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Article 6

From Confusion to Celebration: The Dual Roles of School Counselors as Healers and Educators

Sarah Kit-Yee Lam

Professional associations have done a lot in advocating for the school counseling profession: updating the ethical guidelines for school counselors (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2004a), and compiling research studies that support the efficacy of school counseling (ASCA, 2004b). Unfortunately, many students in school counseling and some practicing school counselors continue to struggle over the identity confusion described in the early 1990s (Borders & Drury, 1992; Hoyt, 1993; Schmidt, 1993; Shertzer & Stone, 1973).

A student in Practicum in Counseling once exclaimed to me, “I like what I am doing in practicum. Counseling seems to make a difference. Too bad, I won’t get much chance to do it as a school counselor in the real world.” Another student taking Field Placement in School Counseling helplessly reported, “When I tried to provide counseling at my site, the administrators urged me not to spend so much time on counseling. They want me to do many other things. I don’t know what I am supposed to do.” A school counselor who has been in the field for over 10 years confided, “The kids are hurting and they need counseling. I know I have been trained to do it. But not having done it for a long time, I am not sure if I can do it.”

The preceding comments depict the internal turmoil of those students and practitioners who struggle constantly with identity crisis. They do not know whether they are mental health professionals responsible for healing children in problematic situations or educators charged with assisting school children to learn. The mission of school counselors is to facilitate the cognitive, emotional, social, vocational, and moral development of children in educational settings (Rotter, 1990). To achieve this mission, school counselors must facilitate children in different areas of development. At the same time, school counselors must work with children in problematic situations. Does facilitation of child development fall only in the realm of education but not counseling? Does helping children with difficult life situations fall only in the arena of counseling but not education?

If school counselors perceive certain activities as purely counseling and other activities as solely educational or administrative, they will have difficulties forming an integrative view of their role. Identity confusion leaves school counselors feeling guilty over not providing enough counseling services to at-risk students when they fulfill other duties. Some others feel isolated from both the mental health profession and the teaching profession because they don’t do enough of counseling or enough of teaching.

One important difficulty for school counselors in forming a solid professional identity is their lack of a framework in which to perceive the educational nature of their counseling services and to perceive the healing power of their educational services. In other words, when school counselors deliver counseling services to school children, they cannot see that this process is also an educational event. In the same way, when school counselors perform duties such as academic advising, they cannot see that this process can also bring healing to students. This perception is in part shaped by the narrow view of counseling and education. Counseling is often associated with mental health while education is commonly confined to teaching. When mental health becomes synonymous with mental illness, pathology, problems, distress, and disorder, school counselors’ role in enhancing children’s mental health becomes obscure. When education is confined to content learning, school counselors’ role as educators becomes, at best, secondary and, at worst, negligible.

The obvious split in conceptualizing education and mental health leaves school counselors scrambling for a framework that can grant full meaning to their mission. To successfully create a framework to illuminate the inseparable relationship between mental health and education, school counselors must embed their work with children in a more comprehensive view of the meaning of education, the nature of educational relationships, the human nature of school children, and these children’s educational reality.

The Meaning of Education

Education is a conscious, purposive intervention by an adult in the life of a child to bring this child to adulthood (Van Rensburg, Kilian, & Landman, 1979, p. 251). To reach adulthood, children need to actualize all aspects of their potentialities under the guidance of adults. Those adults who consciously act with the intent of guiding children to adulthood are these children's educators. These educators may be the children's parents, teachers, principals, nurses, school psychologists, and school counselors. This comprehensive definition of education clearly affirms the role of school counselors as educators.

The Nature of Educational Relationship

Children need the following qualities of educational relationship in order to learn and grow properly: understanding, respect, acceptance, and authority (Landman, Kilian, Swanepoel, & Bodenstein, 1982). The necessary conditions for healing to take place in a counseling relationship include empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard (Salotti, 1990). The fundamental qualities of educational relationship and counseling relationship are almost identical. The quality of authority in educational relationship can be realized in the counseling relationship when school counselors provide guidance. Comparing these qualities can give school counselors a sense of clarity that their abilities to establish counseling relationships with others can easily translate into abilities to establish educational relationships with children. Furthermore, school counselors should begin to appreciate that they are equipped with the power to heal and to educate school children.

An Integrated Image of Children

A truncated image of children is held by counselors who intervene in children's problematic situations by focusing only on these children's emotional and social lives or by educators who appeal only to children's intellectual world in the process of teaching and learning. Van Vuuren (1976) asserted that the eight aspects of being human include physical, emotional, intellectual, social, national, aesthetic, ethical, and religious dimensions. Van Vuuren further underscored that these eight aspects coexist with one another and depend on one another for their fulfillment. In other words, when children struggle with emotional problems, other aspects of their being, such as physical, intellectual, and social, both affect and are affected by such emotional problems. From another angle, when

children have problems in learning, development of other aspects of their being, such as physical, social, and emotional, will be restricted. Looking at children as whole beings will give school counselors a stronger grip on their contribution to the well-being of these children's educational and mental health conditions. When school counselors apply their counseling skills to help children with emotional problems, these counselors obviously try to bring healing to children. However, these counselors must recognize that as children heal, their learning capacity grows. When school counselors assist high school seniors to apply for college, they obviously facilitate these students' educational development. However, these counselors must realize that when students have a clear idea of what goals to set and how to reach those goals, their anxiety will drop and their sense of well-being will grow stronger.

The Total Reality of Education

The reality of education involves the total reality of children's lives. Any educational situation is intertwined with all aspects of the child's being. At the same time, such an educational situation is embedded in all other situations that a child faces in his or her total reality. For example, the situation of children acting out in the classroom definitely involves the reality of the classroom: how these children relate to the teacher, to their peers, to what is going on in the class at that moment, to what is happening physically, emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually inside of them. At the same time, these children might be acting out a situation that took place at home. They might be reenacting a violent situation at home, unleashing their rage at their parents' divorce, or coping with the anxiety of walking back to a neighborhood full of gang members.

School counselors may choose to intervene strategically at the classroom level, at the family level, or at the community level. No matter what these counselors choose, they are going to effect change in these children's educational reality. If some counselors choose to work on the family system, they can rest their minds knowing that their work will have an impact on these children's education. If other counselors choose to work with teachers on behavioral support, these counselors can also find peace realizing that these children may learn the necessary skills to deal with difficulties arising from other life situations. Knowing that all life situations interact with each other to create children's educational reality, counselors will find a greater need to connect children and their families to community resources. Acknowledging that they are not the only educators or the only healers in children's lives

will clarify school counselors' scope of practice and alleviate the daunting guilt over not fixing all the problems in children's worlds.

Conclusion and Implications

School counselors are engaged in different activities and assigned different duties on a daily basis. Different school districts and school campuses demand counselors to use different aspects of their professional training. Some counselors may find more time to conduct counseling sessions with students while others spend more of their energy on developing programs or making class presentations.

The professional identity of school counselors does not have to fluctuate when their tasks and duties change. A stable professional identity comes from the fundamental meaning, purpose, and expertise behind their tasks and duties. Unlike therapists working in clinical settings or teachers working directly in the classroom, school counselors face the unique challenge of integrating the educational and mental health aspects of their training. Instead of struggling over the correct proportion of time spent on counseling or other duties, school counselors can use a comprehensive educational model to affirm that when they are counseling students, they are also engaged in an educational relationship with these students. By the same token, when they are developing programs or making classroom presentations, they are also providing the necessary conditions for students to address problematic situations.

As school counselors advocate for the intertwining relationship between counseling and education, they must also advocate for school children to receive all necessary services to guide them to adulthood. Children cannot reach adulthood successfully without adults. Adults cannot educate children without giving respect, acceptance, empathy, and guidance. Prevention and intervention in children's lives cannot take place without knowing that all life events interact with all aspects of children's being. School counselors must mobilize significant adults in children's lives to effect development, growth, and healing among children at different pivotal points.

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