

Addressing Male Underachievement Through Motivation and Study Skills Group

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Rationale

Over the past few decades, school counselors, and all other stakeholders, have worked to improve the academic, career, and personal/social success of female students who traditionally underachieved compared to their male counterparts. However, instead of bringing female and male students to the same high standard of excellence, male students now appear to be falling behind.² This new gender achievement gap is receiving increased attention, as national data on test scores, grades, and dropout rates show that boys are experiencing greater academic struggles and are achieving at lower levels across most school subjects than are girls.² Beyond the P-12 school years, statistics have shown the long-term impacts of male underachievement in that females are graduating high school, enrolling in college, and completing their degrees at higher rates than males.² Researchers have also found that boys, as a group, do not seem to think school is as important as do girls.² These negative beliefs are having serious impacts on boys' success in school.

This issue is hitting close to home at Noblesville High School (NHS), with more male students being identified each year for the Senior At-Risk Academic Lab (AL) – an intervention aimed at increasing the likelihood of graduating for low-achieving students. Compared to their overall representation of nearly 50% of the student population at NHS, males have been drastically overrepresented in the Senior At-Risk AL: 89.5% (2013-2014), 79.2% (2014-2015), and 73.3% (2015-2016). In addition, male students made up 78.6% of 2014 low-GPA graduates, 66.7% of 2015 non-graduates, and even more startling, 90.9% of 2015 low-GPA graduates. Thus, even when male students are graduating, they are significantly underachieving compared to their female peers.

Purpose

This intervention focused on increasing motivation and study skill development for 11th grade underachieving male students. The main goal of the intervention was to stop existing patterns of underachievement, thus preventing these students from needing to be in the At-Risk AL as seniors.

About the Group

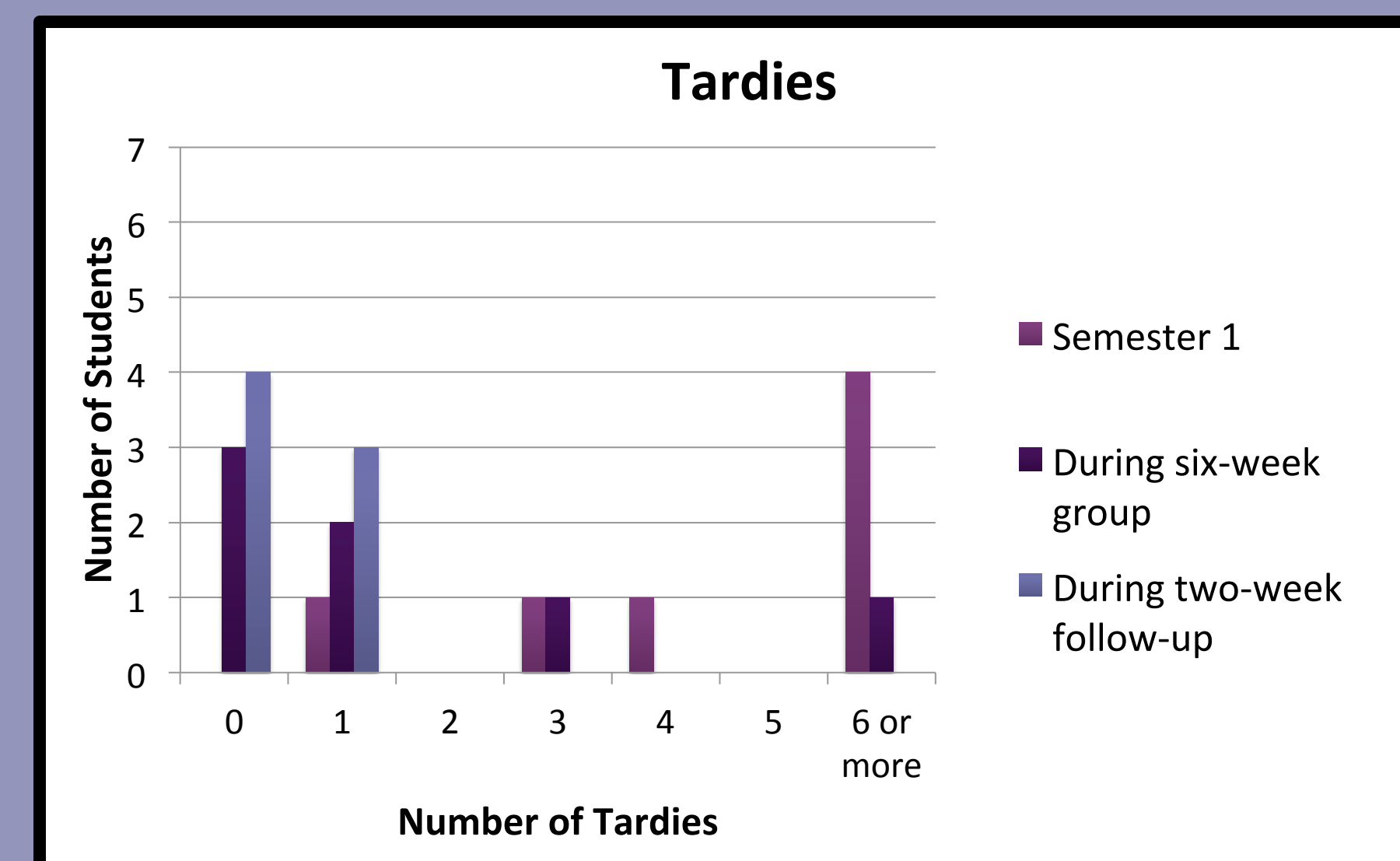
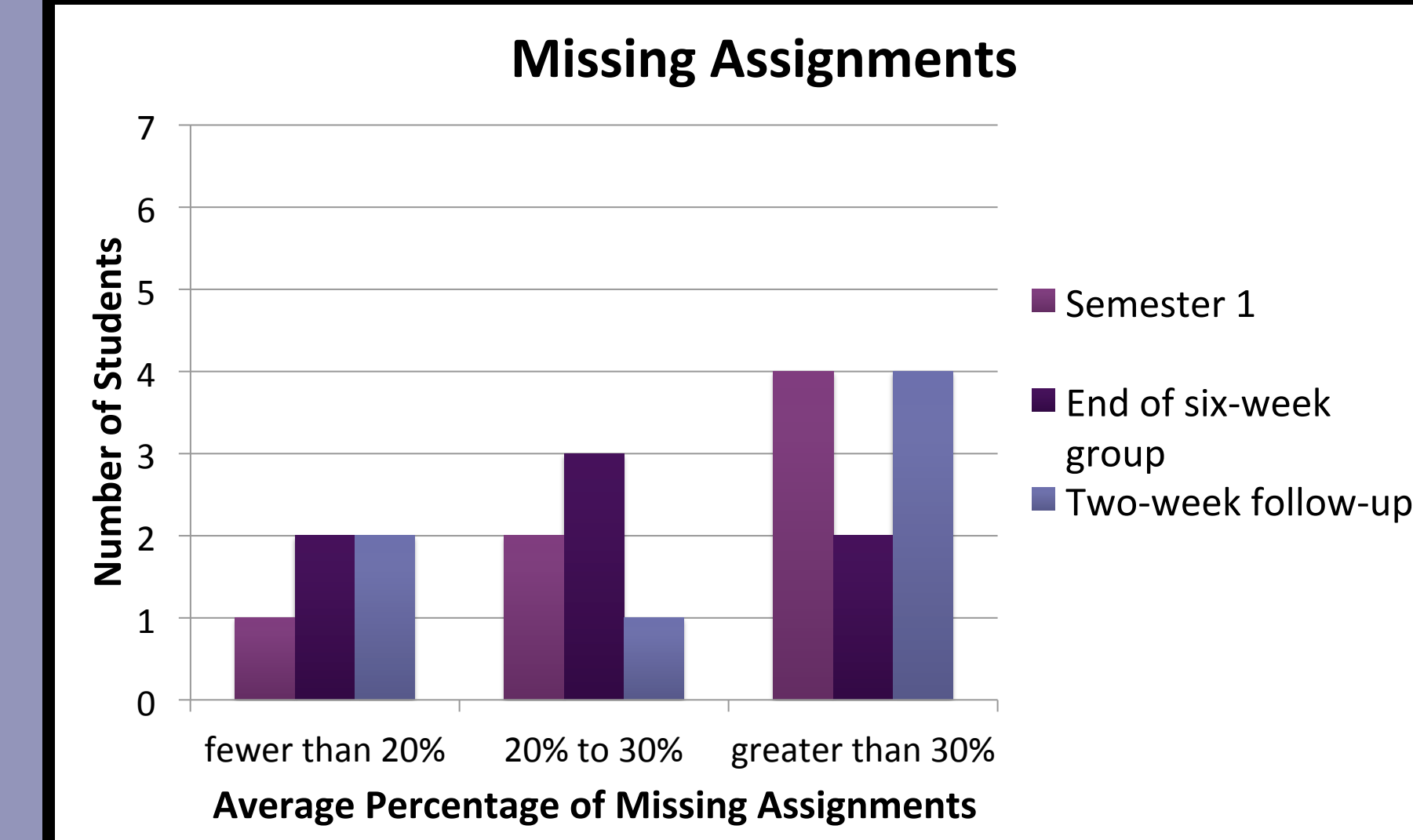
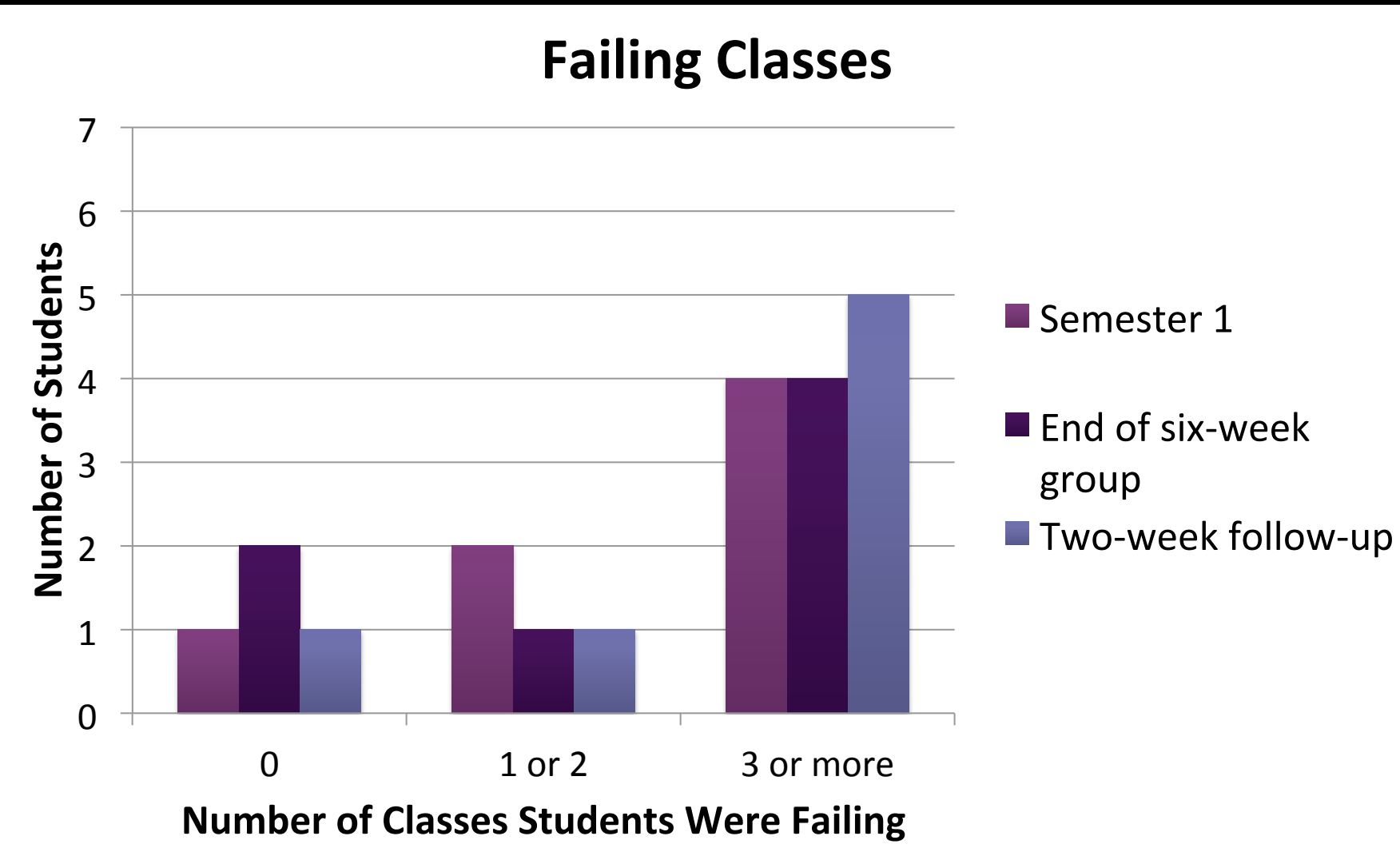
Motivation is one of the most significant factors related to student learning, as lack of motivation often leads to disengagement in school, underachievement, and potentially dropping out of school completely.³ Researchers have identified students' beliefs/perceptions (e.g., self-efficacy, autonomy, and attributional beliefs), goals, values, and intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation as key motivational components that impact student learning.³ The current intervention addressed these aspects of motivation through a six-week motivation and study skills group for 11th grade male students who were underachieving (as measured by grades and percentage of missing assignments) and lacked motivation to succeed in school (as measured by school counselor, teacher, and student reports). Key motivational features of the group included creating a sense of shared-responsibility among group members, engaging in hands-on activities related to students' specific interests that enhance a future-oriented mindset, and fostering autonomy by providing students with choices in activities. Parents were contacted at the midpoint of the group in order to collaborate on students' progress and provide an opportunity to reinforce motivation and study skills at home. At the conclusion of the group, students were given certificates of achievement as an effort to enhance their self-esteem. Parents were invited to attend this session to celebrate their student's commitment to his education by completing the counseling group.

Results

Seven male students were identified for the counseling group, which began at the start of Semester 2 and lasted six weeks. I compared the number of classes students were failing, students' average percentage of missing assignments, and the number of tardies students had at three different intervals. Results can be seen in the charts below. I also conducted a pre/post-test analysis to evaluate students' progress related to various areas of knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

Pre/Post-test analysis:

- Students felt more confident in their ability as a student and a learner.
- Students felt more responsible for their own success in school.
- Students felt more connected to their peers and held each other accountable.
- Students gained knowledge and understanding of their own sources of motivation: intrinsic versus extrinsic.
- Students gained understanding of specific behaviors that contribute to success in school (e.g., time management, study habits, and organization), and they practiced those behaviors more regularly.
- Prior to the group, zero students identified their school counselor as someone who could help them overcome challenges related to their success in school. Following the group, all seven students identified their school counselor as fulfilling this role.



Additional Findings

At the end of the six-week group, compared to Semester 1:

- Six students *increased* their grades in at least one class by at least one letter grade
 - Four students *increased* their grades in at least one class by two or more letter grades
 - Four students *increased* their grades in two classes
- All seven students *reduced* their percentage of missing assignments in at least one class

At the two-week follow-up, compared to the end of the group:

- Two students *increased* their grades in one class
- Four students' grades decreased in one class
- Two students' grades decreased in two classes

References

- ¹Bruce, A. M., Getch, Y. Q., & Ziomke-Daigle, J. (2009). Closing the gap: A group counseling approach to improve test performance of African-American students. *Professional School Counseling, 12*(6), 450-457.
- ²Clark, M. A., Flower, K., Walton, J., & Oakley, E. (2008). Tackling male underachievement: Enhancing a strengths-based learning environment for middle school boys. *Professional School Counseling, 12*(2), 127-132.
- ³Rowell, L., & Hong, E. (2013). Academic motivation: Concepts, strategies, and counseling approaches. *Professional School Counseling, 16*(3), 158-171.
- ⁴Salino, C., Girtz, S., Eppinga, J., Martinez, D., Kilian, D. B., Lozano, E., & ... Shines, T. (2013). All hands on deck: A comprehensive, results-driven counseling model. *Professional School Counseling, 17*(1), 63-75.

Discussion

The results of this intervention show that, while participating in the group, students improved in their use of skills that would promote their success in school. In general, students increased their grades, reduced their percentage of missing assignments, and reduced their number of tardies. Results also showed positive changes in students' attitudes towards school and motivation to succeed in school. Unfortunately, results from the two-week follow-up showed that students digressed in their positive behaviors. This suggests that continuing to reinforce major ideas and skills through booster sessions may be beneficial in order to maintain students' successful habits over time. Another key finding was that, even though most of the students did not know each other prior to the group, by the end of the six weeks they felt more connected to each other and held each other accountable for maintaining successful habits (e.g., being on time, remembering to bring their goal-setting sheets each week, and actively participating in discussions). In addition, students felt more responsible for their own success in school following the group. These results uphold previous research findings that suggest being a member of a group allows students to bond and feel safe discussing personal issues and opinions, while also working together towards a shared goal.¹ Additional researchers have found that by making success a shared goal, students will hold each other accountable so that the whole group succeeds.⁴ Also in relation to group bonding, underachieving boys benefit from a strengths-based approach in which the school counselor highlights individual and group strengths and creates a positive, supportive environment.² When leading the group, I focused on praising the students for their efforts and engaging them in hands-on activities that provided them with opportunities to experience success individually and as a group. This strategy is especially important during adolescence and the high school years, when all students are experiencing changes and developing their identities and self-esteem. Results showed that my efforts in this area were successful, as students gained confidence in their ability as a student and a learner. In conclusion, this group counseling intervention supports previous research findings while also adding new insights related to motivating underachieving males and giving them skills to promote their success in school.

Limitations

The following issues may have impacted this intervention:

- Tracking grades was influenced by the frequency with which teachers updated grades. Thus, grades collected at the time of evaluation may not have been up-to-date.
- One student missed two group sessions. With only six sessions, these absences impacted group cohesion.
- Outside factors, such as parent and teacher involvement, other time commitments (e.g., part-time job), and individual student characteristics may have influenced results data.

Recommendations

Future research should explore the following options:

- Add booster sessions to reinforce and maintain successful habits.
- Implement the group at the beginning of the school year (and earlier grade levels) to initiate good habits from the start.
- Increase collaboration with parents and teachers in designing group lessons and in monitoring student progress.