

OPERATION OCCUPATION: A COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS INTERVENTION FOR ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

This article describes efforts undertaken to design, deliver, and evaluate a college and career readiness (CCR) unit for fifth-grade students. Preliminary findings from the school counselor-developed and -delivered intervention, Operation Occupation, supported interdisciplinary efforts between counselors and classroom teachers. Pre- and postintervention perception data revealed that students increased their knowledge and skills related to CCR. Teachers also reported positive perceptions about the experience. The article shares implications for school counselors.

School counselors play a critical role in assisting students with exploring careers and building college expectations (Blackhurst & Auger, 2008). To compete in the future labor market, students need to develop a college-going mindset and begin exploring careers as early as elementary school (Knight, 2015). An abundance of research is available on the value of providing programs that promote college and career readiness (CCR) at the middle and high school levels, yet little research has been conducted at the elementary level (Kane, 2015; Knight, 2015; Wood & Kaszubowski, 2008). Survey research has identified the need for elementary schools to integrate CCR interventions into their curriculum (Auger, Blackhurst, & Wahl, 2005), citing that elementary students are at a crucial period in which career aspirations are being developed. Researchers have recommended integrating CCR into the traditional elementary curriculum through a strategic career development program (Wood & Kaszubowski, 2008).

The purpose of this case study was to demonstrate how one elementary school counseling team used an interdisciplinary, collaborative approach to implement and evaluate a CCR curriculum. The impetus for such efforts was the identification, through the school counseling program's annual review process, of a gap in career

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doi: 10.5330/1096-2409-20.1.65

education activities. The team selected the fifth grade as the level for initial implementation because this group needed support prior to transitioning to middle school. In this article, the authors describe this approach, present preliminary data collected, offer a discussion of the results and benefits of this intervention for students, and suggest implications for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The primary goal of America's educational system is to prepare students to think critically, behave responsibly, and contribute to society in positive ways (Finn et al., 2014). Carnevale,

school diploma had an unemployment rate of 5.7% in comparison to 4.8% for those with some postsecondary education and 3.1% for those holding a bachelor's degree (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). These statistics indicate the need for educators in the United States to focus on encouraging students to pursue postsecondary education and better plan for careers. A study conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD; 2015) showed that the U.S. has fallen behind in terms of college completion. Only a generation ago, the nation was top among countries in terms of college completion, but now 10 other countries have surpassed the U.S. (OECD, 2015).

academic career plan by middle school (NOSCA, 2012). Furthermore, the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success (2014) specifically speak to preparing K-12 students for college and career readiness in addition to development in academic and social/emotional domains. However, to best prepare students for colleges and careers, counselors need to have the proper knowledge, skills, and tools. Research-based interventions are essential to help guide school counselors in their work on college and career readiness, not only at the middle and high school levels, but at the elementary level as well (Knight, 2015).

Existing College and Career Readiness (CCR) Programs

Although the need for knowledge, exposure, and skills at all levels is evident, few evidence-based CCR curricula actually exist that school counselors can implement. Furthermore, none of the available CCR curricula can be deemed as evidence-based for the elementary school population because the focus of CCR research has primarily been at the middle and high school levels. However, a few interventions available show promise despite the lack of solid research to support their implementation at the elementary level. One example of a school-wide CCR intervention is the Communities in Schools (CIS) project, which provides PK-12 schools with site coordinators to assist with establishing stronger relations with local businesses, community agencies, and volunteers to assist the school with meeting CCR-related students' needs (Communities in Schools [CIS], 2015). CIS (2014) has conducted its own internal research studies, which indicated positive impacts of the program on student attendance, behavior improvement, suspension rates, grade-level promotion, and achievement level at the high school level; however, data on elementary schools was not reported (ICF International, 2010).

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) has analyzed several school-

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Smith, and Strohl (2010) predicted that by 2020, 65% of jobs in the nation will require some form of postsecondary education. However, at the current rate of educational attainment, the U.S. will be short five million workers for jobs that require postsecondary credentials by 2020 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2014). Job outlook has proven to be stronger for people with postsecondary education, and statistics also show a positive connection between educational attainment and income potential. In 2014, individuals whose highest level of educational attainment was a high school diploma earned a median weekly salary of \$668, people with some form of postsecondary education earned \$761, and people with bachelor's degrees earned \$1,101 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). While salaries have been shown to increase with higher levels of educational attainment, the unemployment rate also decreases. In 2014, people whose highest level of education was a high

The changes in the U.S. workforce, coupled with the country's decline in international rankings for postsecondary degree completion, were factors that led the Obama Administration to increase focus on effectively preparing PK-12 students for colleges and careers. In 2010, President Obama announced the North Star Goal, which aimed to make the U.S. a leader once again in postsecondary degree completion (Duncan, 2010). Subsequently, First Lady Michelle Obama introduced the Reach Higher Initiative with the mission to help all students recognize that college was within their reach (Reach Higher, 2015) and she identified school counselors as leaders in this initiative. Furthermore, a recent ACT Policy Report suggested that students who were exposed to certain topics early on, including knowledge of college and postsecondary learning opportunities, had an easier time building upon that knowledge (Dougherty, 2013). In response, most states now require that every student have an

wide programs that may help improve the CCR of elementary school students. However, none of the programs analyzed show any significant effects for grades PK-5. Two examples of school-wide programs are Project Grad and First Things First (What Works Clearinghouse, 2007; 2008). Both programs serve disadvantaged students in grades K-12 and offer support to help students stay in school and progress successfully. The WWC did not find significant effects for either program.

Some studies have addressed school counselor-implemented interventions to improve college and career readiness, yet these studies have not clearly examined the impacts on elementary students. One example is the Real Game Series (RGS; National Life/Work Center, 2013), a K-16 curriculum that introduces world of work and career-related information to students. The elementary programs are the Play Real Game (grades 3-4) and the Make It Real Game (grade 5). Although this curriculum has been evaluated for effectiveness, the researchers only measured its impact on middle school-level students (Dimmitt, 2010). Middle school students who participated in RGS demonstrated an increase in career knowledge, self-efficacy, school engagement, and prosocial behavior compared with peers not in the RGS curriculum. Another example of a more recently developed curriculum is the Believing the College Dream program (Educational Credit Management Corporation [ECMC], 2009). This is a free set of lesson plans written for students in grades 4-8. However, ECMC does not have published research available to support the effectiveness of this program.

While the aforementioned available, research-based CCR interventions show promise for use with elementary-aged students, the present study's school counseling team decided that these interventions would not effectively meet the needs of their school population. Several of the interventions were large school and/

or district-wide efforts that were either unavailable in their region (e.g., Project Grad, First Things First, CIS) or were not directly related to the needs of their students (e.g., RGS, Believing the Dream). And none of the current research demonstrated strong enough support for the effectiveness of these interventions at the elementary level.

THE SCHOOL COUNSELORS DECIDED TO DEVELOP A CCR UNIT THAT ADDRESSED SPECIFIC TOPICS THAT WOULD DIRECTLY MEET THE NEEDS OF THEIR STUDENTS.

Therefore, the school counselors decided to develop a CCR unit that addressed specific topics that would directly meet the needs of their students. One way they gathered input was through an annual needs assessment given to students, parents, and teachers. Feedback from the assessment demonstrated that most students had not been exposed to the wide variety of careers or explored career possibilities in any way. Therefore, this was one of the primary focal points of the CCR intervention. The school counselors discussed the needs assessment findings with a team of two fifth-grade teachers and their principal. They realized that career exploration could be built into the social studies curriculum that was already being implemented. This curriculum covers a basic understanding of the U.S. economic system, including supply and demand, citizens' rights and responsibilities, and economic choice. Based on these topics, the school counselors, teachers, and principal decided to integrate into the CCR unit the concepts of wants versus needs, matching interests with aptitude, and ownership in life choices. The teachers also felt that one of the lesson topics should be devoted to basic job skill requirements so that students could begin to connect how everyday classroom behaviors pertained to future success in their chosen careers. Collectively, these objectives were meant to help students

better explore their career options and discuss job skills needed to succeed in the world of work. The counselors used perception data to measure the effectiveness of this intervention. Two counselor educators assisted the two practicing school counselors in writing up the rationale, procedures, and findings of this intervention.

METHOD

Research Design

This practitioner-focused research followed a case study design through which the school counseling team at one elementary school sought to understand the impact of a college and career readiness (CCR) classroom curriculum unit on their fifth-grade students. Case study designs are exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory in nature and are meant to provide practitioners and researchers with valuable information that can then be used in subsequent studies (Yin, 1994).

Setting

The identified school where this case study took place is a suburban, K-5 elementary school in Northern Kentucky that serves a population of approximately 340 students. Specific demographics from the 2014-2015 school year indicated that 52% of students were male and 48% were female. In terms of special services, 10% of students were English language learners (ELLs), 6% received special education services, and 12% received speech and language services. Regarding ethnicity, 66% of the student population were Caucasian while 34% identified as minority (1% Asian, 14% Hispanic, 13% African American, 6% two or more

ethnicities); 82% of students were on free and reduced lunch. Parent and community involvement at the school is relatively high. A recent school/family event drew approximately 120 attendees. The staff turnover rate is low. The school has been recognized

to Kentucky's Common Core Social Studies Standard 2.18, which states, "Students understand economic principles and are able to make economic decisions that have consequences in daily living" (Kentucky Department of Education, 2010, p.158).

TEACHERS RECOMMENDED THAT ONE OF THE LESSONS SHOULD FOCUS ON THE AREA OF JOB SKILLS TO PROVIDE STUDENTS INFORMATION ABOUT HOW BEHAVIORS AND EXPECTATIONS RELATE TO NECESSARY JOB SKILLS.

for its successful implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), resulting in a low rate of office/discipline referrals. The school also employs two full-time school counselors and recently earned the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) designation.

Participants

Two fifth-grade classrooms with a total of 43 students ($N = 43$; $n = 23$ males, $n = 20$ females) participated in the study during the 2014-2015 school year. Twenty-eight of the students (63%) were Caucasian and 15 were minority (37%). The minority participants included 15% Hispanic, 15% African American, 5% two or more races, 1% Asian, and 1% Native American/Pacific Islander. Thirty-two students (74%) qualified for free and reduced lunch. Four of the students were English language learners (ELLs).

Intervention: "Operation Occupation"

The CCR unit, titled "Operation Occupation," was developed to align with certain ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success (ASCA, 2014) and Social Studies Kentucky Common Core Standards (2010). Figure 1 provides a summary of the Operation Occupation CCR lessons and activities and the corresponding ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors standards. These lessons also connected

Counselors and teachers agreed the CCR lessons should align with the Social Studies - Economics core content standard 2.18. In the fifth grade, teachers have used a token economy system in their classrooms in which students earn fake money for academic success, appropriate behavior, demonstrated engagement, and contributions to discussions. The students then pay rent for their desks and other school supplies. They also receive fines for irresponsible or inappropriate behavior such as losing materials or being off task. After discussing this classroom economy system with the counseling team, both parties felt that providing a CCR unit that built upon what was already being implemented made the most sense.

During the planning stage, teachers reviewed the ideas for each of the proposed lessons and the details and activities for the Career Fair and Reality Store experiences and provided their input. Counselors had offered the Career Fair to students in years past and received positive feedback from students, parents, and teachers so they decided to continue this activity and build upon it. Teachers recommended that one of the lessons should focus on the area of job skills to provide students information about how behaviors and expectations relate to necessary job skills. Simply put, teachers felt students needed to understand the connection between

school and the world of work. The result of this ongoing collaboration was a practitioner-developed CCR unit comprising four classroom guidance lessons and two practical application activities (Career Fair and Reality Store), which would address economic priorities in life, postsecondary options, and responsibilities as a taxpayer. In previous years, these concepts were only taught in the Social Studies classes; however, the counselors recognized that students were struggling to make the connection between work, career, paychecks, adult responsibilities, and economic impact and therefore determined that adding to their existing yet limited CCR activities (Career Fair) was necessary.

Procedures

In the spring of 2014, the school counseling team worked in collaboration with fifth-grade teachers to deliver Operation Occupation. All students were present for all four of the lessons and for the Career Fair and Reality Store experiences. All students completed both pre- and postintervention questions about their participation; the two fifth-grade classroom teachers also completed pre- and postintervention surveys.

The four classroom lessons began in May of the 2014-2015 school year and occurred over the course of one week. The fifth-grade teachers suggested delivering the unit over consecutive days during the spring testing window. Students were tested for five consecutive mornings; each afternoon they then participated in the Operation Occupation curriculum unit. Lessons one to four were delivered Monday through Thursday. On Friday, the counselors completed the unit with the Career Fair and Reality Store experiences.

Figure 1 presents an overview of the lessons, experiences, and standards covered in Operation Occupation. The first lesson, titled "Wants Versus Needs," provided students the opportunity to think critically about the items they need to survive versus

FIGURE 1

OPERATION OCCUPATION LESSON ACTIVITIES AND ALIGNMENT WITH ASCA MINDSETS & BEHAVIORS STANDARDS

Lesson Activities	ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors (LS = Learning Strategies; SM = Self-Management; SS = Social Skills)
Lesson #1: Wants vs. Needs	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Students are placed in small groups. 2) Students are presented a list of various items (e.g., cell phone, water, health care) and told to categorize each as either a “want” or a “need.” 3) Students collaborate in their small groups to decide on a group answer while teachers and counselors circulate and assist. 3) Counselors lead whole class in discussion about difference between a “want” and a “need” and groups share their decision-making process. 	<p>Mindset #2: understanding postsecondary education and life-long learning are necessary for long-term career success</p> <p>Behaviors: LS #1: demonstrate critical thinking skills to make informed decisions LS #9: gather evidence and consider multiple perspectives to make informed decisions SM #2: demonstrate self-discipline and self-control SS #1: use effective oral and written communication skills and listening skills SS #7: use leadership and teamwork skills to work effectively in diverse teams</p>
Lesson #2: Learning Styles	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Counselors teach students about different learning styles (auditory, visual, kinesthetic). 2) Students view a video called “What’s Your Learning Style?” (Slankard, 2013). 3) Students take “The Learning Style Inventory” (Beatrice, 1995). 4) Students are then grouped according to their learning style and provided a list of careers that fit their style. 5) Students discuss what they know about the careers and how job tasks relate to their learning style. 	<p>Mindset #2: understanding postsecondary education and life-long learning are necessary for long-term career success</p> <p>Behaviors: LS #1: demonstrate critical thinking skills to make informed decisions LS #9: gather evidence and consider multiple perspectives to make informed decisions SM #3: demonstrate ability to work independently SS #1: use effective oral and written communication skills and listening skills</p>
Lesson #3: Personality Types	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Counselors show class PowerPoint slides of 32 occupations. 2) As slides are displayed, students are instructed to write down personality characteristics that may describe each occupation. 3) Counselors review which Holland Code may pertain to people in each occupation. 4) Students take a 5-minute assessment, “Crack your Holland Code” (Department of Workforce Services, 2016). 5) Students are given list of occupations that correspond to their personality type. Questions are answered and class discussion continues. 	<p>Mindset #2: understanding postsecondary education and life-long learning are necessary for long-term career success</p> <p>Behaviors: LS #1: demonstrate critical thinking skills to make informed decisions LS #9: gather evidence and consider multiple perspectives to make informed decisions SM #3: demonstrate ability to work independently SS #1: use effective oral and written communication skills and listening skills SS #7: use leadership and teamwork skills to work effectively in diverse teams</p>
Lesson #4: Job Skills	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Counselors introduce students to four basic job skills (communication, social skills, mathematics skills, computer skills) and class discusses why skills like these are important to employers. 2) Students are divided into small groups and are given cards from the same 32 occupations from lesson #3. Groups then discuss job skills that are important for each occupation. 3) Students complete a Daily Work Feedback Form to identify how skills utilized in class are similar to those assessed in a job evaluation. 4) Class discussion is encouraged. 	<p>Mindset #2: understanding postsecondary education and life-long learning are necessary for long-term career success</p> <p>Behaviors: LS #1: demonstrate critical thinking skills to make informed decisions LS #9: gather evidence and consider multiple perspectives to make informed decisions SM #3: demonstrate ability to work independently SS #1: use effective oral and written communication skills and listening skills</p>

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FIGURE 1 OPERATION OCCUPATION LESSON ACTIVITIES AND ALIGNMENT WITH ASCA MINDSETS & BEHAVIORS STANDARDS, CONTINUED

Lesson Activities	ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors (LS = Learning Strategies; SM = Self-Management; SS = Social Skills)
Career Fair	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Counselors invite various professionals to participate in a Career Fair and ask them to share with students a description of their career, education required, and one fun fact. 2) Students are sent on a scavenger hunt to link 25 skillsets they learned about with jobs presented by the professionals. 	<p>Mindsets: #1: self-confidence in ability to succeed #2: understanding postsecondary education and life-long learning are necessary for long-term career success #3: positive attitude toward learning</p> <p>Behaviors: LS #1: demonstrate critical thinking skills to make informed decisions LS #9: gather evidence and consider multiple perspectives to make informed decisions SM #2: demonstrate self-discipline and self-control SM #3: demonstrate ability to work independently SS #1: use effective oral and written communication skills and listening skills SS #7: use leadership and teamwork skills to work effectively in diverse teams</p>
Reality Store	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Based on the students' learning and personality style(s), counselors and teachers assign each student a career. 2) Students are given a Career Card listing: (a) a job description, (b) education and training necessary, (c) and income information. The back of the card includes a budget worksheet. 3) Students are given fake money that corresponds to their assigned monthly income. The following stations are predesigned for students to move through: (a) taxes, (b) housing, (c) food, (d) utilities, (e) transportation, (f) health care, (g) student loans, (h) clothing, and (i) entertainment. 4) At each station, students decide whether they can afford each item. 5) Students who are not following rules of the game or school rules can be penalized and have to pay "fines" for things such as a flat tire, medical expenses, etc. They must then trouble-shoot how to pay for wants and needs. 6) Students can apply for part-time jobs to make extra money to support additional expenses. 	<p>Mindsets: #1: self-confidence in ability to succeed #2: understanding postsecondary education and life-long learning are necessary for long-term career success #3: positive attitude toward learning</p> <p>Behaviors: LS #1: demonstrate critical thinking skills to make informed decisions LS #7: identify long- and short-term career goals LS #9: gather evidence and consider multiple perspectives to make informed decisions SM #1: demonstrate ability to assume responsibility SM #2: demonstrate self-discipline and self-control SM #3: demonstrate ability to work independently SM #5: demonstrate perseverance to achieve long- and short-term goals SS #1: use effective oral and written communication skills and listening skills SS #7: use leadership and teamwork skills to work effectively in diverse teams</p>

Note. ASCA = American School Counselor Association; CCR = college and career readiness; LS = Learning Strategies; SM = Self-Management; SS = Social Skills.

the items they desire to purchase. Students were given a list of items such as cell phone, cable, electricity, water, housing, food, utilities, transportation, health care, student loans, clothing, and entertainment. Students employed critical thinking skills and worked collaboratively with peers to decide whether each item was an essential need.

The second lesson, "Learning Styles," helped students identify which

learning styles (i.e., auditory, visual, kinesthetic) were most fitting for them. This lesson gave students the opportunity to understand the importance of learning styles and discover their own learning style. Students then worked with peers to identify which careers aligned with their learning style.

In the third lesson, students learned about "Personality Types," identifying their own personality type and considering how that type might match

up with various careers. Students were asked to think critically about how personality styles might fit well with certain careers. The counselors then taught students the fundamentals of trait and factor theory and the Holland categorization method for personality types and careers. Next, students took a five-minute Holland Code assessment and used their results to make connections to potential areas of work.

FIGURE 2

“OPERATION OCCUPATION” STUDENT PRE/POSTASSESSMENT

#	Objective	Yes	Somewhat	No
1	I feel knowledgeable about college and career readiness.			
2	I want to go to college.			
3	I want to go to vocational school.			
4	I have at least two ideas of jobs/careers I find interesting for my future.			
5	I think getting good grades is important for my future.			
6	I feel having a good job is important to have a good life.			
7	My grades are good enough to have the lifestyle I want as an adult.			
8	I will be free to spend my money how I want when I am an adult.			
9	I know my learning style.			
10	I know my personality type.			
11	I know the difference between a want and a need.			
12	I am knowledgeable about the skills I need for my dream job.			
13	The Reality Store is an important activity.			

The fourth lesson, on “Job Skills,” assisted students in connecting how basic working skills are like good classroom behavior. Counselors introduced students to four basic jobs skills and the class discussed the importance of these skills in the workforce. Students also discussed the link between skills needed for success in the classroom and skillsets being assessed during a job evaluation.

Upon completion of the four lessons, students were further exposed to different careers, including public librarian, mechanic, graphic designer, art professor, business owner, and educators, at a traditional Career Fair. Professionals were invited to come speak briefly about their careers, and then students were sent on a scavenger hunt to link the skillsets they learned with possible jobs. For example, students were asked to “find a person who uses computers for their job” or “find a person who uses problem-solving skills for their job.” Twenty-five skillsets and potential jobs were listed for students to work through on their scavenger hunt handout.

Finally, students were ready for the culminating experience, the Reality Store. Based on the students’ learning and personality style(s), counselors and teachers worked together to assign

THE COUNSELORS RECOGNIZED THAT STUDENTS WERE STRUGGLING TO MAKE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN WORK, CAREER, PAYCHECKS, ADULT RESPONSIBILITIES, AND ECONOMIC IMPACT.

each fifth grader a career. Students were given information about the career and information about budgeting their salary for that career. Counselors and teachers then distributed fake money to each student corresponding to their assigned monthly income. The following stations were designed for students to move through: (a) taxes, (b) housing, (c) food, (d) utilities, (e) transportation, (f) health care, (g) student loans, (h) clothing, and (i) entertainment. Counselors, teachers, and faculty developed and manned each of the stations. For example, at the Housing Station, students had to use their critical thinking skills to make a decision on their ability to afford a one-bedroom, two-bedroom, or three-bedroom home or apartment. As the students were exploring the Reality Store, they needed to prioritize and budget their money. Students who were not following certain school rules were penalized with “fines,” such as fees to pay for a flat tire, visit to the

doctor, a speeding ticket, or make a home repair. However, they were also able to apply for a part-time job to earn additional money. The Reality Store experience lasted approximately two hours with students spending time exploring, working through certain life struggles, and negotiating how to resolve those together with the assistance of their school counselors, teachers, and staff.

Data Collection Procedures

The researchers gathered perception data through simple pre- and postintervention assessments completed by each of the participating fifth-grade students and their homeroom teachers. The preassessments were administered on May 18, prior to the first CCR lesson, and the postassessment was given on May 22, once the Career Fair and Reality Store experiences were completed. The student assessment comprised 13 items (refer to Figure 2). Sample items included, “I have at

FIGURE 3 "OPERATION OCCUPATION" TEACHER PRE/POSTASSESSMENT

#	Objective	Yes	Somewhat	No
1	The school counseling program has allowed students to demonstrate critical thinking skills to make informed decisions about careers.			
2	The school counseling program has provided information to students about postsecondary options.			
3	The school counseling program has helped foster a positive attitude toward learning and the world of work.			
4	The school counseling program has helped students identify short- and long-term career goals.			
5	The school counseling program has helped students demonstrate leadership and teamwork skills with a focus on the career domain.			
6	The school counseling program has helped students understand the importance of making ethical decisions and using social responsibility in relation to the world of work.			

STUDENTS REPORTED LEARNING THAT LIFE IS EXPENSIVE AND HARD, BUT THAT THE REALITY STORE EXPERIENCE TAUGHT THEM THE IMPORTANCE OF MAKING WISE FINANCIAL CHOICES.

least two ideas of jobs/careers I find interesting for my future,” “I know my learning style,” and “I am knowledgeable about the skills I need for my dream job.” The answer choices were listed on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 3 (1 = *yes*, 2 = *somewhat*, and 3 = *no*). The teacher assessment included six objectives, utilizing the same Likert scale (refer to Figure 3). Sample items included, “The school counseling program allowed students to demonstrate critical thinking skills to make informed decisions about careers” and “The school counseling program has helped students identify short- and long-term career goals.”

Data Analysis

To analyze the pre- and postassessment results, the researchers calculated and compared descriptive statistics. The study authors entered student and teacher responses (no identifying information was provided) into an Excel spreadsheet, coded the answers, and generated frequency rates and percentages for individual items.

RESULTS

Specific results from the student assessment indicated that students reported significant increases in their knowledge and awareness of CCR standards. For example, at pretest only 9% reported that they were knowledgeable about college and career readiness, while at posttest this percentage increased to 100%. Furthermore, at pretest only 72% reported that they wanted to go to college, a figure that increased to 100% by posttest. While only 74% of students reported having at least two ideas of job/careers they found interesting at pretest, 100% reported “yes” on this objective by posttest. Last, at posttest, 100% of students reported they knew their learning style and personality type. The main findings from the student assessment can be found in Figure 4. Teacher assessment results from pre- to posttest periods reflected that, upon completion of the unit both teachers (100%) felt all six of the Operation Occupation learning objectives

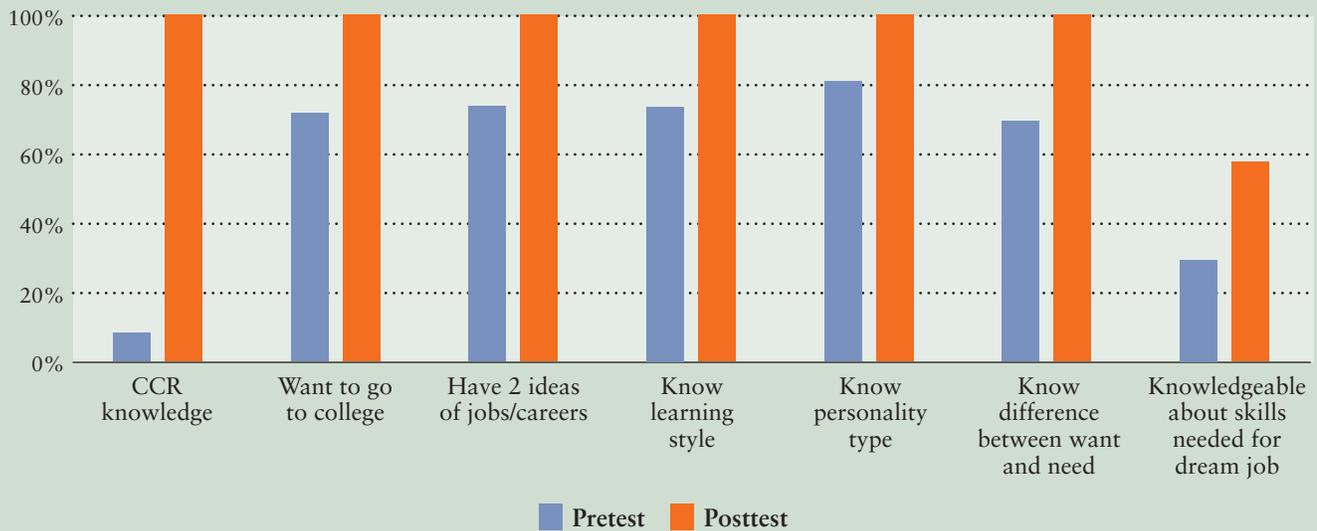
were reached. The main findings from the teacher assessment are provided in Figure 5.

The student posttest included three open-response reflection questions directly related to the Reality Store activity. The prompts were: “What did you think of the Reality Store?” “Was the Reality Store what you expected it to be? Why or why not?” and “Name five things you learned while participating in the Reality Store.” Overall impressions indicated that students felt the Reality Store was “cool” and taught them what it is like to be an adult. Students shared that the money one earns can be quickly spent on needs, and that in the Reality Store, as in real life, there could be unexpected fines for breaking rules or making poor choices. Last, students reported learning that life is expensive and hard, but that the Reality Store experience taught them the importance of making wise financial choices.

DISCUSSION

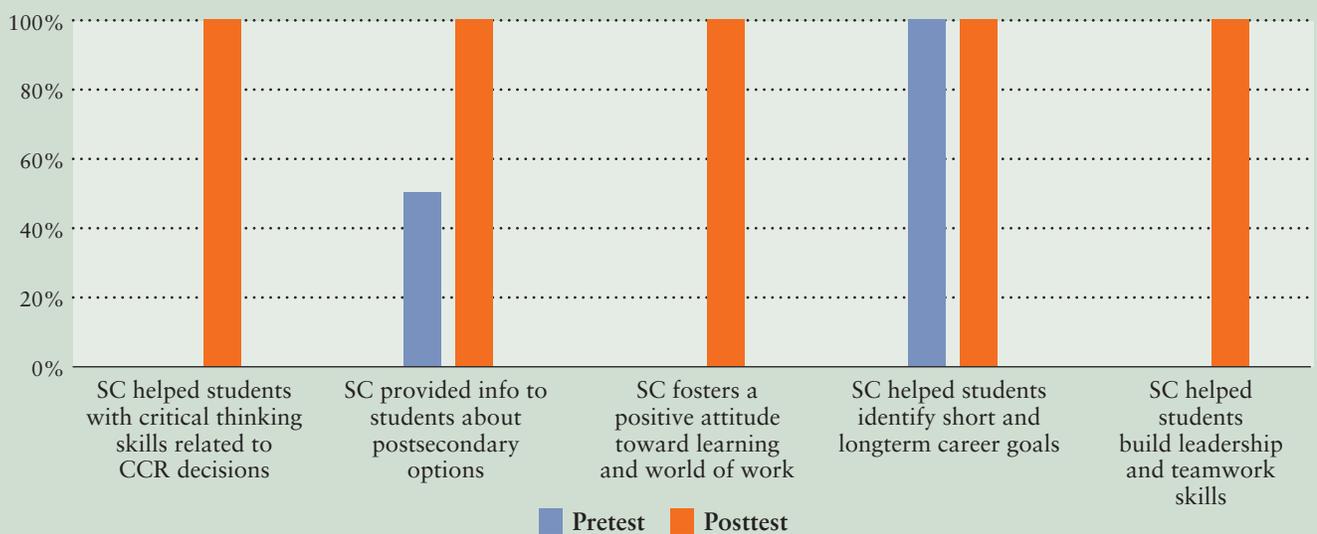
The results of Operation Occupation demonstrated that school counselors can help elementary-aged students increase their knowledge of occupations, raise their desire to pursue postsecondary education, and learn more about themselves, their education, and the world of work. These findings meet many of the recommendations of

FIGURE 4 STUDENT ASSESSMENT RESULTS



Note. CCR = college and career readiness.

FIGURE 5 TEACHER ASSESSMENT RESULTS



Note. SC = school counseling program.

Blackhurst and Auger (2008) regarding the important elements that should be covered in elementary-level CCR interventions. The students' responses to the open-ended reflection questions showed that through Operation Occupation, the school counselors provided students with a positive and fun experience in learning more about college and career readiness. They learned that life can present many challenges and therefore, planning wisely is important, both in terms of their education and their career choices.

THROUGH OPERATION OCCUPATION, THE SCHOOL COUNSELORS PROVIDED STUDENTS WITH A POSITIVE AND FUN EXPERIENCE IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS.

The current study focused on gathering perception data to analyze the effectiveness of the Operation Occupation intervention. In the future, the school counseling team will also plan to measure outcome data to help them further examine the effectiveness of

this intervention. Although the current research study does not provide outcome data regarding changes in student behaviors, the teachers reported to the school counselors that this curriculum was beneficial to the students. Teachers noticed a more positive atmosphere

in the classroom after the lessons were given and they believed that students' motivation to learn was improved. This could have resulted from the connection the curriculum made between students' education and their abilities to meet their goals (including making money). Teachers also reported that students were able to link future academic lessons to Operation Occupation, which helped continue to motivate them in the classroom setting.

Although the major findings from the perception data results were positive, the counselors realized that many of the questions could be reworded and the answer formats amended to provide more detailed information. For example, the student item, "My grades are good enough to have the lifestyle I want as an adult" could be misinterpreted given the answer choices "Yes," "Somewhat," or "No" and could have been reworded to something like, "I believe getting good grades in elementary school will help me reach my future goals." Providing a

for future use. By reviewing the results, counselors realized that not all of the objectives assessed were directly related to Operation Occupation, not all were written concisely or clearly, and some were redundant, needed to be combined, or should be eliminated altogether. The school counselors plan to make these changes in the next school year.

Limitations

As with many studies, this study is not without limitations. First, the present study was a case study and by design investigated a very small sample. Future research should seek to implement practitioner-developed, elementary CCR interventions, such as the one described in this article, with a larger subset of students. Second, the study was implemented in one small, suburban school. Follow-up studies might consider implementing the curriculum across a wider demographic population and within various school settings. The curriculum was

foundation for addressing students' needs related to the career domain. The students' pre- and postassessment results demonstrated that the curriculum lessons coupled with the culminating experiences were useful tools that assisted students in becoming more college and career ready. School counselors can use Operation Occupation to increase students' knowledge of CCR concepts, including self-awareness, importance of postsecondary education, and exploration of career options. Furthermore, Operation Occupation provided an interactive way for students to learn the material and allowed them to disengage from the strenuous and stressful nature of a testing environment. Realizing the value of this curriculum, the counselors determined that this and other CCR interventions should be expanded to all grade levels.

Another benefit the school counselors experienced after implementing Operation Occupation was a stronger connection with teachers, parents, and community members resulting from encouraging their involvement. The administrators were invested in Operation Occupation and saw its benefit; therefore, school counselors also experienced strengthened connections with school leadership. School counselors interested in using a CCR unit like Operation Occupation should plan to work closely with teachers, community members, parents, and administrators to develop an effective curriculum. Although stakeholders will be needed to assist with the lessons and culminating experiences, school counselors are essential in leading the overall implementation of Operation Occupation.

More research on the impact of college and career readiness as the elementary level is needed. At present, CCR programs at the elementary level are limited. With the help of research, including practitioner-conducted action research, available career curricula for elementary-aged students can be expanded. More evidenced-based career programs are needed so that school counselors can properly assist

STUDENTS WERE ABLE TO LINK FUTURE ACADEMIC LESSONS TO OPERATION OCCUPATION, WHICH HELPED CONTINUE TO MOTIVATE THEM IN THE CLASSROOM SETTING.

different Likert scale with possible responses ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" might also assist in providing more detailed information about the perceptions of students. Likewise, some of the teacher items could be improved. The item, "The school counseling program has helped foster a positive attitude towards learning and the world of work" could be problematic and considered a double-barreled item given that it asks the teacher to make a judgment about two things: students' positive attitudes toward learning and positive attitudes toward the world of work. Providing teachers with a more descriptive Likert scale for responses would also provide more accurate perception data. Given this information, the school counseling team determined the pre- and postassessment questions for students and teachers should be edited

implemented only with fifth-grade students; later studies might seek to expand to other grade levels. Last, the counselors relied solely on perception data (from students and teachers) as their only indication of the positive impacts of the program. Further research might include outcome data sources such as standardized CCR assessments, attendance, and grades in core subject areas.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Reflecting upon Operation Occupation delivery, the school counselors felt the curriculum provided a solid

their students in becoming prepared for the 21st century. Results of studies such as these will aid school counselors and educators in better preparing students for postsecondary and career success in the future.

CONCLUSION

Elementary school counselors are encouraged to provide more evidence-based college and career curricula; however, few such programs exist. More research is needed to evaluate existing programs. In the meantime, school counselors may need to develop their own interventions to provide CCR education to their students. Operation Occupation is a positive first step toward developing more elementary-level, evidence-based interventions that school counselors can use to assist students with improving their knowledge of college and career readiness, increasing their desire to attend college, and exploring potential careers. Future implementations of Operation Occupation should include a refined pre- and postassessment in addition to measuring outcome data such as standardized test scores, attendance, or grade point average. It is critical that school counselors and researchers continue to measure the effectiveness of elementary-level CCR curriculum. Once school counselors can demonstrate that CCR interventions improve both perception and outcome data for elementary-aged students, school counselors can more effectively advocate for implementing these types of programs within their schools. ■

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