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Counseling students with limited English proficiency

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Counseling students with limited English proficiency

Abstract

As the United States experiences ever-increasing cultural diversity, school and mental health counselors are struggling to find an effective counseling style for these clients. This study focuses on students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). It addresses possible issues that LEP students will face, the things the counselors need to be aware of when counseling LEP students, the way to work with LEP students' parent(s), using various assessments to understand students, teaming with the English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor, using interpreters, and applying the community counseling model as a guideline to counsel LEP students.

COUNSELING STUDENTS WITH LIMITED ENGLISH
PROFICIENCY

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Michiru Shiraishi

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Abstract

As the United States experiences ever-increasing cultural diversity, school and mental health counselors are struggling to find an effective counseling style for these clients. This study focuses on students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). It addresses possible issues that LEP students will face, the things the counselors need to be aware of when counseling LEP students, the way to work with LEP students' parent(s), using various assessments to understand students, teaming with the English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor, using interpreters, and applying the community counseling model as a guideline to counsel LEP students.

The United States is characterized as a diverse population, usually described as a "Melting Pot" or "Salad Bowl" (Beatty & Doyle, 2000). This diverse population consists of citizens from different ethnic backgrounds, yet they are Americans. As the years have passed, large numbers of people from many different countries have moved into the United States and remained. As a result, school settings are also diverse, with international students as well as minority/immigrant students (Jacob & Greggo, 2001; Zhang & Dixon, 2001).

According to Foss and Buckner (2000), 7.3 percent of the students enrolled in schools in the U.S. are non-English native speakers. As of 1995, "24 percent of K-12 students in California, 13 percent of K-12 students in Arizona, and 13 percent of K-12 students in Texas did not speak English as their first or native language" (Foss & Buckner, 2000, p.34). At least 40 percent of the nation's regular classroom teachers have Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in their rooms (Foss & Buckner, 2000).

The number of LEP students varies from school to school, district to district, and state to state. For example Randolph Elementary School in Virginia has more than 300 LEP students who represent 18 different languages (Lindeman, 2002). If one looks at the nation wide population, there are more than 180 languages being spoken by students (Shore,

2001). As a result of this increasing number of LEP students in American schools, school counselors have been called upon to help these students in a variety of ways. There have not been many studies on counseling Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students at the K-12 level to this point. The purpose of this paper is to identify effective strategies that school counselors can use to counsel LEP students.

Potential Problems that School Counselors Face with LEP Students

School counselors are asked to meet the needs of Limited English Proficiency students who need counseling (Jacob & Greggo, 2001). Those needs include adjustment to a new environment, self-identity, and academic achievement, among other factors (Clemente & Collison, 2000). While there are many studies about counseling international or minority students at the college level, there is a paucity of research for the K-12 levels. Therefore, many school counselors are searching for better and more effective ways to counsel LEP students.

In schools where many different languages are spoken, students who need counseling must have counselors who are able to assist them. If the counselor cannot speak the language, he or she must search for people who can help with the minor language speakers.

Ramos-Sanchez, Atkinson, and Fraga (1999) suggested that it is better if schools have bilingual counselors, especially for those students who

immigrated recently. Having bilingual counselors in the school helps students who are bilingual because students can choose the language that is easier for them to describe things and/or feelings (Ramos-Sanchez et al., 1999). Also, bilingual counselors tend to receive more respect from true bilingual students who can also speak two languages equally (Ramos-Sanchez et al., 1999).

It is important to remember that international students who have limited English ability might go through culture shock (Ryan & Twibell, 2000). Culture shock has four stages: a) honeymoon, b) disenchantment, c) beginning resolution, and d) effective functioning. During the honeymoon period, students are excited about this new experience. When they move to the disenchantment period, they settle down and start to see the reality or differences. Then during the beginning resolution period, they start to develop or seek for new patterns of behavior. Finally, at the effective functioning period, they get comfortable with this new environment (Ryan & Twibell, 2000).

Considerations in Counseling LEP Students

Counselors need to be aware that as of 1992, four times more LEP students dropped out of school than English-fluent students. If the ESL standards for the school do not link with academic standards, this number will most likely increase (Beckett & Haley, 2000). In addition,

counselors need to be aware that sometimes there will be students from countries who are at war with each other, and if students from those countries are within the school or in the same classroom, it might affect relationships among those students (De Marquez, 2002). It is important for counselors and teachers to talk to those students, preferably with their parents, and try to make good connections between them so that students do not have to face conflict at school because of the situation from their home countries (De Marquez, 2002).

Class Placement

Also, it is important to establish the students' level of English before placing them into any classes. Both teachers and school counselors need to be aware of the fact that LEP students may have a difficult time understanding word-heavy courses such as social science, science, and English, but have less difficulty with symbol-heavy courses such as mathematics. Also, depending on the students' cultural background, they might have a difficult time in home economics and industrial arts classes. Students' educational backgrounds also affect their performance in those classes (Lucas & Wagner, 1999). If the school has an English as a Second Language (ESL) program, the problem is not that great since students can usually take ESL class two periods a day and Physical Education for one period, but if there are no ESL classes, students are

more likely to have a difficult time finding classes that will meet the graduation requirement within the school they are attending (Keyes, 1989).

When helping students register for classes, this writer believes it is best to find some substitute classes for English, social studies, and science whenever possible. This will reduce the stress for LEP students, especially if they are new to the American culture and English language, and give them time to adjust to the new environment. At the same time, it is important to place them in some challenging classes but remain aware that if they are in challenging classes and follow the regular class schedule appropriate for their age, they might fail these classes. Where to place students is a dilemma, and lack of careful attention to placement will not only put students at risk, but will also cause frustration for teachers.

There has been some research conducted regarding English-language acquisition and scheduling LEP students. While assessing, counselors and teachers need to be aware that sometimes students pretend to understand what they are doing but do not necessarily understand (Andrews, 2002). McCall-Perez (2000) cited studies that suggested four to ten years of studying were required to reach the level of native English speakers. According to Rothstein (2002), "most language experts say it usually take Spanish-speaking children five to seven years of bilingual instruction to be ready for mainstream English classes" (p. B11).

According to McCall-Perez, positive use of the block schedule could yield positive outcomes.

In scheduling students, it is important to remember that some students think that taking ESL classes is a waste of time and they prefer to take mainstream classes. Counselors need to be aware of these attitudes toward ESL classes and work closely with ESL teachers to encourage students. If this kind of issue arises, it might be helpful to give students an English assessment, show them their level, and then consult with the students' ESL teacher about moving them to a mainstream classroom without ESL instruction, if possible (Lucas & Wagner, 1999).

Another way of handling the issue about moving students to a mainstream classroom is to give them chances to visit some classes for a week or two and let them decide if they can handle it or not (Lucas & Wagner, 1999). English assessment will be discussed later, but its purpose is to determine the students' level and give them better placement into academic classes (Beckett & Haley, 2000). At the same time, counselors need to be aware that sometimes LEP students are placed in special education classes due to misinterpretation of intelligence tests (Skaggs, 2001).

It is also a counselor's responsibility to contact LEP students' academic instructors and educate those instructors in the skills necessary

to work with LEP students and inform them of possible problems that might arise throughout the semester. Usually untrained instructors do not have the knowledge to approach LEP students or know what to expect from them. Sometimes students receive negative feedback due to their instructors' lack of awareness regarding cultural differences. When this happens, LEP students may lose interest which may cause conflict between students and instructors and ultimately result in the student dropping out of school.

Family/Cultural Features in Course Placement

Counselors need to be aware that some parents have concerns about their children's class scheduling, especially placement in ESL classes (Beckett & Haley, 2000). According to Beckett and Haley (2000), some parents might feel uncomfortable placing their children in an ESL class. Because they often misunderstand the purpose of ESL, parents have felt that the focus in the ESL class is survival and social fluency, but counselors need to assure them that the focus in ESL class is integrating academic language (Beckett & Haley, 2000).

Another factor that counselors need to be aware of in working with LEP students is that the lifestyle practiced at home might be different from that of mainstream American families. It is important for counselors to be aware of these differences when counseling LEP students because the

way students act might be coming from their family or cultural beliefs.

Although it is important to keep in close contact with the students' families, usually the parents of LEP students are LEP as well. Therefore, counselors need to create ways to communicate effectively with those parents.

According to McCall-Perez (2000), the parents of LEP students usually do not speak English and are not familiar with the American school system. For that reason, they are usually dependent on the school counselors for their children's success, including career planning and higher education planning (McCall-Perez, 2000). Some parents might have a difficult time understanding the importance of non-academic activities at school such as extracurricular activities and special programs (Lee & Manning, 2001).

According to Keyes (1989), one way to communicate with LEP families is through an advisory board. This advisory board could facilitate better understanding between the school and the LEP students' families. In order to create the advisory board, it is important to include members from each minority population, and they can, in turn, help counselors to find bilingual tutors, to interpret transcripts, and to counsel students or families with LEP as an interpreter (Foss & Buckner, 2000). Also when counselors communicate and interact with clients effectively, that involves the

counselors' competence in focusing on both similarities and differences (Constantine, Arorash, Barakett, Blackmon, Donnelly, & Edles, 2001)

School Counselor's Emotional Intelligence

Counselors need to have high levels of emotional intelligence in order to work with students from different cultural backgrounds (Constantine, & Gainor, 2001). Constantine and Gainor (2001) stated that:

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to process emotional information as it pertains to the perception, assimilation, expression, regulation, and management of emotion. Emotion intelligence is believed to encompass a variety of social and cognitive functions related to the expression of emotion. Emotionally intelligent individuals are often described as well-adjusted, warm, genuine, persistent, and optimistic (p. 131).

In order to determine the impact of emotional intelligence, Constantine and Gainor (2001) used the Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS), the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, the Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale, and a brief demographic questionnaire. Results indicated that emotionally intelligent school counselors tend to acquire interpersonal strengths that may allow them to better understand or adjust to the experiences and matters of culturally diverse others (Constantine & Gainor, 2001).

Inclusion of Parents when Counseling LEP Students

According to Lindenman (2002), many LEP students' parents are interested in their children's education and want them to be successful in school. It is another challenge for the counselor and ESL teachers to figure out ways to communicate with the parents (Lindeman, 2002). In order to accomplish this, Lindeman came up with seven strategies: being visible as much as possible, making a list of people who are bilingual, making a list of children who can help translate, making correspondence in different colors, finding bilingual staff as parent liaisons, explaining the educational activities' value, and scheduling meetings that will meet parents' schedules (Lindeman, 2002).

Another helpful tip when working with parents of LEP students is to ask them for differences between their country's education system and the American education system (Lee & Manning, 2001).

Assessing Limited English Proficiency Students

When counseling students who are LEP, it will be helpful for counselors to administer several assessments that include the English Language Proficiency Test and other standardized achievement tests. These results will help counselors get a basic understanding of students' background and their ability to do school work.

English Language Proficiency Test

The most popular English Language Proficiency test is the TOEFL, Test of English as a Foreign Language (Vasconcelos, 2002). This test is given by the Educational Testing Service and students can take it either in the United States or in their home countries. This test has three sections: listening, reading, and writing/grammar. Some schools develop their own English assessment tests to check their students' English abilities.

Other commonly used tests include LAS (Language Assessment Scale), BINL (Basic Inventory of Natural Language), BSM (Bilingual Syntax Measure), and IPT (Idea Proficiency test) (Law, 1998).

According to Shore (2001), these English proficiency tests need to be administered within a few days after the student's arrival in the school in order to determine the student's level of English.

Minority Identity Development Model

Although different cultures have different customs and characteristics, it is also important to know the level of acculturation. In order to determine this, the Minority Identity Development Model is useful. This identifies an individual's cultural values and customs and/or beliefs, and helps counselors choose effective counseling methods (Kim, Omizo, & Salvador, 1996)

Working with ESL Instructors

If a school offers ESL classes, it is advisable to have a good relationship with ESL instructors. According to the research done by Clemente & Collison (2000), school counselors find Hispanic/Latino students in ESL classes segregated from the rest of the students due to their different academic needs. One possible reason for this is the lack of communication with ESL teachers (Clemente, & Collison, 2000). School counselors feel that it is the ESL teachers who decide their students' schedules, and the counselors do not have much control over scheduling and the decision-making process for the students in ESL classes (Clemente, & Collison, 2000).

ESL students often feel uncomfortable going to school counselors since most counselors are monolingual and it is difficult for those students to express their feelings in their second language (Clemente, & Collison, 2000). These authors noted that the students wish they could interact more with the rest of the school, but most of the students indicate they only "hang around" with their friends from their ESL classes. School counselors need to be aware of these concerns within their schools and possibly work with ESL instructors to get students involved with the rest of the school to create a more inclusive environment.

Another important consideration in working with ESL instructors is that they have a better understanding of students. For example, when ESL students speak English well, teachers assume that they can perform at the same level as native speakers, but it is not always the case with LEP students (Markham, 1999). If one looks at the test scores or classroom performances, it seems that students are low achieving, but it could be caused by their poor writing and reading skills compared to speaking and listening. If this is the case, one can solve the problem by asking ESL instructors to see if the student's ability in that subject would be better if he or she understood English better.

Counseling LEP Students with Interpreters

Sometimes counselors invite an interpreter to join the counseling session to help students communicate more effectively (Clemente & Collison, 2000). School counselors believe that asking student's relatives to interpret is not a good idea due to confidentiality, quality of the counseling relationship, ethical issues, and none or poor professional training on translation (Clemente & Collison, 2000). On the other hand, the majority of school counselors point out that there are few well-trained interpreters to work in the school systems (Clemente & Collison, 2000).

When selecting interpreters to work with school counselors, it is important to consider the language ability, knowledge of the culture, and a

personality that is well-matched with the school counselor's work styles.

Also, if counselors use translators for documentation, the translation/translator needs to be cited within the document (Clemente & Collison, 2000).

Using the Community Counseling Model as a Guideline to Counsel LEP Students

This model's basic assumptions are that a) environment limits people, b) a multi approach is more effective than single approach for helping, c) "prevention is more efficient than remediation" (Kim, Omizo, & Salvador, 1996, p. 69), and d) it is possible to apply the model to any human service setting. The following four different services help counselors to work with LEP students because they can be used to remove some of the concerns or misunderstandings toward counseling that students and/or parent(s) might have.

Direct Client Service

Direct client service is working directly with the client/students (Kim, Omizo, & Salvador, 1996). In some cultures, it is not acceptable to seek help through counseling, and it is sometimes hard for people from those cultures to come to counselors for help. It is important for counselors to help the child from this culture and his or her parents understand that

seeking counseling is appropriate if they feel it is necessary (Kim, et al, 1996).

Direct Community Service

Direct community service is working directly with the community, such as friends, who surround the targeted students (Kim, et al, 1996). It might be necessary for counselors to make other students aware of LEP students' needs in order to help LEP students get more involved and accepted into the school by other students (Kim, et al, 1996). In order to do this, counselors can approach the school or community to have a cultural fair or have a buddy system for new students using former students from the same ethnic background (Kim, et al, 1996). Through this direct community service, counselors are not only providing an environment that is welcoming to the LEP students but also making it easier for them to work on their issues as needed with the counselors.

Indirect Client Service

Indirect client service is working with parents or teachers to help with students' issues. It might also be important for counselors to help students' parents to get more involved with school activities (Kim, et al, 1996). This also helps LEP students to feel supported and makes it easier to seek help from the counselor.

Indirect Community Service

Indirect community service is working with a group of people who surround the students and help them. To help students overcome the language barrier, school counselors may ask the school to provide more English tutoring services (Kim, et al, 1996). Counselors or schools might be able to ask for support from groups outside of the school such as churches, businesses, or organizations. Also, making sure that there are support systems available outside of the school as well helps LEP students feel more secure.

Using the Internet as a Resource

When school counselors need help with different clients, there are internet resources available from all around the world. This is a good way to get ideas or help on how to be effective counselors or understand the students' cultures (Rust, 1995).

One of the biggest programs available on the internet is The International Counselor Network (ICN), which has accesses from all over the world. Through the listserv, people can ask questions about certain topics and get feedback from those who access that web site (Rust, 1995).

Conclusion

It is important to be aware of cultural differences and learn effective ways to counsel these students at the same level as non-LEP students. Also, it is the counselor's responsibility to have different resources available to LEP students as well as their academic teachers and parents, including consulting, providing interpreters, translating documents, and so forth. Although counseling LEP students is not a new field for school counseling, more studies are needed in order to provide better suggestions regarding counseling this population.

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