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The elementary guidance counselor: An essential part of elementary education

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The elementary guidance counselor: An essential part of elementary education

Abstract

Education is a social process. Human interaction is the single most important ingredient in education. Most human behaviors are learned. They develop as a consequence of persons interacting with their environment. The type of person we are is determined by the interactions we have with other human beings. When teaching a child, educators must interact with the total individual; this has become known as teaching the "total child". Education can no longer deal singly with the teaching of subject content, as has been the practice in the past. This method has not produced adults who are prepared to meet the challenges of society. Young people need to be armed with decision-making and problem-solving skills to function in the complex adult world. Due to the problems facing children today, some children feel like failures before they leave the elementary school.

THE ELEMENTARY GUIDANCE COUNSELOR:
AN ESSENTIAL PART OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

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THE ELEMENTARY GUIDANCE COUNSELOR:
AN ESSENTIAL PART OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Education is a social process. Human interaction is the single most important ingredient in education. Most human behaviors are learned. They develop as a consequence of persons interacting with their environment. The type of person we are is determined by the interactions we have with other human beings. When teaching a child, educators must interact with the total individual; this has become known as teaching the "total child". Education can no longer deal singly with the teaching of subject content, as has been the practice in the past. This method has not produced adults who are prepared to meet the challenges of society. Young people need to be armed with decision-making and problem-solving skills to function in the complex adult world. Due to the problems facing children today, some children feel like failures before they leave the elementary school.

There have been some important changes in society during the last two decades. Young people today face a more stress-filled life than any other generation has ever known. While society has changed greatly; the rate of change continues to accelerate. Societal

pressures are enormous for young people. Today, however, there is greater understanding and knowledge of human nature. There is now a realization that people are not born knowing how to adjust and make decisions to cope with life. All need to learn survival skills for dealing with everyday situations. Without such skills, students can become lost in a complex world. The question is how can the school best meet the needs of each child.

According to the guide, Elementary Guidance in Iowa published by the State of Iowa Department of Education, all girls and all boys should be able to develop to their maximum potential in four areas: physical, mental, social, and emotional. "Since social, emotional, and educational development occur simultaneously, a complementary relationship exists between the instructional and guidance programs" (Elementary Guidance in Iowa, 1987, p. 2). Between the nursery school and sixth grade, a child spends nine thousand hours in school, more than twice the amount of time spent in high school (Shedlin, 1986). What better place is there to begin working with young people than in elementary school?

The elementary school can meet the needs of students in two ways (Smith, 1987). The first is the classroom teacher and the second is the elementary guidance counselor. The Task Force on Excellence in Education has emphasized the importance of guidance activities. The subcommittee recommends that guidance counselors at the elementary level be required. "A systematic approach to the implementation and development of an organized program of guidance services is essential" (State of Iowa Department of Education, 1987). A primary goal of guidance at the elementary school level is to develop a positive learning environment. This is important for the academic achievement and for the development of life coping skills. Administrators and teachers currently feel an increasing need to develop an environment conducive to the mental and emotional growth of the students they serve. The role of the elementary guidance counselor is to act as a resource person to teachers and administrators.

A second major emphasis of formalized guidance at the elementary school level is the need to work closely with children. "Research shows that most children's values are internalized and patterned before and during

elementary school years, and that related behaviors are generally good predictors of subsequent adolescent and adult behaviors" (Elementary Guidance in Iowa, 1976, p. 3). It is, therefore, important to design activities for students, which match their chronological and developmental maturity.

Contemporary society is more complex than ever due to the rapid changes occurring in this culture. A young person needs to become self-confident when dealing with the problems encountered in daily living. Students should feel both physically and socially secure. They need to have a good self-concept and feeling of belonging. Learning how to solve problems in everyday life and to make decisions are also important life long skills. These skills are essential if the child is to become a productive member of society.

A program responsive to these societal changes and the demand for accountability would be one designed to help students achieve three basic skills they will need in the twenty-first century: learning to live, learning to learn, and learning to make a living. Individual skills contained in these three large categories would include:

1. Learning to relate positively to oneself and others.
2. Becoming aware of one's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.
3. Becoming responsible and accepting responsibility for one's own behavior.
4. Becoming aware of one's interests, values, and abilities.
5. Learning the relationship of one's interests, values, and abilities to occupational clusters and employment.
6. Developing decision-making, problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills.

These are the skills that guidance programs and personnel are uniquely qualified to provide and that lead to lifelong learning. (The Iowa K-12 Career Guidance Curriculum Guide for Student Development, 1987, p. 1)

Problems Facing Children Today

Children typically encounter a great many changes in their environment. The structure of the family has been altered due to economic stress. More mothers have entered the workplace than ever before. Estimates of

the number of latchkey children in the United States vary from two to seven million and increase yearly (Procaccini and Kiefaber, 1983). This phenomenon affects children in different ways. Those children living in urban areas reported that they experienced more fears and nightmares due to the unsafe environment. Children living in a suburban environment indicated that they had a more positive experience; this difference may be due to the safer environment found in the suburban area. Many children reported that they spent afternoons with peers; however, 60% said they would like to spend more time with friends, 25% said they sometimes minded being alone, and 4% stated they always minded being alone (Burtman, 1984). Parents who feel anxious about the safety of their children may create anxiety for them (Toenniessen, Little, & Rosen, 1985). Children often sense the concern from their parents' attitudes and behaviors.

In the last twenty years the rate of divorce has increased from 2.2 divorces per 1,000 persons in 1962 to 5.3 divorces per 1,000 persons in 1981 (National Center for Health Statistics, 1984). Approximately one of every 53 children experienced the effects of divorce in 1981. Statistical predictions indicate that by

1990, one out of every three children under the age of 18 will have divorced parents (Glick, 1979).

Contemporary society puts increasing emphasis on the individual's right to place personal fulfillment above family obligations (Jones, 1981). Statistics indicate that one out of five children live in a single-parent home. In addition, 50 per cent of all women with school age children work at least half time. This is due, not only to the fact that there are many single parent households, but also to the economic situation. Many families in the 1980's need more than one income to meet their financial needs. Inflation has decreased the value of the dollar, and mothers have been forced to enter the work place. This has changed the basic structure of the American family.

Children who are between the ages of 5 and twelve at the time of the divorce seem to display more behavioral difficulties than do younger children and older adolescents (Kurdek and Siesky, 1980). Characteristic behaviors observed by adults, at home and in school, included poor concentration, verbal outbursts, physical aggression, withdrawal, and inferior schoolwork (Sonnenshein-Schneider & Baird, 1980). In a survey by Wayne Barton, it was found that

children from two-parent families achieved significantly higher in school, while children from remarried families did not show improvement in achievement. Children from one-parent homes were absent from school more often than children from two-parent households. Those from two-parent homes tended to like school better than their counterparts. Children from two-parent homes also seemed to have better relationships with their teachers than those from one-parent homes (Zakariya, 1982). The school provides an element of continuity for children experiencing divorce; it offers structure and routine to students at a time when their homes are undergoing immense changes and fail to provide emotional security.

Last year, in the United States, one million children were physically or sexually abused and two thousand children died painful deaths from beatings, burns, and severe malnutrition (National Council on Family Relations, 1977). Abusive behavior varies from less severe to very severe. Abuse may range anywhere from name calling to beatings and or even murder. These parents are not inhuman creatures who want to hurt their children. Many of them are lonely, confused, and frustrated adults who do not know how to

cope with the stress of everyday living and child rearing. Most abusive parents are the products of a home life with a high degree of conflict and abuse (Otto and Brown, 1982). Often these parents recognize their problem but simply have no where to go for help.

"Tomorrow in the United States approximately 1,000 adolescents will attempt suicide. Eighteen will succeed. During the same period, twice as many young adults between the ages of 20 and 24 will end their lives" (Seibel and Murray, 1988, p. 49). The problems these young people are facing are usually not acute. Often, feelings of failure and helplessness began early in their elementary school days and have become magnified over a period of time. Such students became dysfunctional early in their childhood, and as adolescents showed signs of unhappiness. They may not have experienced success in school which eventually led to low self-esteem.

Another area of concern is drug and alcohol abuse. This is not only a problem of adolescents; 10% of the nation's fifth graders drink alcohol during a month's time; five per cent will have smoked or used tobacco; and about two per cent will have used marijuana (Hansen, 1988). These data indicate that education for

drug and alcohol abuse must begin at an early age. Delaying until students are of high school age is impractical and ineffective.

The role of self-concept has drawn increasing attention in the field of education over the last decade. Empirical evidence suggests that self-perception is related to school achievement. When young people are under psychological and physiological stress in school, they may have academic problems. Educational goals should help children develop a positive picture of themselves in terms of who they are in addition to what they can achieve at the academic level (Beane, 1982). What students believe about themselves vitally affects every phase of their behavior and learning. Students may see themselves as capable or incapable, such concepts are developed from the feelings of joy or depression, failure or success, acceptance or rejection (Combs, 1982). The "self-fulfilling prophecy" supports Combs premise here. Students will try because they have confidence that they can accomplish what they attempt. If students try more frequently, they will succeed more often. If children quit trying, they are doomed to failure.

School discipline has been a concern of parents, teachers, administrators, and the community for many years. In the 1979 Nationwide Teacher Opinion Poll conducted by the National Education Association, one in twenty teachers had been physically attacked, and 11,000 of these had required medical attention. It was estimated that one in four teachers had personal property damaged or stolen. Seventy-four per cent of the teachers surveyed reported that discipline problems impaired their teaching effectiveness, and 17 per cent reported that their effectiveness was seriously reduced. Teachers stated that they needed more help in coping with these problems. Forty-five per cent felt that their school was not doing enough to deal with the discipline problems in the district. Jones (1981) found that such problems become more common the longer the troubled student is in school. As children grow older it becomes more difficult for them to make adjustments. These discipline problems had begun in elementary school.

The most important social phenomena affecting student behavior is the loss of the influence of the extended family and the lack of stability in the home structure. Jones (1981) believes that discipline is

influenced by many factors. The first of these is the change the nuclear family is undergoing. With a rising divorce rate, children see an adult world that has not always dealt with its own problems successfully. The lack of ability to handle problems is also reflected in world tensions, inflation, political scandals, and environmental losses. Children no longer accept adult authority without question. "The changes in the rate of physical and cognitive development and easy access to television have lead children to begin questioning adult authority at a younger age" (Jones, 1981, p. 15). Human rights legislation has created a different attitude on the part of the educational system toward children. Today's children have been told by the Supreme Court that they have the same rights under the Constitution as adults. The increase in disruptive students is a very real and complex problem that stems from both home and school. What can be done to help children learn to cope with these problems?

The problems children encounter affect their school achievement; their personal lives, including their feelings about themselves; their family members; and peers. It is very difficult for a child to view academics as an important part of his or her life while

distracted by other emotional problems. It would seem that the system that deals with these students everyday can have a positive impact on their lives. How can the school best meet the needs of today's children?

How Can The System Help Students Cope With These Problems

There is a debate as to who can best provide guidance to students in the elementary school. Some feel that the classroom teacher should be the one to help children develop decision-making and problem-solving skills. The instructor is the one person who spends the most time with the child. It is believed that the teacher is in the best position to observe the student and develop a plan for improving child relationships with adults and peers. He or she is aware of the problems the student is having in school with academic achievement and social adjustment.

Others feel that an elementary counselor is the one best suited to give guidance because of the specialized training they have received. Counselors can also offer a more objective plan of support because they do not work with the students on a daily basis. The classroom teacher already deals with a complex curriculum which continues to expand while the allotted

time of the school day remains the same. Today's teacher deals not only with the core curriculum, but also with thinking skills, time on task, safety, motivation, teaching models, extra duties, evaluations, test writing, committee meetings, and Phase Three planning. The classroom teacher simply does not have time to do everything necessary to help children. An elementary counselor can work with students in a variety of settings: classroom, small group, and individual. The counselor can also consult with teachers, aides, administrators, and parents. The expertise of the counselor can be a benefit.

A total guidance program, however, consists of a team effort involving the student, teacher, administrator, parent, and guidance counselor. Through counseling, the child learns not only to understand himself, but to become ultimately responsible for his choices and his actions (Dinkmeyer, 1966). The school system can, and should, offer resource people who are willing to interact with students in all areas. Teachers, administrators, secretaries, aides, janitors, and counselors must be willing to assist children in developing coping and developmental skills.

The classroom teacher has the responsibility to create a positive environment in the classroom. This environment should provide opportunities for pupils to be involved in decision-making and problem-solving activities. They must be designed to help students learn how to make decisions and solve real problems in their daily lives.

Children, who have trouble learning, depend on the teacher to diagnose difficulties and to find ways to overcome obstacles. The instructor may also need to help identify the different learning styles and provide opportunities to learn in the manner best suited to individual learning style. It is imperative that children be successful in academic endeavors, this keeps them motivated to work. Techniques that may be used to "invite success" include using the child's name when addressing them; showing students they are important by allowing time to talk to the class and the teacher; identifying their strengths and giving them opportunities to use them; and showing confidence that they can learn (McDaniel, 1984, p. 47). The teacher keeps the classroom a safe and pleasant place for a child to work. When problems do become apparent, the teacher must deal with them in a professional manner

which will benefit the child. The educator must recognize the difference between genuine learning problems and distractions emanating from the home environment. The classroom teacher must have the ability to identify children who are experiencing difficulties coping with daily living. These students should be referred to professional counselors for further help. Even though the student has been referred for special help, the teacher must remain aware of the child's problems and how they are influencing classroom behavior and academic achievement. The teacher must continue to support the child in spite of the problems that arise in the classroom.

Teachers should develop a sound working relationship with students in order to help pupils develop good self-concepts. The classroom instructor should help each child find the best way to learn and be successful. Success is important to the formulation of a good self-concept.

Many schools have a guidance curriculum developed for use by the classroom teacher. They can lead the class in group guidance activities as an integral part of the curriculum. These activities should be

appropriate to the developmental level of the students. The instructor should work closely with the guidance counselor to establish a program that will meet the needs of the particular students.

A second way the school can help students develop life coping skills is through the elementary guidance counselor. Counselors accomplish their goals in several ways. They can use small group, classroom, or individual grouping to conduct developmental activities. These activities should, however, help students develop decision-making and problem-solving skills. It is through these skills, that students gain a positive self-concept. A counselor should also work with students concerning home and family problems, peer relationships, and emotional adjustments. A counselor should help students develop their special abilities and help them resolve their educational problems. The major activities and responsibilities of a guidance counselor are: (a) small group and classroom counseling, (b) counseling, (c) consulting, and (d) coordinating.

Small group and classroom guidance consists of activities which focus on decision-making, problem-solving, communication skills, conflict

resolution, and self-esteem. The counselor helps students develop an appreciation for the value of all people and understanding of people of other races or ethnic backgrounds. Activities should help children develop an understanding of relationships with peers, teachers, family, and other adults. In the area of education, the counselor may provide guidance in the areas of test-taking, learning styles, career awareness, and study skills. The counselor's expertise can assist students in many areas.

Counseling may take place in individual or small group settings. These counseling sessions may be either to help a child with an existing problem or to prevent a problem from developing. Helping students acquire problem-solving skills will provide the tools to cope with life. Counselors may help students develop plans to cope with changes in the home or in school. Problems arise which deal with peer relationships, teacher relationships, and family relations. Children who understand that problems can be dealt with will not feel as overwhelmed by changes in their environment. As they become better at problem-solving, they will mature and begin to understand themselves better.

Counselors may also help students who are having problems with academics. A plan for coping with, or solving, these difficulties can be developed cooperatively with the counselor, teacher, parents, and student. Keeping school a successful experience helps motivate students to stay in school.

Consultation is also a vehicle used by the elementary guidance counselor. Parents and school staff may ask the counselor for help in developing a plan for meeting special needs of a student. When needed, the counselor will serve as a liaison between parents, teachers, and specialists. Parent involvement in education may be enhanced by an elementary guidance counselor. Parents become more involved through parent-counselor conferences, parent-education programs, in-home visitations, and better school-home communication.

Coordinating communication is an important part of the counselor's role. The counselor should coordinate communication between the schools and the community. Needs assessments by students, school staff, and the community should also be developed and published. This provides for continual evaluation, which will document what the guidance program is accomplishing, and will

identify areas that need attention. Elementary guidance personnel may also conduct research concerning effective education and present the findings to the school staff.

A Case for an Elementary Counselor

Bundy and Poppen (1986) found that counselors can help a frustrated teacher to keep a positive attitude toward a child having learning problems or help a concerned parent to understand the reasons for a child's behavior. "Counselors used consultation to change the behavior of students, teachers, or parents in 12 of the 18 studies (67%), and attitudes or perceptions were changed significantly through consultation in 9 studies (50%)" (p.220). The studies showed that there were improvements seen in both attitudes and behavior. Some of the improvements seen were better parent-child relations, improved grades, more highly motivated students, and parents with more confidence in their parenting skills. Changes in behavior or attitude were noted in 67% of the studies.

It would seem that counseling can help some students improve their self-esteem; this, in turn, influences their behavior. Some behaviors that students improved in were: completing assignments,

respecting the rights of others, and possessing good relationships with teachers. A study on consulting in Appalachia concluded that counseling and consulting services had a positive impact in the school. In a two year study they found that the number of behavior problems decreased from 173 cases in 1976-77 to 23 cases in 1977-78 (West, Sonstegard, & Hagerman, 1980).

Bruckner and Thompson (1987) found that an evaluation of an elementary counseling program helped the counselor assess the needs of the elementary groups which had been assigned. Evaluation studies can also provide direction for changes in the group guidance program. It is this type of study that helps guidance programs remain sensitive to the needs of clients. Too often counselors are so busy that they do not have time to complete an evaluation or a needs assessment. It is important for counselors to find out if they are really accomplishing what they think they are. Research must be well formulated or there is a chance that counselors may be led to incorrect conclusions or practices (Hood, Mabry and Hutchens, 1981).

Muro and Miller (1983) state that the counselor's label; vocational, drug, health, developmental, or remedial; does not affect the elementary guidance

program. Counseling should help a child learn at a personal developmental level and build decision-making and problem solving skills. Children should be asked to do tasks that are at their developmental level, not those from a textbook that may be inappropriate. A major role for counselors, therefore, is to assist principals, teachers, and staff in designing curriculum experiences and in grouping children so that children can experience success. It is this type of program that helps a student build a better self-concept.

There is increasing awareness that the child with behavior problems is at risk for academic failure and for inappropriate social behavior. They need special help. The school must develop creative methods in serving these high risk students. The use of an elementary school counselor is more effective and less expensive than an out-of-school placement of these high risk students (Anderson, & Limoncelli, 1982).

Jones (1981) states that when student misbehavior is a response to an emotionally confusing, unstable, and unsupportive home environment, then schools should respond by providing a supportive, stable learning environment. Student discipline can be viewed as both preventive and corrective. Teachers need support

personnel to help them develop plans for dealing with student discipline problems.

When child abuse is suspected it is the responsibility of the school counselor to initiate action.

The guidance counselor's role in working with abusive families can serve several purposes:

1. It can provide support to the child and family during periods of treatment and stress.
2. It can serve to maintain the impact of positive gains, anticipate problems, and monitor development that may require further intervention.
3. It can serve as a readily available resource within the natural environment for families and children in times of stress, helping them to generate alternatives and respond appropriately.
4. It can provide consistency and follow-up for both children and families. (Otto, Brown, 1982, p.105)

The results of a study by Cobb and Richards (1983) support the belief that counselor-consultation

intervention can be successful in reducing the behavior problems of elementary school children. More specifically, the combination of group guidance, small group counseling, and teacher consultation seems to be a very effective method of intervention.

Summary of the Research

Children today face a very complex and rapidly changing social environment. While teachers are better trained, than ever before, to deal with problems encountered by their students, they are challenged to do more than ever before. They can do much to help establish a positive surrounding for students. They can develop a curriculum to help students become better decision-makers and problem-solvers, but this may not be enough. They may need an elementary guidance counselor to lend support to their efforts. The counselor can function in crisis intervention; consult with teachers, parents, and administrators; assist in developing a curriculum for a student with learning problems; develop discipline plans; help identify developmental levels of students; teach conflict resolution, problem-solving, decision-making; and act as a resource person to staff members and parents.

A Guidance Program for the Elementary School

In the next few years many school districts in the state of Iowa will be developing a guidance program in elementary schools. They will be asking the question: How should an elementary guidance program be structured?

The state of Iowa recommends that there be one guidance counselor for every four hundred elementary students. It may be tempting for schools to hire just one counselor to deal with the elementary program in their district no matter how large the enrollment. Schools should avoid this practice. In order for counselors to be effective they must have time to work with the students in counseling programs. Those who are over burdened experience burnout sooner than their counterparts. When they become frustrated and cannot meet the challenge of their job, they may leave the field (Avis, 1982).

Students will benefit most from an elementary guidance counselor when he or she is readily available to develop a positive relationship. Students must feel free to interact with the counselor in informal, as well as formal situations. The counselor should interact with students before, during, and after

school. Recess time offers the counselor an opportunity to mingle with children and learn more about them in a less formal setting. Talking with children as they come and go to school each day will put children at ease around the counselor. The development of communication between students and counselor is paramount to the building of strong interpersonal relationships.

Since the child spends the majority of the time each day with the classroom teacher, the counselor must also develop a working relationship with the teacher. When asked, the counselor should help teachers design classroom structure, discipline plans, and motivational strategies to build a positive environment.

Guidance personnel should serve, not only as consultants, but also as coordinators for inservice programs that are designed to help teachers deal with the challenges of child-teacher-school-parent relationships. Teachers should request assistance in developing strategies for helping students who are at risk in the classroom. After conferring with the classroom teacher, the counselor should attend the parent-teacher conference to design an instructional or behavioral plan for the student.

The elementary guidance counselor should also teach children life skills. It is recognized that learning how to solve problems, make decisions, and communicate with others are not inherent traits. These coping skills must be learned. If a goal of education is to develop better citizens, then life skills must be an integral part of the school's curriculum. The counselor should assist students in the development of these skills. This may be achieved through counselor-directed large group classroom activities or through the development of activities for classroom teachers to use.

Working with individual students is another phase of the counselor's role. These sessions may deal with specific problems the child is having at home or at school. The problems may be either academic or social. The classroom teacher has traditionally helped children with problem-solving. As the core curriculum becomes more measurement-driven, and students come to school facing a greater array of problems, the demands on teacher time has increased. The counselor should help children in times of crisis created by such issues as: low academic achievement, divorce, death, moving, peer relationship problems, parent relationship problems, or

stress. The counselor must select programs which help individual students with their special needs.

Conclusion

The elementary guidance counselor is a vital team member on the school staff. Education can no longer ignore the need for an elementary guidance counselor. Often schools state in their philosophies that their aim is to help children develop physically, mentally, and socially. Many schools, however, have failed to design programs to help the child grow in all areas. Schools have traditionally offered curricula intended to meet the mental and physical needs of students, but have failed to provide for programs that lead to emotional growth. Considering the varied needs of children today, we can no longer leave emotional and social growth to chance. Communities still depend on the educational systems to build strong citizens for tomorrow. If society continues to change at the present pace, how will young people cope? What is their future? Today, schools contain more students who are at risk than ever before. They need to develop the problem-solving and decision-making skills necessary to build a better society.

Educators are extremely concerned about test scores; but are they as concerned about the ability of young people to function effectively in society? Do high academic test scores assure that a person will be a contributing factor to society? It is time to reconsider the role of education in society. How can education improve society? Now is the time for educators to be proactive rather than reactive in addressing societal problems. Children are sent to school to learn what they need to know in order to function in the adult world. It is essential to ensure that they are learning all they need to know.

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