GROUP COUNSELING FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

Report of a graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
Counseling and Guidance

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Introduction:

It has been at least thirty years and possibly more since educators first began to express the importance of mental health to learning and the need for schools to work on helping children not only with the academic aspect of their education but with the social and emotional as well. In 1952, Arthur T. Jersild commented, "...for many young people school is second only to the home as an institution that determines the growing individual's concept of himself and his attitudes of self-acceptance and self-rejection." (3:90)

Still, for many teachers today, teaching remains solely a process whereby the teacher attempts to instill knowledge into the recalcitrant student. Teachers express annoyance at the intrusions of emotion into their classrooms. "There I was with a beautiful lesson planned, all set to go, and there sat this group of girls, passing notes back and forth about 'Let's hate Mary!'", stated a fourth grade teacher. Of course, children who are churned up about a social crisis on the playground cannot become absorbed in Junipero Serra and the California missions. And what about Mary? She sits trembling at the rejection she has experienced from her peer group. She is feeling hurt, angry and vindictive. How can she possibly become involved in
information gathering?

Virginia Axline states, "You cannot divorce learning from life. The child is a dynamic, forceful being. He should not be placed in a groove. Give the child an opportunity to function as an individual. Give him freedom and responsibility and a feeling of success." (1:151) Yet many teachers continue to express annoyance at the child who has difficulty learning because he is not meeting their criteria for success, fitting into their particular "groove" or meeting their definition. Children who are forced to meet such criteria before they are able to, often become the problems which grow more intense each year as the failure syndrome snowballs. I do not mean to say that all problems of such nature begin in the school. In most cases, the child with a poor self-concept comes to school with the problem already well-entrenched into his personality. However, the school can help such children most by accepting them as they are and helping to maximize whatever potentials they have rather than by treating difficulties in learning as a deliberate kind of rebellion which should be punished. As educators, it is important for us to remember that anxiety in children takes many forms, and hostility and rebellion is a major one.
Problem:

Parthenia St. School in Sepulveda and Plainview Avenue Elementary School in Tujunga are two schools where attempts are being made to give teachers an opportunity to discuss and share their problems concerning individual children through a guidance committee which meets weekly. It was in the guidance committee that the question arose as to what could be done to give additional help to children whose academic status is weak, who are frequently the ones who aggressively lash out in anger at others, or whose aggression takes the form of a whining demand for the constant attention of a teacher who is attempting to minister to the needs of thirty-six other children. In other words, these are the children who are a continual challenge and a source of irritation to the teacher.

Both schools chose to select such children, of comparable age levels, to work in groups with a leader who had a counseling background.

Purpose:

The groups were to serve as a problem-solving and supportive body to help these children who invariably fall into the category of what William Glasser calls "children who have failure identities" (2:25)
and are trapped by the negatively reinforcing conditions of poor academic skills and poor self-concept. In order to interrupt this descending spiral, it was hoped the groups could help these children see themselves in a more positive light so that they could redirect their energies more constructively and perhaps, help the teachers so that they could view these children, whom one teacher quoted as "feeling inadequate, because they are inadequate", in a different light with new understanding and insight.

In addition to giving these children support and a time and place in which to discuss common problems, it was hoped the groups would meet other needs such as the need for security through unconditional acceptance, ego-building and thus, an opportunity to modify self-concept, help the individual gain in self-understanding and acceptance of himself and others, as well as an opportunity to grow in his concepts of human understanding.

Process:
Both schools seemed to run into snags in getting their programs started. After several weeks of delay, the teachers turned in the names of children they recommended for the program, parents were contacted
and procedures and goals made known to them, and permission was granted to begin.

At Parthenia, I led two groups of fourth graders. (Two groups of fifth and sixth graders were led by another counselor.) The children were recommended for group work by the teacher and confirmed by the principal. Unfortunately, there was no initial interview whereby the counsellor could screen the children for each group. They did not know why they were chosen although they could guess, and no doubt, they were all anxious, some were overtly hostile, and all were in need of reassurance.

At Plainview where I worked closely with Barbara Teachenor, Curriculum Enrichment Teacher, we co-led two groups also, one of younger children and one of sixth graders. Here, because of resistances on the part of some faculty members and concern regarding parental acceptance, the program was late in beginning. While this was a source of great frustration at the time, in retrospect it proved to be an asset, because in the interim we were able to equip an unused room in a manner which we felt would be conducive to group experiences. We gathered large pillows to sit on, a rug was donated, and we created as best we could, an environment that was part of a schoolroom, yet somehow, warm and inti-
mate. We were also able to equip the room with art supplies and materials for use in activity experiences. When finally, we were given permission to begin our groups, we were ready for them. Each child was interviewed individually so that by the time of the first meeting, the feelings of anxiety were considerably minimized.

The groups met weekly for periods of 30 - 45 minutes. There was a marked difference in the responses of older and younger groups to this experience. The older children were quickly absorbed into the group dynamics of the situation. They could talk about what their problems were in school, what they liked and disliked about their school experiences and tentatively, are now beginning to look at their feelings concerning themselves and their inter-relationships with one another. We are now working at talking directly to one another; they seem to want to communicate through the group leader, in a tattling sort of way.

The younger children, divided into two groups, one of boys and one of girls, presented a unique challenge in that they were on the whole, considerably less mature than the average fourth grader. There was much environmental "testing" in the form of jostling one another, tipping chairs back, playing with equipment in
the room, and in general, they displayed their lack of tolerance for the situation by being easily distractable. In addition, they seemed embarrassed (frightened?) by the idea of the group as a means for discussion. It was apparent that limits would have to be set and other means than verbal found for self-expression. Virginia Axline says "Play is the child's natural medium for self-expression." (1:9) Using this as a guideline, I introduced various different activities at subsequent meetings. We used clay, puppets, drawings of themselves and the most important people in their lives and paper dyeing.

One of the most interesting meetings we had was one in which the girls expressed their keen interest in love and sex through the use of puppets. I was intrigued to find that where there was total lack of interest in what the other person had to say when we had a group discussion, the interest in each other's puppet shows was intense. We have also used puppets to indicate feelings of hate and feelings of being different and left-out.

Clay was another good medium for self-expression, particularly for the boys. Some beat it mercilessly, others made snakes who ate men, volcanoes in which they buried people, ugly people they hated whose heads were
cut off. A whole range of fantasy was expressed.

Results:

It is too soon to evaluate any of these groups in terms of results since we were late in beginning and my early efforts at Parthenia were fraught with the clumsiness of a novice counselor groping to find a most efficient process. Perhaps there has been no behavior change effected and the only value of the experience to the individual child has been a cathartic one. Axline says, "There is value in catharsis -- the outpouring of feelings, but the addition of reflection of feelings and acceptance is the added element that helps clarify the feelings and helps the child develop insight." (1:146)

Suggestions for prospective counselors of elementary school groups:

Although the primary purpose of this project is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree, I would like it to be of value to future counselors of elementary school groups and as such I am including some suggestions that may be of value based on my experience, albeit limited:

1) Prior to group formation, all children should be
interviewed in a relaxed, informal manner, on an individual basis, by the counselor. At this time the counselor can explain the purpose of the group -- to work on problems common to all children at this age in varying degrees and discuss the need for confidentiality. This is particularly important since children express concern as to whether what they say will be reported to the teacher. Thus the counselor gets to know the child, (I was amazed at how much I could learn from a question like, "What kind of a house do you live in?" or "What do you like to eat for breakfast?") and a basis for trust is established.

2) Groups should be limited to six or eight children in a similar age range with a balance of aggressive and withdrawn children and one or two fairly stable members, who are more mature children for this particular age range. Such children are frequently an asset to the group dynamics and take the stigma off the group as being an experience only for "bad kids" or "kids who get in trouble". One child expressed the feeling that he had been chosen for group participation because he had been "in trouble" early in the semester and ever since had been the focus of the teacher's attention as the "one to blame" when things went wrong. All children have problems in
varying degrees and can benefit from a group experience.

3) With younger or more immature children a program of activities is essential. Puppets, art and craft materials and if a male counselor is working with boys -- physical activities involving bodily contact would be valuable.

4) I found it valuable to stay with a non-directive approach as much as possible. Reflecting the feelings of the child releases the counselor from the necessity of taking sides or becoming a "moralizing force" and helps the child look into himself and make his own choices. This has been the most difficult thing I have had to learn and incorporate within myself. Its importance was brought home to me in an incident in which I intuitively attempted to resolve a problem in which a group of fourth grade girls overtly rejected one of their group. Fearing for the self-concept of the rejected child, which was already very shaky, I tried to show the others the destructiveness of their act. This only served to make them feel guilty and defensive. Developing the non-directive, empathic approach so that it is not a technique but is genuinely incorporated into one's being, I feel, should be the
goal of every counselor for only in this way can we give complete acceptance to each child.

5) I recommend that counselors work gently with teachers, particularly those who are least open to the "new" ideas being proposed. I found it was as important to understand their feelings as it was the children's. If they are encountered too strongly, they become defensive and reject all new proposals. If the counselor understands the problems and obstacles they are confronted with, it is possible to help them alter feelings about particular children and in time, effect a general change in attitude.

6) The following is a bibliography which I found valuable:


Moustakas, Clark, Teaching as Learning, Ballantine Books, N. Y., 1972.
7) Questions for use in structuring a group counseling session with young children:

What do you like most about yourself? Least?

What would you like most to change in yourself?

Things I am afraid of......

Things I like ............

Things I hate.....

I wish I was somebody else.....

Things I wish I could do......

Has someone ever done something for you that made you feel good?

Have you ever done something for someone else that made you feel good?

How do you make friends? Do you have a good friend? What is a good friend? Have you ever been disappointed in your good friend? How do you feel about your friend when he disappoints you? Is it good to have many or a few friends?

Do you ever feel jealous? What makes you feel jealous?

What do you like most about school? Least?

Draw a picture of your family and put yourself in it.

Draw a picture of the people most important to you.
References

