School and Community Relations for Prosocial Behaviors, Character Building and Academic Achievement

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Abstract: There is a consensus among school professionals in the United States that we are not fully tackling problematic behaviors. If teachers are to focus on Common Core Standards then school-based helping professionals could help their overall efforts by focusing on appropriate social behaviors in children. This article discusses the pivotal role of school-based helping professionals who are engaged in school and community relations, and the efforts of the authors (experienced professionals involved in the overall training of many school-based helping professionals) to familiarize them (and the community) with the need to increase prosocial behaviors in students for academic achievement and overall well-being..

Keywords: School and Community Relations, School Counseling, Procosial Behaviors, Character Building, Academic Achiement.

1. Introduction

In recent years there have been a number of well-intentioned attempts to address the problems that afflict the United States' failing school system (Liebtag, 2010). As scholars and practitioners we have often found ourselves questioning the current fields of psychology and education, in particular the way that behaviors and character development are only assessed by testing procedures. This shift in the concept of character is an historical phenomenon. Warren Susman (1984) argued that as society shifted from producing to consuming, ideas of what constituted the self began to change. The introduction of mass-produced consumer goods, the rise of psychology, and the expansion of leisure time offered people new ways of forming their identity and presenting it to the world. In place of defining themselves through the cultivation of virtue, people's hobbies, clothes, and material possessions became the new means of defining and expressing self. Susman observed this shift through the changing content of self-improvement manuals, which went from emphasizing moral imperatives and work, to personal fulfillment and self-actualization. While advice manuals of the 19th century emphasized the character of a man and his deeds, what a man really was and did, the new advice manuals concentrated on what others thought of his character and his actions.

David Smail (1993), claims that character has been reduced and simplified by psychological personality theory to subsets of behaviors and cognitive styles which lump people together into personality and or character types. This is attractive to psychologists since it is easier to identify people's traits, behaviors and cognitive styles using a 'formula'. But psychology cannot capture the soul or essence of an individual. Smail also criticizes the burgeoning personal growth movement and their alluring promise

that personal growth can be attributed to self-choice, as if people lived in isolated vacuums. The personal growth movement champions free will but conveniently ignores distal forces, such as socio-economic and environmental factors. These factors of course severely limit the capacity of people to change their lives. It also ignores the effect of others, for example peer groups, on the development of the self. A training program that combines learning of the principles of Positive Behavior Support and Character Development addresses this gap. While recognizing the importance of normalizing behaviors through Positive Behavior Support it avoids teaching children the 'magical thinking' or simplification of personal growth. Instead it embraces multiple perspectives and points of views, staying far away from the repetitious formulated activities created by self-promoting and self-serving educators and mental health professionals. Too often the solution to children's predicaments has been prescriptive and simple, telling them to 'play nice' or 'behave.' In essence we are encouraging these children to modify outward behaviors in order to change the way they are perceived by others, without addressing internal conflicts, desires and goals. Another example of this is having children practice test taking skills and learning rote information in order to increase standardized test scores, instead of learning how to think and extrapolate from a knowledge base.

2. School and Community Relations

In an ever-changing school and community landscape school counselors can have an increasingly important role in promoting learning, improving academic performance and addressing behavioral problems of students through partnerships of the school, families, and the community (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010). These partnerships can also address the issue of lack of resources and budget cuts.

The school counselor can help to identify potential community resources through the use of community asset mapping. Community asset mapping means that any local resources are identified. The philosophy is that all individuals, businesses, and organizations can have a role in addressing student and school needs. This can

include providing gifts or skills to the school and working through associations to promote the need of the school (Griffin & Farris, 2010).

School counselors can help to facilitate after school programs, work as part of interdisciplinary teams, and engage with local community agencies (Bryan & Henry, 2012). These partnerships are meant to engage the school, families, and the community by promoting the strengths and capacities of each partner (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). These types of programs and approaches can help to address issues related to students' academic difficulties and behavioral problems.

The school counselor can have a central role in helping students to succeed through forming and developing partnerships with families and communities resources (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010). Epstein and Van Voorhis (2010) suggest that school counselors should devote 20% of their time to forming and strengthening relationships with educators, parents, and community stakeholders (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010). This would include organizing school activities, assisting in educating parents and educators about interventions to address disruptive behaviors, and working as part of a team (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010).

Students that live in less privileged neighborhoods can be more susceptible to violence, crime, and neglect and as a result may experience academic difficulties and display behavioral problems (Bulanda & McCrea, 2013). After school programs can help to address these issues (Bulanda & McCrea, 2013). Dodd and Bowen (2011) reported about the successful after school program for at risk students. The program was designed to improve the working relationship between students, parents and teachers and to assist students to work on their social skills, discipline, and attendance (Dodd & Bowen, 2011). Bulanda and McCrea, (2013) reported that participating in an after school program resulted in the students learning how to form relationship, improving social skills, and developing in the students the ability to care for others. Also, the use of a mentoring program

can improve academic functioning and reduce behavioral problems (Campbell-Whatley & Algozzine, 1997). The school counselor can have a central role in organizing the mentoring program and pairing students with mentors (Campbell-Whatley & Algozzine, 1997).

Working as a part of an interdisciplinary team can also help to facilitate change in students and address academic and behavioral problems. Bronstein et al. (2012) reported about a school based interdisciplinary approach to improve high school graduation rates. Although there can be various problems in working collaboratively by expanding the services provided to students it can better ensure student success (Bornstein et al., 2012; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010). Kaffenberger & O'Rorke-Trigiani (2013) discussed the importance of using school based and community resources to address student behavioral problems. School counselors can provide direct and indirect services to student addressing the student needs (Kaffenberger & O'Rorke-Trigiani, 2013).

School counselors can help by connecting students and their families to community resources to help to address various problems (Favela & Torres, 2014; Hands, 2014). In many schools there are immigrant populations that require additional assistance and services (Hands, 2014; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). The school counselor can have a pivotal role by identifying the challenges and addressing students' needs through community outreach activities (Favela & Torres, 2014; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). School counselors should identify community resources and visit these locations so that they can observe the types of services provided and populations that are served (Favela & Torres, 2014). In order to strengthen the relationship with the community agencies representatives from the agencies should be invited to the school to discuss their organizations with the students and their families (Favela & Torres, 2014).

Bryan & Henry (2012) suggest a model for school counselors to help build a partnership between the school, family, and the community. The model includes the elements of collaboration, empowerment (Bryan & Henry, 2012). Collaboration means that the school, family, and community have shared decision making and responsibility for the vision and outcomes of the partnership (Bryan & Henry, 2012). Empowerment focuses on the families and increasing their role in any partnership (Bryan & Henry, 2012).

It is also important to acknowledge that there are barriers to the formation of efficient and effective partnerships. These barriers include having low expectations and engaging in blame (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). The school counselor can assist in addressing these barriers and working towards productive partnerships (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010).

A study by Bryan & Griffin (2010) examined the role and involvement of school counselors in partnerships between school, parents, and the community. The study results showed that school counselors are involved in three types of partnerships. The first is the school-home partnerships that connect families and school personnel trying to address family's needs through workshops and home visits. The second is the school-community partnership that attempts to provide community services to students and their families (Bryan & Griffin, 2010).The third is when the school counselor coordinates a partnership between the school, families and communities to provide services to students and families (Bryan & Griffin, 2010).

3. Suggested Approach to Training

So it is clear that involvement in the community, with a school based program (during and after school hours) should dispense with the one-size-fits-all, simplistic approach. As experienced professionals involved in the overall training of many school-based helping professionals we recognize the complex interplay of proximal and distal forces that have to be considered when working with children to resolve bad predicaments.

When we train school counselors and other school-based helping professionals we often emphasize that for success of achievement and character building we need to be engaging and

enlisting the aid of community stakeholders. In addition to several Kindergartens we have been training at the elementary and middle school levels (involving during and after school programs) in underserved and unrepresented communities across the New York metropolitan area and beyond. Working in these environments, as well as in the high school level, our efforts are also focused to increase training in Positive Behavior Support and Character Development principles in response to the lack of motivation of students to complete their homework. Under our clinical supervision, interns in a School Counseling program are tasked in finding age-appropriate ways to creatively implement these principles in elementary and secondary school environments.

We are starting to receive some feedback from our interns (and starting to put in place schemes for measuring feedback) in the field and there seems to be a consensus among them that problem behaviors are increasing in the school in the United States form year to year, and that the issue needs to be tackled systemically and with enhancing school and community relations.

We see our school/community relations approach starting to have an effect, when we hear that at-risk high school students are identified and are involved in arts and music by producing music in a recording studio we are ecstatic to hear how they are not being penalized for not having early advantages in their lives and rather being given a chance and outlets for creativity, happy to hear of any and all out-of-the-box thinking. This seems to have been possible because of many meetings between school and community stakeholders to support the individualized needs of students (academic support issues resolved at the school and social/emotional support in their home life). This was also possible because of the involvement of community leaders who were social entrepreneurs in that they empowered volunteers from the community (recording engineers and other support staff). Our interns also guided underprivileged students at exploring various college-bound careers, to include careers that involve healthy lifestyle and at the same time instructing students on how

their future lives at work might be impacted by their health and lifestyle.

At this point we want to also discuss some specifics about our training approach, regarding children's ability to learn and stress that their academic achievements can depend on their ability to engage in prosocial and positive behaviors. For instance, issues that can impact a child's behaviors may include problems related to domestic abuse and learning disabilities.

Children that were exposed to domestic violence tend to have difficulties with their academic functioning and exhibit problem behaviors (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). The school counselor, school psychologist, and social worker can help address these issues through group counseling. The issues addressed in the group counseling sessions include developing conflict resolution skills and ways to express feelings (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012).

While is good to have a system-oriented approach in mind, in our training we do not only take into account the ecological elements. We believe that it is equally important to look at the different developmental stages, as well as development over the lifespan.

A study by Malecki & Elliot (2002) examined the relationship between social behaviors and academic achievement in third and fourth grade students. The study results show that social skills are positively associated with academic achievement and that problem behaviors are negatively associated with academic achievement.

A student success skills program based on an Adlerian approach (Campbell, 2003) is focused on developing in children pro-social skills because it is believed that developing these skills can result in success in school and later in life. In essence, this program focuses on developing the children social skills and improving their confidence level (Campbell, 2003).

Continuing to emphasize that there is always a need to look at the different stages of development we would like to discuss

two studies that examine the use of students' success skills to improve academic achievement (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Webb, Brigman, & Campbell, 2005).

A study by Webb et al., (2005) examined the use of students' success skills program to improve social and academic competence of elementary and middle school children. The interventions focused on improving ability to set goals, improving interpersonal skills, and managing difficult feelings such as anger and frustration. The study results showed that focusing on improving student skills can improve academic and social skills (Webb et al., 2005).

A study by Brigman and Campbell (2003) used the students' success skills program to improve the social skills of fifth, sixth, eighth and ninth grade students. The study results showed a positive association between the training and the children social skills (Brigman & Campbell, 2003).These studies suggest that there should be more focus on developing social skills in age appropriate ways in children.

4. conclusion

We hope we have sufficiently highlighted the urgent need for school and community relations. We are now in the process of addressing the audience of New York City district leaders and principals, as well as leaders nationwide, to let them know of our preliminary discoveries through our vast and recent experience in training school-based helping professionals. There seems to us that there is a lack of communication between high school counselors and community counselors, leading to a "disconnect" about outside services that could be offered, such as academic interventions and age appropriate training for increasing prosocial behaviors and teaching social skills. In the high school level there is a need to provide information on career opportunities, as well as education and training opportunities for at-risk youth. Moreover, professional development of school-based helping professionals for the personal development of our children requires a training program that focuses at connecting schools and communities. A focus should also be placed at the need to provide information to children, parents, teachers, pupil personnel service providers, community leaders and activists.

We hope that the school/community relations approach to training we discussed will increase prosocial behaviors and assist in building character for the best academic achievements possible for each and every pupil. And we hope that our system-oriented training movement will grow and help everyone gain a better understanding of the individualized needs of children and of the personal development process in children who look to all of us for information and guidance.

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