

FROM OVERWHELM TO OWNERSHIP

Using Structured Small-Group Counseling to Strengthen Executive Functioning and Social- Decision Making in Middle School Students

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Abstract

During my internship at Township of Ocean Intermediate School (**Grades 5-8**), I facilitated structured small-group counseling sessions with students in **grades 5-7** designed to strengthen organization, task initiation, and peer interaction skills.

Sessions incorporated **guided discussion, reflection activities, and collaborative problem-solving** to help students examine common academic and social situations more intentionally. Early observations suggest that when everyday academic and social situations were slowed down through guided discussion, students began identifying the skills influencing their responses rather than viewing challenges as personal shortcomings

Observations

Early observations suggested that structure played an important role in shaping how students interpreted everyday academic and social situations. When common academic and peer situations were slowed down through discussion, students moved beyond quick reactions and began **examining intent, impact, and personal responsibility** more thoughtfully. Breaking executive functioning challenges into concrete strategies also helped students identify specific barriers to task initiation rather than describing themselves as simply "bad at school."

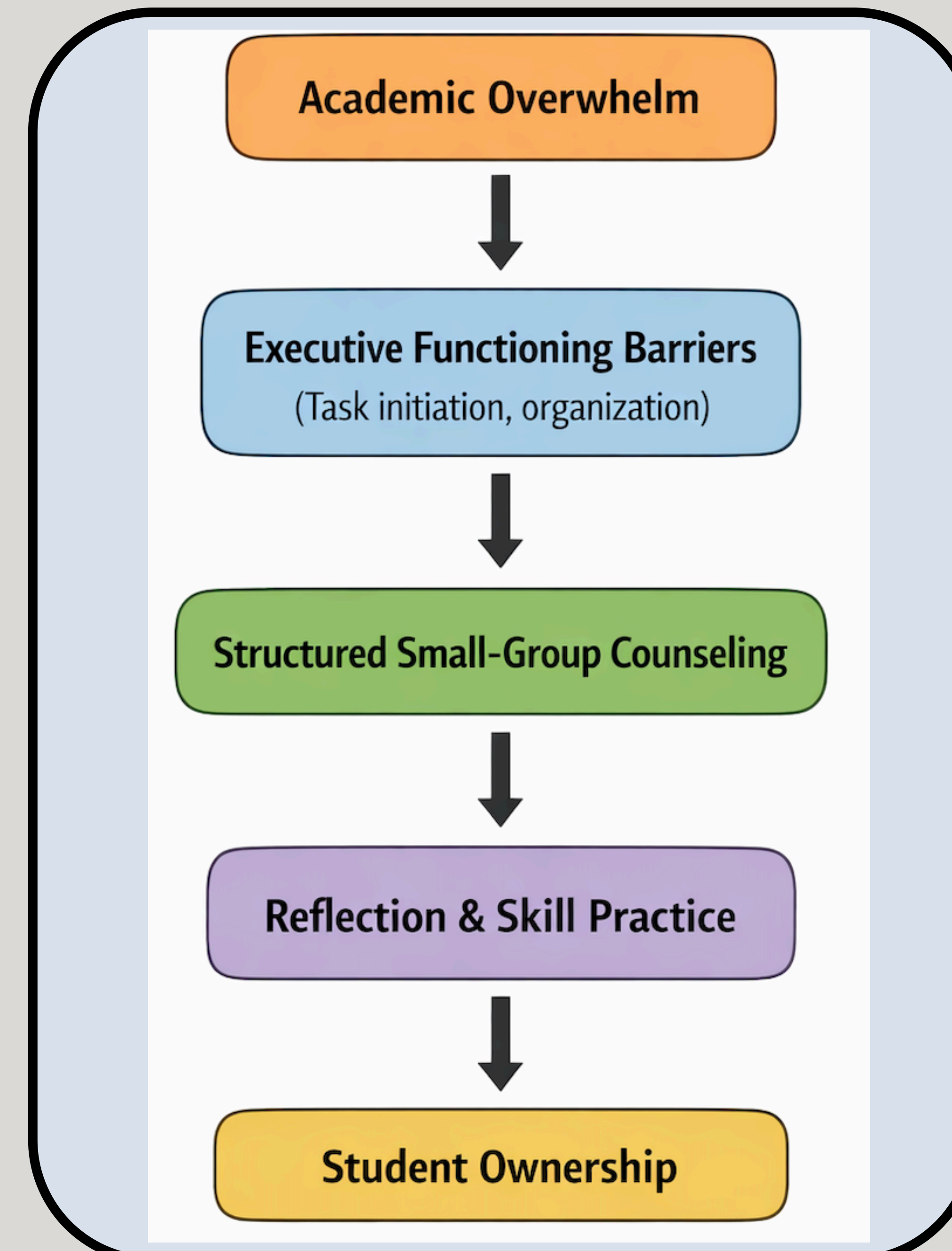
Small-Group Counseling Initiative

Groups were designed as **skill-building spaces** where students could examine how academic habits and peer interactions influence one another in daily school experiences. By breaking down common situations and reflecting together, students practiced identifying barriers, considering different perspectives, and developing strategies they could apply beyond the group setting.

Activities & Strategies

- Scenario-based activities helping students analyze common middle school situations and reinterpret peer interactions before reacting
- Guided perspective-taking exercises that encouraged students to pause, consider, and evaluate
- Practiced communication and problem-solving strategies
- Connected social decision-making with executive functioning skills

Framework



What I Learned

Facilitating these groups deepened my understanding that many middle school behaviors reflect skills that are still **developing** rather than simple choices. As students slowed down to examine everyday academic and social situations together, it became clear how rarely they are given space to interpret their own reactions and assumptions. This experience reinforced for me that school counseling is not only about responding to problems, but about **creating opportunities** for students to develop awareness, perspective, and confidence.

Background

Middle school is a developmental stage where expectations for independence increase rapidly while executive functioning and social-emotional skills are still developing. Students are expected to manage assignments, initiate tasks, and navigate complex peer dynamics, often without having been explicitly taught the strategies to do so.

When these skills are underdeveloped, behaviors such as **disorganization, avoidance, or peer conflict** may be interpreted as disengagement rather than skill gaps.

Field Experience Setting

Township of Ocean Intermediate School
Grades 5-8

- School counseling intern working to support students' academic functioning and social-emotional development
- Designed and facilitated a structured small-group counseling intervention with students in **grades 5-7** focused on **executive functioning and peer interaction skills**
- Group sessions included approximately **3-6 students** and were implemented as part of ongoing counseling support within the school

Future Implications

This experience reinforced the value of creating structured spaces where students can pause and examine situations that often lead to quick reactions in school. Moving forward, I hope to continue incorporating small-group conversations that encourage students to consider multiple perspectives and approach academic and social challenges more thoughtfully.

My Impact

Facilitating these groups created a space where students could speak openly about situations they frequently experience in school but **rarely pause to process**. As discussions unfolded, students began recognizing that many of the frustrations they face are shared by their peers. This environment allowed students to listen to one another, reconsider reactions, and collaboratively think through alternative ways of approaching common challenges.