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SCHOOL CLIMATE AND THE ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL COUNSELOR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

ABSTRACT: It was the purpose of this study to compare the interpersonal climates of elementary schools with and without counselors. Ten public elementary schools from two Florida counties were selected to participate in the investigation. All teachers from the 10 schools, 93 from the 5 schools without counselors and 118 from the 5 schools with counselors, were administered the *Survey of Interpersonal Relationships*. Results tend to support the concept that an elementary-school counselor makes a difference in a school's climate.

Student achievement, attitudes, and behaviors have long been recognized as related to the environmental influences of home, community, and school. What the child is and what he becomes are a reflection of his total environment. However, within the last few years increased study and research has been directed toward school environments and their learning climates.

Recently, Walz and Miller (1969) reviewed several studies regarding school climates and suggested some implications for counselor preparation and practice. In general, they assumed a sociological point of view and implied that knowing the school's climate would enable a counselor to adjust and adapt role behaviors appropriate for a particular school situation. However, closer examination of these studies and others (Glasser, 1969; Holt, 1964; Withall, 1967) also supports the counselor's need to know and act on the psychological conditions which differentiate school climates. In this case, emphasis is given to the central core of interpersonal relationships which affect learning and personal development, regardless of social, economic, or geographic location.

This latter point of view is consistent with the trend in counselor education to prepare school counselors who are skilled in the learning process and consultation procedures. Some educators (Dinkmeyer, 1968; Faust, 1967, 1968; Kaczkowski, 1967; Myrick, 1969) consider consultation with school personnel, with focus on improving the learning climate, to be a primary function of counselors, especially those in elementary schools. Generally, these educators have suggested that a developmental elementary-school counselor, as a human behavior and relationship specialist, can promote and aid in the development of interpersonal relationships within a school, which would tend to predispose teachers and children to learn and change in positive directions. This position implies that the counselor is an agent of change both within

and upon the school climate.

Can a counselor have a positive effect on a school climate? The authors of this paper hypothesized that an elementary-school counselor would tend to positively affect the interpersonal relationships in a school setting and, consequently, the school's learning climate. To test this hypothesis a comparison of elementary schools with and without counselors was made, using an interpersonal relationship inventory as a measure of school climate.

DESIGN OF STUDY

Population.

Ten public elementary schools (Grades K-6) from two northern Florida counties were selected as schools to be assessed. Five of the schools employed state-certified elementary-school counselors and five did not have any counselors. For comparison purposes, attempts were made to match schools on the basis of geographical location, county administration, socio-economic level, faculty composition, size, and racial ratio of the student body. All teachers from the 10 schools, 93 from the schools without a counselor and 118 from the schools with a counselor (N=211), participated in the study.

Criterion Measure.

The criterion measure used in this study to assess school climate was the *Survey of Interpersonal Relationships* (SIR) as developed by Wittmer (1972). SIR is a perceptual inventory which attempts to measure the interpersonal climate within an educational setting and yields three scores: cognitive, affective, and total. Items on the SIR permit an individual teacher to report problems and strengths regarding communication and interpersonal relationships within his school. Each item is responded to on a five-point Likert-type scale.

Based on the results from 3,900 central Florida classroom teachers, representing 170 schools, reliability coefficients (Spearman-Brown) have been reported as .82 (affective); .86 (cognitive); and, .91 (total) (Wittmer, 1972). These coefficients appeared high enough to merit the instrument's use in this investigation.

Although each examinee responded to the total inventory, only six of the ten SIR sub-categories and sub-scores were used for this particular study. The six sub-categories used were: (1) Teacher vs. Principal; (2) Teacher vs. Other Teachers; (3) Teacher vs. Self; (4) Teacher vs. Non-teaching Personnel; (5) Teacher vs. Different Types of Students; and, (6) Teacher vs. Students in General.

Collection and Analysis of Data.

Teachers met as a group, within each of the ten elementary schools, to respond to the SIR. Data from all schools were collected during the

same week. Analysis of the data was performed by using a *t* test of the difference between independent samples with the significance level set at .05. Since no previous evidence was available which would allow for a directional hypothesis, all tests of the hypothesis were two-tailed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data indicated that a significant difference existed between those schools with a counselor and those without a counselor on four of the six sub-categories of the SIR. No differences were found between the two school groups on the categories of teacher vs. other teachers and teacher vs. non-teaching personnel. The significant differences existed between the two school groups on the variables of teacher vs. principal, teacher vs. self, teacher vs. different type of students, and teacher vs. students in general. On all four of these categories, schools with a counselor reported a more favorable school climate than those without a counselor.

Teacher vs. Principal

The teacher vs. principal sub-category of the SIR consists of six items. Rather than a report of productivity in activities, attempts are made to secure a description of how teachers feel about their principal. The following are sample items: "Our school lacks group cohesion and harmony as a result of the relationship between faculty and principal" and, "Teachers at our school are not given an opportunity to express openly their feelings regarding change in school policy." A significant difference between schools with a counselor and schools without a counselor occurred at the .01 level (Table 1). Those schools with a counselor reported more favorable relationships between teachers and principals.

TABLE 1

SIR Comparisons of Elementary Schools With and Without a Counselor

SIR Categories Teacher vs.	With Counselors Mean	Without Counselors Mean	t-value
Principal.....	15.8	16.9	-2.76**
Teachers.....	18.0	18.2	-0.21
Self.....	13.9	14.6	-2.21*
Non-teaching Personnel.....	13.6	13.9	1.09
Students (Different Types) .	16.9	17.9	-2.06*
Students (In General).....	28.4	29.6	-2.04*

Low scores on SIR are positive in direction.
 High scores suggest communication and interpersonal difficulties.
 **p* < .05
 ***p* < .01

In their work, elementary-school counselors on occasion help translate school policy and coordinate school services, which has a tendency to bring teachers and principal closer together. More important, however, the counselor's counseling and consulting work often prevents many cases from becoming a crisis and being referred to the principal's office for disciplinary action. Our tentative hypothesis: A counselor's preventive and developmental focus enables a teacher and his principal to talk more about the developmental aspects of the school than correctional or remedial ones which, because of its positive focus, fosters a better interpersonal relationship between the two.

Teacher vs. Self

The teacher vs. self sub-category of the SIR consists of five items that are designed to assess the teacher's perception of self. For example, "I often get so wound up in what I want to say that I do not really listen to what other people are saying," and "I often feel that people do not understand me." Findings indicated a significant difference between schools with and without a counselor at the .05 level of significance (Table 1). Teachers in those schools with a counselor reported less self-conflict and feelings of being misunderstood than teachers in schools without a counselor.

Most effective counselors are good listeners. Through consultation an elementary-school counselor frequently helps a teacher by listening to his interests and special problems. The work of the counselor enables a teacher to feel understood and often lessens the personal anxiety resulting from feeling totally responsible for alleviating a child's learning difficulties. In addition, one of the primary aims in consultation is to aid, support, and reassure a teacher in her efforts to establish and maintain an effective learning climate in the classroom.

Teacher vs. Different Types of Students

The five items of this SIR sub-category are concerned with the different types of students commonly recognized in schools: the discipline problem, the underachiever, the culturally disadvantaged, the gifted, and the racially different. The following two items are among those found in this category: "I feel inadequate in my understanding of the underachieving student" and "It is often difficult for me to communicate effectively with students of a different race." Those teachers in schools with a counselor reported more understanding and better relationships with "different type" students than those teachers in schools without a counselor. A significant difference appeared at the .05 level (Table 1).

Effective school counselors attempt to aid teachers in obtaining more information about their students and help teachers explore their relationships with various students. When teachers receive help in understanding students the learning climate is enhanced. Greater academic progress, fewer psychological conflicts, fewer school dis-

turbances, and more positive attitudes toward school have been found where teachers have been helped in learning about and exploring student behavior (Ojemann & Wilkinson, 1939; Bush, 1954).

Teacher vs. Students in General.

The sub-category of teacher vs. students in general consists of nine items which attempt to measure the respondent's knowledge of the learning process. This category is considered to be more cognitively than affectively oriented, but it represents an important variable in a school's learning climate since teachers tend to structure classroom situations based on their cognitive knowledge of how students learn. Sample items are: "Students must be forced to learn," "Learning, on the part of the student, must often be a painful process," and, "One of my basic teaching duties is to point out a student's mistake to him." Schools with and without a counselor differed at the .05 level of significance (Table 1). Teachers in schools with a counselor appeared to have a greater understanding of how a child learns and of those processes which facilitate learning.

In training, few teachers spend as much time learning about the affective conditions of the learning process as do most counselors. For the most part, teacher education programs have tended to prepare individuals to know subject matter and methods of presenting information. They have sadly neglected such areas as the helping relationship, group process, and affective variables in learning. Consequently, the school counselor serves as a valuable resource in aiding teachers to understand and develop more effective learning situations. This special preparation in the affective domain of learning can make a difference in a school's learning climate.

Other Categories

No significant differences were found on the sub-categories of teacher vs. other teachers and teacher vs. non-teaching personnel. The first of these two categories consisted of seven items which attempted to measure the relationships between teachers. "Our teachers disrupt one another at faculty meetings" and "Several of our teachers will strive to obtain a goal even at the expense of their associates" are two items from this category. In light of the other differences between schools with and without a counselor, the lack of a significant difference in this category (Table 1) was contrary to expectations and predictions.

An elementary-school counselor is not a mediator of teacher differences, but his presence generally serves as a catalyst for good interpersonal relationships. In some schools, however, social opportunities, including time to be together in a teacher's lounge, can help rapport between teachers. This would also be true of relationships with non-teaching personnel, such as custodians, secretaries, and teacher aides. Thus, while the differences between groups of schools in these two categories were not significant, schools without a counselor tended

to report higher mean scores indicating a less favorable school climate.

This study attempted to assess school climates of elementary schools with and without a counselor using a relationship inventory (SIR). Results appear to support the concept that an elementary-school counselor can make a positive difference in a school's climate. The developmental elementary-school counselor who finds himself in a particular social area where students are recognizably different from usual student populations will learn to develop new strategies for working within the school situation. But, more important, he will, through his work with children and teachers, help develop the kind of positive learning climate which provides the essential interpersonal dimensions which meet the needs of all children, regardless of where they are. Perhaps as more elementary-school counselors find a place in the schools, more children will become better learners because of school climates which are more conducive to learning.

RESUME: Le but de cette étude était de comparer les effets de la présence et de l'absence du conseiller sur le climat des relations interpersonnelles dans les écoles primaires. On a utilisé dix écoles primaires publiques de deux comtés de la Floride comme échantillons. On a administré le "Survey of Interpersonal Relationships" (Inventaire des relations interpersonnelles) à tous les instituteurs des dix écoles, soit aux 93 instituteurs provenant de cinq écoles dans lesquelles il n'y avait pas de conseiller ainsi qu'aux 118 instituteurs de cinq écoles dans lesquelles des conseillers étaient présents. Les résultats permettent de conclure que la présence du conseiller à l'école élémentaire est susceptible d'affecter le climat des relations interpersonnelles.

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