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An Ecological Approach to Weaving the Threads of Prevention: Community Partnerships Build Healthy Student Environments

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The University of Cincinnati Counseling Program was engaged by Cincinnati Public Schools to provide school and mental health counseling expertise in the interest of prevention in three urban schools with low academic performance and high dropout rates. The ratings were as low as 10.4% of students at and above the state proficiency level, and dropout rates by high school completion ranged from 60 to 99%. The grant, therefore, is focused on research-based prevention program development, resulting from collaboration with school administration, community and school partners, counseling graduate students, and families.

The grant that makes this work possible is funded through the U. S. Department of Education to deliver a 3-year project within three impoverished schools (grades kindergarten through eight). As external consultants, we are entering into multiple social, economic, and even political systems to provide knowledge and expertise within those contexts. The project staff has primarily come from the University of Cincinnati Counseling Program and the Center for Ecological Counseling. As external helpers (e.g., counselors, consultants, researchers) enter another system, especially when its characteristics are appreciably different from those of the external helpers, special care needs to be given to the process of entry and advancement.

The overall process intention is guided by the concept of collaboration as we work across boundaries to deliver preventive counseling services in the schools. Rather than operating from the philosophy of doing to, we are attempting to work with the urban populations. Rather than being perceived as the university experts up the hill, we want to develop relationships with those indigenous to the schools – the students, families, and school staff. They can identify what is working, what is not, what fits, and what does not. We have knowledge and skill-based expertise in content and process areas that are important to this cross-boundary project, but our first job has been to earn their respect and trust.

The project has a dual mission: to reduce the dropout rate and to improve academic performance.

Targeted are middle-school children in three urban schools that were identified by Cincinnati Public Schools because of their state proficiency scores. Academically, students at all three schools have extremely low proficiency scores (scores range from 18 to 40% in the key areas of reading, math, and science; the state requirement is 75%). Dropout rates are also extremely high, with up to 78% of these students not attending high school, and half of those who do continue not finishing ninth grade.

The schools are comprised of low socioeconomic status populations near the inner city, with 80 to 90% of children receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Families of children within these schools have a high percentage of single mothers, missing or incarcerated parent(s) (hence, extended family caregivers), parent/guardian unemployment or underemployment, and related challenges. Each of the three schools also has a percentage of homeless families. The neighborhoods are within high crime communities, which pose even more challenges to families living in the area.

Multicultural considerations have been crucial to understanding the population in this urban setting. Being sensitive to enter the sites with caution, to go slowly and earn trust along the way, sets the stage for caring, understanding, and acceptance of the grant staff. Local cultures and norms must be fully acknowledged, as well as how levels of the ecosystem are functionally interrelated. Plans and interventions need to be contextualized, set within the ongoing fabric of life (Conyne & Larson, 2004).

The range of contextual issues crosses levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model. An ecological approach provides a logical choice to guide interventions in our project. Applied to counseling, ecological counseling is defined as "contextualized help-giving that is dependent on the meaning clients derive from their environmental interactions, yielding an improved ecological concordance" (Conyne & Cook, 2004, p. 6). Principles include meaning-making, interdisciplinary, metatheoretical, parsimonious, empowering, interactional, integrated view of people,

considers individuals in an ecosystem, considers multiple contexts, considers how time is important, interdependence, collaborative, concordance, and includes a full range of targets. The project is grounded ecologically in seeking to view and respond to students and others in the schools in connection with each other and with other systems surrounding the school, including family, community, and political.

All levels of ecosystems are considered as the project works through the program development phase, from the micro to the macro. The microsystem includes settings and contexts of individuals, such as their families, work, and school. The mesosystem includes connections between microsystems, such as home and school. The exosystem includes social institutions and the media, and the macrosystem includes general values and global factors, such as the economy and political structure of the country. Because there are frequent barriers between levels of systems, families and students find it difficult to negotiate between systems. The project is seeking to find ways to weaken boundary lines at the system interfaces to enhance access, participation, and maximal resource availability.

With all of the local partners, such as the Cincinnati Recreation Commission, the community representatives from the Civic Garden Center (a Cincinnati area organization), St. Leo's Catholic Church (located in an area which serves two of the schools), the Fairmount Providers Group (a group of community agencies which serves two of the schools), and GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, serving all three schools' sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, as well as 10 other schools), ongoing collaboration is essential in order to identify and cross barriers. Parents, teachers, members of school advisory councils, and community councils have been engaged to collaborate in order to develop the most effective strategies for the project. This takes time, and time is relevant to any ecological approach.

The three schools are in the process of redesign with Cincinnati Public School's building plan, which means that there will be considerable construction challenges over the next 3 years as well as redistricting issues. These issues are being implemented in order to obtain what are called community learning centers, to reduce or eliminate busing of students, and to create education centers that also address other social, medical, and mental health needs. Local decision-making committees are established in all Cincinnati schools in this process to assist the community in designing schools that suit their needs. Members of this grant project have become involved with such committees to learn about the community.

Though the project is intended to be preventive

in scope, the counselors' initial engagement with the schools has been remedial in nature. This was an important step to become connected and to build a base of support, as it responded to the immediate requests of the school personnel. None of the three schools had a school counselor, but there were several outside agency providers connected to some of the students. Fragmentation is common when external helpers become involved in the schools, so one important goal for this project is to develop relationships that are congruent with the services already in place and serving families in the three school areas, while creating a structure or process that serves the greatest number of students and families in order to achieve our goal of retention and academic improvement.

Once the support base is established, the project plan is to move beyond remedial counseling into the realm of prevention. Preparation for this step has been to review evidence-based prevention programs that appear to hold merit for our local situations. Consideration of the specific needs and goals for the students in each school will determine the programming for preventive counseling, along with the collaboration and support of the ecological partners. Several key areas of concern have been identified, such as academic difficulty, social skills deficits, and violence in school and at home. Programming will begin with the idea that there is potential for reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors, providing best practices in preventive counseling (Conyne, 2004).

The grant project's director, Robert Conyne, created a school ecological profile, which has been conducted by each school counselor to address the cross-ecology strengths and challenges of each school. This resulted in a clarification of ecological elements that represent facilitative and inhibiting forces relevant to this project. This information will also be used to identify resources that can assist the implementation of prevention programming. The interventions, then, stress the reduction of inhibiting forces and the enhancement of supportive forces.

Several major sources of skill enhancement programming have been identified to date and will provide guidelines that will help the grant project staff to work with these schools and the community to develop resilience in their children. These children negotiate great barriers and negative consequences within the target communities, and will benefit from identified resiliencies such as insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and character. Though each school has a unique set of challenges, aspects of this type of programming have the potential to build resilience so that students are stronger in confronting life's challenges.

Two checklists are helpful in assisting counselors with their personal skill sets. One is a skills checklist of preventive counseling skills, which helps to identify and assess the necessary considerations for counselors working within a prevention framework. The other checklist is an ecological checklist, which helps counselors to assess their understanding of ecological principles in considering prevention or interventions.

References

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