

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELLOR TRAINING: A DEVELOPMENTAL, PREVENTIVE AND A REMEDIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper describes the elementary school counsellor training program at the University of British Columbia. It outlines the background, philosophy, and selection criteria and then delineates in greater detail the core aspects of the program. To date the course has trained 60 students of whom 85% are currently working as elementary school counsellors. The program focuses on the acquisition of developmental, preventive, and remedial counselling skills and on communication, consultation, and coordination. Its strength lies in providing trainees with a broadly based theoretical framework and an in-depth supervision of counselling sessions with individuals, small groups, whole classrooms, parents, and teachers.

Résumé

Cet article donne un aperçu du programme de formation de conseiller à l'élémentaire offert à l'université de la Colombie-britannique. L'auteur brosse une rétrospective du programme, en expose les principes philosophiques et décrit les critères de sélection. Il cerne ensuite avec soin les idées fondamentales du programme de même que les projets de recherche et les publications qui en ont découlés. Jusqu'à présent, ce programme a contribué à la formation de 60 étudiants dont 86% occupent des postes de conseiller à l'élémentaire. Le programme porte sur l'acquisition de techniques relatives au développement, à la prévention et à la correction; il traite aussi de la communication, de la consultation et de la coordination. La valeur du programme réside dans le fait qu'il procure une vaste base théorique de travail conseil et inclut des séances rigoureusement supervisées auprès d'individus, de groupes restreints, de classes entières, de parents, et de professeurs.

Elementary school counselling is a relatively recent development. Many of the elementary counselling services in Canada only emerged in the late 1960's. A survey by Merchant and Zingle (1977) revealed that many Canadian elementary schools had no counselling services. Of the elementary schools with counselling programs, only 33% of the counsellors had completed graduate work.

Counsellor education at the University of British Columbia, similar to other universities across Canada, was mainly for the training of secondary school counsellors. Thus, many counsellors working in the elementary schools were not trained specifically in counselling young children. In order to meet this need, the first author, an experienced elementary school counsellor, was hired in 1973 to initiate and develop an elementary school counselling program. By 1975, 40 to 50 applicants were seeking admission annually and this resulted in the hiring of another elementary counselling specialist (i.e., the second author). In addition, two other faculty members have assisted in some teaching and supervision.

The purpose of this article is to describe the elementary school counsellor training program at the

University of British Columbia. This will include the philosophy, student selection criteria, the core program, the elementary specialty, practicum, research and publications, and discussion.

Philosophy

A pragmatic and eclectic model of counselling is emphasized, the goal of which is primarily skills training in a number of diverse areas. For example, students learn developmental, preventive, and remedial approaches and are taught basic counselling, consulting, coordinating and evaluation skills. The goal of the program is to equip the trainee with a wide range of practical skills for the job of counselling in elementary schools.

In the specific area of the client-counsellor relationship, training is based on the work of Carkhuff (1969) and Egan (1975). An attempt is made to provide the trainees with the different skills that are needed in the different stages of the counselling relationship. These skills involve helping clients to explore issues, understand concerns and to act constructively. To this end, concepts and techniques from client-centered, psychoanalytic, reality therapy, and behavior modification theories are utilized.

Selection Criteria

Criteria for student selection include: 72% average on 30 units of third and fourth year undergraduate courses (at least 6 units of first class standing), a teaching certificate, three to five years teaching experience, three excellent references from current job situations, and a personal interview where relating skills and emotional strengths are sought.

Core Program

Three graduate level programs are offered: a one year diploma, a one year MEd, and a two year MA. The diploma and the MEd programs emphasize counselling skills, require comprehensive exams, and a major graduating paper in the elementary school counselling area. The MA program emphasizes both counselling and research skills and includes a thesis.

The elementary school counsellor trainees are provided with a broad background of knowledge from the discipline of counselling psychology. Courses are taken with all other trainees in the department in counselling theories, assessment techniques, counselling skills, and research. In addition, material particularly relevant to counselling in the elementary school is mandatory — family counselling, school psychology, developmental psychology, and special education (i.e., learning disabilities and exceptional children).

Elementary Specialty

Training involves a 3-hour weekly seminar on theoretical aspects of elementary school counselling following by a one-day-a-week practicum in an elementary school from September to April. From April to June the trainees spend four days a week in the field under the supervision of a qualified counsellor and a faculty member.

Three main texts are required: *Fundamentals of child counseling* (Keat, 1974), *Counseling in the elementary and in middle schools* (Muro & Dinkmeyer, 1977) and *Consultation* (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1975). Such supplementary texts as *100 ways to enhance self concept in the classroom* (Canfield & Wells, 1976), *Therapeutic use of child's play* (Schaefer, 1976), and the American Personnel and Guidance Association's journal of *Elementary School Guidance and Counseling* are also used.

The course starts with an historical perspective on the emergence of elementary school counselling as a profession. This is followed by role definitions and functions. Particular attention is paid to developmental, preventive, and remedial aspects of counselling and to the skills of consultation, communication, and coordination. Time is also spent on understanding the social context of home,

school, and community, their interrelationships and the effects of those influences on the counsellor's role. Research and evaluation are stressed throughout the program.

Developmental Counselling

The trainees are made aware of the different developmental stages and tasks of children and the appropriate counselling skills for an understanding of the psychological needs at various age levels. A focus is placed on the uniqueness of each child.

Another aspect of developmental counselling is that of providing a curriculum that meets the emotional needs of whole classrooms. That is, counsellors need to know how to provide developmental psychological education programs. To this end, the trainees are given experience with a variety of programs and approaches which address this aspect of the counsellor role. Among these are Duso Kits (Dinkmeyer, 1973), Magic Circle programs (Palomares & Bessell, 1967), classroom discussions (Glasser, 1969; Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper, 1971), Toward Affective Development kit (Dupont, Gardner, & Brody, 1974) and to the theories underlining them. The goal of these programs is to help children understand their thoughts and feelings, other children, and to learn effective coping and life skills.

Preventive Counselling

Trainees are taught how to identify high risk children and to provide assistance before a crisis is reached. Particular attention is paid to "danger signals" — extreme introversion, frequent temper tantrums, trauma, scapegoating, death, divorce, and alcoholism in parents — and to parent and teacher education. Also, a focus is placed on the intervention strategies that can be used — parent and family counselling, consultation with teachers, changes in classroom environment, peer helpers, and individual and small group counselling.

Remedial Counselling

Lectures are given on the origins of psychopathology, its various manifestations, and on different kinds of treatment modalities. Trainees learn how to communicate with children so that children can explore their concerns, understand their problems and develop more appropriate behaviors. Trainees are also taught how to modify the environment through ongoing consultation with teachers and parents. Finally, trainees are encouraged to explore in greater depth one theory and treatment approach that best fits their personalities.

Communication, Consultation and Coordination

Models for these three important areas are presented (Ginott, 1972; Gordon, 1970, 1974; Satir,

1972; Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1975). The consultative role of the counsellor is a critical one. It involves knowing how to consult with teachers, parents, and administrators and also how to coordinate services with the various agencies within a given community. Discussing these issues with our trainees often provides them with a better understanding of the "politics" involved in the counsellor's job.

Practicum

The elementary school counselling theory course is augmented by clinical practice; that is, approaches raised in class are practised, tested and evaluated in an elementary school setting by the trainee. Each professor is assigned five trainees, and all spend one day a week (8:30 – 4:30) in an elementary school. Here the students have a chance to observe the professor counsel and he in turn is able to watch and supervise them. This intensive practicum plays a key role in the success of the program.

The practicum starts with developmental theory and a developmental sequence. Trainees spend time in each classroom, kindergarten through to Grade 7, getting to know the teachers and observing children particularly in their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive tasks. Trainees write observational reports, observe critical incidences, and develop strategies for handling them. They also carry out appropriate developmental activities for each grade level (usually from Duso or Magic Circle).

Feedback is a crucial variable in training, thus time is spent by the trainee evaluating their performance. For example, the professor asks:

- What did you do?
- What did you like about what you did?
- What did you not like?
- What could have made it better?

Following this, other trainees add their comments before the instructors give their insights and suggestions.

After the developmental sequence the trainees start to build a caseload. This usually consists of two or three individual clients, one or two small groups, one or two whole classrooms (including the teacher), and some parent contacts. The caseload involves both primary and intermediate grades and the counselling activities centre around developmental, preventive, and remedial counselling. At times special requests are made of the trainees for assistance with issues such as integration and mainstreaming, scapegoating, prejudice, family life education, parent drop-in, peer counselling projects, and in-service for teachers.

Research and Publications

The program has generated considerable research and publication in the area of elementary school counselling. The types of research conducted falls into three broad areas: Needs assessment, counselling approaches or techniques, and evaluation.

Needs Assessment

A number of surveys have been carried out to determine the needs within the B.C. school system for elementary school counsellors. In the first assessment, the views of the superintendents and directors were sought (Allan, 1976). This was followed by a survey of 150 elementary school principals, primary and intermediate teachers (Allan, Doi, & Reid, 1979) and by a survey of the 97 elementary school counsellors (Allan & Ross, 1979).

In all cases the return rate was high (61% to 88%) and the responses were encouraging and helpful, particularly in regard to designing a counsellor training program that would meet the needs of the school system. For example, 86% of the superintendents and directors felt there was a need for more counsellors in the schools. Most teachers and principals felt that there is a need for counsellors in their schools two or three days a week. In addition, the school personnel emphasized the need for the following counsellor skills: individual and small group counselling, consulting with teachers, handling discipline problems, and classroom management techniques. A second cluster of skills centered around crisis counselling, consulting with community agencies, in-service for teachers, and testing.

Counselling Techniques

Particular attention has been paid to developing and describing techniques and approaches that the counsellor can use in the school setting. In the area of developmental and preventive counselling, articles have been published on: a baby clinic in an elementary school (Allan, 1975); facilitating emotional and symbolic communication in young children (Allan, 1978a); peer helpers (Allan, 1978b), training in caring (Allan, 1980a); and mainstreaming in the elementary school (Allan, in press, a).

In remedial counselling techniques, articles have been published on: the use of creative drama with acting out 6th and 7th graders (Allan, 1977); serial drawing (Allan, 1978c); serial storytelling (Allan, 1978d), scapegoating in the classroom (Allan, in press, b); and racial prejudice in the classroom (Allan & Nairne, 1981).

Evaluation

The effectiveness of counselling elementary students with behavioural and learning difficulties was evaluated. Three models of counselling were employed: counselling students, counselling and consulting students and teachers, and counselling and consulting students, teachers and parents. It was found that all three methods compared to no counselling resulted in a statistically significant improvement in reading performance. Positive gains were indicated in self-concept and classroom behaviour but these were not statistically significant (Friesen & Der, 1979).

General Discussion of the Program

Since 1973, 60 students have graduated from the program. Over 85% of these graduates currently hold elementary school counselling positions; the other 15% are teaching or are counselling in junior secondary schools or family clinics. These graduates have improved the quality of counselling services throughout the province by implementing programs to provide developmental and preventive services such as teacher and parent groups, classroom discussions, and consultation with administrators and community agencies. School districts who are utilizing the skills of these graduates are becoming more aware of the impact these trained counsellors have on the school system. Some districts have recently created as many as three to five new counselling positions. The number of trained elementary school counsellors in British Columbia (i.e., those with a masters degree in counselling) compares very favourably with other provinces in Canada. For example, Merchant and Zingle (1977) found that only 33% of elementary counsellors across Canada have masters degrees, whereas Allan & Ross (1979) found that approximately 70% of British Columbia elementary counsellors have a masters degree.

In the last few years, the elementary counsellor education program has undergone changes to meet the needs for counsellor-trainees in the school systems. To this end, our counselling department has initiated two out-reach, community-based counsellor training programs — one in Prince George and the other in Nanaimo. The didactic courses are provided on campus in the summer while the practicum experience occurs throughout the year in local school settings. Faculty members travel to these communities bi-weekly to offer direct supervision and small group discussions. This service is being provided because teachers in rural areas are unable to take a leave of absence and because we believe by training counsellors in their own setting we will have a greater impact upon the school system and the community. By training counsellors in their own districts, we create a more receptive environment because other administrators, teachers,

and parents become more aware of the effectiveness of counselling services. By involving the local school personnel and the community, a better understanding of counsellors and their services will result.

In sum, the strength of the program lies in its diversity of training, the practicum components and in the intensive small group supervision. Students state that one day a week, all academic year, in an elementary school enables them to experience and respond to a wide range of counselling needs. Receiving on-the-spot supervision by the instructor and peers provides for immediate feedback and learning. Students report leaving the program feeling confident to handle many counselling situations and in general this is supported later by external evaluations from the field.

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