

Person-Centered Counseling in the Schools

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Meeting the individual needs of students is a primary goal for the school counselor. Often this goal is a moving target dependent upon the developmental needs of the student and the evolving needs of the community. Within one community, student needs may range from assistance in the college application process to an exclusive university to helping a student cope with the daily challenges of homelessness and poverty. Fundamental to providing counseling across such a large spectrum of needs are the basic facilitative skills of genuineness, acceptance, trust and empathic understanding (Rogers, 1994). As school counselors, we are trained in these skills; however, the experience of the “real” world provides unforeseen challenges.

The American School Counseling Association recommends a ratio of one counselor to 250 school students. In reality, the national 2006-2007 average of school counselor to student for the 2006-2007 school year was 475 (ASCA, 2008). Large urban school districts often have more than 500 students assigned to one counselor (Graham, 2009). With these numbers in mind, how does a counselor establish a climate conducive to self-expression and genuine, empathic understanding? According to Rogers in the *Freedom to Learn*, counselors support the “facilitation of change and learning” through the development of a relationship. The “development of relationship” aspect of a school counselors’ role is extensive. Counselors build relationships with students, teachers, parents, administrators and community members. So exactly how do we go about developing these relationships in the school setting?

Student-Counselor Relationship

Essential to the facilitation of change is the development of rapport with students (Axline, 1947). The person-centered counseling approach provides a fundamental philosophical orientation and way of

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being in which to develop these relationships. Specifically, Roger's three core conditions of genuineness (congruence), unconditional positive regard and empathetic understanding provide the foundation for the counseling relationship.

Working with children and adolescents can be humbling. Humbling because, although children and adolescents are in the developmental process of learning how to be congruent-- they tend to be very "real." And with their realness, they set a standard for the counselor. A person-centered school counselor strives to be genuine, even transparent. As Rogers noted, "The term "transparent" catches the flavor of this condition: the therapist makes himself or herself transparent to the client; the client can see right through what the therapist *is* in the relationship; the client experiences no holding back on the part of the therapist". In a "real" way, present yourself to *your* student as a person – it goes a long way with an individual in the throes of adolescence and self-identity exploration.

As a school counselor, there may be 500 or more students on your caseload. Will you like them all? Probably not. However, as a person-centered counselor, your responsibility is to provide each client or student with unconditional positive regard. Everyone (no qualifiers provided) deserves someone, some place, somewhere, somehow, who accepts them as the vulnerable human being they are. How do we do this with so many students and their very complex needs? I believe it is all about context. Place your student in the context of his or her life – and it is so easy to see them as an individual, identify their innate goodness, then accept them and regard them with the dignity and basic human respect that all deserve. Schools are systems – systems are susceptible to overlooking the individual.

As the school counselor, be the "protector" of the "individual." Listen with empathic understanding. Yes, easier said than done, and some days our heads can spin with the varied and complex concerns of our students. In any given day, student issues range from "someone wouldn't look at me at the locker" to "my mother is going to prison." As Rogers stated, "we think we listen but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy." Are you really listening?

Students are seeking an adult to connect with – or they wouldn't be waiting outside your office. So, as the line of students

outside the office door seems to grow exponentially, remind yourself to meet each student with eye contact, empathy understanding and genuine respect. Having worked with adolescents for many years, one of the top complaints I hear is that adults do not listen to them. “Kids know” – if you aren’t open, accepting and empathic, they may or may not chose call you out on it, but they *do* know.

Teacher-Counselor Collaboration

School Counselors address the academic, career, social and emotional needs of student, however, time is short and students are many. Meeting the needs of all 250 plus students within one academic year is unrealistic – *if* we view the role of counselor from a singular perspective. Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate. Collaborating with teachers can take many forms – the one I will address here is collaborating with teachers to provide an emotionally supportive and genuine classroom environment. Teachers want their classrooms to be productive and manageable; students essentially want to be in a hassle-free environment. Establishing respectful, appropriate relationships with the students provides the foundation for this type of classroom. However, we can be working against the grain of a long established culture.

The General Teaching Counsel of England’s *Research for Teachers* publication of October, 2008 illustrated this long established perspective. “There’s an old saying in teaching, 'Don’t smile before Christmas' (meaning don’t show your nice side before you’ve shown them who’s boss’), but Carl Rogers’ work led him to believe passionately that teachers should do precisely the opposite. He believed that teachers should seek to create emotionally warm, supportive environments in which they worked collaboratively with their students to achieve mutual goals. In such environments, he suggested, students came to “love” learning. His beliefs, expressed in his book *Freedom to Learn* (1969), were underpinned by years of experience as a counselor and supported by research evidence.”

Counselors - work with the teachers. Help them establish routines in their classroom that facilitate student-teacher relationships of respect. For example, a teacher can meet the students at their door,

greet them and make eye contact. Establishing this routine will take time, it will take effort and it will take a bit of adjustment for both the student and the teacher. Teacher-counselor collaboration also gives the counselor an opportunity to be actively involved in the day-to-day operation of the school day. Rather than being seen as the “*counselor*” – become an integrated part of the teachers and students daily routine. Through collaboration with teachers, counselors get into the classroom, join the discussion, and become familiar with the curriculum and the teacher’s teaching styles. As Oliver Twist said “become part of the furniture!” The counselor’s person-centered way to being can be transmitted to others in the community through suggesting and supporting such endeavors.

Parent-Counselor Collaboration

It’s all about the relationship. School counselors should – yes, I did say, *should* – introduce themselves to the parents at the Back-to-School nights. Get to know the parents at events and school activities that are educational or fun. Communicate information of interest to the parents. Be a resource. The primary goal of these activities is to provide information, educate and help establish a community. A secondary gain to these endeavors is that you are establishing a relationship with the parents. Establishing this relationship on an even playing field provides both you and the parents the opportunity to get to know each other and develop a mutual understanding and respect. This sets up the entrée for parents to contact you for information, appropriate support, and collaboration.

Because often - counselors meet parents on one of the worst days of their lives. And, if not the worst day, certainly not a high point in the week of this parent, this student, this family. Collaboration begins with establishing a relationship and bringing to the table unconditional positive regard. We cannot know what the student – and child of this parent – is experiencing or has done, but we do know is that this very vulnerable parent needs to be heard. Frequently, parents report a fear of being judged. Does the school think I’m a bad parent, that I don’t care about my child, that I haven’t taught my child the necessary life lessons? Implement the therapeutic attitudes of

congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding. This is an opportunity for a person-centered counselor to truly be the counselor we all aspire to be.

Administrator-Counselor Collaboration

The fundamentals of person-centered counseling provides the school counselor with a framework that is theoretically consistent with the demands of the school environment and the needs of the students. Rogers (1977) describes counseling as a process of freeing a person and removing obstacles so that normal growth and development can proceed and the client can become independent and self-directed. Clearly, the counseling process as presented by Rogers is consistent with the goals of today's educators. These goals are best facilitated through administrator-counselor collaboration.

Working with the administrators to establish a culture of respect is a key component to establishing a successful person-centered counseling program. Interestingly, the initial steps in this process are to respectfully gather information about the current culture. Once the counselor has a clear understanding of the mission of the school district, they can identify ways in which the role of the counselor can be more effectively integrated into the school's decision making process. Through collaboration with the administration, the counselor can become part of the process as the school district identifies and/or clarifies the vision and future plans for the school district. Making sure you have a place at the table during planning will facilitate development of an authentically person-centered environment. Importantly, ask what change is being considered, and how the administration envisions the role of counselor in this process.

Defining the role of a counselor is also another important aspect of collaborating with administrators. In a school setting, the role of counselor can lack clarity. I often hear from counselors that when a student was asked to come to their office the first thing the student asked was "Am I in trouble?" How sad. The role of counselor should be clearly understood by the students, faculty, parents and administration. Students should know that although we collaborate with teachers and administrators, counselors are not part of

the discipline process. Counselors may be sought out as advocates for students in the disciplinary process, but the role of counselor is set apart from the disciplinary process of the school. Work with administrators to clarify the role of counselor and the need for students to have a safe place to talk in a very complex system.

Take Away

As a person-centered counselor – lead with your way of being. Be transparent. Be respectful and accepting. Be truly empathic. In busy counseling offices, basic relational skills can get lost in the chaos and “walking the walk” of the person-centered orientation can get – let’s say – misplaced. Ask yourself: Do I care for myself so that I can genuinely care for others? Am I “doing my own work”? We can only be as genuine as our own journey.

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