Psychoeducational approach

Can’t You See What I’m Dealing With Here?
A Psychoeducational Group Counseling Approach to Increasing
Educational Efficacy in Economically Challenged Families

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Urban, economically disadvantaged African-American students who leave school before attaining their high school diploma face bleak futures. Higher instances of poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, incarceration, and limited opportunities to break the cycle of privation are directly tied to the level of academic attainment (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006). Employment opportunities for such individuals usually take the form of low-paying jobs with few benefits, security, and little advancement potential. Not only is this destructive to the individual, but has generational implications. Children born into families of low educational attainment are vulnerable to the same environmental conditions that impeded parental progress (Terrion, 2006).

This is a substantial problem. Although African-American students graduate high school at a national rate of 72%, urban, economically disadvantaged African-Americans drop out at rates approaching 50%. This percentage is probably lower than actual rates since school reporting requirements do not include those who drop out of elementary and middle school, or are expelled and never return. It is estimated that one in four African-American urban males are expelled from school each year (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006; Cassidy & Bates, 2005).

Due to the pervasiveness of the problem, an urban legend has developed among educators and the public at large that inner city, African-American parents are largely disinterested in the educational attainment of their children. This view is built mostly on their children’s lack of preparedness for school, supposed parental hostility towards school personnel, lack of involvement with school activities, and an apathy towards education in general (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, Jr., 2006). A positive link has been established between parental involvement at school, providing support at home, and student educational success (Hill & Craft, 2003). While research supports the concept that many urban African-American parents are less active and their children less prepared to interact with their schools, it does not support the view that these parents and families value education less then their more economically stable, urban and suburban counterparts (Building Strong Families Summary Report, 2004). Indeed, urban African-American parents consistently place education at or near the top in what they value most for their children (Children’s Defense Fund, 2004).

The problem, then, is not apathy towards education, but rather the environment these families are forced to operate within. Many economically disadvantaged children come from single-parent homes that can result in isolation, substandard housing, monetary uncertainty, and dangerous neighborhoods. These factors can leave little time or energy to encourage and nurture a child’s academic success or effective advocacy and involvement at school (Koonce & Harper, Jr., 2005). In addition, the care-givers own low educational attainment and unpleasant school experiences are likely to have resulted in skill deficiencies, negative institution attitudes, and low self-efficacy in preparing the child for school and in dealing with school personnel (Tenenbaum et al., 2007).

Any mental health approach helping underserved families interact with their educational opportunities is likely to be more successful through a holistic inclusion of home/school/community organizations to alter their attitudes and community structure in order to develop a sense of empowerment (Cassidy & Bates, 2005). Since parents (care-givers) are the child’s first teachers and their shared emotional experiences serve as the foundation for social, cognitive, and emotional development, enhancing parental psychological and communication skill sets are important (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005).
Parents practicing a democratic style help support age-appropriate autonomy, decision-making, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation in their children. Further, positive talk and support for education, and valuing respect and cooperation with others further enhances their child’s educational experience (Tenenbaum, et al., 2007). In their dealings with school personnel, many economically disadvantaged African-American parents are subjected to a deficit model in which they are cast as the problem. This has the effect of alienating them from their schools and diminishing their participation and advocacy (Koonce & Harper, Jr., 2005). In a holistic, mental health approach, caregivers are helped to increase their self-efficacy through building problem-identification and solving skills, meeting preparation and dynamics, questioning, emotional intelligence, and fostering a partnership attitude with school personnel (Terrion, 2006). Finally, assisting parents to identify and interact with extended family, neighbors, and community organizations decreases isolation and enhances peer collaborations (Koonce & Harper, Jr., 2005).

Group Type

This will be a psychoeducational group counseling experience designed to help members learn effective care-giver/child communication skills centered on school issues, and advocacy skills to more efficiently work with personnel in their neighborhood school. The expected outcome of this program is to help historically disenfranchised children and their families engage fully and successfully with their educational opportunities.

Group Goals

During the first five sessions, participants will learn family communication skills that will be used to enhance the child’s attitude toward school and increase his or her emotional and social skills necessary for academic success. Parents will become familiar with the statistical benefits of education, the linking of the home environment to success in school, explore their attitudes and expectations for their child’s education, and learn and practice specific skills designed to help their children increase respect and cooperation with others, while building their autonomous decision making capabilities.

In the final five sessions parents will explore successful and unsuccessful past interactions with school personnel, issues surrounding positive communication with school personnel, and the skills of successful advocacy for their children. These skills include discerning between their own helpful and harmful attitudes, problem identification and interview preparation, openness to others opinion, and cooperative problem solving strategies. In addition, parents will identify community support systems and ways these systems might be helpful in home/school interactions.

Setting

In determining the setting for the ten-session group, it was important to consider the impact on the members of distance to be traveled, community comfort, and the use of community-based institutions.

Travel can prove difficult for African-American families locked into isolated inner-city neighbors. Taxi service often discriminatory and cost prohibitive. A lengthy bus ride could involve confusing transfers in unfamiliar neighborhoods, made more burdensome if parents are forced to bring their children. This could work to discourage members from participating in all ten sessions, or dropping out early. In addition, many economic families do not own personal transportation or personal transportation that is unreliable.

Community comfort, in this paper, is intended to take into consideration the suspicion and discrimination many minority, economically disadvantaged individuals are faced with when traveling outside their communities. The reaction of the members to this distrust can result in a wariness to engage with an organization outside the community where their friends, family, and known community service agencies operate.

In considering these issues, the setting will be community based and three options seem to offer the most viable setting for the parents. The first would be a community center specific to the neighborhoods of the participating members. These centers are typically funded by non-profit, community-empowering organizations such as the United Way, National Urban League, YWCA, or YMCA. It is more likely that members have had productive contact with these centers, or at least have heard positive reports about them from neighbors or family. Such centers typically have rooms large enough for a group, and private enough to address issues of confidentiality. There are also tables and chairs and many have child friendly rooms where an aide can provide childcare for those members who
could not find a babysitter. The second choice would be a local church. Such institutions have a history of active service in the African-American community and have many of the advantages of a community center. Disadvantages to this choice would be differences group members might hold between their particular denomination and the one represented by the site church, and the recent movement of some local churches to serve as agents of gentrification. This holds the potential of members viewing the church unfavorably as they face untenable rising housing costs. It would be important to research the church site carefully and canvas community member viewpoints. The third option is the neighborhood school, which offers many of the same advantages, including presenting group members with the opportunity to be in the school building under more positive auspices than past experiences. However, negative feelings about past interactions with the school and personnel might hinder participation.

Logistics

Two rooms will be needed. The first is a child friendly room staffed by qualified personnel for parents who need child care services during the group sessions. Group members will be urged to find their own childcare, but this will be available for those who are unable or unwilling to do so. The second room will be large enough to accommodate eight to eleven adults sitting in a circle, and two tables along one wall for refreshments. Ideally it will have minimum wall decorations other than posters specific to the group’s goals such as power declarations or statistical findings, and no windows in order to hold down distractions. It will also be separated by an appropriate distance from other activities at the center for the same reasons. As a part of each session, drinks and snacks will be available for members for the first ten minutes of gathering. This serves an icebreaker to help members build cohesion and comfort as they socialized and get to know each other better. Members will be encouraged to visit with different individuals before each session begins.

Recruitment and referrals to the group will be made through community agencies and the school, most likely from the school counselor. Parents must have a child entering or already in pre-school, kindergarten, or first grade. Flyers can also be sent home to qualified families through the school. This recruitment presupposes a partnership, or at least buy-in, with the target school and community center. During pre-group screening, it will be important to ascertain potential group members who wish to learn student enhancement skills and attitudes at home, and more effective communication skills with school personnel. Those with previously unsuccessful encounters but who remain open-minded will be particularly beneficial to the group in providing a deeper understanding of the issues. The program will consist of one weekly session of ninety minutes for ten weeks.

Program Evaluation Plan

Before beginning the program, I will use a combination of surveys and personal interviews as a comparison with later data collection. The parent survey will include their attitudes and expectations of the school, education in general, the program, and the parental/child communications at home. It will also seek to identify what they consider their strengths and challenges in fostering home and home/school connections and support systems. I will also, with signed consent and in a developmentally appropriate manner, interview the students about their attitudes and beliefs concerning education, their teachers, and their perceived strengths, challenges, and the type of support from their parents and teachers they would appreciate. Finally, I would ask the teachers to complete a questionnaire on the attitudes, classroom behaviors, and parental participation qualities of each child whose parent is a group participant. This information will be confidential and not shared with group participants.

At the end of the ten-week program, similar surveys and interviews will be conducted and measured for growth in attitude, knowledge, and action. A follow-up data collection will be conducted six weeks after the end of the sessions to measure authentic change.

In addition, participants will be asked to keep a weekly journal during the program. These journals will serve two functions. The first is to monitor the day to day implementation of the various ideas and skills introduced during the group sessions. Participants will keep track of how their expectations are being met during the counseling sessions, as well as documenting their interactions at home and with the school. Specifically, themes of change and growth can be examined, can serve as
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informed check-ins, and help guide the group process of problem-solving discussion. They will also provide a collective end-of-program practical guide to what worked, and didn’t work.

Multicultural Issues

The multicultural aspects of this program are straightforward. The population itself will be fairly homogeneous. They will come from the same racial background and share the socioeconomic culture typical of inner city, minority experiences. As a white male leading this all African-American group, I will be subjected to the distrust and suspicion earned through past and present, inter-generational exposure to the white, male culture. It may be enough to share my qualifications based on years of service to the African-American community. However, a better approach will be to co-lead the group with an African-American. This offers several advantages. There is the natural affinity to trust and value information delivered from one’s own race. The power differential experienced by African-Americans between the dominant white culture and a facilitator of color, cannot be ignored. Regardless of facilitator intentions and past experiences, the initial phase of trust building must take into account the history of white, male oppression endemic to the African-American community. An African-American co-leader can serve as a bridge to help resolve ethnic and cultural misconceptions, guide his or her white colleague in the subtle mores of the culture, and function as a model for communicating across cultural and ethnic lines.

Sessions (10)

Session 1
Introduction: Informed consent (and all that implies), introductions, icebreaking activity, create group rules and outline goals (in coordination with stated pre-screened goals), share and discuss personal educational experiences. Homework is to journal one positive and one negative past school experience and how it might affect their current view of education. Also, list three support methods their parents provided (or wished they provided) that supported their education.

Session 2
Goal: Supports for education
Members discuss their feelings and concerns about helping their children succeed in school. Members who wish share homework. Discuss personal experiences of support. Members generate a list of supports. List should include changing negative comments into positives and alternative methods of problem solving. Facilitator demonstrates elements of positive communication. Discuss modeling. Members separate into groups of three to role-play change a given negative perception into a positive. Members share their processing with group. Homework is non-academic article on parents as their child’s first teachers in building cognitive, affective, and behavior school readiness skills, practicing positive communication at home, and journaling.

Session 3
Goal: Members examine their actions and its importance in the educational attitudes of their children. Facilitator summarizes article and emphasizes important points, linking them to the list of supports identified by the group. Members discuss their own thoughts and feelings about the article. Members who wish share journals. Discuss. Facilitator presents a group cooperation exercise emphasizing respect, sharing, rules, and attitude. Members discuss experience and how to support the skills of cooperation in their children. Homework is group working on supporting skills at home through verbal communication and modeling and journaling.
Session 4
Goal: Review previous learning. Introduce autonomous decision-making.
Facilitator leads group in summarizing previous sessions. Members discuss changed perceptions, experiences with their children, concerns.
Members who wish to share journals. Discuss.
Facilitator leads discussion on the benefits of building autonomous decision-making capacities in their children. Show video of children being taught and using autonomous decision-making skills.
Members discuss their own autonomous decision-making processes and how they can transfer these to their children. Group makes a plan to continue implementing previous skills and adding specific autonomous building exercises.
Homework is journaling about their experiences during the week.

Session 5
Goal: Continue autonomous decision-making discussion and activities. Guest speaker on how the physical home environment can enhance children’s learning.
Guest speaker covers learning space, access to books, quiet environment, sleep, nutrition, etc.
Members interact with guest speaker and facilitator and discuss barriers to setting up the home environment and solutions.
Facilitator and members continue discussion on autonomous training, the week’s experience, difficulties, and what worked.
Homework is nonacademic article on the importance of interacting with school personnel and advocacy. Journal their own experiences with school personnel.

Session 6
Goal: Introduce concepts involved in successful interaction with school personnel and advantages of effective advocacy.
Co-facilitators role-play an ineffective interaction between parent and school personnel.
Members discuss the interaction and share their experiences with school personnel, how it made them feel, and what attitudes resulted for them. Members who wish to share journals.
Facilitator summarizes article main points: problem identification, preparation, questioning skills, emotional evenness, partnership building. Also benefits for their children listed in article.
Members discuss article.
Facilitator and member role-play a school interaction, working specifically on emotional evenness and partnership building.
Members discuss.
Homework members will journal a past unsuccessful experience and suggest an alternate scenario using the discussed skills.

Session 7
Goal: Review home skills and tie the communication skills to interactions with school personnel.
Facilitator leads discussion on how skills being taught to their children apply to working with school personnel.
Members discuss their concerns, feelings, and thoughts on approaching school personnel, barriers that might impede successful interactions, and alternative ways at approaching those barriers.
Members pair into dyads and role-play a facilitator generated dispute between a parent and school personnel.
Members bring the dyad experience back for group discussion.
Homework will be members are asked to imagine the perfect school personnel meeting and list the elements discussed during sessions to make it reality.
Session 8
Goal: Give members an opportunity to see school personnel side. Practice interaction skills; introduce the attitude and skills of empowerment.
Guest speaker from the school; principal, assistant principal, counselor, or willing teacher to share his or her view of the issues, problems, and benefits of successful interaction with school personnel.
Speaker and members interact, share concerns, experiences, and ways to better communication.
Facilitator leads discussion on seeing the issue from another person’s perspective.
Facilitator outlines personal empowerment and links previous sessions’ skills.
Members discuss what empowerment means to them, the benefits, and possible barriers.
Willing members role-play positive interaction between parent and school personnel. Group discusses.
Homework is journaling about where families can find support in the community and what form that support might take.

Session 9
Goal: Identify additional needs (babysitting, transportation, tutoring, parenting classes, etc.) and the social capital available within the community.
Facilitator leads a discussion on the dangers of isolation and the potential deleterious effects on parent/child communication and educational attainment.
Members share their experiences with isolation, their feelings, and successful steps they took to ease the situation.
Group identifies sources of social capital; extended family, neighbors, friends, community agencies, church, businesses, school, etc. Discuss how these sources of social capital can be accessed.
Discuss ways the group has been a source of social capital and the lessons the experience offers for forming neighborhood support groups.
Guest speaker from agency, church, or school gives a presentation on services.
Facilitator hands out a list of resources in community with phone numbers and brief description of services.

Session 10
Goal: Review, discuss concerns and growth, make individual plans to continue using skills, plan follow-up, complete questionnaire, closing ceremony.
Members facilitate discussion on what they have gotten out of the program, discuss possible challenges and ways to meet them, and discuss improvements for the program.
Individuals share their plans for using the skills and developing social capital.
Facilitator plans follow-up check-ins.
Members complete questionnaire.
Closing ceremony includes sharing feelings and emotions about the group, process, and termination.

References


