marshall consistently. The only major inconsistency is that the students at John Marshall passed English with a higher percentage than the NWCP students for the First and Second Marking Period but not the Third Marking Period when the NCWP far exceeded the John Marshall students in term of passing rate (Tables 1, 3, and 5).

Discussion

Introduction

The Rochester City School District has been moving away from large high schools to a concept of smaller schools within schools. This change has been met with varying levels of success. At the start of the 2006-2007 school year a new school, the Northwest College Preparatory High School (NWCP), was opened on the John Marshall Campus alongside the existing John Marshall High School. NWCP was created as a partnership between the Rochester City School District and the College Board. The major difference between the two schools was that NWCP had as a part of the school curriculum a mandatory counseling period known as Advisory. This feature of the schools is supported by the College Board as the primary means of increasing student achievement and decreasing incidents of violence within the school. For this reason, this study sought to examine if this objective held true for NWCP. In essence, does mandatory group counseling in middle school increase students academic achievement and decrease incidents of violence.

To conduct this analysis, student report cards were referenced and data were charted. The report cards were analyzed to see passing rates by subject in each marking period as well as number of courses passed per marking period and at the midterm point in the year. The data from both schools were converted to percentages for comparison purposes. The data were examined and several consistencies were found. First, the students at NWCP passed three or four core courses with a greater rate than the students at John Marshall. Second, students at NWCP passed their individual core courses with a greater frequency than the students at John Marshall. Overall, it was seen that by marking period and at the midterm point in the year, students at NWCP were passing more than the students at John Marshall.

Interpretation of Findings

In reviewing all of the data it was seen that across subject area and across marking periods that the students of the Northwest College Preparatory High School had achieved a higher passing rate. The only difference was that the students at John Marshall performed better in English during the first and second marking periods. The only suggestion for reason that this difference in the general trend was that the curriculum for English at NWCP was a new pilot curriculum for both teachers and students; whereas, the John Marshall teachers were using the old curriculum.

The students at NWCP were receiving mandatory group counseling and passed their core classes at a higher rate than the students at John Marshall. The Advisory period, besides being mandatory, focuses on social adjustment, career goals, and the college issues. The current research shows that groups focusing on these issues have shown results similar to this experiment. For example, according to Metcalf (1995) groups in middle school allow students to tell their stories and work through issues that allow them to shift from problems in the classroom related to fear to focusing on class material. In their research, Hirschstein & Frey (2006) identified that through group counseling students develop socialization skills that have shown a correlation to more success in the classroom. Besides socialization and interpersonal skills, careers and college counseling helps increase student performance by giving meaning to school and coursework. Research conducted by Trusty, Niles, & Carney (2005) indicated that through learning about careers and college, at risk students are shown the value of education and therefore will develop a stronger focus on academic achievement. In providing students a college and career focus in middle school, they are given a jump off point that starts their high school career on a strong track toward success (Osborn & Reardon, 2006). Citing all of this

research on socialization, adjustment, and career and college, and the results of this research, it can be seen that in making this type of group mandatory there is the creation of an environment, school-wide, that increase performance overall, not just at the individual level.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that will affect the outcome of the experiment. First, there is the issue of difference between the two schools. Since there were two different schools with different teachers, administrators, and cultures the results may have been affected by this school design. Having two groups of teacher and administrators the students in the two schools were inevitably held to different standards. For example, all of the teachers and the principal at NWCP knew every student in the school, the students at NWCP traveled in classes as a group, and there were clear expectations and consequences set in place and enforced uniformly across the school. Conversely, at John Marshall the students had three different vice-principals that they interact with depending on their location of their last name in the alphabet; each administrator at John Marshall had their own style. Also, the students at John Marshall were not grouped for their classes meaning that they may had a different group of peers in each class they took. Despite the difficulty in creating identical conditions between the two schools, it can be stated that the mandatory group counseling had benefits, along with other unique school features, in increasing student performance. Secondly, NWCP only had seventh and ninth grade students, John Marshall was a full seventh through twelfth grade school; under these conditions, the students of John Marshall had older role models that exhibit different behaviors than those enforced in NWCP.

Implications for School Change

The findings of this study show that there is a correlation between student achievement and the use of mandatory group counseling. These initial findings suggest that there was a significant increase, for all grading periods, for students who receive mandatory group counseling integrated into their school day showing achievement at a higher level, consistently. For schools that work with at risk or underperforming students it is clear that the mandatory group counseling period has positive effects and could truly help students. Though the change may be slow and small, at most a 16% greater passing rate in this study, it is important to continue the efforts because though it is a small change, it is a change in the right direction. It is important then for schools to consider adding to their curriculum a period similar to the Advisory counseling period. It is important for schools to provide counselors with training so that they can conduct effective Advisory. There is a need for counselors to be trained to teach their counterparts in the methods of Advisory as well as to advocate for it in the school. Also, there is a need to educate teachers about advisory and the value it plays in the schools and in helping with student success.

Recommendations for Counseling Practice

School counselors should take this information and use it in their work as advocates for change in schools. Many schools may be resistant to giving time to mandatory group counseling. For many school leaders, such a move would be indicative of time being taken away from the core subjects, the subject that students have to meet certain standards to appease the government. It however is important to present these suggestions with the facts, here in this research it is clear that student achievement did increase along with the Advisory period, it is the

role of the counselor to become the advocate for any changes that will help students, and in this case it deals directly with the counselors area of expertise.

If schools are not willing to implement mandatory group counseling as a school wide philosophy the counselor can work on a smaller scale to target the students most at risk and help them. Since it is seen that the school as a whole benefits from the use of group counseling, it may be expected that individuals who are willing to participate or for who participation is a need, there would be a benefit. First, the counselor would need to identify the most at risk students, behaviorally and academically. Next the counselor would need to set out to plan the group. The counselor would need to determine group focus, is it psycho-educational or person centered or another style, is it a career group, a feelings group, a social skills group, or whatever topic the counselor deems necessary based on the population. This is important the type of group and theme must be determined by the needs of the students selected to be in the group. Next, it would be important to sit with each student invited to join the group and explain how the group will work and determine with the student if this seems to be something in which they would be committed too participating in for a period of time. Following the creation of the group, the counselor has the responsibility to facilitate the group. Throughout the course of the group it is the role of the counselor to assess if the group is meeting the objectives as well as needs of the student. Once the group has terminated it is important for the counselor to analyze the results of the group, if possible, to share with the leaders of the school, as this might provide more evidence for the need of this service and may aid in the implementation of a school wide program that is mandatory as discussed in this paper.

Further Research

Throughout the process of research it was challenging to find any work on mandatory group counseling in general. Several articles about mandatory group counseling were found regarding the prison system and mental health facilities however they had little relevance to this research. It is likely that because very few schools have instituted a program of mandatory group counseling similar to the Advisory program at the Northwest College Preparatory High School. Though this practice may not be frequently used by a large population of schools, I believe that over time there will be an increase in the number of schools that employ such practice. For this reason I believe that further research as to the implications of such policies is necessary. Also, this experiment was conducted under less than controlled conditions and the result could stem for a wide variety of factors that are inter-related and maybe even not at all tied to the Advisory experiences of the students. The size of the school, the teaching staff, the grouping of student, or any other number of factors could have caused or affected these results. It will be important to conduct further research into the possibility of other factors influencing these results. As it is seen not there is a correlation between the use of mandatory group counseling, in this case the Advisory program, and an increase in academic performance. However, it is also important to note that correlation does not indication causation.

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