REFEREED ARTICLE

The Beginning School Counsellor

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Abstract

The most effective counsellors help their clients find their own solutions. This method often requires the counsellor to ask more questions than give answers. The positive outcome of empowering clients to take control of their own life is the end goal. Unfortunately, developing trust with students, identifying the sources of problems, and providing best practice does not happen overnight. Counsellors new to the field have much to overcome but with hard work, compassion, and an open mind, they can engender positive differences in students.

At the beginning of their career, school counsellors face significant challenges. Counsellors assist individuals and groups who need support for a variety of reasons, many of which carry a heavy emotional toll (Merriman, 2015). Often, the students who have been referred to a school counsellor do not want to engage or trust a new face (Kertes, Westra, Angus, & Marcus, 2011; Stehn & Wilson, 2012). Overcoming this resistance to build relationships, defining the issues and staging interventions, and developing leadership qualities are all areas of concern to people entering the profession of school counselling.

Overcoming Resistance

Resistance is a major barrier to effective school counselling. People who have been referred to counselling are often closed or ambivalent to the idea of being helped by an outsider (Stehn & Wilson, 2012). In some cases, this reluctance stems from having no choice in the matter (Gasevic, 2014; Stehn & Wilson, 2012). Students are referred to new school counsellors by parents, teachers, administrators, outside agencies, or even their peers more commonly than they sign themselves up to visit a stranger. Frequently, students who have been referred to counselling have been let down by adults in the past and are skeptical of anyone's ability or motivation to help them (Kertes et al., 2011). Student resistance is shown in many forms such as questioning the level of trust, "selective mutism," and talking only about previous experiences (Yildirim, 2012, p. 130). The youth who need counselling are correct to question about the person with whom they are being asked to build a relationship.

To combat this hesitancy, counsellors need first to open themselves up to students, building trust and rapport in the process. Visibility around the school and involvement in extra-curricular activities help students to become familiar with a new staff member (M. Keown, Virden Collegiate Institute principal, personal communication, May 25, 2015). Beginning counsellors can also use humor with students as an effective way to lighten the mood around what is usually a serious topic (Berg, Parr, Bradley, & Berry, 2009). A game of cards or a board game is another simple method that a counsellor might use to create enough diversion for the client to feel safe and to make conversation more natural (L. Wotton, Green Acres School counsellor, personal communication, May 9, 2015). Lastly, a patient approach is prerequisite to overcoming reluctance by students (Jones-Smith, 2016; Young, 2012). Just as with healthy friendships, the relationship between student and school counsellor takes time to build naturally. When time has passed and the client becomes comfortable with the counsellor, the work of defining the student's problem can begin in earnest.

Defining the Issues

Once a counsellor has opened the doors of communication with a client, defining the problem is the next step. Determining the issue is sometimes completed with the client, and sometimes decided upon by the adults in a school, without the student present (B. Lee, Waverly Park School principal, personal communication, June 13, 2015; Kimber & Campbell, 2014). Counsellors help students and staff to target the improper behaviour that needs to be changed, because students often have difficulty seeing themselves and their behaviours clearly. For example, an autistic child may be unable to explain why he/she is breaking down (K. Bonk, Crocus Plains Regional High School counsellor, personal communication, June 8, 2015). Another way that counsellors can support their clients is by identifying behavioural patterns. Most students engage in inappropriate behaviour repeatedly because they do not see their actions as a problem (Camacho, Anderson, Moore, & Furlonger, 2014). Observation and documentation of troublesome behaviour provide key evidence for counsellors to show the students that these patterns exist. Lastly, dialogue with staff and key individuals can aid counsellors in recognizing troublesome behaviours (Katz, 2012). As with building rapport, defining the true issues of the client is multifaceted.

Depending on the student and his/her level of motivation to change, adults may set behavioural goals. However, counsellors must always look for agreement from their clients. Three common goal categories identified by middle years students are increasing self-confidence or self-acceptance, controlling or reducing anger, and improving relationship(s) with family member(s) (Rupani et al., 2014). An adult's perspective on each of these conflicts is different from that of a school-aged child. When one adds in the poverty and socio-economic realities that many students who require counselling live with, collaboration on goal-setting is even more challenging (Bray & Schommer-Aikins, 2014; Stephens, Arriaga, & Lindsey, 2013). A counsellor can not simply tell students the steps to have more self-confidence or to control anger. The counsellor must work with students to set realistic goals to make progress (Bray & Schommer-Aikins, 2014; Rupani et al., 2014; Stephens et al., 2013). When the intervention objectives, clients are much more likely to invest fully in the sessions and engage in activities suggested by the counsellor to achieve these goals, thereby leading to greater success. Defining the problems and establishing goals are two key aspects to a helping relationship.

Staging Interventions

The next challenge for counsellors is delivering the correct form of intervention to achieve progress. To beginning counsellors who have limited experience in the field, matching the type of help to the issue at hand can be difficult (Merriman, 2015). One method of dealing with this lack of experience is through educating oneself through coursework and seminars (B. Aston, Waverly Park School vice-principal, personal communication, June 14, 2015). Researching successes of other types of therapy is another way to overcome inexperience. An example of research guiding intervention is a study that used group therapy to help people with disabilities who were struggling with drug or alcohol addictions (O'Sullivan, Blum, Watts, & Yates, 2015). Although peer support groups are a common therapy for substance abuse problems, the researchers found a program called the Self-Management and Recovery Training (SMART) as best serving persons with disabilities who suffer from substance use disorders (O'Sullivan et al., 2015). Another example is a study that used the Solution Focused Therapy (SFT) approach to school counselling and more specifically posing the "miracle question" to students (Lines, 2011; Jones-Smith, 2016). SFT provides an effective, step-by-step approach to help many students work through their problems successfully. Finally, counsellors must use the support of experts within their school divisions and communities, such as mental health workers, occupational therapists, and psychologists in order to give the best care possible to clients on their caseload (Stephens et al., 2013; Young, Tanganyika, & Kneale, 2013). With the multitude of issues

students bring to counsellors, one would need to access as many resources as possible to offer up the best therapy option for each particular case.

Developing Leadership Qualities

Counsellors have a unique role in relation to the leadership of the school. On one hand, counsellors work closely with administrators to create supports for students and staff (Stephens et al., 2013; Young et al., 2013). On the other hand, counsellors often find themselves at opposition with principals (Kimber & Campbell, 2014). Whereas a principal's first priority is to meet needs of the school as a whole, a counsellor's priority is to meet the needs of individual students. Because of these opposing views, administrators often leave counsellors as mere gatekeepers, maintaining the status quo, rather than collaborative leaders with their colleagues who make systemic changes (Stephens et al., 2013). Unfortunately, counsellors often lack the leadership skills necessary to guide professional staff because they have no leadership training (Paradise, Ceballos, & Hall, 2010). Too frequently, counsellors are expected to learn their leadership skills through on-the-job training (Paradise et al., 2010). Working to become more than mere gatekeepers is a major challenge to school counsellors.

One significant benefit that a school can accomplish through elevating the counsellor to a leadership role is improving the social justice within that school. School counsellors can facilitate family involvement in schools and assist teachers in connecting particularly with families in poverty (Paradise et al., 2010). The collaboration between school and home helps both sides to understand each other better. When handled correctly, this diversity makes students and schools stronger (Katz, 2012). It creates an open environment wherein the student's welfare and success are emphasized. It recognizes that equity does not always mean delivering the same program to all students or staff of a school (Katz, 2012; Stephens et al., 2013). Counsellors as school leaders can improve the lives of those less fortunate.

In addition to advocating for social justice, counsellors also need to develop leadership skills to manage the staff working with their clients. For any counsellors, especially those with limited experience, convincing teachers to handle a student in a different way is difficult (Young et al., 2013). Teachers do not enjoy hearing that their methods are not working and that they must adapt their ways. Much like working with students, counsellors must build rapport with staff in order to convince them to implement the adaptations suggested. Rapport is built through having counsellors as valued members of school programs such as parent support groups, staff professional development, and student leadership teams (Stephens et al., 2013). As with students, when counsellors can open themselves up to their school and community and contribute to school-wide success, staff will begin to see the counsellor as a leader (Miller, 2015). A significant part of a counsellor's job is collaborating with professional staff to support their clients as much as possible.

New school guidance counsellors have many hurdles to navigate in order to become effective professionals. First, they must be able to build rapport, break down resistance, and create an open dialogue with the students they are trying to help. Next, they need to define the specific issues students have, set goals for the interventions in collaboration with each student, and find the best type of therapy to achieve these objectives. Lastly, counsellors must develop their leadership qualities within their school and broader community. These challenges can be daunting to a person new to the profession. However, with an open mind, a caring heart and a willingness to work hard, counsellors can and will succeed.

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Malcolm Oldcorn is currently working on his Master of Education in guidance and counselling. He has enjoyed his first year as a counsellor at Green Acres School in Brandon, Manitoba, after twelve years of teaching middle years students. Malcolm believes that all students have a voice that deserves to be nurtured and respected.