A Systematic Literature Review of School-Counsellor-Led Group Counselling Interventions Targeting Academic Achievement: Implications for Research and Practice

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Abstract

This article reviews group counselling interventions conducted by school counsellors that aimed to improve academic achievement. A total of 12 studies met these criteria. The studies that used comprehensive/comparative tests and GPA as academic achievement outcome measures had moderate to large effect sizes. Secondly, this review broadly examined whether a protocol or group manual was used, the number of group sessions, and demographic information of the group leaders and students. Implications and recommendations for future research are provided including exploring more international articles.

Keywords: group counseling interventions, academic achievement, literature review

School Counsellors have the requisite educational background and skill set to use group counselling interventions within school settings to meet an array of student developmental needs (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). While it is clear that groups in school settings are promoted as effective at addressing a variety of different issues for children and adolescents, the evidence still remains scarce (ASCA, 2019; Griffith et al., 2019). Specifically, the ASCA (2014) position statement on group counselling suggested that groups in school settings promote academic achievement and personal growth, yet more research is warranted concerning achievement outcomes in particular (Zyromski et al., 2018). In fact, it is argued that evidence-based school counselling scholarship is lacking in counsellor education and hinders the development of practice within the school counselling field. However, the literature base is still limited from which to draw these conclusions. In part this is explained by the fact that it is very difficult to facilitate group counselling interventions and to conduct studies with rigorous research designs (e.g., large sample size, controlled studies, high treatment fidelity) in school settings (Griffith et al., 2019). Additionally, there remains a dearth of research that examines school counsellors' use of evidence-based practices in school counselling and this includes but is not limited to group counselling interventions (Mullen et al., 2019).

Group Counselling Literature Review

The research on groups that do indeed explore academic achievement outcomes has occurred sporadically over the years and appears to still be in a nascent phase (Bruce et al., 2009; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007; Kayler & Sherman, 2009; Rose & Steen, 2014; Truneckova & Viney, 2006; Whiston et al., 2011). Some studies examined general areas of focus on children and adolescents being served in groups. For example, Hoag and Burlingame (1997) reviewed 56 studies and determined that group counselling has a substantially positive impact on children and adolescents. Prout and Prout (1998) found a positive effect for students on a broad range of measures. Shechtman's (2002) position piece reviewed group work in schools and suggested that there was consensus for effectiveness.

Over 16 years ago there were 98 published research studies from 1990 to 2000 that examined the efficacy of group treatments focused on primary prevention for children (Kulic et al., 2004). The majority of these interventions occurred in a school setting; 75.6% used a treatment manual or specifically outlined their interventions, half of these interventions' treatment length were 3 months or less, and half were facilitated by a professional counsellor with or without a co-leader (Kulic et al., 2004). The results of this meta-analysis also supported the notion that some groups in schools are facilitated with structured treatment manuals. In addition, interventions that were cognitive-behavioral, focused on specific issues such as depression, and/or utilized with elementary school students were the most efficacious (Kulic et al., 2004). It is important for school counsellors to be aware of the research on groups for specific problems, because there is a great deal of variance in the efficacy of programs and in what can be done to make a program more effective. It is important for researchers and practitioners to work together to maximize the impact of group interventions in school systems.

More recently, ASCA compiled a document that described research examining the impact of school counsellors and school counselling programs on K-12 student outcomes (ASCA, 2015). The 45 research articles identified between 2000 and 2018 support the value of school counselling for students in academic and social-emotional development as well as college and career readiness. The articles examined were drawn from national peer-reviewed journals and included various types of interventions. Only eight of the articles were specifically related to group counselling (ASCA, 2015).

Yet, group counselling in school settings is a subject matter that has policy implications for counsellor education, school-based practice, and furthering the development of ongoing research due to the current standard-based era requiring all educators to document how their work impacts the lives of students and academic achievement in particular (Griffith et al., 2019). This pressure stems directly from recent legislation such as Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) that some authors have argued has made a significant impact on school counseling practice (Dimmitt et al., 2007).

While the current study does have policy implications that can be made, according to Carey and Martin (2015), changes to national standards and educational practice that focus on academic achievement solely are "not perfectly aligned with the longstanding federal policy focus on postsecondary placement" (p. 9). Despite this tension, school counsellors can use group counselling interventions to meet the needs of more students in schools. Currently, it is commonly noted that many school counsellors often have large caseloads and other non-counselling related duties that place demands on their time. In fact, the national average student to school counsellor ratio in the United States is 464 to 1 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), while it is recommended to be a ratio of 250 to 1 (ASCA, 2019). Therefore, if school counsellors can demonstrate that group counselling has a significant impact on academic achievement, decision makers could authorize more group work in schools. As a result, more students would have access to services that may address a myriad of other important concerns along with their academic achievement.

Group Counselling in Schools Research Opportunities

The summary of extant literature related to group counselling in schools suggests that group counselling programs are able to address issues including, bullying and anger management, social skills, interpersonal skills, and communication (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2000). What is less commonly found within the literature is evidence of groups attending to career and college readiness as well as academic related outcomes. There are a number of reasons to implement groups in schools. For example, group interventions conducted by school counsellors can improve attendance for rural students (Steen et al., unpublished manuscript), foster positive identity development for culturally diverse populations (Shi & Steen, 2012) and help students participate in fun activities that help evaluate the targeted outcomes (Steen & Kaffenberger, 2007; Studer et

al., 2006). While the findings in the literature are largely supportive of the impact of group counselling outcomes for students, the reason for this manuscript is that we need to know more about school counsellor-led groups in schools especially concerning academic achievement because these outcomes are sparse.

In addition to the pressure for students to achieve, schools are challenged to be more intentional in their efforts to serve a wider diversity of students. In fact, twenty years ago it was noted that school counsellors were under pressure to make intentional efforts that would lead to increases in student achievement especially for racially and ethnically diverse students. Another specific area we explored was the racial background matching between students and group-leaders and its impact on group counselling effectiveness. There are a limited number of articles on this subject, however the evidence is mixed as to whether or not it is necessary for the members and leaders racial backgrounds to be homogenous. Additional research in this area warrants more attention as at this point it is difficult to support the importance of this relationship and cultural match between group leaders and members.

Comparative Review of Studies

Literature reviews are important to build a credible body of research in any area of interest such as school counselling (Carey & Martin, 2015). In order to more fully explore the impact of group counselling on student academic achievement within the literature, an article review on this topic and a statistical analysis to make results comparable across studies was conducted. We discovered four important literature reviews with significant implications for public policy related to school-based counselling, but none of these addressed group counselling in particular, which confirms to some extent that the body of research available needs to grow (Carey & Martin, 2015). Therefore, we will not review those four papers here because none of these literature reviews explicitly examined group counselling in isolation. However, McGannon et al. (2005) completed a comprehensive review of 20 years of school counselling outcome research and discovered that positive student outcomes were possible, yet the most effective practice strategies were not able to be determined. It was concluded that the body of research was too limited, and those studies that were available lacked strong research designs (McGannon et al., 2005).

Another overarching yet important literature review related to school counselling policy research was reported in a review of major school counseling policy studies (Carey & Martin, 2015). Specifically, Whiston et al. (2011) completed a review of school counselling outcome research studies conducted over the span of 24 years. This review was categorized as a meta-analysis and one component of the study sought to discover the extent to which responsive services (i.e., individual and group counselling) within comprehensive counselling programs were effective. It was determined that these interventions were moderately (.30 effect size) successful when addressing school related

outcomes (Whiston et al., 2011). Broadly speaking, they found that school counselling interventions were especially effective in increasing students' problem-solving abilities (.91) and decreasing discipline problems (.86). When it came to achievement, school counselling interventions yielded much lower effect sizes in students' Grade Point Average (GPA) (.15) and standardized achievement test scores (.16).

In the current study, the authors conducted a comparative review to determine the impact of school-counsellor-led group counselling interventions that targeted academic achievement variables solely. The strategies used in this study to examine effect sizes were similar to meta-analysis studies, however differed in that this study could not complete a true meta-analysis due to the fact that there were small samples and these studies did not contain enough statistical data. Therefore, we examined the articles that fit the criteria carefully and calculated the effect sizes of the school-counsellor-led group counselling interventions and compared them to each other while also looking at other aspects of the interventions that could play a role in its effectiveness.

As mentioned, a secondary focus of this review was to gain an understanding of aspects of the intervention that may have had an impact on its effectiveness. Specifically, we examined if structured group manuals were used. If not, the authors explored if and how treatment fidelity was maintained. Next, we explored the number of group sessions and demographic information of the group leaders when it was provided. There is some literature available from which to draw conclusions about these aforementioned factors. For example, regarding manualized programs, cognitive behavioral techniques are commonly used (Gerrity & Delucia-Waack, 2007). With these types of interventions, the protocol is highly structured yet there is no indication if these structured manualized programs are more successful than less structured ones. Regarding the length of the intervention, Gladding (2012) explains that group counselling interventions in schools typically occur on average over six sessions. There is no obvious literature examining this issue in detail. When considering demographics, an earlier study describes a group where the school counsellors were European American females working with a sample that consisted of all African American girls (Muller, 2000). These school counsellors worked with students that did not share racial membership in order to discuss identity, relationships, the future, and racism but it is not clear whether this dynamic could be associated with effective group interventions (Muller, 2000). These factors were selected for examination in the current study and were based on prior professional experience of the first and second authors conducting their own group work in schools.

Finally, this comparative review also aimed to minimize publication bias. To illustrate, typically academic journals are subject to publication bias when "the research that appears in the publication literature is systematically unrepresentative of the population of completed studies" (Rothstein et al., 2005, p. 1). This is directly related to the

increased likelihood of research with statistically significant results being published compared to those with non-significant results. For this literature review, published dissertations were included in addition to academic journal articles in an effort to address potential publication bias. Specifically, dissertations are more likely to present the means and standard deviations of non-significant results, they are often reviewed by a panel of dissertation committee members and external reviewers with expertise on the topic and undergo multiple revisions towards completion.

In sum, the present study was conducted in order to add to the body of literature reviews. The specific area of focus was to compare school-counsellor-led group counseling interventions by comparing effect sizes of each statistical analysis so that the magnitude of differences could be compared across studies.

Purpose of the Study

Given the scarcity of group counselling research in school settings, the goal of this review was to (a) explore the overall effectiveness of group counselling interventions facilitated by school counsellors that aimed to improve academic achievement outcomes for children and adolescents; (b) provide more evidence for the development of similar evidence-based interventions in the future; and (c) discover other aspects of the interventions that could be distilled from the literature base. Scholars continue to call for additional research on group interventions targeting important outcomes for school counsellors (Griffith et al., 2019; Zyromski et al., 2018). In this study, the main research question was "To what extent do school-based group counselling interventions facilitated by school counsellors impact academic achievement for K-12 students?" The secondary research question was to determine whether or not these studies used manualized protocols, the average number of sessions, and demographic characteristics of the school counsellor leaders.

Method

The systematic review process comprises a clear and transparent systematic search method and its subsequent relevance to the research study (Cooper et al., 2018). Comprehensive and rigorous literature searching correlates with minimized bias, which in turn provides a greater significance in contribution to policy, practice, and research (Lefebvre et al., 2011; Russel, 2005). The authors chose to conduct a systematic review because it is regarded as a key foundation for evidence-based decision making (Kraus et al., 2020; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Cooper et al. (2018) suggests that the following stages guide the literature review process, who should search the literature, aims and purpose of literature searching, preparation, strategy, searching databases, supplementary searching, managing references and reporting the search process. In order to ensure greater confidence in the findings, the comprehensive methodology which follows similar steps used to gather literature for this study is described below (Fehrmann, 2011).

A comprehensive literature search was conducted to locate every study that might possibly meet the inclusion requirements. The literature search was completed in two rounds. The first round of the search focused on journal articles, whereas the second round focused on dissertations. In the first round, the following steps were used to obtain the studies to be included in this review. First, an advanced search in *APA PsycNET*, a search engine that includes *PsycINFO* and *PsycARTICLES* was conducted. Additional electronic databases which include *JSTOR*, *Google Scholar*, *and ScienceDirect* were also accessed through *PsycINFO*.

The key words "group counselling" and "achievement" were entered into the advanced search form. To ensure a thorough review of existing literature, the search field specification was set to "any field." Next, the "Peer-Reviewed" option was selected to limit results to scholarly journals and periodicals. An additional limiter applied was publication date. The years 1990 to 2019 were selected as

States, the year 1990 is early in the evidence-based movement that emerged from the steady decline in students' educational achievement scores during the previous three decades (National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1994). This evidence-based movement included all stakeholders in schools and increased funding and support for reliable and replicable research pertaining to student achievement (Hempenstall, 2006). Therefore, the years 1990 to 2019 were chosen to ensure that studies included in this systematic review aligned with the evidence-based movement's principles, which comprise high quality studies, rigorous methodology, and findings with meaningful effects on student outcomes (Slavin, 2002). Lastly, the authors wanted to eliminate studies that were outside of school aged participants. Therefore, to ensure the search results have potential to meet our inclusion criteria, filters were applied to eliminate results concerning every age group other than "Childhood," "School Age," and
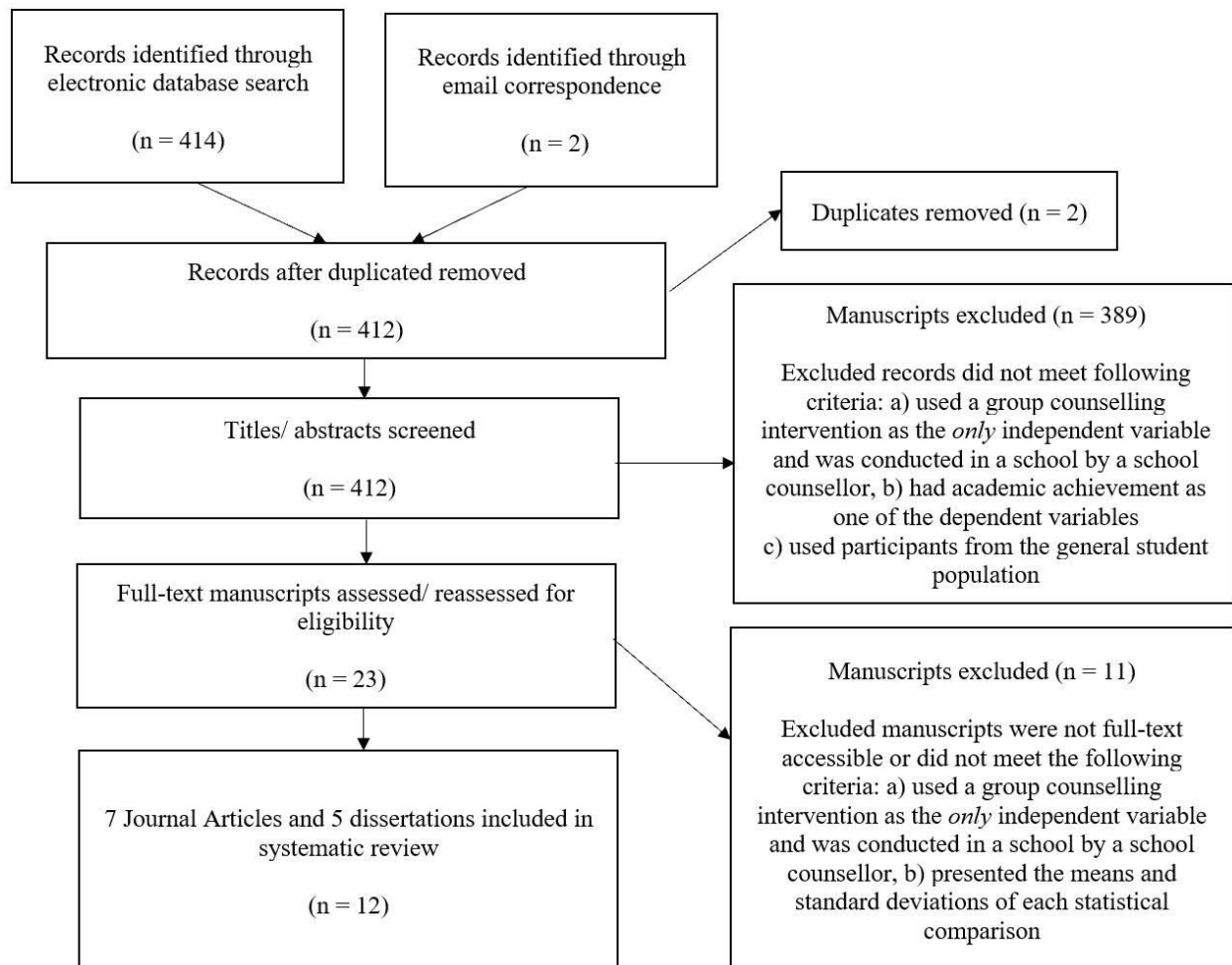
Figure 1

Flow chart illustrating the literature selection process, number of studies assessed within each stage, and exclusion criteria.

the publication dates for this search. Within the United

"Adolescence." This first round of searches yielded a total of 392 records.

Two authors who had multiple articles published were identified and emailed to request their most up-to-date relevant manuscripts that may have been in preparation, in press, or unpublished. One of them replied and sent along two additional studies that were already captured in our initial search. This round was concluded by reviewing the reference pages of the articles to capture manuscripts that may not have emerged in our electronic search. The articles referenced were already captured electronically in our initial search.

The second round was conducted to search for dissertations. Even though dissertation studies are not published in peer-reviewed journals, the research is developed under the supervision and guidance of a dissertation committee which is composed of subject experts and methodologists. Further, the Cochrane handbook for systematic reviews of interventions outlines that researchers should actively try to find unpublished studies in addition to the published studies found (Lefebvre et al., 2011). Therefore, we consider dissertation studies to provide valuable information if they meet the inclusion criteria of this study. This round of dissertation search was conducted using *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global*. The key words "group counselling" and "achievement" were used to conduct a search from 1990-2019. This yielded a total of 22 dissertations.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The authors screened the 392 journal articles and 22 dissertations reviewing the abstracts, methodology, and reference sections. The following criteria were used when selecting the studies to be reviewed in this study: the study had to use a group counselling intervention as the *only* independent variable and be conducted in a school by a school counsellor or school counselling intern. Studies that included other interventions (e.g., classroom guidance lessons, mentoring sessions, etc.) were excluded. Next, the study had to have academic achievement as one of the dependent variables. The study also had to present the means and standard deviations of each statistical comparison. The participants in the study had to be from the general student population in K-12 schools, and the publications had to occur between 1990 and 2019.

Each study was reviewed to determine if it fits the inclusion criteria, which were clearly defined and reviewed per the systematic review process (Koffel, 2015). Studies were first assessed based on their titles and abstracts. If the article was still eligible after this initial review, the full manuscript was examined. Manuscripts excluded during the full-text review were due to confounding variables present and lack of direct achievement data analysis. At the end of the process, the articles remaining were fully reassessed to confirm their adherence to the inclusion criteria specified. This process, as depicted in Figure 1, yielded a total of seven journal articles and five dissertations.

Results

For each statistical analysis, the means and standard deviations were input into an online effect size calculator (Ellis, 2009). Effect sizes were computed so that magnitude of differences between the groups could be compared across studies. The magnitude of each effect size was interpreted using Cohen's (1988) definitions of "small" associated with $d = .2$, "medium" associated with $d = .5$, and "large" associated with $d = .8$. The effect sizes are presented in two tables, with Table 1 presenting all 12 studies categorized by type of academic achievement variable (e.g., GPA, course grade, comprehensive or comparative test). Table 2 presents average effect sizes for each of the three academic achievement variables as well as the associated standard deviations and 95% confidence intervals. In narrative form, the studies will also be highlighted on the following: (a) whether or not there was the use of protocol or group manual; (b) the average number of group sessions; and (c) various demographic information of the group leaders and students. Comprehensive information about each study reviewed are presented in Table 1 as well.

Effect Sizes

The 12 studies (seven were studies published in journal articles and five were doctoral dissertations) provided 24 statistical findings related to group work and academic achievement outcomes with an average overall effect size of 0.40 and standard deviation of 0.39. The dissertations provided the smallest effect size on math grade from Steen (2007) and the largest effect sizes on GPA from Conyers (2005). In total, the studies included 518 subjects with a range of 10 to 207 subjects per treatment.

There were 12 statistical findings from five studies that used course grades as the outcome variable. The effect sizes ranged from 0.01 to 1.17 with an average effect size of 0.26 ($SD = 0.36$) and a median of 0.11. There were six studies that reported on GPA as the academic achievement outcome measure with effect sizes ranging from 0.07 to 1.18. The average of the six effect sizes associated with GPA was 0.42 ($SD = 0.47$) and a median of 0.18. Four studies reported on a comprehensive or comparative test as the academic achievement outcome measure. There were six statistical findings from these four studies. The effect sizes ranged from 0.24 to 1.02 with an average effect size of 0.65 and a median of 0.71, both of which were in between medium and large categorization of effect sizes.

Confidence intervals were computed for the average effect sizes for each academic outcome variable. The 95% confidence interval around the average effect size of 0.26 on course grade was 0.06 to 0.46. The 95% confidence interval around the average effect size of 0.42 on GPA was 0.04 to 0.79. These intervals include values that could be considered small as well as values that could be categorized as medium or close to large. Thus, it appears that there is a moderate effect of group work on course grades or GPA on average. Group work had the largest effect on high stakes tests (such as comprehensive tests, comparative tests, or district-wide

Table 1
Compilation of Studies Reviewed

Authors (Year)	Setting	Use of Manual or Protocol	Model Used	# of Group Sessions	Group Leaders	Group Participants	Dependent Variable	Subjects per treatment	Cohen's d
Allen (1990)[a,b]	Elementary	Yes	Reality therapy group counseling curriculum	6	2 school counselors	30 at-risk students	Grade – Math	27	0.03
							Grade – Reading	27	0.07
Bauer et al. (2000)[c]	Secondary	N/A	Meichenbaum's stress inoculation model with cognitive/behavioral strategies	9	Two facilitators who were trained in group process techniques	15 females and 15 males (Rural at-risk students)	GPA	15	0.16
Berger (2013)[b]	Secondary	Yes	The Achievement-Orientation Model (AOM)	8	A counselor educator and two interns	5 African American	GPA	13	0.19
Blackburn (2008)[a,c]	Secondary	No	Social constructivist group counseling	8	One school counselor/researcher	162 students (below grade reading level)	GPA	80	0.08
							District-wide Test Reading	80	0.74
Campbell & Brigman (2005)[c]	Elementary & Secondary	Yes	Student Success Skills (SSS) Intervention Model	8+4 booster sessions	25 school counselors (19 females and 6 males; 22 Caucasians, 1 Hispanic)	Total 240 (82% White, 9% African American, 5% Hispanic, 60% on Free & Reduced Lunch)	Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test – Math	153	0.49
							Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test – Reading	154	0.24
Conyers (2005)[a,b]	Secondary	Yes	Lessons were planned by the research	8	One school counselor/researcher	30 black males (at risk students)	GPA	15	1.18
Hinch (1995)[a,b]	Secondary	Yes	Model developed by the researcher and based on a Reality therapy	10	One school counselor/researcher and 2 teacher as tutors	15 males and 5 females/ 17 Whites, 2 African American, 1 Asian (Rural at-risk students)	GPA	10	0.82

Note. Using the criteria discussed earlier, eight journal articles and seven doctoral dissertations met the criteria to be included in the review. Within these 12 research studies, 10 studies were conducted with U.S. K-12 students and two were conducted with Israeli K-12 students.
a. publication is a doctoral dissertation. b. effect size calculation is based on pre and post test scores. c. effect size calculation is based on control and treatment group scores.

Table 1 Continued
Compilation of Studies Reviewed

Authors (Year)	Setting	Use of Manual or Protocol	Model Used	# of Group Sessions	Group Leaders	Group Participants	Dependent Variable	Subjects per treatment	Cohen's d
Shechtman (1993)[b]	Elementary	N/A	Developmental model of group counseling with children that emphasizes interrelations	Weekly session starting in November and ended in June	One school counselor with two graduate students enrolled in a group counseling course	30 males and 43 females; all Isreali	Grade – Reading Comprehension	40	0.02
							Grade – Reading	40	0.05
							Grade – English	40	0.25
							Grade – Math	40	0.21
Shechtman, et al. (1996)[c]	Elementary	No	Modified interactional group therapy model	20	3 female school counselors (varying levels of experience; one served as supervisor of the other two)	142 low achievers (51% boys, 49% girls) (Jewish, middle-and-low SES)	Grade – Language	58	0.76
							Grade – Math Israeli Comparative Test – Language	58	1.17
							Israeli Comparative Test – Language	58	0.73
							Israeli Comparative Test – Math	58	1.02
Steen (2007)[a,b]	Elementary	Yes	Racing to Achieving through Group Work (RTA) created by the researcher	6	3 school counselors	15 students from low achieving schools and low SES background	Grade – Math	15	0.01
							Grade – Language Arts Virginia Standards of Learning Test – Math	15	0.09
								15	0.68
Steen (2009)[b]	Elementary	N/A	Goals and objectives were based on the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Standards	20	Two school counselors (one African American male and one White female)	8 females and 12 males; all African American	GPA	16	0.07
Webb, et al. (2005)[c]	Elementary & Secondary	Yes	Student Success Skills (SSS) Intervention Model	8+4 booster sessions	25 school counselors (received training about the SSS model)	Total 209 (85% White, 4% African American, 9% Hispanic; 45% on Free & Reduced Lunch)	Grade – Math	207	0.34
							Grade – Reading	207	0.12

Note. Using the criteria discussed earlier, eight journal articles and seven doctoral dissertations met the criteria to be included in the review. Within these 12 research studies, 10 studies were conducted with U.S. K-12 students and two were conducted with Israeli K-12 students.
a. publication is a doctoral dissertation. b. effect size calculation is based on pre and post test scores. c. effect size calculation is based on control and treatment group scores.

Table 2
Effect Sizes by Type of Academic Achievement Variable

Academic Achievement Variable	Number of Analyses	Number of Subjects	Cohen's *d* M *(SD)*	95% CI *[LL, UL]*
Course Grade	12	347	0.26 (0.36)	[0.05, 0.46]
Grade Point Average	5	149	0.42 (0.47)	[0.04, 0.579]
Comprehensive or Comparative Test	6	306	0.65 (0.26)	[0.44, 0.86]

tests) with an average effect size of .65. The 95% confidence interval ranged from 0.44 to 0.86.

Use of Protocol or Group Manual

Nearly half of the studies (Allen, 1990; Berger, 2013; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Conyers, 2005; Steen, 2007; Webb et al., 2005) provided a protocol or group manual for the group leaders**.** According to the information given in those studies, the protocols or manuals provided by the authors varied in how structured the information was presented. For example, a highly structured manual was provided to group leaders in the Campbell and Brigman (2005) and Webb et al. (2005) studies. These studies described in detail how to conduct the entire group program. These two studies were the only ones that used protocols based on a pre-existing evidence-based intervention developed by the authors. On the other hand, Steen's (2007) study offered a "semi-structured format and curriculum for the group leaders" (p. 55) that was designed to allow group leaders opportunities to process emotions with students in the groups. This author also provided some guidance on how to open and close a session when conducting the groups. Berger's study provided structure for the group leaders to keep the students on "task" (Berger, 2013, p. 91), details on the activities, but also included language that could be used to "process" the information that emerged in the sessions. The school counsellor interns who led the groups were instructed to redirect the students if they needed to keep them focused on the topic being discussed.

Among the others that did not report a group manual (e.g., Blackburn, 2008; Shechtman et al., 1996; Steen, 2009), the groups were described as being more process-oriented. In some cases, the group leaders took liberty to facilitate the sessions in a way that addressed the students' emotions and any of their reactions that may have emerged. For example, a social constructivism approach was used in Blackburn's (2008) study. In this case, social constructivism was defined as not having a set curriculum or prescribed set of practices. Further, the purpose for not being too structured was in order to ensure the unique needs of underachieving students could be targeted (Blackburn, 2008). There were studies (e.g., Hinch, 1995) that had no clear information on whether or not a protocol or manual was included. For example, in Hinch's (1995) study, a description of the topics and activities in

each session were provided in an appendix, but there were no other session plans included.

Number of Group Counselling Sessions

School-based group counselling interventions have been noted to be relatively short in the number of sessions mainly due to challenges and demands associated with facilitating these services in schools (Prout & Prout, 1998). It was discovered that the overall average number of group sessions for the studies is 9.6. (e.g., Conyers, 2005; Hinch, 1995). In the Steen (2007) study the number of group sessions were between eight and 10 sessions. The number of group sessions ranges between six and 20, which encompasses the average number reported above.

Demographic Information about Group Leaders and Participants

Some demographic information was provided about group leaders and participants in many of the studies. In addition to years of experience, the racial background match between group leaders and students was also explored to see if there was any link to the strength of the intervention. In previous research the group leader to group participant match has been noted in terms of racial background (Muller, 2000). Further, group work experience and training has been cited as an important consideration that may impact the potential success of the group counselling intervention (Shi & Steen, 2012). For two of the studies that did provide demographic information of the group leaders such as Campbell and Brigman (2005) and Conyers (2005), the group leaders and most or all of the student participants shared the same racial background. In fact, in the study by Conyers (2005), the group was led by an African American female school counsellor and the participants in the study were all African American males. In Campbell and Brigman's (2005) study, 22 of 23 group leaders were European American and a majority of the students (82%) were European American as well. In both of these studies the effects of the groups were large to moderate, with Conyers' (2005) study producing the largest effect size of all studies. One article that did not yield statistically significant results on the academic outcome described the demographic information of group leaders (Steen, 2009). In this study, the group leader's racial background was similar for the students. However, this

intervention produced a small effect size ($d = 0.07$). Although this racial match between group leaders and students can be found in many of these articles, some do not present the racial/ethnicity background information about the group leaders.

Another important factor that emerged from the studies is the number of years of school counselling experience or group work training for the group leaders. Conyers (2005) mentioned that the group leader was a veteran school counsellor and had additional training in group work after graduating with a master's degree. Additionally, the groups in Campbell and Brigman's (2005) study were led by school counsellors who had an average of seven years of experience. Nevertheless, some of the school counsellors had only a few years of experience and/or had not received training in group work since graduation. Berger's (2013) study had school counselling interns co-facilitate the group interventions with a counsellor educator who had experience working as a school counsellor in middle and high school. Another study (Shechtman et al., 1996) provided many details about the group leaders and the amount of training and years in group work they each have. These authors disclose information about the group leaders' years of experience and the fact that the group leaders in the study received their graduate training in group counselling from the first author.

Discussion

The synthesis of research presented in this article provides some evidence that groups facilitated by school counsellors attending to academic achievement outcomes are effective. However, this line of inquiry seems to be in a very rudimentary stage. Interestingly, this study used the 1990 to 2019 timeframe, yet articles only emerged from 1990-2013. We have no clear explanation for this, but it is important to note that there is plenty of room for group researchers and practitioners to take some of these considerations from this study moving forward. We are calling for more research within the context of academic achievement. First, it is clear that school counsellors can facilitate group interventions in school settings that target important outcomes while making a powerful impact on student achievement. Next, school counsellors used both highly structured and flexible protocols. In fact, a little more than half of the groups presented in the current article were structured with specific protocols. Among the groups that used protocols, there existed differences in how structured they were. There were several exceptions to these structured groups. In cases where there was less structure, it seems that the school counsellors would facilitate the sessions in a more process-oriented manner (e.g., Blackburn, 2008; Shechtman et al., 1996, Steen, 2009). For these studies with group sessions that were less structured, effect sizes ranged from 0.77 to 1.17. However, Conyers' (2005) study provided a protocol and clear structure and produced the largest effect size overall ($d = 1.18$). Therefore, findings are mixed and a recommendation for practitioners is to consider having clear goals for the group intervention along with a process-

orientation within the groups to address students' broader needs. School counsellors have group counselling training and could help students explore both the content that focuses on achievement while also considering other underlying issues that may prevent them from reaching their fullest potential. Combining both content and process may in turn help them to concentrate on their academic needs and apply any insight gained during the intervention. Further exploration should take place in order to determine if there are specific potential benefits for students' academic performance using a more integrated approach.

Next, regarding the number of sessions used over the course of group intervention, prior to this point, it had been recommended that groups for children and adolescents met for a *minimum* of six sessions (Gladding, 2012) and the studies presented in the current article suggests that the average should increase to about 10 sessions. Two studies, each with the most number of sessions overall (20) had a wide discrepancy. Shechtman et al. (1996) had the largest effect size of ($d = 1.17$) whereas one of the lowest effect size ($d = 0.07$) was for the other intervention with 20 sessions (Steen, 2009). The Campbell and Brigman (2005) study had an effect size of ($d = 0.49$) and Webb et al. (2005) had an effect size of ($d = 0.34$) and both of these interventions included four-month follow-up booster sessions after the initial eight sessions in order to reinforce any learning. This brought the total group sessions to 12 for both. The range of effect sizes is varied and does not seem to clearly suggest the most appropriate number of sessions; therefore, the average of 10 sessions could be a reasonable recommendation for school counsellors to conduct.

Additionally, as for the demographic information of school counselor group leaders and group members, some of the studies that yielded strong effects had group leaders who shared the same racial and/or ethnic background as the group members. However, the remaining studies either did not include demographic information for the group leaders or no connections could be drawn between the characteristics of the group leaders and members and how this may impact the outcomes. Another consideration is that the level of experiences of the group leaders in the studies that had moderate to large effect sizes varied from an average of seven years to "veteran" school counsellors, which implies a considerable amount of experience. Nevertheless, additional research is needed to draw the conclusion that matching group leader and student racial and/or ethnic background as well as more experienced group leaders with specific small group training beyond graduate school will likely benefit students.

Lastly, school counselling practitioners who would like to determine how successful their group interventions are at targeting academic achievement should be strategic when selecting outcome instruments. It is tentatively recommended, based on the current results presented in this review, that school counsellors at least be open to using comprehensive/comparative tests and GPA as appropriate outcome measures. This suggestion can be made because the findings presented from the studies in the current article are moderate overall for these two types of outcomes with $d =$

0.65 and $d = 0.42$, respectively. It is realized that outcomes are not isolated from other factors associated with the intervention (e.g., number of group sessions, demographics of group leaders, etc.). However, the literature presented in the current article suggests that these outcome measures are reasonable. Practically, this should be helpful for school counsellors because school officials in school districts are definitely interested in student achievement and would consider GPA and standardized tests scores as important measures.

Implications and Recommendations for School Counselling Research Effect Sizes

Based on the findings there are several recommendations for researchers, practitioners and school-based counselling policy makers. First, although not every study that yielded large effect sizes used protocols in their groups, the study (Conyers, 2005) with the overall largest effect size ($d = 1.18$) did. It seems that researchers should examine and practitioners should use some form of protocol to increase treatment fidelity to ensure that the interventions are facilitated in the manner in which they are intended. This should help to improve the research design. Protocols cannot guarantee adherence to the true intent of the intervention. At the very least, providing some training to group leaders would help to enhance fidelity if protocols are not used. For example, in the studies of Campbell and Brigman (2005), Steen (2007), and Webb et al. (2005), trainings on the group manual were provided to the group leaders to improve treatment fidelity. Campbell and Brigman (2005) and Webb et al. (2005) described in detail a list of strategies they used to enhance fidelity in their studies, such as providing suggestions to the group leaders on how to provide feedback on their leadership performance and documenting attendance and group topics that emerge. All three of these studies had moderate effect sizes but many of the other studies did not report offering training of any sort or using a manual.

Number of Group Counselling Sessions

Second, in regard to the number of group counselling sessions and whether to include follow-up sessions, more research is needed to better inform researchers and school counsellors about how long an intervention should last to be able to make a difference in students' academic performance. One suggestion for future research is to include qualitative strategies and methods in order to reflect students' gains from the group participation that might not be shown in the data analysis. This could lead to more in-depth exploration as to what may be occurring in the group counselling interventions. For example, the dissertation research conducted by Steen (2007) used qualitative strategies to solicit information from parents and teachers that could be included in the evaluation. The inclusion presented a clearer picture of how much students may have improved academically, which was not readily apparent in the quantitative results either.

Demographic Information about Group Leaders and Participants

Third, it is not obvious as to whether or not the demographic matching between group leaders and group members served as a significant factor in the effectiveness of group interventions on student academic achievement. Therefore, research that could account for the impact of these different demographic variables could be useful in determining the best combination of group leader and student characteristics. We recommend more research in this line being produced in order to further explore these initial findings, such as racial or cultural match between group leaders and participants. Also, the interaction between group leaders' level of experiences and their demographic match with group participants seems to play a role in effect sizes of the group interventions. Along these lines, applying a more intentional exploration of these same variables with an international focus is important for ongoing research in this area.

Measuring Group Counselling Academic Outcomes

Finally, it is recommended to discover more ways to measure academic outcomes or alter the groups' content/interventions to more directly meet the requirements of the academic measures. It could be that academic achievement in a narrow sense is a distal outcome and therefore highly unlikely to be improved from short term group interventions. In other words, it is possible that results from a group intervention will not be recognized immediately. It is recommended that this be evaluated in at least two different ways. Longitudinal studies should be employed with appropriate periods of follow-up to determine the relationship between the intervention and the outcomes. Furthermore, investigation of proximal outcomes that contribute to distal outcomes should be conducted. For example, measuring the enhancement of self-esteem, stress management, social skills, study habits, and time management might prove to be appropriate. Nevertheless, it is realized that this statement essentially challenges the notion that GPA and comprehensive/comparative tests as outcome measures are appropriate as mentioned heretofore. Speculations have been made that this research needs further attention to make more robust claims in either direction.

It is also recommended that future research adopt more rigorous methodology to account for other variables that might play a role in academic achievement. Exploring international articles seems reasonable to expand these ideas and strengthen designs. In the present article, those reviewed occurred within the United States except for Shechtman (1993) and Shechtman et al.'s (1996) work that took place in Israel. The articles by these researchers had strong research designs. International school counselling program research is still emerging yet often these studies that are published have strong designs. For example, in a review on School Counselling Research in China, Shi (2018) found an academically related group counselling intervention used to reduce test anxiety among high school students. These

authors deployed a pre-and-post-with-control-group design and discovered that group intervention had significant impact on decreasing student test anxiety which could hinder their academic achievement. Both the researchers and the participants were from mainland China.

Conclusion

In sum, this review examined 12 group counselling interventions targeting academic achievement related outcomes. It was discovered that studies that used comprehensive/ comparative tests and GPA as achievement outcome measures produced the highest effect sizes. This review also examined other factors that may have had an impact on the effectiveness of these group interventions, such as use of protocol, length of the interventions, and group leader and student racial match. These factors are not clearly linked to the effectiveness of these studies. Further, the impact of a counselling intervention is not always immediately apparent. In some instances, the impact of the intervention is not perceptible for weeks, months, or even years. With this being the case, targeting and promoting academic development and achievement is still challenging and more research and practice in this area is warranted. Nevertheless, these studies reviewed in this article are informative to others interested in furthering this line of inquiry. The research on the effectiveness of group counselling in schools is still in its nascent phase and it is encouraged that other researchers and practitioners continue building on the work that is currently presented in this literature review.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the studies included in this review have different research designs and the rigor of methodology varies. Some studies used pretest-posttest control group design with randomization (e.g., Campbell, & Brigman, 2005; Webb et al., 2005). Others did not use a control group or randomization and only used pre-and-post group comparison design. Second, studies that targeted enhancing academic achievement but their interventions included other components instead of only group interventions might not have made it in this literature review due to the interventions included more than just group work. It is highly probable that this review may have missed the studies that used a comprehensive counseling program that contained group counseling as a component.

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