Empowerment Groups for Academic Success (EGAS) is a group counseling approach designed to “reduce academic disparity” among “at-risk” or marginalized students (Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005, p. 377). It is the aim of researchers Fred Bemak, Rita Chung, and Linda Siroskey-Sabdo through this model, to create a system by which school counselors could take students who are classified as at-risk and provide them with counseling services “from a multicultural perspective” in hopes of “preventing high school dropout and improving academic performance” (p. 377).

The developers of EGAS created this approach in response to the increased demands of school counselors to operate outside of their roles. As the ratio of student to counselor is increasing, the amount of time each counselor is available to meet with individual students is decreasing (Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005). As a result, several marginalized students, in desperate need of intervention, are overlooked. In response to this issue, Bemak and his associates, proposed meeting with students in small group settings. Through the EGAS approach to counseling, students are provided an opportunity to meet and discuss relevant and pertinent issues with their peers as well as with certified counselors. As part of the effort to decrease
negative behaviors and replace them with positive, self-empowering ones, students are allowed to facilitate the group discussion. Bemak’s group counseling model is based on existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom’s group therapy (F. Bemak, personal communication, April 12, 2013). In Yalom’s (1980) work, he conceptualized the idea that human beings have four areas of concern: death, isolation, freedom, and meaning. Though Bemak does not explicitly connect his study with Yalom’s work, his Empowerment Groups embody elements of Yalom’s existentialist counseling. This connection is evidenced as Bemak attempts to move participants from self-defeating attitudes of life and school to more proactive, socially constructed, empowerment.

Action research, according to Geoffrey Mills (2003), is

any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers to gather information about the ways that their particular school operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn. The information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment and on educational practices in general, and improving student outcomes (p. 4).

Some practitioners believe “at-risk” or marginalized students have specialized, unmet needs because we, as educators, do not fully understand their particular dynamics. Not only are these students’ needs diverse, but the population of marginalized youth also is becoming increasingly more diverse, as alternative education placements note a rise in female residents. These changes are perplexing, and school systems are scrambling to find solutions to the unique challenges these students possess. Through action research, school systems may arrive at what Michael Fullan (2007) coins as “educational change,” through a deeper “understand[ing] the social and political context in which they teach” (Giles, 2006, p. 42).

A rural, alternative school in the southeast United States was the setting of my action research study. Service learning, community service, and job-readiness training are only a few of the short-lived intervention plans implemented for the purpose of invoking long-lasting change in the student body. Not only have all of these programs failed, the rate of recidivism—particularly within the female population—has increased over the years. With the increase of the female population, the leaders of the school have to address heightened instances of teen pregnancy, student-teacher verbal altercations, parent-child conflicts, dress-code compliance issues, in-school fighting, etc. Because of these pressing concerns, the leadership team at the alternative school met to discuss the possible implementation of another intervention.

Without giving credence to the root of the girls’ problems, most of the leadership committee automatically hypothesized the girls’ negative attitudes toward school often contribute to their lack of educational success. Fearing the committee was about to embark upon an uninformed decision, the researcher asked to be allowed to study the empowerment groups approach with a group of the girls, in order to establish other possible causes for the girls’ negative perception of school. It was hoped that the implementation of empowerment groups—through careful reflection and examination—would support Brause and Mayher’s (1991) statement, “seeing that many of the things we have always taken for granted may be hurting us [and our students] as much as they help” (p. 6). The leadership team had voiced concerns in the limited amount of counseling services being offered to the students at this alternative school due to either the lack
of insurance or lack of committal to services by parents. The school’s principal presented the
staff with the idea of incorporating mental health services in with the curriculum. These services
would be individual in nature and administered by certified mental health counselors. Although
some of the staff members were vested in the idea, nearly all of the students (17 out of 21) stated
they would not agree to speak with a stranger about their lives. Consequently, the school was
scrambling to meet the emotional and social needs of the student body.

As many schools, particularly those with increased numbers of marginalized youth, are
unequipped to meet the social needs of their student bodies, they inadvertently encourage student
In other words, when students are placed at-risk or “marginalized, excluded, negatively labeled,
and do not fit what is considered to be the normative, they may experience social injustice”
(Mirci, Loomis, & Hensley, 2011, p. 58) which may, in turn, lead to a disengagement with the
educational process and increased wastage (drop-out) rates.

Because of the profound emotional needs of the students and the uniqueness of the teaching
environment, I investigated the validity and reliability of the Empowerment Groups for
Academic success approach. The girls’ emotional needs were briefly identified and examined
through their active engagement in a relatively new group-counseling model during which they
were in full control of the sessions. Although I was present in the sessions, I only acted as a
mediator and did not influence discussion.

As presented earlier, racial considerations has been one of the biggest critiques of this model.
Race, however, was not a key factor in choosing this approach and was not even considered a
limitation until reading the critiques of the study.

This action research study aims to examine Fred Bemak’s curriculum developed to empower
marginalized or at-risk female students to confront “individual selfish behavior” and to assist
them in building “a set of values and attitudes enabling them to be responsible, active citizens”
(Sunal & Haas, 2008, p. 257). The purpose of this study was to determine whether Fred
Bemak’s Empowerment Groups for Academic Success would promote positive, pro-social
behaviors within the sample of female students. Although there is a growing body of research
(Bemak, 2005; Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005) on the effects of group counseling on
the at-risk student body population, little research exists on the direct correlation between the
effects of group counseling and increased academic performance among female students. The
EGAS model, moreover, has only been examined with a relatively small group of students.
Accordingly, it would be of interest to investigate the effectiveness of the Empowerment Groups
for Academic Success on my sample of at-risk female students enrolled in a southeastern U.S.
alternative education school. For this particular action research study, the following research
question and two sub questions were considered: Does the implementation of Bemak’s
Empowerment Groups for Academic Success increase academic and behavioral performance
among at-risk female students?
• How does this model empower female students placed at-risk?
• How does EGAS lend itself more to a social justice program than a traditional mode of counseling?

The following hypotheses were considered before engaging in this study:

H₀: The EGAS model will be a more effective counseling model for these southeastern rural, female alternative students as evidenced by increased daily points earned, reduced absenteeism, and increased grade point averages. H₁: The EGAS model will be as effective, or less effective, than the traditional methods of counseling, as evidenced by daily points earned, rates of absenteeism, and grade point averages. Because this study attempted to examine the needs of student enrolled at a southeastern, rural alternative school, there may be terminology used that is not common knowledge to the rest of the teaching profession. These terms are described below.

Alternative School. School designed to house students who have committed various Class III offenses, thus they have been removed from the regular educational setting.

At-risk student. “Students are placed at-risk when they experience a significant mismatch between their circumstances and needs, and the capacity or willingness of the school to accept, accommodate, and respond to them in a manner that supports and enables their maximum social, emotional and intellectual growth and development.” (NAREN, 2011)

Class III offenses. These are types of wrongdoing committed by the students that would typically warrant him or her expulsion from the school system. Examples of these offenses include: possession of drugs and/or alcohol; possession of a weapon; making terroristic threats; continued defiance of local school authority; engaged in multiple fights; etc.

Expulsion. When a student is removed—by the vote of the local board of education—from the school system for a period of time. The time limit ranges from one semester to forever.

Recidivism. The rate by which a student returns to negative behaviors (See definition of Class III offenses) which merit returns to the alternative school.

Review of the Literature

According to research completed by Howard Snyder and Melissa Sickmund (2006), the number of female committing delinquent acts resulting in a residential place is on the rise. These female students, as cited in the literature by several authors, experience more psychosocial and emotional issues. Sondra Smith Adcock, Stephanie Webster, Lindsay Leonard, and Jennifer Walker’s (2008) study of a group counseling intervention program suggests girls who are labeled as marginalized or at-risk students “are often offered limited or inappropriate counseling and related intervention services” (p. 111). Because of the lack of appropriate services to address the needs of this population, these students tend to allow their frustrations to be manifested through negative behaviors.

Though most researchers agree that counseling in any form is “far more effective than institutionalization,” the recommended method of intervention varies (YES Community Counseling Center, 2013). As with most trends, the pendulum swings toward one approach for many years, then changes to a more effective strategy or approach. In terms of methods for
reaching marginalized female students, the pendulum is now moving toward the group counseling approach. Two specific methods specifically geared towards the meeting the emotional and psychological needs of the marginalized youth are the The Moral Reconation Therapy model (YES Community Counseling Center, 2013) and Holistic Group Counseling approaches (Smith-Adcock, Webster, Leonard, & Walker, 2008). Another approach is the Empowerment Groups for Academic Success (Bemak, 2005). In reflecting on his work with his EGAS cohort, Fred Bemak (2005) asserts the basis of behavioral and psychological issues within the female at-risk population stems from lack of control over most areas of their lives. It is, therefore, in his professional opinion these young ladies ascertain a level of “empowerment” or the ability as an “individual or group of individuals [to] gain control over their lives and decisions” (Bemak, 2005, p. 402).

Group counseling in its traditional form has operated in direct resistance to the EGAS model by “emphasizing more structured controlled groups, avoiding difficult and emotionally painful issues that would more easily emerge in a less controlled group format” (Bemak, 2005, p. 401). The traditional method of group counseling further alienates the already at-risk student by forcing him or her to “focus on happy and positive feelings and thoughts, at the expense of allowing an examination of more painful issues” (Bemak, 2005, p. 401). In short, Bemak (2005) believes traditional counseling methods inadequately meet the specialized needs, wants, and abilities of the at-risk and marginalized student. As such, the EGAS model is designed with the goal of assisting the counselor of the at-risk student in “relinquishing their power and control, as the previously disempowered gain greater control to manage their own lives” (Bemak, 2005, p. 403). This approach to counseling seeks to empower girls by allowing them to have control over one area of their lives in hopes this will cause a trickle-down effect that helps them to gain control over other areas.

Alexandra Loukas (2007) discusses the various levels of impact school climate has on student outcomes. School connectedness is one manner by which school officials can account for a positive experience in schools. As most of the students within alternative education placements often felt as if they are victims of mistreatment by school officials, Loukas’ recommendation of “treating students with care, fairness, and consistency” (p. 2) is a plausible, but almost questionable at the same time. Perhaps, this statement has a two-fold meaning, as it is difficult to quantifiably measure characteristics such as fairness or consistency, due to the fact the very essence of what defines these words varies from person-to-person. Though Bemak’s Empowerment Groups are relatively new to the academia world and have, according to Bemak, yielded much success in empowering marginalized youth, there are some critics of his work. One such critique comes from Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy (2005). In a very brief, but critical, examination of Bemak’s EGAS model, Holcomb-McCoy vocalized her disappointment in the study. Holcomb-McCoy cites a number of limitations to the model; however, her main concern was that the all African American group-counseling sessions were led by a male, non-Black (African American) counselor and his non-Black student interns. Holcomb-McCoy maintains there was no mention of empowering the inner African American within the young women. She further states there was no mention of how Bemak’s Empowerment Groups operated to conceptualize the young ladies’ problems from a Black feminist perspective. Ultimately, Holcomb-McCoy believes these groups should be applied from an Afrocentric feminist perspective.
Apparently, Holcomb-McCoy is not isolated in her views. Building a separate study on the ideas of Holcomb-McCoy, Ruth Nicole Brown (2009) also expresses concern with Bemak’s empowerment groups. Brown’s book, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-hop Feminist Pedagogy* discusses the current dialogue of Black women as it relates to speaking to “discrepancies and contradictions” (p. 48). Openly critical of the term “empowerment” as a mode to give power to the voiceless, Brown states:

Yet in grassroots community-based programs, national nonprofit initiatives, university civic engagement projects, and clinical prevention and interventions, empowering girls, especially marginalized girls, is the professed goal and celebrated outcome, with little regard given to the way meanings of empowerment differ greatly depending on the context and individuals involved (p. 49).

She further states these programs typically have an adverse effect on African American girls as it changes their voice from what is natural to them to a manner that is more acceptable by mainstream (or White) America. Brown cites Paulo Freire’s (1998) work in an attempt to substantiate her case stating, “White people in leadership positions [do not] have to abandon their work, but they must realize that as long as they hold positions of power, they are making it impossible for a person of color to do so” (p. 51).

Both Holcomb-McCoy and Brown believe Bemak’s work was superficially impressive, but possessed great limitations as it related to the empowerment of African American girls. Both women believe it is up to the Black community to bring voice to the young women being silenced by schools and by life. Neither provides any research-based alternatives to Bemak’s Empowerment Groups for Academic Success.

**Method**

The review of the literature has produced reoccurring themes emphasizing the need of empowerment as it relates to the success of the at-risk female student (Bemak, 2005). It is vital for female students to gain control over their emotional lives in order to have success in other areas. According to Sondra Smith Adcock, Stephanie Webster, Lindsay Leonard, and Jennifer Walker (2008), at-risk female students often receive inadequate interventions to meet their needs. As a result, this action research study attempted to examine whether one particular group counseling method—Empowerment Groups for Academic Success (EGAS)—offers a sample of at-risk, female students the guidance they need to be successful in the classroom. Three instruments were employed for data collection in this action research study: the students’ daily behavior reports, verbal flow observation sheets, and an open-ended questionnaire. The students’ daily behavior goals were measured with a “daily behavior report” already in use in the school. The students are rated on the following measures: following rules, completing assignments, and demonstrating respect. The students can earn 16 behavior points per day for positive behaviors. Attendance records were obtained from the school’s counselor providing access to students’ daily attendance and behavior progress reports throughout the course of research. The alternative school’s counselor was educated on how to appropriately introduce new group counseling concept (EGAS) to the girls, in case she had to moderate in the researcher’s absence. The researcher followed the EGAS model for six weeks. Data, pertaining
to daily points earned and attendance, were calculated prior to the new model and after the new model. Pre- and post-intervention data relative to attendance and daily behavior performance points were statistically analyzed using descriptive statistics with change over time being recorded.

The population for this study consisted of 10 girls: five (5) ninth graders, four (4) tenth graders, and one (1) eleventh grader. According to Patten (2004), the quality of the sample affects the quality of the research generalizations. The sample location was chosen out convenience, as it is located near the researcher’s residence. Although Bemak (2005) and his associates met with his participants during a weekly 45 minute session over the course of one academic year, this researcher or counselor met with these alternative students three (3) times weekly for 35 minutes per session. The girls were introduced to the new group-counseling format by the researcher, who explained the Empowerment Groups for Academic Success were “what they wanted them to be.” There would be “no forced script.” In other words, it was understood that the girls could discuss whatever issues they desired.

Five validity criteria exist in order to determine the credibility and trustworthiness of action research according to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007). These five criteria were developed by Anderson and Herr, as cited in Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007).

1. Outcome validity or the extent to which actions occur that lead to a resolution of the problem under study or the completion of a research cycle that results in action (p. 610).
2. Process validity or the adequacy of the process used in different phases of research, such as data collection, analysis, and interpretation, and whether triangulation was used (p. 610).
3. Democratic validity or the extent to which the research is done in collaboration with all parties who have a stake in the problem under investigation and to which multiple perspectives and interests are taken into account (p. 610).
4. Catalytic validity or the degree to which the action research energizes the participants so that they are open to transforming their view of reality in relation to their practice and highlight the emancipatory potential of practitioner research (p. 611).
5. Dialogic validity or the degree to which the research promotes a reflective dialogue among all the participants in the research, to generate and review the action research findings and interpretations (p. 611).

Intra-observer reliability (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007) was measured by comparing markings on verbal flow observation sheets with recorded sessions.

The conclusions from the data were taken from notes written on the verbal flow technique observation sheets and the individual open-ended questionnaires. Audio taping the counseling sessions provided intra-observer reliability so the written comments could be used to develop consistency with the actual observational codings. Exclusively, the researcher performed coding, for themes and patterns. The findings were developed solely by the researcher with the intention to provide insight relative to the academic empowerment of female at-risk students.
Results

The primary purpose for conducting the open-ended interviews was to address the level of empowerment experienced by each female participant in Empowerment Groups for Academic Success.

Initially, one student (W. J.) dominated the sessions as the other girls appeared leery to opening-up. During the second week, it was noted on the verbal flow technique observation chart, that a couple of girls would call upon W. J. to start the sessions. She agreed, but would say, “I’m gone need y’all to talk too!” Gradually, all the girls began to talk, and by the final session, they were all eager to get to the counseling sessions.

Topics ranged from Taylor Swift to bullying to politics. Each session took this researcher on a different journey into the lives of the students. It was interesting to listen to them discuss issues that were later deemed as “insignificant” by the counselor; yet, these topics were of high relevance to the girls.

During the initial sessions, the girls simply listened to each speaker without much interaction or exchange. As the sessions progressed, the girls began to give advice to one another and began to hold one another accountable to the advice. For example, W. J. mentioned how she disliked her stepdad because “he took away all of [her] things”. One of the other girls asked her what happened, and upon hearing from W. J. the events leading up to the consequences, the girls agreed that W. J. overreacted, thus bringing the punishment upon herself. From there, each girl offered suggestions for W. J. to talk things over with her stepdad, and for the next few days, they asked if she had carried out the plan.

Themes

Because the focus of some qualitative research seeks to generate a hypothesis of why the EGAS groups are successful, brief descriptions and self-reflective statements from participants are included. In sequential order from the most to the least consensual among the perspectives of the participants, the following themes emerged:

1. Control
2. Freedom of Choice
3. Comfort
4. Trust

Control and Freedom of Choice

As stated in the review of the literature, the increase in positive control (Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005) tends to be the primary emerging theme of the participants. Specifically, the students all mentioned they feel a lack of control for most areas of their lives. In essence, they feel they are always being told: what to do; when to do it; how to do it; and why they should do it. One student shared her thoughts: “I liked being able to pick what we talked about
instead of [school counselor] leading group and telling us what to talk about.” Another student shared: “I like the new group better because we can talk about what we want to. We aren’t made to talk about things we don’t want to.” It is important to note multiple participants expressed that no one cares about what they want to discuss; the current group model forces them to discuss issues: they either do not want to discuss, or they do not feel comfortable discussing in front of their peers.

**Comfort**

While it is important for these at-risk, female students to gain control over their academic lives, it is vital that they are comfortable while in the transformative process. One student refers to her experiences with the new group-counseling format:

I really liked the new group format. It allowed us to talk about whatever we wanted to talk about, without worry of being uncomfortable. It also allowed us to talk about things that we were comfortable with. Not once did I feel uncomfortable about being in [the] group with the other girls. I didn’t really talk much, but I sure wish I had.

Another student shared her thoughts: “I feel more comfortable talking about the things we want to talk about.”

**Trust**

As the girls became more comfortable talking about things of relevance to them, they grew to trust one another. This trust forged a bond within the group, and they began to hold themselves accountable to doing better in school and in life. A student shares her experience:

I have been through a lot in my life, and having to deal with violence, drugs, money, and abuse should not even be around me at my age. That is why I think the girls group is such a good thing we have. You can talk about whatever your feeling…whatever is on your mind…I mean everything! I love the people I am around; they put a smile on my face everyday we have group. It just feels good to know you’re not a screw up in life…people just make mistakes.

**Conclusions and Implications**

It is important to note that while all students unanimously agreed that control was the primary reason for them enjoying the new group-counseling format, the most important finding was the effect the EGAS had on the alternative school’s counselor. Initially, the counselor was reluctant to implement the new group format, and admitted she was only participating “for the sake of your research”. After a short period of time, however, the counselor stated that she would continue with the intervention on her own as it deemed effective at “really getting to the heart of empowering them for success as students and citizens”. In terms of the research hypothesis, H0: The EGAS model will be a more effective counseling model for these southeastern, rural alternative female students as evidenced by increased daily points earned, reduced absenteeism, and increased grade point averages, the data support the effectiveness of EGAS in increasing
positive behaviors and reducing absenteeism; however, the researcher could not access the students’ grades to verify any correlation between EGAS and GPA.

Descriptive research and statistics were used to investigate and report the students’ attendance and behavior. As shown in the below graph, each girl experienced a gain in her attendance during the observational period.

**Table 1**

*Weekly Student Attendance*

![Graph showing attendance trends for different students over weeks.]

The data also show each girl’s daily behavior points either remained consistent or increased during the implementation of the new group counseling session. (Appendix 1.) This researcher reported the mean and the standard deviation in order to measure the amount of variability within the daily behavior scores.

This action research study investigated the effects of a new group counseling intervention for at-risk female students (Empowerment Groups for Academic Success) for multiple purposes. The first purpose was to examine how effective the EGAS groups were equipping the girls to take charge of other areas in their academics. The second purpose was to analyze its effectiveness as a social justice program. The third was to further dissect the first purpose through the use of descriptive statistics.

Returning to the research question posed, the EGAS model will be a more effective counseling model for these southeastern, rural alternative female students as evidenced by increased daily points earned, reduced absenteeism, and increased grade point averages. It was determined that this model was effective in increasing daily points earned and reducing absenteeism on average,
thus creating a sort of social justice platform for the empowerment and liberation of these young ladies. Because the grading period has not ended, the researcher had no access to the students’ grade point averages.

The second major finding was that 100% of the girls felt this new mode of group counseling empowered them to take control of other areas of their lives. Freedom of choice, increased comfort, and increased control over subject matter emerged as themes relative to EGAS’s success rate with the student population. Although this study was successful in some ways, there are important limitations to be considered. The first limitation speaks to the short period of time with which this study was conducted. This study was conducted over the span of 6 weeks, which is not sufficient time to observe all research variables. Finally, as this researcher acted as a participant, a certain degree of subjectivity can be found. While the sample size was small its results could be useful to this particular alternative school.

The findings supported the literature indicating that the female students often feel powerless; therefore, the increase in the negative behaviors could be a result of their feelings of ineffectiveness. This information can be used to develop specific intervention aimed at increasing their levels of empowerment. By providing the students with some sort of method to increase their levels of empowerment, the alternative school may witness a decrease in the students’ negative attitudes toward education.

For future studies giving further consideration of this approach, this research should be expanded to a span of no less than one semester. The sample size should also be increased to include more female students. This could be accomplished by visiting other alternative schools to include their female population.

References


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Loukas, A. (2007). What is school climate? High-quality school is advantageous for all students and may be particularly beneficial for at-risk students. *Leadership Compass, 5*(1), p. 1-3


**Web-based References**


12
## Appendix

Means and Standard Deviations (Per Student, Per Week)

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