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## GROUP COUNSELLING OF UNDERACHIEVERS

**ABSTRACT:** Grade 9 underachieving volunteers and non-volunteers were taught effective study skills through group reinforcement counselling. Direct and statistical controls were emphasized in the analysis. Results supported reinforcement counselling with volunteering clients. There was improved achievement of non-counselled non-volunteers who received a "study guide."

Increased demands are being placed on educational counsellors to aid students who are underachieving in our schools (Brown, 1965; Gilbreath, 1967; Shaw & Wursten, 1965; Zingle, 1965). Recommendations have been made for the use of group techniques (Wilson, 1967); verbal reinforcements (Ryan, 1967; Ryan & Krumboltz, 1964; Trimble, 1968); and the teaching of study skills (Fox, 1962) to aid underachievers. Ofman (1963) feels that the underachiever's desire to improve is necessary for any program to be effective. This desire is often considered to be indicated by the underachiever's act of volunteering for counselling. Fox (1962), Gilbreath (1967), Ofman (1963), and Trimble (1968) obtained more promising results (increase of school marks) with volunteers than Broedal, Ohlsen, Proll, and Southard (1960) who used non-volunteers. The complexities of effects and interrelationships of the many variables associated with counselling underachievers support Ofman (1963) and Ohlsen (1965) who stress the importance of controlling variables which might covary with behavior change, in order to clarify changes as a result of treatment.

Considering the foregoing, the authors explored the effects of reinforcement group counselling on achievement of volunteering and non-volunteering underachievers. Direct and statistical controls were emphasized in the experimental design.

### METHOD

#### *Identification of Underachievers and Volunteers*

Two criteria were used to identify underachievers in the present investigation. The first criterion consisted of identifying students with major differences between ability and achievement. Ability scores were obtained from the Dominion Group Tests of Learning Capacity (DCL). Achievement measurement was obtained from teachers' marks on a February report card (Ach). Teachers' marks in five major subjects (language, literature, social studies, mathematics, and science) were averaged for each grade-9 student. DCL and Ach scores were then converted to normalized  $T$  scores ( $\bar{X} = 50$ ;  $SD = 10$ ).

The second criterion consisted of the teachers' evaluation of students whom they thought would likely increase their mark in a particular subject by at least one full letter grade if they adopted more effective study skills. Underachievers ( $N = 74$ ) were defined by: (1) Ach scores that differed by 6.0  $T$  score points from their DCL results, and (2) teachers' evaluation.

Each student was then sent a letter stating that with better study habits they could probably improve their marks. Students were invited to attend eight weekly noon-hour meetings to learn more effective study skills. Volunteers were those students who accepted the invitation and who actually attended three or more study sessions. Forty-four volunteers and 30 non-volunteers were thus identified. Non-volunteers were students who were urged to attend these study sessions.

Problems with students' timetables prevented the establishment of matched treatment groups. Some non-volunteers were required to attend sessions with volunteers during school hours. An attempt was made to control counsellor bias by having volunteers and non-volunteers counselled together in some groups. The 74 students were distributed into eight different treatment groups. (Forty were assigned to five counselling groups. The remaining 34 students served as controls for the investigation.)

## PROCEDURES

Students in three of the reinforcement counselling groups received a study guide at the beginning of each session. It was used to direct the topic of discussion in all reinforcement counselling groups. Only the counsellor had the study guide sheets in the fourth reinforcement counselling group. A fifth counselling group received insight counselling.

To provide a stimulus situation in which students could be expected to verbalize desired effective study behaviors, the counsellor asked questions like: "Why is this effective?"; "What is the advantage of . . . ?" Questions answered by the study guide were avoided: e.g., "Why is it better to study at a desk?" was asked instead of "Where is the best place to study?" To reinforce statements in agreement with the study guide, the counsellor would lean forward, nod, smile (attending behaviors) and/or say "yeah;" "great;" "I agree;" "that's right;" etc. Inappropriate responses were followed by the counsellor's looking away from the student and saying nothing. As weeks progressed, increased agreement with the study guide was required for reinforcement. At the end of each session students selected an effective study behavior to practice during the ensuing week. Student and counsellor recorded the chosen task and subsequent sessions began by asking each student how the task was carried out. Minimal successes were reinforced in early sessions, whereas in later weeks closer approximation to the study guide was required for reinforcement. Peer reinforcement was encouraged by asking students to react to other students' statements. The counsellor reinforced students for reinforcing each other.

*Insight Counselling*

Students in this group received one sheet of the study guide at each session, but they were allowed to discuss any topic they wished. The explained purpose of this study group was to discuss problems and feelings about school. The counsellor displayed an interest in, respect for, and understanding of each student's feelings, experiences, and statements. Contradictions, criticisms, evaluations, and agreements were avoided. The counsellor used reflection and paraphrase, and accepted group interaction.

## RESULTS

To determine whether underachievers who received counselling were able to increase their marks, the test for significance of the difference between two means for correlated samples (Ferguson, 1959, pp. 38-40) was used. The two achievement measures compared were February and April report-card *T* scores. A significant improvement  $p < .05$  in marks from February to April report cards was made by underachievers (volunteers and non-volunteers) who received counselling. When volunteers and non-volunteers were separated into five groups, it was found that the four groups who received reinforcement counselling had mean increases in marks that were significant at least at the .05 level. The one insight counselling group showed no significant improvement. Non-volunteers showed no significant improvement after reinforcement counselling; non-volunteers who were not counselled did improve ( $p < .01$ ); volunteers who were not counselled and drop-outs did not improve.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of reinforcement counselling with groups of volunteering and non-volunteering grade 9 underachievers. Reinforcement counselling was effective with volunteers but not with non-volunteers. This lends support to the use of self-referral systems and reinforcement counselling to assist underachievers to improve their marks. The improved achievement of non-counselled non-volunteers suggests the possible effectiveness of a letter and a study guide which these students received.

The reinforcement techniques employed by the counsellor here have been and should continue to be used experimentally by the classroom teacher and the school administrator. Positive and negative reinforcements are naturally to be seen in operation in most human relations situations, including education, but the contingencies between behavior and reinforcement must be carefully calculated to produce desirable specified behavior modification. There can be no doubt from experimental and experiential evidence that counsellors, teachers, and administrators, through reinforcements, verbal and otherwise, are daily shaping and conditioning children's behavior. As professional

educators, it is therefore their responsibility to attempt to know what reinforcements are affecting what behaviors and how, and to take all possible measures to ensure that the behaviors are being modified in a manner most likely to be in the best interests of that child in his/her society.

Counselling is not a simple and easily understood process, with simple answers to simple problems. The professional counsellor should approach his tasks with the calculated tentativeness of the experimenter.

**RESUME:** En utilisant un counseling de groupe de renforcement, on a enseigné des habiletés à l'étude à des étudiants de neuvième année en sous-rendement académique (underachievers). Le groupe était constitué de sujets volontaires et involontaires. Des contrôles directs et statistiques furent introduits dans l'étude. Les résultats tendent à supporter l'efficacité du counseling de renforcement auprès d'étudiants volontaires. On nota une amélioration du rendement académique chez les étudiants involontaires, non soumis au counseling de renforcement, qui avaient reçu un "guide d'étude."

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