

Field Notes and Personal Experiential Accounts



Classroom Guidance Program- An Essential Tool for School Counseling

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Abstract: Children belong to a vulnerable and constantly changing phase of the developmental process. These changes require consistent monitoring, adjustment and support. The wellbeing of a child does not just ensure the smooth transitions during childhood, but it increases the chances of adding to society an adult (of tomorrow), with balanced physical and mental health. Hence, the counseling services in schools are important to ensure primary intervention, prevention and promotion of the well-being needs of all. Whereas, the task of intervention requires counseling expertise and availability, the prevention and promotion of well-being part needs constant outreach programmes, feedback and evaluation. To achieve these goals, the counselor takes on various roles including, individual student counseling, parent counseling, guiding teachers for dealing with referred student, and career counseling, etc. Each of these modes of counseling has its own significant effect on the counselee and on the objectives of counseling. In all of this, one method that often stays neglected, but undoubtedly serves as an effective preventive and educative program, is the classroom guidance program.

Significance of School Years in the Developmental Process of Personality

To understand the effectiveness of the classroom guidance programme, it is important to view it through the eyes of a school student. Children in schools belong to the age group of 4 to 18 years. School aged developmental milestones include social, emotional, physical, moral, and cognitive development. The process of learning to communicate, share, and interact with others takes many years to develop. Children continue to develop their social-emotional skills well into their teenage years, or even into young adulthood.

Research shows that effective counseling programs are clearly based on human development theories that have universal relevance in understanding the developmental process, like those of Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg. These counseling programs are proactive and preventive; helping students acquire knowledge, skills,

attitudes and self-awareness, necessary for mastery of these developmental tasks. According to Eric Erikson, it is the stage of Initiative versus Guilt when a toddler begins school in India. The child experiences a need to copy significant adults around her and takes initiative to create play situations. Frustrations around these natural desires may easily cause guilt. Classroom guidance can be effectively used to instill the basics of socializing and accepting through story, narration and play. The counselor can prevent many a damage through prevention of guilt, by providing opportunities to initiate and encourage efforts.

The elementary years of grade 1 to 5 (6-7 to 11-12 years) correspond to Erikson's stage of Industry versus Inferiority. The virtue that they imbibe as a result of appropriate reinforcement is 'competence'. Throughout these school years, children continue to develop self-confidence through learning new things. If they are not encouraged and praised properly at this age, they may develop an inferiority



complex. According to Piaget's cognitive developmental stage they are transitioning from pre operational to concrete operational stage. Their language use becomes more mature. They also develop memory and imagination, which allows them to understand the difference between past and future, and engage in make-believe. Till grade 2-3, their thinking is based on intuition and still not completely logical. So very wonderfully can these years be moulded through classroom guidance programs on social issues like friends, family, virtues such as being fair, facilitate self control and appreciate diversity! A stage where hero worship comes naturally; a patient and caring adult (read counselor), presenting a food for thought in an activity based interesting method (classroom guidance programme) can work wonders.

As children enter Piaget's Concrete Operational Stage (7 to 11 years), they demonstrate logical, concrete reasoning. Their thinking becomes less egocentric and they become increasingly aware of external events. They begin to realize that one's own thoughts and feelings are unique and may not be shared by others or may not even be part of reality. The classroom guidance programs in this stage can focus on developing empathy, preventing bullying, identifying feelings, communication skills (using 'I messages'), being responsible (in school, home, on the street) and preparing for adolescence (physical, social, emotional and cognitive self care).

A bigger challenge both for the children and adults around them arrives with the phase of adolescence. Erikson perceived adolescence as the time of identity formation (Kroger, J, 1993). Adolescents struggle, by essentially bouncing their provisional identities off significant others in their midst—groups, gangs, girlfriends and boyfriends, heroes and villains—and seeing what sticks. Consequently, adolescence is an intensely social time, when the hunger for belonging, community, social status, and emotional closeness provide the context within which teens discover their identity. Failing this, they risk falling into what Erikson called role diffusion or the development of a negative identity such as “addict,” “slut,” “doper,” or all-around “loser.” What Erikson could see

decades ago through his studies, any counselor can observe happening in high schools around.

Hence, this stage of development brings enormous risk and long-term cost of any mishandling, miscommunication of the growing adolescent. The need of the hour is prevention and outreach. A structured, effective, classroom guidance program has tremendous potential to avail this opportunity of developing a child into a healthy and empowered personality. From a self directed child to a mature youth (journey from Kindergarten to Grade 12) one continues to consistently go to school, hence, the counselor with her focus on well being and preventive objectives, can utilize the teenager's innate desire and curiosity to learn, express, and be recognized. Can these young, energetic, trouble mongers (often misjudged) be helped to find direction and purpose? Yes, intervention is the answer. But the deterrence to the failure (of identity formation) through structured classroom guidance is certainly more cost effective and less damaging.

Influence of a Guide/ Positive Adult

During the classroom guidance program, the basic psychosocial needs for being respected, approved, achieving appreciation, are served through a counselor who approves of diverse views about the issues discussed. This provides students the opportunity to gain confidence of expressing themselves. Such programmes and respectful acknowledgement of their views help to bolster their sense of identity, and promote their cognitive and moral development. It is amazing how many youth are hungry to discuss these issues with a trusted adult, and how few are offered the opportunity.

With teachers getting more and more occupied with documentation in schools, they are not left with enough time to indulge in informal classroom discussions. Even the interactions during zero periods are now events of the past. In such a scenario the only solace the system has is the counselor. Whether in India or abroad (the USA) the students interviewed about the need for classroom guidance programs, have always expressed a need for regular guidance classes with a counselor. In India, most schools have just one



counselor hence, the workload often does not include classroom guidance. In the U.S., classroom guidance occurs in elementary and middle schools but high school counselors are busy preparing schedules and providing for college counseling, resulting in teenagers having no opportunities for direct interactions in class about their concerns. While teenagers may often exhibit a need for independence and freedom, at heart they look for guidance, a patient ear to listen, and an understanding adult who responds to them respectfully (Sehgal, 2014). The truth is that adolescents, despite occasional or numerous protests, need adults and want them to be part of their lives, recognizing that they can nurture, teach, guide, and protect them on the journey to adulthood (APA, 2002).

Numerous studies have shown that the presence of an adult—a parent or someone other than a parent—with a strong positive, emotional attachment to the child is associated with resilience (Garbarino, 1999). For some youth, it is also a source of safety and stability. Some of the same qualities that characterize families of adolescents who do well—a strong sense of attachment, bonding, and belonging, and a feeling of being cared about—also characterize adolescents' positive relationships with their teachers and their schools. One additional factor, adolescent perception of teacher fairness, has also been found to be associated with positive adolescent development (APA, 2002). Because schools are such a critical setting for adolescents, it is the most effective medium that the society has, in order to create a support system. And none can do the required justice to this prevention program, as a counselor can.

The Structure of Classroom Guidance Programs

The effectiveness of classroom guidance comes from the structure of the program. The counselor uses professional skills of being friendly, respectful of different opinions and non judgmental. She eases the difference of viewpoints in a way that nobody tries to play defensive, one can participate in a non-critical and unthreatened

environment, use rationale and logic in deriving key messages and use day to day events and concerns that are age appropriate, and students can relate to the topic personally.

During adolescence, transitions can present challenges, both to academic performance and psychological well-being. Therefore, the structure of classroom guidance includes age appropriate topics. The objective is to empower students; hence the curriculum of the classroom guidance program must be according to their choice. Choose a topic that is relevant to adolescents (e.g., deciding how to deal with an interpersonal conflict, identifying strategies for earning money for college) (Keating, 1990). Discuss ethical and moral problems that are in the news. Encourage the adolescent to think through the issues out loud. Without challenging his or her point of view, wonder aloud about how others might differ in their perspective on the issue and what might influence these differences (Santilli & Hudson, 1992). Hence, outreach goal is to include relevant topics related to student's life and psychosocial development that go on consistently to empower, to develop life skills and resilience.

Yet another aspect of structure includes the methodology used to deliver the key messages. The most relevant messages are the ones that come from within, and to elicit a response from within a participative and interactive technique need to be used depending on the type and age of the class group. The combination of techniques (e.g., brainstorming, small group discussion, role play, case study, etc.) however, works better in order to involve each student in class activity. This contribution by each student will bring real learning. All students must be given the message that they are worthwhile, there are people who care about them, and that there are resources available to meet their needs.

Topics of Developmental Relevance

Suggestive Classroom Guidance Plan

As mentioned before, classroom guidance allows school counselors to address student needs, work on issues that are of concern to the particular age-group, inform students of school-wide



opportunities, prepare them for transitions in psycho-social process of development, distribute information about educational resources and postsecondary opportunities, etc.

A tentative plan is presented as an example; although all the listed topics can be designed for each age-group and many more significant themes added.

Grade 2- Identifying and expressing feelings, being kind-(hard words and soft words)

Grade 3- Being fair, making friends, following directions

Grade 4- Be a safe and smart kid 'Good touch –bad touch', understanding our bodies and preparing for menstruation (girls)

Grade 5- Complementing versus complaining, saying no to bullying, preparing for teenage, life skill-empathy

Grade 6- Introduction to counseling, study habits, cyber safety

Grade 7- Self awareness-a life skill, handling peer pressure, accepting diversities

Grade 8- Growing up issues-changes in body/mind and attractions, preventing bullying, world of work (careers), staying safe from substance abuse-refusal techniques

Grade 9- World of work, building confidence and self esteem, effective communication, managing emotions, body image, and personality development

Grade 10- Selecting subject stream, anger management, adolescent reproductive and sexual health, interpersonal relations, family bonding

Grade 11- Application of life skills, stress management, no no's of life (value clarity), making impressions, handling examination pressure

Grade 12- Career guidance, balancing priorities (relations/ studies/ interests)

Scope of Classroom Guidance programs

Mental health is still stigmatized as a profession. Even in contemporary times, a number of parents

or teachers consider it a matter of shame to be referred to the counselor. Hence, a majority of students would rather avoid seeking help with the fear of 'what if' someone notices! However, instead of them going to the counselor, if the counselor comes to the room and addresses all the students together, the brilliant, average and below average, irrespective of gender, or any other discrimination, and talks about issues that are close to the heart, the effectiveness of counselling can be maintained. Moreover, the stigma about a mental health professional disappears with familiarity due to regular interaction. Most begin to see the counselor as a friendly guide and hence feel comfortable in walking to her room, even after the class.

Many children suffer due to poor social skills, shyness or low self esteem. They go through the stresses of being teased, isolated or inability to sustain friendships. Most of these children are unable to speak out these concerns or consult the counselor and often their parents/teachers consider the issues too insignificant to refer. Through classroom guidance, however, all such social adjustment issues can be addressed and the shy students can benefit in a non threatening way. The introductory program, 'Introduction to Counseling' by the author in sixth grade in every academic session resulted in a number of students seeking appointment for individual counseling. Hence, it certainly reduces stigma and enables the child feel comfortable in seeking help. The students who are referred for counseling by teachers or parents are few but those in the classroom constitute the entire population of students.

In conclusion, besides individual counseling, parent and family counseling, advocacy programs, age-appropriate workshops, etc; an effective tool for reaching out to all the school students is a structured, regularly conducted classroom guidance program. This would ensure healthy attitude and wellbeing, give students an opportunity to express their opinions and feelings and provide alternatives to their conflicts. Most of all it would reduce hesitation of students in general to approach the counselor in times of distress and de-stigmatize the counseling services.



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