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The Effects of Individual Counseling on Students with Disciplinary Issues

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Abstract

The intent of this study is to ascertain if individual counseling can be used as an intervention to help those students who have continual, problematic, disciplinary issues. The literature review is presented, and discusses the possible outside influences to behavioral issues, as well as psychological factors, social-emotional supports, and counseling as an intervention. Similarly, this study examines if counseling can be an effective intervention for the students who receive multiple disciplinary referrals within a school year, but have not yet received individual counseling. Students were selected based upon a criterion of a minimum of 5 disciplinary interventions within the last school year (in school suspension, out of school suspension, multiple class failure across semester, insubordination, physical violence and continual reported peer conflict).

Within this study, four students brought parental consent forms and signed minor assent forms in compliance to complete this six-session study. Students were given a pre-test at their first session, and a post-test at their last session. These tests were used as a means of self-report for the students to see if they could identify their feelings, attitudes, and areas of need before and after the intervention. Student disciplinary records were examined before and after the study as means to objectively view if the intervention may have been successful. Results supported the claim that counseling can be used as an effective intervention with this population. Both the participants' self-report and disciplinary records proved that counseling was an effective way to minimize disciplinary referrals and aid in student self-awareness and coping skills.

Introduction

Children with disciplinary issues are often labeled negatively within a school setting, and can internalize those labels as they mature into adolescence and young adulthood (Bean, 2013). Too often these students develop a stigma as being a “bad kid” and have a difficult time finding appropriate, healthy coping mechanisms to deal with their issues. In addition, some students may be suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder, a learning disorder, or any host of psychological struggles that are hindering their ability to perform socially and academically (Konicarova, 2014). Students may also be lacking social-emotional supports (friends and family), there may be differing cultural/environmental values at play (Bean, 2014), and there may be a general misunderstanding of the child or their presenting issues (Konicarova, 2014). Rather than forcing the student to be someone they are not, or asking them to do as they are told without question, it may be beneficial to sit down and explore what they identify as their needs, strengths, and weaknesses. This is why it is important to examine the literature to understand why students may be having disciplinary issues, and how individual counseling may be able to answer the needs of those students. As a counselor in a school setting, it is important to understand why students may act out, and how to handle it according to each child’s individual needs.

The review of the literature is to determine what may cause children to behave, think, and feel the way they do. It will also examine biological and environmental factors of behavior of school-aged children. Furthermore, this review will examine the effects of a school counselor on children with disciplinary issues.

Psychological Factors

There is much to be said about the presence of Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and other psychological disorders among school-aged children and its potentially damaging effects on learning (Konicarova, 2014). Konicarova (2014) noted that it may be important to understand the effects these factors may have on a child's mentality and learning capabilities in order to understand why it may cause them to lose focus, act out, bully, be bullied, or generally get in trouble. Not only may individual counseling give these children the opportunity to have these factors identified, but they may also direct them to means for testing, biologics, and other resources.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). There is an high correlation between student who act out and ADHD (Konicarova, 2014). The DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.59) defines ADHD as,

“A persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development, has symptoms presenting in two or more settings (e.g. at home, school, or work; with friends or relatives; in other activities), and negatively impacts directly on social, academic or occupational functioning. Several symptoms must have been present before age 12 years.”

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder has proven to be a core issue in children who exhibit behavior that gets them in trouble (talking back, lack of attention, impulsivity, hyperactivity etc.) One study found that students with ADHD were more likely to be the students doing the bullying and engaging in impulsive, disruptive behavior, especially if they were males; whereas students with a learning disorder and ADHD were more likely to be bullied but still struggle with social skills and impulsivity (Klomek et al., 2015).

Learning Disorders. Learning disorders can interfere with a child's ability to process, understand, or memorize information they hear in class. The DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.66) defines it as,

“Disorders with onset in the developmental period, often before starting school, and characterized by a range of developmental deficits that impair normal functioning. Intellectual disability (Intellectual developmental disorder).”

Often, if a child feels unmotivated, or even discouraged, to learn, they will stop trying or otherwise fall through the cracks, and struggle in school (Martin, 2014). Individual counseling was recognized as one of the most fundamentally critical resources – particularly for development in childhood and early adolescence. Martin (2014) goes on to state that it is the proactive, rather than reactive, approach that proved most effective when working with reactive students with ADD and/or students with learning disorders. Additionally, Martin (2014) cited the close link with the school psychologist and their, “access to testing and knowledge of disorders and illnesses” (p. 88); paired with the “one-on-one attention” (p.89) and time the school counselor utilizes in order to gain a better understanding of the child is crucial.

Other Psychological Factors. Studies on attachment theories have purport that the way a parent interacts with a child in their infancy and childhood can affect the way a child views the world and their relationships with those around them (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1965). One study in particular (Erkan et al., 2015) demonstrated how the offspring of mothers with bipolar disorder may develop dismissing attachment disorder, with these children being more at risk for developing other mental illnesses. Dismissive attachment style is the result of a child learning that they can depend only on themselves, they often feel better without close relationships, and get defensive in the face of rejection (Sheinbaum, 2015). Further, Scheinbaum et al. (2015)

asserted that there was a high correlation between poor childhood care/ unidentified schizophrenia. This could mean that, if gone untreated, mental illness in mothers could have an impact on a child's development and relationships.

Social-Emotional Supports

Clark & Breman (2009) asserted that proper social-emotional supports and resources can be critical to a child's achievement and success in school. If a child does not learn how to behave and the ultimate rewards for following through on that behavior, they may not learn the value of why it may be good to act appropriately in school or social settings (Clark & Breman, 2009). Sometimes this attitude is due to lack of attention, other times it is due to a cultural or environmental circumstance that is out of their control, and sometimes maybe something they cannot yet verbally identify (Clark & Breman, 2009). In all of these situations, counseling may aid in understanding the bigger issue(s) and bridging the gap between student and success.

Parental Support and Intervention. Lansford et al. (2011) found that there was a high correlation between parents' physical discipline and children externalizing their behavior, particularly in middle school. This conveys that children who act out or are physically violent in school may be learning these behaviors in the home. Other researchers discovered that it was crucial to emphasize achievement in order to strengthen middle school boys' performance in school (Clark et al., 2008). This is important to note, because there is a particularly high rate of physical punishment that occurs within families in this district. In addition, all of the children on the disciplinary list are struggling in many areas in school.

Generally speaking, much of the research on children with disciplinary issues have focused on one root issue, which is lack of appropriate attention. Children who don't receive

praise for their achievements or care and attention from parents/guardians/friends tend to struggle in school and social relationships (Lansford et al., 2011). In fact, one particular study posited that maternal and paternal attachment patterns in early life can determine the way a person interacts with others throughout the rest of their lives (Granot & Mayseless, 2001). These researchers cited maternal attachment issues as being less prevalent but “just as damaging to the child” (p.535) as paternal attachment issues. They concluded that secure children demonstrated better adjustment to the school system and the intellectual, social, emotional, and behavioral demands associated with it than insecure children (Granot & Mayseless, 2001). Familial relationships play a key role in development, but there are also other factors to take into consideration.

Culture and Values. Another dynamic of note is cultural and familial values that may differ from the school environment. For example, Bean (2014) explored this by looking at school-aged African-American males and asking why he noticed a “disproportionate amount” (p.491) of young African-American boys and men getting in trouble more often than students of other cultures. The answer, he found, was the lack of social and academic supports that they are qualified to receive (Bean, 2014). Some of these student reported feeling reluctant to ask for help for fear of looking weak or losing face in front of their friends, whereas others did not feel understood by the staff (Bean, 2014). This study makes an important point about how crucial it is to make sure every student, regardless of who they are, has a place where they feel safe and understood.

Connecting this to the middle school population, it is prudent to understand the factors in why a child may be choosing his or her words and actions. If this is true, it may be one factor in an ultimately bigger picture to help bring some background and understanding behind a student’s

behavior or actions. However, there are other cultures that utilize corporal punishment and other forms of repercussions for their actions that may also need to be examined.

Asian-American students have cultural values that may veer from the American norms: for example, it is considered rude to make eye contact with authority figures in many Asian cultures (Leu et al., 2011). Leu et al. (2011) further asserted that Asian cultures also discourage the expression of emotion or disclosure of personal information to those outside of the family, as this is considered inappropriate and may enforce these values with corporal punishment. This may impact the counseling relationship between student and counselor if the counselor is unaware of the culture and/or the values within it. If a child is withholding information or refuses to make eye contact, it could be taken as a sign of disrespect to those unfamiliar with their cultural norms.

Other Factors. Additionally, it is important to understand how a child may be affected by having a parent who is incarcerated. One researcher identified it as a “traumatic experience for a child” (Rollins, 2012, p.199) and emphasized the importance of maintaining a regular, healthy relationship with that parent. She also stressed the necessity to have other supports elsewhere, including time spent with family, engaging the incarcerated parent in normal routines (i.e. reading to the child, birthday celebrations, telling stories, etc.), and getting the child into therapy to develop healthy coping mechanisms (Rollins, 2012). As a school counselor, it would appear important to have knowledge of family scenarios such as this, as Rollins (2012) says it can affect the child’s attitudes, motivation, and overall achievement in school.

Counseling as a Solution

Individual Counseling in a School Setting. In a 2016 study conducted in Spain, researchers found that students who, “are aware of their emotions and guided by specific teaching strategies, their learning performance improves in relation to their motivation, engagement and self-regulation... Likewise, when teachers are conscious of students' emotional state their attitude and feedback become more effective and timely.” (Arguedas et al., 2016, p.102). Applying this to a broader understanding about self-awareness in students, researchers identified that emotional intelligence and an over-all understanding of the self plays an important role in student success (Arguedas et al., 2016). The authors further explained that all the people who interact with the students must work as a team in order to meet the student needs and create a cohesive, consistent environment that supports student learning.

Connecting this to student counseling, it is important that teachers and counselors create a unified approach for each student. If the counselors are approaching the student from one angle, and the teachers are taking another tack, the student will receive mixed messages about what is expected of them. This can lead to student difficulties, including but not limited to, emotional distress, anger, stress, violence, academic struggle or failure, poor grades, poor self-image and self-efficacy, and physical ailments (Arguedas et al., 2016).

Advantages of School Counseling. School counselors are trained to understand the rigors of day-to-day life for students, both in and out of school (Char-Koosta, 2014). They are there to greet new students, set up their schedule and make changes as needed, and above all provide a safe, supportive, confidential environment for the students to utilize as needed (Char-Koosta, 2014).

Depending on the school environment, students who are new to the school, or transitioning back from another location of learning, may feel anxious, scared, concerned,

overwhelmed, excited, angry, etc. A trained school counselor will be able to identify themselves and the services they provide for the students, along with guiding them through their academic career to ensure optimal outcomes for that student (Char-Koosta, 2014).

School counselors are a vital necessity for students with disciplinary issues, learning disorders, mental illnesses, or any other life situation that may affect their performance in school. Counselors are trained to understand the basis of these issues, investigate, and help the students come to a solution (Romano & Kachgal, 2014). These authors (2004) say this is crucial in working with students, because it is imperative to understand the “why now” of the behavior versus punitive action as a reaction to a behavior. Not only do students see that the school is willing to work with them and understand what is going on, but it gives the school the opportunity to generate a lasting, long-term solution, rather than a short-term punishment which is often ineffective in the long-term (Romano & Kachgal, 2014).

This review has examined the many facets of a student who appears to be acting out. These students maybe suffering from attention deficit disorder, a learning disorder, or any host of psychological struggles that are hindering their ability to perform socially and academically (Konicarova, 2014). Students may also lack many crucial connections, such as social-emotional supports (friends and family), differing cultural values at play (Bean, 2014), and there may be a general misunderstanding of the child (Konicarova, 2014). It can be beneficial to sit down and explore what they identify as their needs, strengths, and weaknesses. As a counselor in a school setting, it is critical to explore why students think, feel, and behave the way they do. The research being conducted intends to answer the question if one to one counseling with these students may help to reduce the number of incidents and improve a students over-all attitude and coping skills.

Can individual counseling positively affect students with disciplinary issues, and furthermore; can these affects be observable in self-report and disciplinary records?

Method

This study is a quantitative, quasi-experimental research design. The school counselor selected students who have a high rate of disciplinary issues that are not currently receiving individual counseling. That counselor sent home consent forms and information to the parents via physical mail. When a student returned the consent form, they were read the assent form and asked to if they would like to participate, and told it will not affect them if they choose not to join the study. If the student wanted to participate, they sign the assent form, and the researcher began the first session, which includes the pre-test. Each participant took a pre-test created by the researcher before beginning individual counseling in order to identify their attitudes, self-image, coping and social skills, and current performance in school. The age range in this study was as young as eleven and as old as thirteen, as there were two students in sixth grade and two in seventh, and their birth dates vary. Participants were based on who enrolls in the study. The participants that remained in individual counseling until the end of the six sessions were given a post-test that is very similar to the pre-test. The pre and post-test of each student were compared to identify changes in students.

Student attended six sessions of about 45 minutes each, and they attended one to two sessions per week. Students began counseling as soon as parental consent and student assent were received. The topics discussed in session varied student-to-student, as each student's disciplinary issues stem from a different cause. The goal was for students to learn more about themselves, and develop healthier coping mechanisms and management of their mind and body.

Some needed to be taught anger management techniques, others needed help with impulse control, and those issues will be identified and addressed during the course of counseling.

In terms of how the data was analyzed, the pre-tests of the four students were compared to their post-tests. Common themes and patterns were identified between pre and post-tests; those results were compared to the number of disciplinary interventions students have received since beginning the study in order to identify that there could be a correlation between the students' attitudes and behavior, and the intervention of individual counseling.

Instrument

The following instrument was made in order to gauge an understanding of the students' perceptions, attitude, and self-awareness of themselves and how the counseling setting affects them. The first two questions are intended as a student's self-evaluation of their feelings before and after counseling, and to see if there is a difference between how they answer the pre-test and post-test. The next question is to understand how they feel about individual counseling before the intervention and then after, to find out if they would rather be seen for individual counseling. The fourth question evaluates what the student thinks they need to work on, and also gives the researcher a chance to understand the student's needs and topics to work on in counseling.

In the post-test, the researcher felt it was important to include a question about whether the student would like to come back to counseling. Ultimately, this question is important because if the student doesn't wish to return, then that needs to be taken into account when deciding on what to do with the student in the future.

How I Feel About Counseling
Pre-Test

1. How do I usually feel before counseling? (circle one)

1 **2** **3** **4** **5** ?

Bad Not good In the middle Good Great! I've never been before!

2. How do I usually feel after counseling? (circle one)

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

Bad Not good In the middle Good Great!

3. Individual counseling has helped me more than group counseling

Yes! They both help! No, I think I prefer group!

4. I think I want help with (circle whichever one(s) apply to you):

Social skills Calming down Handling anxiety Dealing with stress

Respecting myself & others Learning about myself Schoolwork

Feeling angry Getting in trouble Focusing in class

How I Feel About Counseling
Post-Test

2. How do I usually feel before counseling? (circle one)

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

Bad Not good In the middle Good Great!

2. How do I usually feel after counseling? (circle one)

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

Bad Not good In the middle Good Great!

4. Individual counseling has helped me more than group counseling

Yes! They both help! No, I think I prefer group!

4. Individual counseling has helped me with (circle whichever one(s) apply to you):

Social skills Calming down Handling anxiety Dealing with stress

Respecting myself & others Learning about myself Schoolwork

Feeling angry Getting in trouble Focusing in class

5. I would like to come back again for individual counseling:

Yes No

Results

Of the four students in the study, three reported feeling better (“good” or “great”) leaving individual counseling than they did coming in, both in pre-test and post-test. One student reported feeling “in the middle” both coming in and leaving counseling, on both their pre-test and post-test.

All four students reported in their pre-test and post test that they like both individual and group counseling, and didn’t prefer one over the other.

All four students reported wanting help with “calming down” and “dealing with stress” in the pre-test, and all four students reported working on that during their time in counseling and on their post-test. Two students reported wanting to work on “feeling angry” in their pre-test, and reported working on feelings of anger in their post-test. One student reported wanting help with

“getting in trouble” on their pre-test, but not in their post-test. Another student reported wanting help with “respecting myself and others” in their pre-test, and This was the only instance where a student identified wanting to work on something in their pre-test and did not indicate working on it in their post-test.

All students reported wanting to come back for individual counseling in their post-test.

During the course of the study, none of the student received disciplinary interventions (in school suspension, out of school suspension, detention, lunch detention, referrals, etc.)

Discussion

This study supported that individual counseling could have a positive effect on students with disciplinary issues. All students self-reported wanting to come back for individual counseling, and were able to learn or work on at least one thing during their time in counseling. In addition, none of these students received any disciplinary referrals during the course of this study. Although the sample size is small, these results indicate that individual counseling gives these students the opportunity to hone in on their presenting issues, thereby keeping them out of trouble.

Another interesting piece is that all students were able to identify areas they wanted to work on, and the issues that would lead them to get in trouble. The students had the self-awareness to identify their issues, and with the exception of one area (see results section) reported working on those areas of issue in counseling, and did not receive any disciplinary intervention as a result.

These results lend themselves to what the literature has implied about the effects of counseling on students. However, much of the literature on students with disciplinary issues focuses on boys, and this study was made up entirely of girls. This indicates that the literature

could be generalized across genders; however, more research would need to be done in order to definitively generalize this information.

Some of the limitations in this study are the fact that it is only one gender, and a sample size of only four students. The gender factor of this study proves rather ironic, as most research within this topic is on males, but this study was made up entirely of females. This researcher suspects that increasing the sample size and incorporating males in the study would aid in the reliability of the findings; however, this is a promising start. In the future, this researcher recommends expanding the number of students, the age range, and the gender balance of the experiment if it were to be replicated.

Conclusion

This research suggests that if a student receives continual individual counseling, that the number of disciplinary interventions could drastically decrease. The literature on counseling supports this belief in a general sense, but there is not much research to support this idea specifically. Students can identify the areas they wish to work on and actively work on them in their time during counseling. Without counseling as an intervention, the students may not have the time or opportunity to learn coping skills or have a space to process what is going on for them. By giving them this space they get the opportunity to decompress, process, and learn so that they may go back out into the school environment ready focus and thrive.

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