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## RESPONSE TO ALTMANN: ON THE NEED AND THEORY OF ELEMENTARY COUNSELING

**ABSTRACT:** In his response to Altmann, the writer is critical of the abundance of quotations and assertions which lack logic and sense. The fact that some children in the elementary schools need assistance does not justify the need of counselors. Such an assumption may even be dangerous.

A theory of elementary counseling, if it is to be anything more than a rambling statement, must take into account the lack of awareness, the immaturity, and the verbal and conceptual limitations of the child. If the two examples given by Altmann are the best to be found in the literature, probably a theory appropriate to children has yet to be proposed. It is suggested that the counselor not counsel but rather consult with the child and counsel the teachers and parents, bringing about modifications in the environment so that appropriate behavior is elicited. Outcome and spontaneous remission studies tend to make counseling a highly questionable practice.

**NOTE:** An abstract of the Altmann article follows:

### THE NEED, FUNCTION, AND THEORY OF ELEMENTARY COUNSELING

**ABSTRACT:** A review of the literature on elementary counseling was made in an attempt to determine the status of this field. Specific issues involving need, function, and theory of elementary counseling were discussed.

**RESUME:** On a effectué une revue de la littérature sur le counseling au niveau primaire afin d'en établir le statut. On a ensuite discuté de certains problèmes spécifiques concernant les besoins, la fonction et la théorie du counseling à ce niveau.

The references, assertions, and logic that are presented under the general rubric of "need" fail to show any empirical or even logical link to the need of elementary counselors. In the elementary school it is not a question of whether or not children need assistance. That some children need assistance is self-evident. Whether or not this need should be dealt with through the creation of additional personnel, mainly counselors, is a big question. Not only is there a severe paucity

of empirical evidence to support such a creature, there is good reason to believe that the availability of such personnel may be dangerous, especially if their roles are primarily that of counseling. Consider, for possibilities, the following hazards: (a) change of orientation — the teacher is inclined to think he is not capable, that the personal and social growth of the child is not his responsibility, and that his business is subject matter, thus becoming less person- and more subject-oriented, and (b) change of focus — the illusion may be created that the problem resides within the organism rather than being, as a large component, a function of the environment of which the teacher is a part. Surely it can not be denied that a large part of one's behavior is in response to the social group, to the teacher (style, expectations, standards, etc.), to the material to be learned, and to a number of specifics in the home environment. Do we change the environment by counseling the child? This possibility of change in focus not only has distinct negative implications concerning a particular child, but rather, many children; that is, the "goodness" of the school environment may decline, giving rise to more children in need of assistance. It is suggested that before we eagerly follow our neighbors to the south, we must first determine whether counselors are of any benefit, or at least are not harmful. Secondly, evidence must be brought to bear on the question of whether or not counselor personnel are an effective means of aiding students in need. As Arthur (1971) has pointed out, it is not enough to know whether something works. Perhaps resources would be much more effectively directed toward (a) being more selective of teachers who exhibit facilitative characteristics as cited by Truax and Carkhuff (1967), (b) reducing student-teacher ratio, (c) being more selective of those who train teachers, or (d) providing teachers with consultative personnel.

Concerning the *Theory of Elementary counseling* (Altmann, 1972, pp. 224-6), it is overwhelming to find that Dinkmeyer, for example, has made a "valuable contribution" to the counseling process. Except for words such as "child" and "students," there is nothing in the quotation cited to suggest application to children. After changing "child" or "student" to individual, seven out of seven counselors in the elementary field judged that Dinkmeyer's quotation concerned itself with the counseling of adults. Hopefully, one could expect a little more substance. If Dinkmeyer's approach is one of the best, as claimed by Altmann (1972, p. 226), a theory appropriate to children has yet to be proposed. But suppose one accepts on face validity the appropriateness of such an approach, as Altmann has, where is the evidence that children (presumably, as given, ages 5 to 12) all of a sudden, can "investigate, analyze and deliberate."? Perhaps Altmann is "guilty of a serious oversight" — the very thing he cautions others about. The importance of developmental stages as confirmed by Piaget is stressed (p. 221) and then completely disregarded a few pages later. Perhaps the characteristics of the concrete operations stage (7 to 11) should be reviewed, with particular attention directed to "the child is not aware of it since he never thinks about his own thought . . . no powers of reflection . . . (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958, pp. 339-40)."

If the counseling of elementary children (ages 5 to 12) consists of anything more than (a) a person showing his concern for the child, (b) the transmitting of messages that some of his behavior is liked and some is not liked, and (c) acting out of appropriate behavior with other children, it is doubtful whether counseling exists to a degree significant enough to warrant consideration in terms of general application. Play therapy, as a communication medium, may get around some of the problem of undeveloped conceptual thinking and verbalizing abilities, the mixing of fantasy and perceptions, and the child's lack of awareness of a need for help (i.e. the child does not come voluntarily out of a desire for what adults call self-exploration, rather he is sent because he has displeased some adult). However, whatever the approach, it is going to lack integration and application unless it is operative within the limitations of the child. As for limitations, consider for example: the child's lack of ability to reason about thoughts, propositions, and possibilities, the child's lack of processes, involving reversibility, the child's lack of comprehension of causality (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Piaget, 1930), and the child's relatively primitive level of moral development (Kohlberg, 1971; Piaget, 1965; Hoffman, 1963; Morris, 1958). Kohlberg's research showed that 70 percent of the children aged 10 were at the pre-conventional stage in which the child avoids punishment and acts to satisfy himself, exhibiting virtually no respect for the rights of others. Until an approach to this "unique counseling process" has been defined, perhaps the counselor should limit himself to consulting with the child, and the counseling of teachers and parents, being primarily a manipulator of the child's social environment both at school and at home.

In his concluding statements, Altmann asserts "any counseling have usually been found to be more beneficial than no counseling (p. 227, without reference)." This evidence has not been encountered. Quite to the contrary in terms of children, Levitt (1957), after a review of the literature pertaining to psychotherapy, reported that treated children (N=4000 plus) improved 67 percent while 72 percent of the untreated controls improved. Chisan (in press), in a pilot project, found that 81 percent of the students who were perceived by their teachers as having difficulties (some were even profound, defined as cases which could not be satisfactorily helped in the school setting even with the aid of psychologists) in June were not referred during the next year, while in another project, 76 percent of those originally referred, but not treated, were perceived eight months later to be operating satisfactorily by their new teacher. In terms of adults, Landis (1938), Denker (1946) and Eysenck (1952) have reported that spontaneous remission occurred in approximately 60 to 70 percent of cases across a number of pathological categories. And, apparently, eclectic treatment approaches do not accelerate this rate of recovery (Levitt, 1957; Barendregt, 1961; Wolpe, 1958). While counseling typically involves individuals of a "normal" nature relative to the "abnormal" nature of psychotherapy clients, the normals, presumably, possess more strengths which may readily permit spontaneous remission. Thus, before pressing for the development of elaborate systems

for the execution of an undefined service to children, let us consider the words of Truax and Carkhuff, "Psychotherapy may be harmful as often as helpful, with an average effect comparable to receiving no help (1967, p. 21)."

The literature on elementary counseling requires a much more systematic and critical review than has been conducted by Altmann. For those who wish to assert themselves through publication, may this article remind them to resist the temptation of relying heavily on the notion — assertion is evidence.

**RESUME:** Dans cet article, l'auteur répond à Altmann et critique son abondance de citations et d'affirmations gratuites. Le fait que certains enfants dans les écoles primaires ont besoin d'aide ne justifie pas la présence de conseillers. Une telle supposition peut même être dangereuse.

Si une théorie du counseling au niveau primaire doit être autre chose qu'un "discours incohérent", elle doit tenir compte du manque de conscience, de l'immaturité, et des limitations verbales et conceptuelles de l'enfant. Si les deux exemples donnés par Altmann sont les meilleurs qu'on puisse trouver dans la littérature, il est probable qu'une théorie appropriée aux enfants est encore à formuler. On suggère que le conseiller ne donne pas de conseils à l'enfant, mais le consulte plutôt, et qu'il conseille les instituteurs et les parents de façon à modifier le milieu et à induire les comportements appropriés. Les études portant sur les effets du counseling et sur la rémission spontanée en font une pratique fort discutable.

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