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Engaging Students in Classroom Guidance: Management Strategies for Middle School Counselors

Classroom guidance for all students is an important element of the program delivery system for middle school counselors. Effective classroom management is essential to implementing classroom guidance and may be challenging at times. This article presents strategies and management techniques to facilitate middle school counselors' planning and implementation of classroom guidance to meet the unique needs of middle school students.

School counselors have the opportunity to communicate developmental information and guidance to many students in middle school classrooms (Wittmer, 2000). According to the ASCA National Model® (American School Counselor Association, 2003), classroom guidance is an important part of the delivery system for counseling programs, and it is recommended that middle school counselors spend 25% to 35% of their time in delivery of the guidance curriculum.

ASCA (2003) and Campbell and Dahir (1997) have emphasized a partnership between counselors and teachers to provide a proactive and preventative guidance curriculum addressing topics that every adolescent may face and teaching healthy skills to cope with these experiences. The original middle school philosophy (George & Alexander, 2003) included a teacher-as-adviser approach with groups of students meeting weekly with teachers to address developmental issues within the peer group. Many middle schools have removed this advisee time to fulfill requirements for more academic content (Myrick, 2003). In today's middle schools, counselors may be the sole presenter of the guidance curriculum in the classroom.

Unfortunately, school counselors may be uncomfortable in the classroom because of a lack of experience in classroom management. The ASCA National Model (2003) includes the following statement: "Although teaching experience is not required in some states, it is important for school counselors to receive training in ... classroom behavior management" (p. 16). This article presents strategies to

assist middle school counselors in effectively implementing classroom guidance. A mixture of counseling and classroom management techniques specific to working with early adolescents is discussed.

EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM GUIDANCE STRATEGIES

Because the school counselor has a special role in middle school as compared to teachers, classroom strategies need to be slightly different but equally effective (Wittmer, 2000). A good balance of caring, empathic counseling skills coupled with traditional behavior expectations and interventions is needed (Myrick, 2003). Parental influences lessen in comparison to that of friends during the middle school years (Caissy, 1994), and for early adolescents, teaching within the peer group atmosphere can be most effective (Wavering, 1995).

Preparation

The middle school teacher grade-level teams can be of great help with preparations and their input can offer helpful recommendations for counselors planning classroom guidance activities. Teachers can assist the middle school counselor in identifying topics that need attention, the time of day that will work best, and which classes can best accommodate classroom guidance (ASCA, 2003).

For example, the first author's initial job as a new counselor in a rural middle school provided a specific challenge. In the first weeks of school, physical fights were commonplace and students had serious verbal conflicts related to simple issues. Conflict was erupting in this school and many students felt unsafe. A common statement from students and parents was that fighting was acceptable if one was "hitting back and defending oneself." Teachers assisted the counselor in devising a plan for presenting alternative actions through counselor-delivered classroom guidance activities. For scheduling, the teacher team suggested avoiding Thursday and Friday, and review and test days. In addition, the

teachers recommended offering classroom guidance activities at the end of math lessons. This would absorb homework time but not interfere with instructional time. Also, the team reminded the counselor to include special education math teachers to ensure that all students would participate in the classroom guidance activities.

Managing the Environment

After preparing for middle school classroom guidance, it is important that the counselor address how to manage classroom dynamics. According to style and personality, the counselor must decide how to best manage the classroom (Wittmer, 2000). After a few harried classroom presentations, the first author examined successful middle school teacher management strategies that could be combined with her personal style and desirable counselor characteristics.

The perception of fairness is very important to early adolescents (Caissy, 1994). Each session should begin with a few simple rules stated positively (Carlson & Lewis, 1988). Using established teacher and school rules often works best because students are accustomed to those routines. If a student breaks a rule, it is helpful to clarify the rules and apologize for not being clear (Emmer, Everston, & Worsham, 2003). It is to be anticipated that middle school students will deliberately test limits to see if rules will be enforced (Charney, 2002).

Spreading one's influence by moving around the classroom is an essential factor in classroom management (Emmer et al., 2003). The counselor's movement in the classroom and monitoring of the dynamics stimulates the students to stay on task and attend (Myrick, 2003). Friendliness and enthusiasm help pace the lesson and maintain a level of intensity and excitement (Tileston, 2000). As the school counselor in the conflict-burdened rural middle school, the first author found that students were enthusiastic and optimistic about learning how to resolve conflicts safely. Their enthusiasm was attributed to the counselor's enthusiasm and optimism. They modeled the example and attitude, which was also reinforcing for the counselor.

Humor can be an effective tool in managing classroom behavior as well (Caissy, 1994). Counselors have the unique opportunity to be personable and teach in small amounts of time, and incorporating humor can create an enjoyable, fun, and motivating atmosphere. Most middle school students are developing a deeper sense of humor and love to laugh (Carlson & Lewis, 1988). Making the lessons fun for students creates a positive atmosphere for learning and is developmentally appropriate in middle school.

Engaging Students and Managing Their Behavior

After careful preparation and the creation of basic guidelines for interaction, the middle school counselor must maximize contributions and minimize disruptions. When interacting with students in the classroom, the counselor can use small group counseling and listening skills to contribute to a positive classroom climate. Through active listening, summarizing, linking, and asking open-ended questions, the school counselor can mold and direct interactions in a positive way (Myrick, 2003).

With early adolescents, it is helpful to link their contributions by finding commonalities they share (Wittmer, 2000). As early adolescents are feeling so different (George & Alexander, 2003), illustrating similarities in the experience is a great way to target students in need of feeling they are not so very different (Wavering, 1995). Thus, the classroom group can be used to enhance the social and academic development of early adolescents (Carlson & Lewis, 1988). At this time in their lives, students begin to believe they are isolated in their feelings of inadequacy and uniqueness. Through a group discussion of feelings, for example, students can see they are not alone. Counselors can point out the commonality of their experiences and create a sense of belonging (Tileston, 2000).

Middle school students also seek reassurance (Balk, 1995), and providing positive feedback on student contributions encourages further communication (Charney, 2002; Myrick, 2003). Early adolescents often are insecure and unsure of themselves; praise can be used individually and within the group (Caissy, 1994). In the first author's experience as a middle school counselor, there were numerous times following classroom guidance lessons that students came to the counseling office to talk privately with her. The students understood the strategies to resolve conflicts, but they wanted personal conversations and support in solving their particular problem with another student. The students were seeking approval, reassurance, and feedback and seemed to value this individual follow-up to the guidance lessons.

On the other hand, middle school counselors in the classroom often are faced with managing difficult situations. For a new counselor, it may be difficult to decide how to respond the first time a student willfully misbehaves. Classroom guidance in the middle school invites the counselor into the inner circle of experience, both positive and negative, of the students. As a counselor, it is helpful to try to understand the struggle of individual students in the context of the dynamics of the group. Classroom lessons are an excellent way to identify students who need extra assistance, possibly as small group participants (Myrick, 2003).

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When a particular student has not responded to the group management strategies and it is time to address the individual's behavior, it is best to speak with the student privately. Avoiding embarrassment is important at this age and discussions are most productive without an audience (Caissy, 1994). Middle school students view themselves in front of an imaginary audience and are acutely self-conscious (Balk, 1995). Therefore, letting the student know in private that his or her participation is important can engage that individual in the classroom guidance lesson. Approaching a defensive student can be challenging, but being positive and nonconfrontational can create an ally. In the authors' experiences, it was not unusual for a middle school student to be flattered by the individual interest and positive behaviors often followed.

After exhausting all classroom management techniques, a school counselor may decide that some students are unable to participate in a particular classroom guidance lesson. Disruption in middle school is common, and the school counselor needs to respond to and address it effectively (Caissy, 1994). Some challenging situations may require assistance and/or referral. However, after a situation in which a student requires a serious reprimand, it is essential to reconnect with the student as he or she needs to know the counselor still cares. The student needs to be approached individually and the counselor must, again, express interest in his or her positive involvement. This individual connection can be powerful for both counselor and student and can lead to a better relationship inside and outside the classroom. In the authors' experiences, such an effort can initiate a relationship that the student desperately needs.

CONCLUSION

Classroom guidance lessons can be the backbone of a middle school guidance program and are the primary means by which counselors can directly impact all students. A successful classroom management

plan can positively impact the educational, personal-social, and career development of middle school students and can effect positive changes in the classroom environment.

Finding the right balance of engagement and management creates a climate of learning and comfort for middle school students. Classroom guidance is often students' introduction to the school counselor. This interaction should initiate a relationship that middle school students will call upon when in need. Classroom guidance is an ideal way for middle school counselors to connect with individual students while meeting and interacting with grade-level groups. ■

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