
Counseling Strategies and Techniques to Sensitize School Counselors to the Life Experiences of Culturally Different Students

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Attention to multiculturalism and diversity in schools has been growing and is reflected in the rapidly changing demographics of the United States (Chang, 2000; Chang, 2002; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998; Keller, 2001; U. S. Census Bureau, 2002). Multicultural counselors who show an appreciation for the life experiences of culturally different students are generally successful in building a positive helping relationship with their students (Diller & Moule, 2005). It is important for counselors to develop multicultural counseling skills and techniques to assist their students. Counselors who are not trained in multicultural intervention skills may underestimate the influence of a student=s cultural background. Thus, they may plan inappropriate counseling intervention strategies. The experiences of culturally different students are different from that of the majority students. The culturally different students, therefore, may be more likely to feel a sense of alienation, conflict, resistance, oppression, and low satisfaction with their education (Hurtado et al., 1998).

Competent and sensitive multicultural counselors should have competencies that include the following: (a) awareness of his/her own cultural values, biases and assumptions, (b) awareness and understanding

of the student=s world view, (c) knowledge and application of culturally appropriate intervention strategies (ACA, 2004; Arredondo, Toporek, Brown, Jones, Locke, Sanchez & Stadler, 1996; Chandras, 1997; Chandras, Eddy, & Spaulding, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2003), and (d) willingness to exhibit empathic understanding. Multiculturally effective counselors should use these knowledge and skills in counseling culturally different students.

In the area of education, the treatment of culturally different students has reflected biases, stereotypes, and discriminatory behaviors similar to those found in the society as a whole (Herbert, 1992; Lessinger, 1995; Sue & Sue, 2003).

Sometimes a counselor can make a response that is inconsistent with what the student is outwardly stating he or she feels or understands about a situation. For example, we may find the following response:

Student: I have difficulty in understanding what the teacher say in class. I am trying to communicate better, but nothing helps. Teachers don't understand my problems.

Counselor: You are frustrated and you are not successful in communicating. It seems that nothing works for you.

In the example, the counselor is not reflecting the feelings expressed by the culturally different student. Counselors should sense the true feelings and not reflect “frustration” because they assume that’s what the student was feeling. Listening is one of the most important counseling skills that facilitate student growth and understanding. Effective listening includes allowing the student to talk, not interrupting the student, concentrating on what is being said, giving minimal advice, empathizing, asking for clarification when needed, and not asking too many questions (Neukrug, 2002).

Awareness of His/Her Own Cultural Values and Biases

Awareness of self is an important element in learning to work with culturally different students whose backgrounds differ from that of the counselor. To work effectively with culturally different students, it is important for counselors to be aware of their own sociocultural backgrounds, assumptions, biases, values and perspectives with regard to culturally different students. Counselors must come to grips with issues such as racism, sexism, economic and social class, and other realities that cannot be ignored if they want to understand diversity and the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds (Baird, 1996). Ho (1995) states that

Those who do not know the culture of others do not really know their own (p. 21). Critical self-examination may be threatening to the counselors because it involves their beliefs, biases, and feelings related to cultural differences. As products of their own culture, counselors are conditioned by their own culture and operate from that worldview. They should recognize the impact of their beliefs on their ability to respect others different from themselves.

Counselors should explore their values, beliefs and assumptions about culturally different students= behaviors and lifestyles. Instead of being ethnocentric, counselors should respect the cultural differences of their students. If counselors do not respect the cultural differences of the students, there is more likelihood of counselors imposing their values and standards on culturally different students. Skilled counselors are sensitive and actively engaged in avoiding discrimination, prejudices, and stereotyping. This improves the chances for successful interactions and broadens the use of counseling services by the students (Chandras, 1997). For example, a counselor who was brought up believing in a particular religion may with effort develop tolerance for other religions. Students who belong to other religions may possess different value systems from the counselor. Therefore, the counselor should be tolerant and respectful of

other religious beliefs and counsel the students accordingly.

Counselor Awareness and Understanding of the Culturally Different Students= Worldview

A sensitive counselor must be aware of the history, experiences, values, and lifestyles of culturally different students. An awareness of the students= historical and cultural background should be understood in the current social context relating to perceived racial, gender, cultural, and other differences. It is crucial that the counselor relates first to the interpretations of experiences that the student provides in terms of the student=s background, the frame of reference, and norms of social behavior.

For effective counseling, a suitable psychological climate should be established before the culturally different student will experience the freedom necessary to initiate a productive counseling relationship. This can be done when the counselor and the student are able to appropriately and accurately send and receive both verbal and nonverbal messages (Chandras, 1997; Sue & Sue, 2003). Only through accurate empathic understanding of the student=s world can the counselor can create a

positive psychological

Other factors, such as a student's difficulty communicating with others due to a language barrier, style of dress, skin color, and physical appearance, contribute to the nonacceptance of students by the dominant culture (Gladding, 2005). To escape from stress and humiliation, students may seek support and understanding principally in their own groups.

Implications for Counseling

A constructive and empathic relationship is very important in counseling the culturally different students. An effective counselor must avoid attitudes and behaviors that will foster a negative or destructive relationship with students. For example, a counselor who continually shows behaviors that are judgmental, nonempathic, defensive, sexist, or argumentative is not fostering a positive trusting relationship with students. The counselor should avoid these characteristics and behaviors and exhibit other qualities that will foster a positive relationship with students.

There are a number of counselor traits that are important in building a positive trusting relationship with culturally different students (Neukrug & McAuliffe, 1993; Sexton & Whiston, 1994). According to Neukrug

(2002), the following eight characteristics seem to be highly related to effectiveness as a counselor: (1) being empathic, (2) being open, (3) being real, (4) having high internality, (5) being an experiencer of life, (6) having good emotional health, (7) being an alliance builder, and (8) being competent.

Other elements of counseling interventions with culturally different students include the following (Chandras, 2000):

1. The counselor should ask only the most relevant questions and refrain from asking too many personal questions.
2. Preparation of the client for counseling is very important. The counselor should explain the stages of counseling, what happens during counseling, and the need for verbal disclosure (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997).
3. The counselor should focus on the specific problem brought in by the student and help the student develop his/her own goals for counseling.
4. The counselor should usually take an active or directive role because most culturally different students have an external locus of control.

5. The counselor should fully analyze the environmental concerns of the student.
6. The counseling should be time limited and focused on concrete resolution of problems.

There are other strategies designed to sensitize counselors to adapt to the challenges of diversity. Some of the strategies are: (1) experiential cross-cultural training, (2) weekend workshops and retreats, (3) studies abroad in specific countries.

Experiential Cross-Cultural Training

Schools may send their counselors overseas for cultural immersion training in which initially, the counselors may experience a culture shock. This passing anxiety enhances awareness, learning and personal growth. Counselors should anticipate initial anxiety and develop ways to keep themselves engaged in cultural immersion.

Weekend Workshops and Retreats

Workshops and retreats provide an uninterrupted, focused time for counselors to explore their personal and cultural beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about students. Experienced cross-cultural counselors present

factual information regarding common stereotypes and assumptions about students. Counselors participate in these presentations and actively examine their beliefs, attitudes and actions that may have caused distress for others. They should have an opportunity to reflect, to research and develop steps toward personal change (Chandras, 1997).

Studies Abroad in Specific Countries

Many academic institutions, professional organizations and school systems in the United States provide global experiences to counselors and students by offering opportunities abroad. Teaching centers are available in many countries, such as Japan, Korea, Philippines, China, India, Soviet Russia, England, and other countries. The Council for Intercultural Teacher Education shares information and promotes intercultural experiences in counselor/teacher education programs (Brennan, 1992).

Conclusion

In our increasingly global and diverse world, counselors need to develop an ability to work with students whose backgrounds and experiences are different from their own. Cross-cultural knowledge and skills are a must for counselors who work with culturally different students and their

families. Counselors must sharpen their skills in how to listen, how to value different cultural norms, and how to question their own culturally conditioned values (Diller & Moule, 2005).

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