

ADLERIAN GROUP COUNSELING IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: REPORT OF A PROGRAM

G. EDWARD STORMER AND JONELL H. KIRBY

West Virginia University

The assumption of Adlerian psychology most useful in elementary school counseling is that behavior is to be explained by the goals we are striving for, that these are often not in our actual awareness, but that they may be inferred from the consequences of our behavior. These goals are always in accordance with a striving for success, which includes enhancement or safeguarding of the self-esteem (1, 4).

For the understanding of a child's behavior this means that we must assume: If a child embarks upon and retains undesirable behavior, even when this causes interpersonal conflicts and is altogether not really satisfactory to him, he nevertheless derives some satisfaction from this, in accordance with a hidden goal. Or, we may say, he does so, because he is reinforced in some way. We may consider some of the effects of his behavior, its consequences, as reinforcers and formulate from these a hypothesis as to what his hidden goal may be.

For example, when a child constantly talks or creates a disturbance in the classroom and the teacher persistently corrects him, calling his name and spending time scolding him, he may feel his teacher is unfair, his classmates do not like him, and he is bad. Yet he may actually be rewarded by receiving this attention from his teacher and classmates. It is perhaps this attention which reinforces his misbehavior and which is its very purpose. Such a child is not likely to change unless the teacher offers some strong reward for proper behavior, or until both child and teacher understand the motives and purposes of the misbehavior and agree upon some more desirable method of the child's gaining attention.

The elementary school counselor, then, must be skilled in identifying the motives and purposes of the child's behavior, in interpreting the behavior to him in a nonthreatening atmosphere, using the process of psychological disclosure, and in making specific recommendations which will result in more desirable behavior in the immediate future (4). A great advantage of this procedure is that in most cases, "once the dynamics of the purpose of the behavior is known, the action to take is apparent" (7, p. 26).

In the Adlerian approach group counseling has been found to be most effective. Not only does the child benefit by becoming concerned about the problems of the others and seeing similarities with his own situation; the group will often recognize and understand an individual's hidden motives before he does himself and thus offer invaluable support to the counselor in his effort to bring about a change of motivation in the individual.

When a child does try out a new method of behaving, the success and its permanency depend greatly on the cooperation of his teachers and parents. Thus they must understand behavior, and know how to encourage (reinforce) desirable behavior and discourage (bring to extinction) undesirable behavior. To enable them to learn this, the group counseling of the children is conducted in the presence of teachers and parents in what we call demonstration groups. In addition, group meetings are held with teachers and parents separately.

To be most effective, the elementary school counselor must then work with the total milieu, that is, he must understand and work directly with all of the immediate interactional forces affecting the child's behavior. This includes the child himself, his peers (in school and at home), teachers, principal, and family unit (residential family and other relatives with whom the child has frequent contact).

A previous study of a similar model (10) indicated that success in behavior and attitude change is directly related to the number of significant others in the pupil's milieu who are involved, and the intensity of their involvement. Accordingly group counseling of the children is also more effective when a counselor works with a smaller school in which most teachers have been trained and become involved in the approach outlined, than to spread his services across a number of schools although he may reach an equal number of teachers. We concluded from this previous study that change can be achieved by working with the child alone, but more change will occur when, and to the extent of which, his peers, parents, teachers and principal are involved.

A previous paper, by Grubbe (7), has pointed out the advantages of Adlerian psychology for elementary school counseling. The purpose of the present paper is to describe one such program of elementary school counseling, the Demonstration Center for Elementary School Counseling, and to present some of its results and evaluations. The Demonstration Center is the Talent Development Project, Wheeling,

West Virginia, now in its third year of a three-year project. It is conducted for five counties with an elementary school enrollment of about 45,000 pupils, and 1,700 teachers, as a model program to demonstrate its feasibility to surrounding schools.¹

PROCEDURE

Counseling Demonstration Groups

The group counseling of children takes place in what may be considered an open group, that is, old members may terminate and new members may begin at any time. However, because of the time involved in orienting new members to the group, members are added usually only upon request by a member of the existing group. Also, with the permission of the group members, the counseling is conducted in the presence of their teachers and/or parents, as mentioned above.

The counselor's function in the group counseling sessions is (a) to build a relationship based on mutual trust, (b) to gather information, (c) to generate hypotheses regarding the purposes of the student's behavior, (d) to test these hypotheses through "psychological disclosure of his goals" (4, pp. 34, 53-58), (e) thereby to help the student understand the motives and purposes of his behavior, and (f) to make recommendations toward more desirable behavior based on insights gathered from or formulated by the group.

The teachers and parents present learn by observing how to interpret behavior, with visitors also often sitting in to observe. Sometimes they stay after the session to discuss the behavior of the group and of individuals. The children also are often eager to remain for these discussions.

Generally children are not apprehensive about an adult audience, but experience has led us to expect difficulties with some groups because of the presence of an audience. These are likely to develop especially when visitors appear irregularly or when the regular observers are still unfamiliar with the procedures of Adlerian counseling. Children quickly test and discover observers who respond to their previously learned clever devices for goal attainment. Then

¹The Demonstration Center staff consists of Ronald R. Smith, director; Arthur E. Jones, counselor; Fred A. Hoke, instructor analyst; and G. Edward Stormer, consultant. It is funded through the U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (ESEA Title III, Project No. 67-03904-0).

they are likely to revert to earlier, less desirable patterns of behavior, such as attention-getting, making the adults feel guilty for their own behavior, or making them feel powerless or confused, angry or hurt, or getting the adults "off their backs."

Ten counseling groups of 6 to 8 pupils each were conducted during one year's operation of the Demonstration Center, involving 69 pupils in all—23 from grades 1 and 2, and 46 from grades 3 to 8, drawn from two schools. They were referred by their teachers.

Each group met for 45 minutes, once a week, for 6 months with a counselor trained in Adlerian group counseling. Discussions were often initiated by the children. Topics common to all age levels were: school and problems attached to academic experience, interpersonal relationships, peer-group pressures and standards, personal interests, parent-child relationships, teacher-student relationships, sibling rivalry and family constellation, and values.

While the problems were, as expected, similar for the various ages, children in grades 1 and 2 were sometimes less able or willing to talk, and their attention span was shorter than was the case with the older pupils. On the other hand, the younger groups were some of the most insightful and productive. Role-playing, stories for self-understanding, and unstructured play were used at times to arouse their interest and maintain their attention and to supplement verbal discussion of "why we do the things we do."

Teachers' Seminars

Teachers meet weekly, in an in-service program, to discuss general problems of management of classroom behavior, or specific problems with individual students. During these discussions the basic assumptions of the socio-teleological, or teleoanalytic approach for understanding behavior, based on Adlerian psychology, are brought to bear on the cases (9). As the teachers begin to understand the purposes behind children's misbehavior, as described by Dreikurs and Soltz (6), and its consequences in the form of the teachers' reactions, a second phase of the in-service program is initiated. This involves the use of an interaction analysis technique similar to that of Amidon and Flanders (2) in systematic observation in the classroom, and of the CERLI instrument (3). Audio tapes obtained during the regular class periods are also used in a modified training (T) group of 6 to 8 teachers meeting for 5 to 8 sessions.

Parent Discussion Groups

The parents of the pupils participating in the counseling, and any other parents in the schools involved who desire to attend, meet for group discussions, referred to as "Discussions for Family Living," at regular weekly intervals. These discussions deal primarily with problems of parents with their children (5). An interview schedule is used with the parents who volunteer to present their case for discussion. The questions are designed to demonstrate the misdirected or useless goals of the child. They cover the nature of the problem the parents have with the child, the child's relationships with his siblings, with each parent, and with other people, his daily routine, and his attitude toward school (8).

Parents often prefer to discuss problems of a general nature as a guise for their interest in learning about the specific behavior of their own child. On the other hand teachers have little time or patience for generalities and theories. They tend to seek immediate help for their own classroom situation and prefer to discuss concrete problems and cases.

RESULTS

In evaluation of the program we shall present (*a*) several cases which showed favorable change; (*b*) the results of an informal check list study with teachers and pupils; and (*c*) opinions expressed by some participants and others.

As a general result we may mention here that initially low academic achievement was the most frequent reason for a teacher's referral of a child to a counseling group. But as the teachers learned through their discussions to identify the misdirected and useless goals of misbehavior after the fashion of Dreikurs and Soltz (6), they began to categorize the undesirable behavior as attention-getting, power-seeking, revenge, or display of inadequacy.

Cases

Rick, referred for counseling by his teacher as an extremely aggressive and troublesome student, was performing quite poorly in school although his test scores and past performance indicated high ability. He was a transfer student in the seventh grade and had suffered considerable physical abuse upon entering the new school. The larger older boys had picked fights with him and would intertere

with him whenever he attempted to make friends, especially with girls. To win favor with this "gang," Rick began talking back to the teacher and being defiant when confronted by the principal. Eventually the "gang" accepted him and supported him in his conduct, but his grades suffered and his relationships with other groups and with teachers were unsatisfactory.

During the group counseling sessions, Rick began to discover that other youngsters also feared being alone and different, and that everyone seemed to want the support of a group. As he revealed more about himself, he began to understand that he sought the "gang" membership for protection and security, and that it was to obtain their approval that he was behaving in a destructive way. The new counseling group offered him support and acceptance, and welcomed his contributions in their problem-solving and goal-setting activities. Thus Rick became encouraged to set more constructive goals for himself, e.g., to make good grades and to conduct himself in a more positive and polite manner. While he again suffered some attacks by members of the "gangs," he gained support from other groups. His teachers also offered him rewards for appropriate behavior. Rick's grades improved rapidly and his teachers reported improved personal relationships.

James, an eleven-year-old in the sixth grade, would sit in class passively, and refuse to participate in classroom activities. His teacher kept him at lunch time and after school to work with him. His mother consistently checked with his teacher about James, and picked him up after school, although he lived only a short distance away. His classmates began to tease him about the attention he was getting. This is why the teacher referred him for group counseling.

During the group counseling sessions the students asked James why he would not talk. He revealed that he was afraid he would make a mistake and the class would laugh. The members of the group assured him that everyone makes mistakes but most people do not laugh. Situations that were embarrassing to James were role-played. For example, because James said he could not give reports in history class, history lessons were role-played. James had a chance in this situation to role-play with the "guarantee" that no one would laugh at him. The teacher also assisted in helping James learn new behavior. For example, the teacher called on James to point out countries on a map instead of talking in class. She also began using small groups and buzz groups in class which made it

easier for James to participate. Prior to the end of the year, James had begun to contribute to both group and classroom discussions.

Jimmy was a very hostile fifth grader who performed poorly academically, and misbehaved in class. He had stolen some small articles, and been a part of a group who had broken into the school and destroyed some property. He would get extremely angry when any authority confronted him, and would deny involvement. He felt he was blamed for any misdeed whether he was guilty or not. Initially, during the group counseling sessions he would lose his temper and could not accept disclosures about his behavior. He felt the world was unfair, and he was setting out to prove it by causing people to reject him. However, after many group counseling sessions, he eventually recognized that he wanted to be "a big shot." Only after much pressure was exerted on him by law and school authorities, he reluctantly agreed to try out new behavior, and was apparently quite surprised to find ready acceptance by his peers and teachers. He began to exert his leadership ability in his new group, and assisted the counseling group in establishing goals. Jimmy's performance in school improved.

Teachers' and Pupils' Check Lists

For an evaluation of the changes in pupils participating in the counseling, the teachers completed a behavior and attitude check list for these children. The data so obtained showed that the teachers felt the counseling had helped the pupils in their social and personal development, but did not contribute to improvement in academic achievement.

Pupils' self-report on a similar check list following counseling revealed that pupils in grades 1 and 2 perceived group counseling as helpful in relating to classmates and teachers, but *not* helpful in understanding behavior; whereas, pupils in grades 3 to 8 perceived counseling as helpful in understanding and *accepting* their own and others' behavior, but *not* helpful in developing more positive relationships with classmates and teachers.

Informal Opinions

Written statements, letters of endorsement, and various reports and requests reflected favorably on the program.

1. Teachers and staff reported changes in the behavior of children who had been in group counseling.

2. Teachers enjoyed participating in the seminars and found them helpful in learning to understand behavior of and to work with pupils.

3. The parents who participated in the discussion groups were enthusiastic and interested, although it was not possible to get all parents involved.

4. School administrators approved of the program and felt teachers and pupils had benefited from it.

5. Five additional schools, beyond the two that had been involved, requested similar programs.

6. The elementary school counselor is beginning to be regarded as a resource person capable of assisting not only children, but also teachers, school administrators, and parents.

SUMMARY

The approach to changing children's problem behavior, herein described, is based on the Adlerian concepts that behavior is purposive, and that the individual by his nature strives for success. The school counselor therefore begins by identifying the purpose of the child's misbehavior, then discloses this purpose to him, in an acceptable way, and helps him to respond to his situation in more constructive and socially beneficial ways. The counselor also communicates his understanding of the case to the significant persons in the child's environment, and helps them to encourage the child's changed, more desirable behavior. For the child, understanding is facilitated in group counseling. For the parents and teachers observation of such group sessions, together with discussion groups of their own, is an effective way of increasing their understanding and skills of responding.

To be most effective, the elementary school counselor works with the child's total milieu as well as the child himself. Such a counselor, then, will be a specialist who is trained to work from a school base with all of the forces—i.e., teachers, pupils, administrators, and community—in the community of that educational setting.

A set-up involving the foregoing approach and procedures, the Demonstration Center for Elementary School Counseling, Wheeling, West Virginia, is described. From observations, students' and teachers' evaluations at the end of the first year's operation, and requests for expanded services, the program is judged to be quite successful.

REFERENCES

1. ADLER, A. *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*. Ed. by H. L. & Rowena R. Ansbacher. New York: Basic Books, 1956.
2. AMIDON, E. J., & FLANDERS, N. A. *The role of the teacher in the classroom: a manual for understanding and improving teachers' classroom behavior*. Minneapolis, Minn.: P. S. Amidon, 1963.
3. Classroom Interaction Analysis Instrument, CERLI. Chicago, Ill.: Educ. Regional Lab., 1967.
4. DREIKURS, R. *Psychology in the classroom*. 2nd ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.
5. DREIKURS, R., CORSINI, R., LOWE, R., & SONSTEGARD, M. (Eds.) *Adlerian family counseling: a manual for counseling centers*. Eugene, Oregon: Univer. Oregon Press, 1959.
6. DREIKURS, R., & SOLTZ, VICKI. *Children: the challenge*. New York: Meredith, 1967.
7. GRUBBE, T. E. Adlerian psychology as a basic framework for elementary counseling services. *Elem. Sch. Guid. Counsel.*, 1968, 3, 20-26.
8. SONSTEGARD, M. A rationale for interviewing parents. *School Counselor*, 1964, 12, 72-76.
9. SONSTEGARD, M., & DREIKURS, R. *The teleoanalytic approach to group counseling*. Chicago, Ill.: Alfred Adler Inst. Chicago, 1967.
10. STORMER, G. E. Milieu group counseling in elementary school guidance. *Elem. Sch. Guid. Counsel.*, 1967, 1, 240-254.