

COUNSELING SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES

7. SCHOOL COUNSELING SKILLS & TECHNIQUES

7.1. Background Theories

The professional school counselor provides responsive services through the effective use of individual and small group counseling, consulting, and referral skills. There are three major theories that have shaped how counselors provide therapeutic interventions in schools. The first of these is based on the theoretical foundation provided by psychoanalysis, first defined and elaborated by Sigmund Freud. These approaches include those that can be described as neo-Freudian and those that contain elements first identified in Freud's writings. Eric H. Erikson, Alfred Adler, and Otto Rank have built models for practice based on these approaches and theories. The early behaviorists provided the second theory that guided approaches to therapeutic interventions. Behaviorism was first defined in psychological laboratories with carefully controlled experiments to look into how individuals learn and respond to their environments. These approaches to therapy include William Glasser's reality therapy and choice theory. Related theories describe goal setting and brief solutions-focused counseling, strengths based counseling, cognitive therapy, behavioral counseling, and cognitive behavioral techniques. Each of these methods is based on helping clients learn new ways of thinking, processing information, and responding to their environments. The third major theoretical basis in counseling is a uniquely American approach devised by Carl R. Rogers. His person or child centered approach is one that does away with the notion that a counselor is going to fix a problem the student is having. The approach is one that helps the student better understand his or her own thinking and find a resolution within. School counselors have also adopted an abbreviated approach for providing student focused interventions that are time efficient and highly effective. Central to these solutions focused methods are strength-based school counseling and narrative therapies.

7.2. Ground Rules for School Counselors

When a new school counselor begins a career, he or she must build a practice. Schools will have referral systems and children will be "sent to see the counselor";

however, an effective counselor soon develops a practice built on trust that has been earned. Students know the genuine thing when they see it, and a counselor who is trusted will have a reputation that is spread by word of mouth throughout the building and beyond into the community. This can happen only if the school counselor has the personal warmth, integrity, and skills to create a counseling environment in which students know they will be listened to by a professional adult who is nonjudgmental and who truly understands them. The effective counselor knows counseling theories and has the ability to employ techniques that can help students. Beyond that knowledge and skill base, the counselor should be an optimist who has a true belief in his or her skills and the ability of students to change and improve.

To be effective, the dynamic interactions of a group of students working with a counselor can employ a number of approaches to therapeutic intervention. Counselors need skill and an understanding of group dynamics and theory to provide an effective program of group counseling. A new direction for school counselors is in working within a virtual school. The online world is changing old rules about the delivery of counseling services for many students today. Counselors working in public schools must establish ground rules with students who begin the counseling relationship. One is that everything discussed by the student and counselor is kept in confidence by both parties. Second is that there is a strict time limit to the length of each counseling session. Counselors must establish boundaries, including the fact that they are paid professional employees of the school who may never break the school's rules or policies. The counselor works in the interest of each individual student; however, as a professional, the counselor maintains a separation from students who are receiving counseling services. Finally, counselors do not play favorites, make exceptions, or do anything to discourage any student or group of students from seeking assistance. Counselors must understand students and the culture of students as well as the culture of the school.

Effective counselors recognize their roles in the culture of the school. The counselor also understands and respects the society created by students but never tries to become part of that culture. This implies the counselor is with it and up to date with popular culture but does not affect airs or try to act like the students. This will be immediately detected, and the counselor will be labeled by the students a phony and subsequently lose credibility. Central to the job is listening. This skill is one very few adults in a child's life have. The counselor must always be sensitive to all levels of communication being used by the student being counseled. Verbalizations make up one dimension; others include the student's posture and

body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures. All aspects of the student-client being counseled must be mentally noted by the counselor and become part of the therapeutic dialogue. Listening in all these dimensions leads the school counselor to be able to achieve empathy, the ability to sense and feel the feelings, understandings, motives, and attitude of the student being counseled as the counselor's own. The ability to understand why a student behaves in a particular way, what he or she is thinking, and what his or her motives and needs are is the essence of being a counselor. If the counselor is heard as judgmental by the student, this trusting relationship will never occur. Language by the counselor that starts with the pronoun you should be avoided. For example, never start a sentence with "Don't you think . . .," or "You should/should not . . .," or "It's really your doing/fault that . . .," and so on. Other characteristics of good, highly effective school counselors can be found in self-reports. One is self-deprecating humor. More than 30 years ago Norman Cousins published a report demonstrating the power of humor to improve the condition of medical patients. Counselors should make the counseling office an enjoyable, never a threatening environment. A sincere smile and pleasant greeting should go to all students in and out of the counselor's office area.

7.3. Group Counseling

School administrators often burden school counselors with large caseloads and many expectations for expert assistance. The ability to employ group counseling methods can greatly improve the efficiency of the counselor and make it possible to assist many more children. Each of the major theorists in counseling has endorsed the use of groups, starting with Alfred Adler. The psychotherapy model of Adler assumed that there was a social need within us all that longed for acceptance and approval from others. Students with emotional problems have generally been unable to interact with others in successful ways. Psycho-educational groups guided by the school counselor can teach students social skills and give them their first opportunities to be successful. Carl Rogers wrote positively about instituting what he described as encounter groups in schools and other educational institutions. Theorists believe that groups can give students accurate feedback about irrational thoughts and help them try different roles and approaches to problem solving.

Counseling in the schools must match the developmental levels and needs of students. Before fifth grade, students have limited attention spans and are bound by a form of linear logic that emphasizes deductive reasoning and makes insight

impossible. Group counseling with students at this developmental level should be focused on concrete issues that are easy to grasp and discuss. Primary level groups should be limited to four members or fewer. Eight is the maximum for middle and high school students in a counseling group that a counselor should lead. There are three major psycho-educational group types that a school counselor may make part of the school's counseling program. These are groups that encourage growth, improve school climate, and reformative groups.

7.4. Group Process

The use of groups by the school counselor is the most effective intervention available for most problems among adolescents. The key to a good psycho-educational group is a well-trained counselor who possesses sterling leadership skills. Prior to the first group session, it is best if the counselor meets individually with each student who will participate. This meeting can help the counselor and student by identifying and clarifying the student's goals in becoming part of the group. The counselor can also review rules for the group: (1) all meetings are confidential, (2) no one ever gets laughed at or teased in or outside the group, (3) each member listens very carefully to what each other member is saying, and (4) meetings start and end on time. After ground rules are set, the first session with a new group usually needs a group activity designed to be an icebreaker and way to allow group members to get to know and trust one another. These students will know of each other as kids in the same school but will not know them the way members of a psycho-educational group eventually will.

For each group session, the leader should have a plan of what he or she wishes to accomplish and provide exercises to facilitate reaching his or her goal. Counselors should be careful to notice and reinforce when the group is showing cohesion and support for one or more of its members. This is a good sign of the group's health. Leaders should note to themselves indications of the group developing norms. These are never expressed but always present in a working group. Group norms become evident when a student violates one, for example, when a student "disses" the group by putting ear buds in his or her ears and finds that others in the group are unhappy with his or her behavior. The final group session can happen when the leader feels that the group has made all the progress possible or may have been built in as the plan for the group and spelled out in advance. Students from cohesive and well-functioning groups may feel grief and loss at its ending. The task of easing children through the transition of being in a group to not being in a group must be planned. This requires that counseling time be set aside to review

the group's progress and the individual progress of its members. The final session should also have the participants complete an evaluation activity.

7.5. Solution-Focused Brief Counseling

Time constraints on school counselors make approaches to service delivery involving only a few sessions very appealing. This need for more counseling in less time may explain the rapid expansion in the use of solution-focused brief counseling (SFBC) in schools. Some counselors have found that even single-session counseling can produce significant improvement for students receiving counseling. The whole approach is predicated on five assumptions:

1. Concentrate on success and change in needed areas will occur.
2. Every problem has a time when it is not present or doesn't happen. Use those times to formulate a solution.
3. Small changes in how the student behaves have a large ripple effect on others in his or her environment.
4. Students being counseled have what is needed to resolve their problems. Counselors must concentrate on those strengths and successes.
5. Always work toward positive goals.

In using SFBC, the first session is a time for establishing good rapport and developing clear positive outcome goals between the student-client and counselor. To assist in this, the counselor may ask positive outcome questions. One of these is, "If a magic wand was waved over your head and solved your problem, what would be different?" The counselor asks follow-up questions such as, "If you were getting along better with other kids, what would you notice that you were doing differently?" The student's answer to these questions can help clarify the answer into a positive goal statement. The best goals are behavioral and easily demonstrated and operationalized. Positive goals state what the student will be doing as opposed to vague goal statements such as "I want to do better on tests." The goal could provide behavioral change and be developed by the student by the counselor asking, "If you were on the road to better test grades, what would you be doing that would show that?" Goals must never be *negative*, taking the form of either "wanting to stop doing something" or "wanting others to stop doing something." To turn these into positive goals, counselors would reply, "If you were not doing ____ (describe what the student should not be doing), then what would you be doing instead/differently/or what would you start doing?". Harmful goals involving rule breaking, illegal activities, or harming one's self or others must be

avoided. Turning these into positive goal statements requires the counselor to help reframe the student's goal in a positive way to meet his or her needs. A question that can help reframe a harmful goal idea is, "What's the reason you want (don't want) to . . . ?" Students making "I don't know" or "I have no idea" their first goal statement are expressing resistance to the process. This can be recast in positive terms by asking, "If you did know, what . . . ?" or "If you did have an idea, what . . . ?"

In setting goals, identify exceptions. When a student uses non-absolute terms, for example, *sometimes*, *almost always*, *usually*, or *generally*, they are indicating moments when they are successful. Focus on those positive moments and help the student clarify what is working for him or her. Also, use mind mapping to assist the student in identifying what he or she was doing differently when success of the identified exception was experienced. Counselors should be cheerleaders for the student by verbally rewarding these successes with praise. The final concern in goal setting is making its success measurable. This scaling task involves asking the student to give a numerical level to the degree he or she experiences the problem (1, lowest, to 10, highest). With each subsequent visit, the student is asked about the level of this problem. Any positive movement seen should spark praise for progress and questions of what is being done differently. By having specific, measurable, behavioral goals and focusing on what is improving, the counselor may not need to see the student more than five or seven times after the initial session. The student is doing all the "heavy lifting." The counselor should ask the student to do a vague sort of homework between sessions. This involves writing down incidents that occurred where he or she tried out the new behavior and what happened. As with other approaches, this can be facilitated by instant communication or standard e-mail entries open to the counselor. These reports then become a focus of the subsequent sessions.

7.6. Virtual Counseling

The whole nature of schools and the role of school counselors are about to be changed in a dramatic way. The cause of this phenomenal educational metamorphosis is the sudden growth of technology-based distance education and the growth of virtual schools. Yet, most school counselor organizations have not realized what the future holds. The strength of this technology movement can be seen in its impact on other areas. Up until 2002, there was a clear trend toward continuing growth in homeschooling in the United States. That trend has been reversed by the growth in enrollment in virtual schools.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has been following the growth of virtual education and charted the rapid expansion taking place with both virtual elementary and secondary schools. The federal report demonstrated that by 2005, 37% of all school districts had students attending virtual schools. The growth rate was about 60% in a 2-year span of time. Virtual schools have been able to grow this quickly by using the regulations of charter schools in many states. As a case in point, in Pennsylvania there are 11 licensed virtual charter schools enrolling nearly 20,000 students. In a fully staffed public school system, 40 or more school counselors would serve that number of students. Yet, in these virtual schools, there is only one school counselor providing direct service to the students.

The reasons that these virtual schools are growing so rapidly are related to several deep-seated parental concerns. For one, parents are concerned about the “bad influences” their children will meet in public schools. Related to this is a parallel concern about bullies, the presence of drugs and alcohol on campus, and a felt need to control all aspects of their child’s life. Another large subgroup of parents feel that public schools are far too secular and fail to teach and reinforce the religious values they teach at home. Other parents appreciate the fact that students can learn at their own pace and schedule. The implications for this trend are obvious. Counselors should become proactive and have state education departments require that counselors for virtual schools be licensed in their states. The technology for this is available, including video cameras on computers for individual counseling and the ability to use conference technology to conduct virtual psycho-educational counseling sessions. Cyber-based virtual schools have the potential for being dangerous for students. Enrollment in a virtual school is typically done online. This can provide a back door into a seemingly child-safe environment for dangerous individuals who wish to harm young people. Students in virtual schools can contact each other either through the school’s system or through social networking. The use of Facebook and other social networking can also be a problem for students, counselors, and teachers. Close monitoring is clearly needed in virtual education programs, but it is rarely provided. Many virtual schools are for profit and work from a business model. The following is an excerpt from a 2009 online advertisement for a counselor or advisor for a virtual charter school: *We are creating a high-tech approach to educational support and expect our counselor to have superior customer service skills and a commitment and desire to provide the best experience possible for students and families.*

7.7. Summary

A central skill for school counselors is the ability to actively listen to students and truly understand the feelings of distress and emotional responses they are experiencing. The first modern counselor advocating a child-centered form of counseling was Carl Rogers. His writings have influenced the course of psychotherapy in America and represent the “third force” in psychology. Rogers was greatly influenced by a neo-Freudian, Otto Rank. Another significant neo-Freudian of the 20th century was Alfred Adler, a therapist who included the important role played by groups and society in the structure of each individual’s personality. Neo-behavioral approaches have provided school counselors with techniques that teach students different ways to think about problems and challenges they confront in life. One of these theories, rational emotive behavioral therapy, developed by Albert Ellis, provides students with new ways to understand the world around them and also new methods to solve personal problems in the future. In a similar way, Aaron Beck’s cognitive behavioral therapy teaches student-clients to challenge inappropriate thinking by using a hypothesis testing approach stressing scientific logic. A third neo-behavioral system is the control theory and reality therapy of William Glasser. This approach emphasizes the link between the child’s actions and the reality of the outcomes.

Group counseling is an effective method that can both be more time efficient for school counselors and employ peer influence in the therapeutic relationship. Time efficiency is an advantage to the counseling approach of solution focused brief counseling. The strengths-based school counseling model is a crossover set of methods adapted from the practice of social work. Strengths based counselors are proactive in their efforts to build up the inner resolve and strengths of students as a way of inoculating them against potential problems. The future of school counseling is not clear, as the nature of schools is evolving rapidly. There is a need to address the problem of providing the services of school counselors in a virtual school environment. Children exist in the real world, but many schools now exist in a cyber-world. Counseling is needed for the real-world students but must be delivered through cyberspace.