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School Counseling:  
Psychology Applied to Schools

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## School Counseling: Psychology Applied to Schools

As we who work in schools attempt to develop well rounded individuals, we typically focus our objectives and curricula in the areas of the mind--developing the intellect, and the body--the health and physical fitness of our students. In the Holy Scriptures, we find guidance in how to develop a person holistically. The "greatest commandment" is to "love the Lord your God with your heart...soul...mind..and strength...and love your neighbor as yourself." This commandment is foundational to both the Hebrew Torah (Deuteronomy 6:5) and the Christian New Testament (Mark 12:30-31). But how does this apply to education in the public school? We must help our students become whole, by knowledge and experience in the affective domain (heart), spiritual domain (soul), cognitive domain (mind), and physical domain (strength).

It is well known that sometimes students' abilities to learn seems better than others. This is often due to the fact that students' personal and emotional lives interact with academic programming, affecting their ability to learn. Some examples of this interaction include: personal and family problems, learning and behavioral disabilities, social skills inadequacies. An individual must have balance in his or her life in order to learn well. If the affective needs of a person are so great that they interfere with the cognitive learning process, then the balance is skewed. If a student is depressed, or suffering from other emotional stresses, that person may not be physically up to school or service to the community.

A goal of educators is to help remove barriers to learning. This may occur in three ways: a) prevention of the barrier in the first place, b) intervention when difficulties arise, and c) knowledge of the developmental needs of different aged students to plan appropriate strategies. In many schools in the world, there is a person who is an expert in these areas: the school counselor.

This chapter will give a brief history of counseling in the education, describe the role of a school counselor, and discuss how this multiple focus of prevention, intervention, and development exhibits itself in a well-functioning school. It will also briefly describe the educational program a school counselor needs in order to be well-trained for this job.

### Brief History

Helping relationships in alliance with education are as old as humankind. In ancient times, people went to the sages or spiritual leaders in the village to get advice for survival. As civilization progressed, these relationships changed into help in all manner of life-skills, such as medical, spiritual, social, and career advice.

The ancient Greeks gave us a philosophy of living that focused on human development in the areas of education and an early psychology of the individual. Aristotle wrote about how the environment of the learner influences the ability to learn, and how important individual perception is to the learning process.

Hebrews and Christians of the post-Roman period proposed concepts regarding free will, self-determination, and human value, which have contributed to the development of democratic ideals currently cherished by much of the modern world.

Another important development occurred in the 16th and 17th Centuries with the philosophical arguments over the nature of human learning, the Nature vs. Nurture (innate, genetic ability vs. environmental shaping) debate.

The modern generation has added the influence of behavioral psychology, Freudian psychoanalysis, and many other types of "counseling psychologies". In the United States, counseling in schools developed in the early 1900's to help students become moral citizens. There has for many years also been a strong emphasis on how students should choose and become prepared for a suitable career after school.

The important issue here is that all of these trends over time have led us to a place where we may now use the fruit of these philosophical and scientific labors and apply them to help children better learn in school, and become prepared for life after formal education.

### Job Definition

The job of the school counselor is one of the most diverse in a school. The services a school counselor provides differ somewhat at each grade level, depending on the developmental needs of the child.

#### Elementary School, grades K-5, (5-10 years of age)

In the United States it is common for there to be one school counselor in a school building of 400 students. This person usually works a balance between individual counseling and group counseling.

Elementary school counselors help children who are having difficulty in social skills--in getting along with other children. Appropriate social skills may be taught in small groups of 4-5 children. They are pulled out of the regular classroom once per week for this group. Other types of groups that school counselors conduct include anger management, helping children from alcoholic homes, or helping children whose parents are divorcing. Elementary counselors also talk privately to students and try to help them cope better with their lives to do better in school. Often a word of encouragement can make an important difference to a student, teacher, or parent.

#### Middle School, grades 6-8 (11-13 years of age)

In middle school, school counselors help early adolescents deal with the issues of growing up. Sometimes with the hormone changes of adolescent bodies, their moods become unpredictable to students, parents, and teachers alike. School counselors can help all keep perspective on the normal nature of this development.

Also in middle school it is common to begin some early career planning. Students must begin to take courses in the areas that will eventually guide their future choices for careers. It is the school counselor's job to provide guidance here. In the United States it is common for there to be two middle school counselors in a building with 500 students.

Middle school counselors often help students deal with peer difficulties. Developmentally, these preadolescents are attentive to what their peers value, and can be quite ego-centric. This often results in volatile friendships forming and breaking up, and the strong emotions that accompany that process. School counselors can help stabilize this so that students can refocus on their school work.

#### Secondary school, grades 9-12 (14-17 years of age)

In secondary school, school counselors play many very important roles. In fact, the placement of school counselor in the schools began with secondary counselors, then middle schools, and only more recently has moved into the elementary level.

In a building of 800 students, there may be four school counselors. Typically, one is in charge of student preparation for life after secondary school. This might include help in preparing for going to college, technical-vocational school, or going directly to work. Depending on the adult career path desired, the counselor advises certain courses to be taken in secondary school.

The other three secondary school counselors provide a variety of services. Development of an affective curriculum dealing with values and moral development, helping students plan their class schedules, and dealing with social-emotional problems individually or in group counseling, are but a few.

#### Integration with Academic Curriculum

A fundamental assumption is that all children can learn. However, often the environment is not one that promotes student optimal learning. School counselors can help administrators, teachers, students and parents mold the environment into a place where all students may learn. School counselors are also often responsible for the affective portion of the curriculum in a school. It is important that in every master curriculum there is balance between cognitive or intellectual development and affective or social-emotional development. School counselors are trained to help teachers and administrators find this balance.

School counselors at all levels work closely with the classroom teachers. They have been trained in pedagogy, so may go into a classroom and either co-teach with the classroom teacher, take over the class for a brief time to teach a lesson, or lead a discussion. They must not be viewed as extra or only as a support staff person in a school. If used appropriately, they are an integral part of the whole school system.

For example, when a student has trouble learning for any reason, that student may not pay attention to the teacher. When the student is not attending to the lesson, her or she may talk to neighbors, or make other distractions in the room. The teacher is busy and does not have time to deal with such disruptive students.

The school counselor may be called to intervene with the student. The counselor will talk to the student and discuss why learning is difficult. Maybe the student recently had a family loss, such as a parent divorce. In this

case, talking about the sadness may help the student in the grief process. Maybe the student has difficulty with vision and needs to be referred to get some glasses. There may be many reasons for the student's difficulty in the classroom. The counselor may do some testing to evaluate the students academic difficulty.

The school counselor then calls a meeting with the teacher, the student, maybe the parent, and together they work out a plan for the student to perform more appropriately in the classroom. It is important that the plan include all of the affected parties. For change to last, it must be encouraged at home and in all classes at school.

Another example is if a child has a low self-concept, research suggests that he or she will be less likely to believe that he or she can learn than a child with a positive self-concept. Therefore, if a counselor helps a teacher build into the lessons the idea that students may believe in themselves, that they are able learners, then they likely will learn more.

This integration with the total curriculum lets the students work on important life skills while at the same time learning their required academics. For example, in a Language Arts class, a teacher may wish to instruct students in how to write formal letters. The school counselor may also wish to help student prepare for their careers. So, the two may combine their objectives and the students will write letters to future employers.

Another very critical component of the work of the school counselor is crisis intervention. This also takes the form of understanding development, prevention, and intervention. An example will best explain how this affects a school.

Often middle school students take perceived offenses in their personal lives very seriously, too seriously by the adult view, but developmentally, this is common. So if a parent leaves the home, or if a girl breaks up with her boyfriend, or if a beloved grandparent dies, the student may be very emotionally upset. Another quality of this age group is to believe that no one else has ever felt so intensely. Because the middle school counselor knows this, part of the affective curriculum may be how to express feelings of loss or hopelessness that everyone feels now and then. They may go into a classroom and talk about even very difficult ideas like depression or suicide. They may use some classic literature or current events to stimulate such discussion. They may give the students some coping skills for those difficult moments, including making the counselor him or herself available should the student need a sympathetic ear. This preventative approach has proven to be very useful.

But sometimes prevention is not enough. Suicides or great losses do happen in the school community. It is up to the school counselor to help the administration develop a plan in advance for how to cope with such an emergency. In a crisis moment, there are many details to consider, and if there is a well developed plan in advance, then the school may continue to function even a crisis. This is very helpful to the whole community: administrators, teachers, students and parents.

#### Training program for school counselors

It is important to say a few words about the training of school counselors. With such a complex job, it is important that they be well trained and very competent. Most commonly persons who wish to become school counselors have experience as teachers. A master's degree is required in most places to hold this position. Often after a few years of teaching experience, a teacher will return to the university for more education.

The most common training model takes into account training in counseling including crisis intervention, human development, education, sociology, assessment, and career development. This will include two years of classwork, which include all of the previously mentioned areas, plus development of skills in counseling. Finally, the student will be placed in an internship, working for one year under a mentor school counselor.

In summary, the school counselor has been described as an affective hub in the center of the wheel of the school. They operate to help all of the elements of a school system run smoothly. They often help staff members deal with students who have difficulty learning, and listen to the teachers' frustrations about the difficulty of educating such students. They often are advocates of the student helping to mediate difficulties between the student and his or her peers, or other members of society. Most importantly, school counselors can help the school keep a sense of balance between cognitive, physical, and affective development, which serves to prepare the student for the complex needs of the adult world.