Counselors in the Classroom: A Developmental Approach to Student Well-Being

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By Scott E. Hall and Thomas W. Rueth

Middle level and high school counselors play a critical role in the development of students' mental and emotional well-being. Given the counselors' varied responsibilities and the sometimes overwhelming number of students in a school, successfully accomplishing this task can be a challenge.

School counseling traditionally embraces a preventive-developmental approach in which clients are helped to develop healthful and appropriate coping skills for daily problems of living. While this focus would be most appropriate for a school counselor, the actual duties of the school counselor range from directing proficiency testing to advising the yearbook staff (Anderson and Lauderdale, 1987). In addition, the counseling that does occur may be more reacting to a current problem or emergency than an active intervention.

Successful Secondary School Counseling

Students in middle level and high schools face significant developmental concerns and challenges that are part of the maturing process. The manner in which these concerns are addressed will greatly affect the effectiveness and adjustment of the students. Gilbert (1995) supports this contention with the belief that educators balance the areas of methods, content, and human growth and development. Unfortunately, she has found the psychological component has been somewhat minimal. A classroom environment must be created that fosters risk taking and is tolerant of error (Gilbert, 1995).

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Fraser (1996) noted that for students to have a successful secondary school experience, it may be beneficial to promote self-efficacy and perceptions on the value of academic achievement. Aubrey (1985), in another context, urged that school counselors be directly involved in the development of effective curricula.

If the school experience should include an emphasis on developing personal life skills as well as on academic growth, we need to identify who can best provide this emphasis and how it can be included in the curriculum. The proposed “classroom” approach identifies the school counselor as a primary participant in the students’ overall development; designates a course that addresses developmental issues and concerns as a legitimate addition to the curriculum; allows the school counselor to move beyond the administrative tasks and reactive “emergency counseling” that often characterize their efforts into a developmental approach to student well-being; and establishes the classroom teacher and the school counselor as a team who co-teach and co-facilitate the in-class sessions.

Benefits of the Classroom Approach
The following points represent the benefits of the classroom approach:

1. Provides a Preventive/Developmental Context.
The classroom approach is grounded in a developmental framework; issues are discussed that are common to adolescents, although students may differ from one another in the level of awareness and/or struggle they have with the different topics presented. This is the essence of prevention, which D’Andrea and Daniels (1996) support as cultivating a more peaceful and respectful environment in the schools.

2. Normalizes Developmental Struggles.
By addressing common developmental issues in a classroom/group setting, students quickly realize they are not alone in their efforts. This awareness can be used to strengthen peer relationships and can serve as a tool in developing a positive self-concept within individuals.

3. Increases Awareness.
Part of the challenge of intrapersonal and interpersonal development is to recognize and accept one’s own uniqueness in relation to others.
Awareness, however, is not always easy because it forces one to evaluate personal life choices, values, and goals. This may lead to feelings of self-rejection, which may lead to conforming behavior as a way of coping (Atkinson, Morten, and Sue, 1993). With proper guidance, self-awareness can be used to develop a positive self-concept and appreciation of one's individuality.

4. Encourages Appreciation of Diversity.

As students share their own beliefs and listen to the beliefs of others, they begin to understand the concept of diversity in gender, culture, thought, and values. This understanding is a critical component of conflict resolution skills (D’Andrea and Daniels, 1996).

5. Presents the Counselor as a Resource.

Students will be able to put a face with a name and title, and the counselor will be viewed as someone who cares and understands the everyday concerns students are experiencing. Students who need more individualized attention, yet may have been reluctant to seek help, may now feel comfortable contacting the counselor.

6. Provides a Holistic Education.

Students see the school taking a holistic approach to their development. Personal and social growth can occur in the classroom along with intellectual development. The school shows an appreciation for young people both as students and as maturing individuals.

7. Promotes Collaboration Between Counselor and Teacher.

The students experience the teacher and school counselor as collaborators who facilitate learning and discussion together. The collaborative style may allow the teacher to continue to provide a “safe” and open environment even when the counselor is not present.

**Process**

The principal and the faculty should first understand the benefits of such a program and agree to the plan before the program is implemented. An initial step is the choice of a target group; two approaches are identified. The counselor and the staff member may choose to visit each classroom every two weeks for about 45 minutes. This would allow for ample discussion and a short lecture on a given topic while not taking a substantial block of time away from academics. In the second approach, the counselor and staff member may want to target intervention to selected classes such as sociology, health, and physical education on a trial basis.
The first time a counselor visits a class, he or she should provide an overview of the future content, format, and purpose of their biweekly visits, and the concept of the teacher and counselor as a team should be introduced. It may also be beneficial to solicit general reactions and ideas from the students about the proposed topics. This can be done through verbal feedback or anonymous written responses collected by the counselor at session's end. The counselor also has an opportunity to educate students about his or her role as an integral part of the school staff. An overview of small groups should be provided to include purpose of small groups, the need to respect differing opinions, the need to allow everyone the opportunity to talk, and the need to respect the right of others not to participate.

Sessions can begin with a short lecture (approximately 10 minutes) on the given topic. The counselor/teacher team could then propose a question designed to encourage student reflection on the perception and values associated with the topic. A 5-minute reflection should be sufficient. Small groups of three to four students would then discuss their respective positions on the topic while adhering to small group guidelines of respect and openness.

During small group discussion, the counselor and teacher could circulate among the groups. Although discussion time may vary, a 20-minute limit should serve as an appropriate time to process. Each group would then be encouraged to give a brief summary of their discussion (a representative for each group should be appointed). A one-page reaction paper to the session might be assigned to be turned in the following day. Sample questions could include "What did you learn about yourself?" "What did you learn about others?" and "How can you use what you learned about yourself and others?"

**Developmental theory is often used as a foundation on which to base intervention with adolescents and teens.**

**Content**

Topics for the sessions should be geared to issues that affect adolescents and teens in general, but may also include issues specific to a particular school or community. Developmental theory is often used as a foundation on which to base intervention with adolescents and teens. Erik Erikson (1968), in his model of psychosocial development, stated that the 14–20 age range was a period when individuals struggle to develop a sense of identity. Forming an identity includes an increase in self-esteem, social role consolidation, and a gradual integration of one's past identifications, present lifestyle, and sense of future (1959a; 1959b). Marcia (1980) agreed that although the process of developing identity occurs throughout life, it is most
critical in adolescence, when the physical, social, and cognitive factors merge together.

Filer (1985) suggested that classroom activities and topics “should allow for self-understanding (defined as an awareness of one’s feelings and values concerning the material presented) and yet not deal with confidential problems” (p. 581). Topics can center around two categories: interpersonal development and intrapersonal development.

**Interpersonal Development**

Interpersonal development pertains to one’s ability to understand and communicate with other persons. The core of interpersonal development is based on effective communication skills such as learning to take ownership of one’s statements (use of “I” messages); active listening techniques; constructing and sending messages; and responding appropriately in an assertive rather than an aggressive manner. These skills could be the focus of an initial session, thereby serving as a framework for small group communication in future sessions.

Positive social skills are also necessary in building successful relationships with peers and adults (Tolan, Guerra, and Kendall, 1995). Topics with a relationship theme might include cooperative work strategies, dating, friendships, intimate relations, and sex-role orientation. D’Andrea and Daniels (1996) noted the importance of conflict resolution skills as necessary at any age. Peer mediation programs have gained popularity among school systems recently as a method for addressing the interpersonal aspect of development.

**Intrapersonal Development**

Intrapersonal development pertains to an individual’s sense of self-worth and accomplishment. It involves striving for congruence between who one is on the inside and what one projects to others. Rogers (1957) labeled this as being genuine or authentic. Part of the challenge in becoming congruent is to understand and appreciate one’s uniqueness while being open to initiating positive change. Topics of an intrapersonal nature include identification of personal values, coping strategies to deal with stress, anger management, decision-making skills (D’Andrea and Daniels, 1996), and building self-esteem. Substance use/abuse is an essential topic that is related to intrapersonal development (self-worth, need for acceptance) as well as interpersonal development (peer relations and conformity).

In addition to group facilitation, introspection on personal issues has been noted as an effective method of encouraging exploration of oneself.

In all interventions, it is important to determine the effectiveness and outcome of the effort.
Waterman and Archer (1979) found that expressive writing, such as poetry writing and keeping a journal, also promotes identity development. This is the basis for adding a one-page reflective paper to each session.

**Outcome Measures**

In all interventions, it is important to determine the effectiveness and the outcome of the effort. The short-term intended outcomes of the classroom project are to facilitate appropriate discussion among teens about relevant topics and to help them more clearly identity their own opinions about the issues.

Long-term objectives may focus on developing more positive attitudes and perceptions within the team about the specific issues. In this context, appropriate assessment procedures may include a pretest/posttest format using Likert scale surveys. The scales allow the students to rate their perceptions of self, others, and the appropriateness of session content, and would be administered frequently, perhaps after every two or three sessions. A second indication of change could be derived from an analysis of the reflective papers written by the students. A third outcome measure would be the monitoring of the potential change in the frequency with which students seek out the counselor for individual counseling.

**Conclusion**

The secondary school counselor plays a critical role in developing students' mental and emotional well-being. Successfully accomplishing this task can be a challenge, given the counselor's various responsibilities and the sometimes overwhelming number of students within a school.

Collaborating with teachers in a preventive program not only reflects a joint effort toward student development, but might help to prevent crises from occurring. In addition, the school counselor is able to reach out to all students and become a visible and integral part of their mental, emotional, and social development.

**References**


