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INITIATING AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELLING PROGRAMME

For two years I was in the unique position of being the first and only full time elementary school counsellor in the province of Newfoundland. While it must be taken into account that I came as a counsellor from a large urban city in another province and was, therefore, "a stranger," my observations which follow can be generalized to any province.

When you are the first counsellor in a school, the teachers, principal and students are unsure just what to make of you. While the work of the counsellor is primarily with students, it is the teacher at the elementary level who spends the most time with him. It follows then that the teacher is the person that he must reach first. The counsellor must sell himself first of all as a person. The staff is suspicious of this new role and they are wary and sometimes fearful to have the counsellor come into the classroom to observe a child. They may feel that the counsellor is watching them to see how they are to blame for the child's problem. Some teachers may voice the suspicion to others that you are a spy for the principal.

It is best, I found, to first of all meet the teacher informally in the staffroom and get to know her and let her get to know you. Then you can talk about what your job is and set up a time when you can visit her classroom to talk to the students. Meeting the teacher like this will mean drinking a lot of coffee but does pay off.

The principal must also understand what you are trying to do in counselling and support your efforts. Sometimes teacher-counsellor conferences in the staffroom are misunderstood by the principal and are seen by him as idle chatting. The teacher may feel uneasy as the principal comes into the staffroom during her spare and she is talking to the counsellor and not marking books.

The principal must realize that the counsellor's role is nonauthoritarian and that the counsellor has a more informal relationship with students than it is possible for the principal to have. If he is a new principal and rather unsure of himself *he may be jealous of the counsellor's relationship with the staff and students and try for some of this himself.* This can lead to difficulties if he tries to interfere with groups you have been working with, particularly if these groups are composed of students who get into trouble around the school and are sent to the principal. While these comments may be seen as somewhat harsh or down on principals, they are never-the-less part of the realities of counselling, particularly in the beginning. The situations I have mentioned may be partly prevented by the counsellor having frequent conferences with the principal.

The next area of concern in initiating an elementary counselling programme is how you are going to have the students identify you. If you see

just the problem kids you very quickly become the "problem lady"; if you have materials that kids can use or "play" with or if they just sit around and talk, you may be the "fun lady" who is good for a period out of the classroom. I preferred to be the "fun lady" as I believe that guidance and counselling is for all students. The kids came to me for the period off at first or to see what it was like but ended up talking about the things that worried them or displayed problems that showed the need for follow up or referral.

I went around to each class in the schools that I visited and introduced myself, told what I did in the school and explained the self referral procedure. In one school I neglected to say I was the counsellor and the kids, and in some cases their parents, thought I must be a psychiatrist.

It can be seen then that the next area where a counsellor must educate is the parents. They too are afraid or suspicious of the new counsellor and will joke about how you are going to find out how they beat their children or laughingly say "Let's get some counselling" as they quickly pass your door at the Fall open house.

This problem could be helped by a pamphlet or letter to the parents explaining what you do and how they can get in touch with you. Other parents, after they have seen you, will pass on the word to others and you may find yourself deluged with a variety of problems and not all of them about their children. This unsolicited advertising will also be done by the students and word of what you are like and what you do quickly spreads.

While the demands on your time are not too great in the first days of your programme, it is good to find out what community agencies are available for possible referral and then go and meet with them personally. This will make the agency much more willing to help you when the days are busy and you want to make a referral. In some cases it may help speed up the action taken with the referral as you are more than a signature on a letter or a voice on the telephone.

Generally it is the counsellor who acts as liaison for the school with particular agencies. It is important when dealing with agencies not to forget to include the teacher in dealing with the feedback. The teacher must feel that she is a part of the team and that her opinion is sought and valued. It may be possible for the teacher to sit in and take part in conferences with helping agencies. Too often the teacher is the last person to receive information in helping the child and she feels as though she is working in a vacuum. Yet the teacher will spend more time with the child than anyone, and is really the only person who can report as to how the child behaves and performs in the class situation. The counsellor must remember that the child he sees in a one to one counselling session is often not the same child the teacher sees in a class of thirty-five or more.

Who makes the referral can also make a difference in the reaction of the teacher. She will feel comfortable about the referrals she makes and wants to do or have something done about them. However, the reaction may be different if the parent is the one who makes the referral. This is particularly true if the child is one who is having difficulty in school. When you ask to see the child you may get answers such as "Oh, you can't see him now as we are doing spelling and he does that well." You then suggest a later time and get the reply, "But that's when we do math and he can't afford to miss that."

If the child refers himself you may get questioned as to why he wants to see you and the child may be questioned before he gets to see you. These situations call for the counsellor to be reassuring as to her role and make the teacher feel again that the counsellor is there to help and not condemn.

Constant evaluation by the counsellor of the counselling programme must go on. But this may be easier said than done. The rest of the staff evaluate the counsellor by the overt change, if any, that can be seen in the students after they have visited the counsellor. When the child sees you and returns to class the teacher may look for some change of a positive nature and if none is seen you are found lacking. But this again comes back to the relationship between the counsellor and teacher, the counsellor must constantly be aware of what the counsellor is trying to do and will be aware if a student's classroom behavior programme is worked out by the teacher and the counsellor together, with each bringing her particular skills to the situation. The counsellor may also share what she can of what is happening in the counselling sessions, although care is taken in this. Evaluating a counselling programme by overt change in students, and even in staff attitude, is an easy and natural way to evaluate. Counsellors too need some positive reinforcement and are on the look out for it. If none is forthcoming frustration and dissatisfaction follow. But is this how one completely evaluates one's own programme?

While counselling is still new to the school some teachers will not approach the counsellor until it is just about time to decide promotions. In the pre-promotion panic the counsellor may be besieged with names of students he had never seen. This is the time to make note of the names presented and follow them up in the next year. At the same time the counsellor must keep an eye out for promotional buck-passing and quietly but firmly make known her role in the deciding of promotions. I would give my opinion and any relevant information I had but not make the final decision.

In initiating elementary counselling programmes the counsellor must move slowly and be patient with the pace at which things will move. The first year will be the most lonely and trying. It really is a year of selling counselling to others in more established roles. You will hear remarks that are discouraging and incidents will happen that make you wonder if anyone understands what you are trying to do even when you have spent much time talking about your activities. But every now and then some tiny bit of progress may be seen. These tiny bits are the things to cling to as you keep plugging on.

L'INSTAURATION D'UN SERVICE DE COUNSELLING DANS UNE ECOLE PRIMAIRE

PHYLLIS HYMMEN

L'auteur fait quelques observations sur la façon d'instaurer des services de counselling dans une école primaire. Il a lui-même fait l'expérience d'une telle initiative dans la province de Terre-Neuve et souhaite qu'elle puisse être utile aux conseillers qui se trouveront dans la situation d'être le premier conseiller à exercer ses fonctions dans une école.

On commente la façon avec laquelle le conseiller devrait se présenter au personnel et aux étudiants de l'école. On discute brièvement des conflits possibles avec le principal, des réactions des parents et de la façon d'y faire face.

L'auteur discute aussi de l'approche que pourrait utiliser le conseiller dans ses rapports avec les agences communautaires et du rôle possible de l'instituteur à cet égard.