

Successful Elementary School Based Counseling in a Large Metropolitan Area

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Abstract

A private community-based, nonprofit, mental health agency developed a school counseling program that helped to strengthen the capacities of youth to navigate developmental milestones and learn the skills needed to make positive choices. The program was designed to promote healthy growth and development, increase problem solving abilities, promote student achievement, and decrease high-risk behaviors. The agency trained psychology pre-doctoral interns, marriage and family therapist interns, social work interns, and licensed professional clinical counselor interns under the supervision of a licensed psychologist, to work in local public schools. The counselors provided individual and group counseling and psycho-educational services to students referred to counseling by teachers, parents, or administration. This study examined archival data collected from the 2012-2013 academic year from over 10 elementary schools. The results indicated statistically significant differences on all measures of the Strengths and Difficulties Self-Report Questionnaire between pre assessment and post assessment scores for students receiving the counseling. Additionally a small control group provided further evidence of program success.

Keywords: School Counseling, Prevention, Counseling Psychology

1. Introduction

A private community-based, nonprofit, mental health agency developed a school counseling program that helped to strengthen the capacities of youth to navigate developmental milestones and learn the skills needed to make positive choices.

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The program was designed to promote healthy growth and development, increase problem solving abilities, promote student achievement, and decrease high-risk behaviors. The agency trained psychology pre-doctoral interns, marriage and family therapist interns, social work interns, and licensed professional clinical counselor interns under the supervision of a licensed psychologist, to work in local educational public schools and provide individual and group counseling and psycho-educational services. This study examined the data collected from the 2012-2013 academic year for evidence of the program's success.

For the past twelve years, the private community-based, nonprofit, mental health agency assisted schools in a large metropolitan area by providing mental health counseling within the public schools. For the majority of that time there was little evidence collected on the outcomes of the program, however for the past five years, a subset of the program focused primarily on one public school district and utilized a research-based pre- and post-test, the Strengths and Difficulties Self-Report Questionnaire (SDQ), to evaluate the effectiveness of the group interventions with public school aged students. The program provided students, mostly students in the elementary level, with the opportunity to resolve conflicts, lower anxieties, and become better adjusted through individual and group counseling interventions. Studies have found that children in the elementary level can benefit from counseling interventions (Bostick & Anderson, 2009; Duchesne, Vitaro, Larose, & Tremblay, 2008). Benefits from these interventions can include lower rates of anxiety, and school dropout, and higher rates of academic success.

2. Methods

The program was designed to provide students with opportunities for positive experiences and success in school, while enhancing their personal lives. The counseling program also collected control data on a group of anonymous students not involved in the counseling interventions. The researchers in this study, with the permission of the program's management, used an archival data analysis perspective to ascertain the effectiveness of the program over the 2012-13 academic year.

2.1 Measurement Instrument

The SDQ is a standardized instrument, widely used throughout the world and is available in many different languages, and it has been tested and researched in many languages to assure validity and reliability (Goodman & Goodman, 2009; Riso, Salcuni, Chessa, Raudino, Lis, & Altoè, 2010; Hintermair, 2006; Kóbor, Takács, & Urbán, 2013). The SDQ website includes over 20 different research studies verifying the reliability and validity of the English version (SDQinfo, 2014). The SDQ questionnaire evaluates each participant across seven categories. The categories are as follows:

- Overall stress
- Emotional distress
- Behavioral difficulties
- Hyperactivity and attention difficulties
- Difficulties getting along with other young people
- Kind and helpful behavior
- Impact of difficulties on the young person's life

The program combined several of the categories to develop subscales. The first three areas were combined by the program to obtain a total score ranging from 0-50 inclusive and titled *Stress & Difficult Emotion/Behavior*. *Hyperactivity & Attention Difficulty* was used alone by the program to assess the effectiveness on ADD/ADHD type behavior. The score for *Kind & Helpful Behavior* was based on the number of positive qualities the teacher endorsed in the questionnaire. The higher the number, the more positive qualities were endorsed. It was the only subscale assessing positive qualities and was its own subscale. Difficulties getting along with other young people and impact of any difficulties on the young person's life were combined for a *Difficulty with Life & Others* subscale.

Although we report on the program's subscales in this analysis, we also looked at each category independently to ascertain any significance between the pre and post assessments.

2.2 Participants

Pre-intervention and follow up questionnaires were completed for the total sample of 151 students grades K thru 6 who were referred for counseling by a teacher, parent, or administrator.

Participants were deemed appropriate to receive services after an initial intake interview with the counselor assigned to the school. Students attended one of 13 elementary schools or a district established community resource center. There were 100 male (66%) and 51 female (34%) students, ranging in age from 5 to 11, $M = 8.33$, participating in the intervention. The modality employed was primarily small group counseling, with 3-4 students in each group. All participants were initially seen individually for evaluation and a small number may have received individual counseling when it was deemed appropriate and necessary. The questionnaires were completed by the child's main classroom teacher. Additionally, the program asked teachers in the schools to fill out pre and post assessment material on a random anonymous student who was not part of the counseling intervention. The program had 8 pre and post assessment material for students that did not receive counseling.

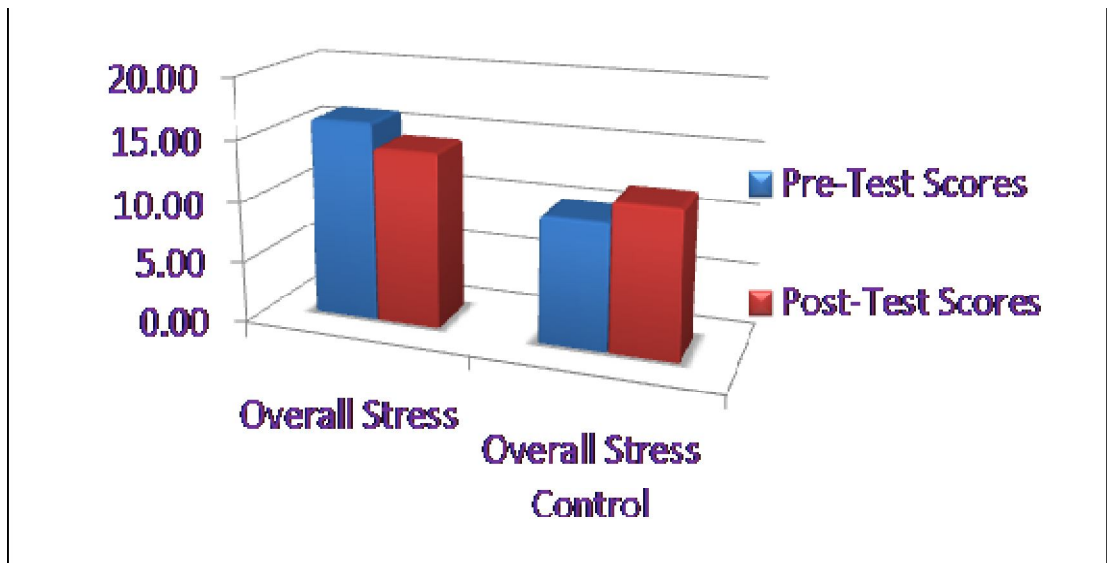
2.3 Procedure

During the referral process, the student's teacher was asked to complete the pre-SDQR-assessment. Referred students were provided with an individual intake interview by the counselor assigned to the school. If the counselor deemed the student group appropriate, the student was scheduled to participate in a weekly group with 2-3 other students of similar age. Groups in the elementary level were mixed gender with no more than 1 grade of differentiation. Group activities varied between groups based on the age and needs of group members. However, all counselors were trained and required to include mindfulness type activities, social skills exercises, and promote a safe confidential environment for all students. At the end of the intervention, the student's teacher was asked to fill out the post-SDQR-assessment. Additionally, the program asked teachers in the schools to fill out pre and post assessment material on a random anonymous student who was not part of the counseling intervention. This data was used by the program to provide a reference group to compare the program's effectiveness between students who received counseling with students that did not receive counseling services. The low number of participants in the control group, $n = 8$, limited the analysis of the control data in this paper.

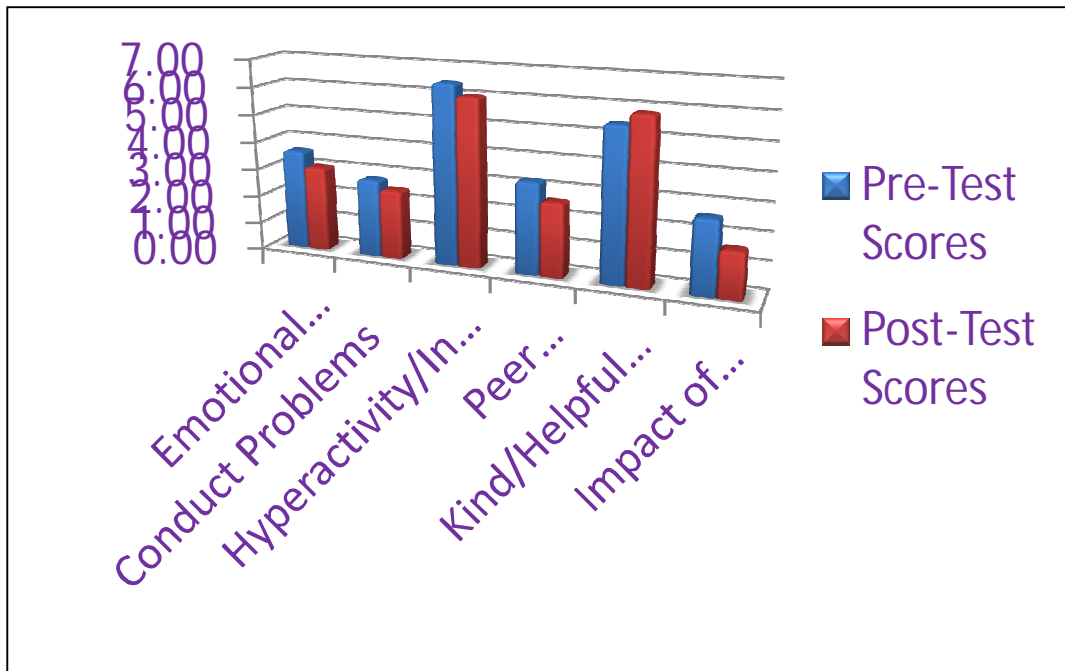
3.0 Results

All scores were assessed by comparing the pre-SDQ-assessment scores with the post-SDQ-assessment scores.

Additionally, pre-assessment scores and post-assessment scores were compared with a control group of students not receiving the counseling services. The SDQ analysis demonstrates that the school based counseling program had a statistically significant improvement in all SDQ categories.



The analysis on the category of overall stress shows a decrease in scores from pre assessment to post assessment for the participants in the program, while no significant difference was found with the control group. No analysis was completed between participant and control group responses due to the heterogeneity of variance associated with the largely unequal sample sizes.



The remaining 6 categories also showed significant differences in participants' scores from pre assessment to post assessment. Statistical analysis using a paired means one tailed t-assessment provided empirical confirmation of statistically significant changes in the scores of participants from pre-assessment to post-assessment as rated by the participant's main teacher.

The *Emotional Distress* scores demonstrate a statistically significant decline, beyond the .01 level, the pre-assessment $M = 3.62$ and the post-assessment $M = 3.07$. An additional analysis was conducted with the control group of 8 anonymous students. This helped us to determine if other variables apart from the counseling interventions might explain the changes in the pre-assessment to post-assessment scores. The additional analysis did not find significant differences between the pre-assessment scores and the post-assessment scores of the control group. Although the control sample size was small and thus no analysis was made between control group and participant group, the lack of change in the control group could provide support that the counseling intervention was a factor in the change on the pre and post assessment scores for students involved in the counseling program.

A statistically significant difference was also found in the category of *Hyperactivity & Inattention Difficulties*, the results indicate a statistically significant improvement in reported scores from pre assessment to post assessment.

The pre assessment $M = 6.46$ and the post assessment $M = 6.03$. The additional analysis conducted with the control group of 8 anonymous students, showed no significant differences between the pre-assessment scores and the post-assessment scores of the control group. In fact, although not significant, there was an increase in mean scores for the control group from pre-score and post-score on this measure. Hence again, this could lend more support that the counseling intervention was a factor in the change on the *Hyperactivity & Attention Difficulties* scores for students involved in the counseling program.

The category of *Peer Relationship Problems* also achieved a statistically significant result, well beyond the .001 level, with decreasing scores suggesting a generalized improvement in dealing with life situations and interacting positively with others. The pre-assessment $M = 3.29$ and the post-assessment $M = 2.65$. In the additional analysis conducted with the control group of 8 anonymous students to determine if other variables apart from the counseling interventions might explain the changes in the pre-assessment to post-assessment scores no significant findings were found between the pre-assessment and the post-assessment scores of the control group.

The scores for *Kind & Helpful Behavior* scores reflect an improvement in the participant's level of cooperation and willingness to interact positively with others from pre to post, and did meet a traditional level of significance beyond the .05 level. The pre-assessment $M = 5.47$ and the post-assessment $M = 5.87$. The score for Kind & Helpful Behavior is based on the number of positive qualities the participant/rater endorses in the questionnaire. The higher the number, the more positive qualities were endorsed. This was the only subscale assessing positive qualities. Again an additional analysis was conducted with the control group of 8 anonymous students in the same classes to determine if other variables apart from the counseling interventions might explain the changes in the pre-assessment to post-assessment scores and again the additional analysis did not find significant differences between the pre-assessment scores and the post-assessment scores of the control group.

The scores for *Impact of Difficulties* is a combination of the first 4 categories and provide an overall assessment of difficulties for the student. The results for this subscale also show a significant difference between the pre-assessment and post-assessment scores well beyond the .01 level, and the same distinction was not found in the control group.

The SDQ also provides two impact questions following the standardized questions. The impact questions are asked in a Likert scale fashion and are as follows:

1. *Since coming to counseling, are the problems*

Much worse A bit worse About the same A bit better Much better

2. *Has coming to counseling been helpful in other ways, e.g. providing information or making the problems more bearable*

Not at all A little A medium amount A great deal

These questions were answered by the participant's teachers. In answering the first impact question, 10% of the participant's teachers indicated the problems were much better as a result of the intervention. 59% indicated the problems were a bit better, and 31% indicated their problems were about the same. In all, 69% of the teachers responding indicated some degree of improvement in the participants. None of the raters indicated the problems were a bit worse or much worse. This provides additional data supporting that the intervention helped improve most of the participant's coping skills available for dealing with the stressors in his/her life, and adds additional support to the quantitative statistical analysis.

In answering the second impact question, regarding whether or not the intervention had been helpful in other ways, 25% of the participant's teachers indicated the intervention had helped a great deal or a medium amount. 50% indicated the intervention had helped a little. In all, 75% of the teachers indicated the intervention techniques applied were helpful in some way.

4. Discussion

An analysis of the SDQ data demonstrated that the elementary school based counseling program had a statistically significant improvement in all of the areas measured on the SDQ assessment. Although the data is not available to provide overall empirical support to equivocally address causation, there is ample evidence in this archival data to suggest that the counseling program intervention played a part in the positive results found with the students receiving the counseling.

It is also likely that a positive impact was made on the lives of the vast majority of children who participated in the counseling program. The analysis showed a decrease in scores for overall stress, emotional distress and behavioral difficulties. Scores related to difficulty getting along with other young people and impact of any difficulties on the young person's life decreased. A significant increase in scores for kind and helpful behavior was also observed. There was also a decrease in the score for Hyperactivity and Attention Difficulties.

Significance

Students benefited in many areas as a result of the counseling intervention program. The analysis of the results adds support to the program's claims of positive intervention and the potential to provide students with greater benefits from the classroom learning environment, strengthen the capacities of youth to navigate developmental milestones, and learn the skills needed to make positive choices. The results of the analysis may also lend weight to school counseling as a vital component in helping children and families to cope with crisis, reducing school dropout rates, increasing attendance rates, preventing injury to self and others, strengthening emotional coping in the face of both acute and chronic stress, and improving social and academic functioning. Program designers noted their beliefs that the program instills and nurtures hope in students and families, who otherwise may have given up. Although the program does not provide any data to directly support this claim, there is anecdotal data that less anxiety and more positive-self-worth leads to higher academic achievement in school aged children (Bostick & Anderson, 2009; Duchesne, et. al., 2008).

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