



Empowering Teachers in Schools with Basic Counseling Skills

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Abstract

Mental disorders are behavioral or psychological syndromes or patterns manifesting in individuals, indicating an underlying psychobiological dysfunction. The rising prevalence of mental disorders among children and adolescents is a significant public health issue, as a newly introduced lifespan approach stresses that childhood mental health issues lie on the developmental continuum and can manifest at different stages of life as severe mental health disorders. To assist the public health system in fulfilling this burgeoning and alarming need, in the last two decades, schools have moved towards achieving the goal of a health education system wherein student well-being and academic output are supported hand in hand. School-based interventions are sought to improve mental health literacy and reduce stigma, which can prevent these disorders and promote well-being. The main rationale of the current review article is as follows. One in eight children and young people aged 5 to 19 years have at least one mental disorder. Research shows that high demand has caused a shortage of qualified school psychologists and counselors. Hence, there is a need for teachers to support the mental health team. It is seen that with the advantage of their direct contact with students, they can effectively support student wellbeing along with academic output. Also, there is a need for interventions to reduce stigma and increase mental health literacy. This may facilitate help-seeking and the use of mental health services by young people. Among other rationales are: it is seen that school-based interventions carried out by professionals in a school other than mental health professionals can prevent the onset of mental health issues by supporting students in dealing with minor mental health issues, improving mental health literacy, and reducing stigma. Hence, this review discusses and posits equipping teachers with basic counseling skills as a valuable strategy and methodology of intervention in school mental health programs.

Keywords: Counseling skills, Positive psychology, Well-being, Teachers, Schools

Introduction

Recent historical and contemporary research points out the application of building school-based mental health intervention into existing school systems as a valuable evidence-based counseling approach.¹⁻¹⁰ School-based universal interventions aim at improving mental health literacy and reducing mental health stigma as it has the potential to prevent mental disorders and promote mental well-being, thus reducing the burden of mental disorders. In this effort, the teacher-student relationship is taken advantage of. There are a few rationales behind the purpose of this study. There is an ongoing thought that teacher proximity with students in schools makes them effective in supporting student well-being. As seen in schools, teachers are engaged in much more than simply imparting knowledge. Besides pedagogy in school, teachers console a child with emotional outbursts and deal with an anxious and lonely student during a teaching day. Besides,

teachers regularly engage in Individual Educational program (IEP) meetings, conduct parent conferences, and coordinate discussions around students' emotional problems. Across the school years, many students, regardless of academic ability, encounter some emotional, behavioral, and developmental challenges from time to time.¹¹ Although, ideally, such challenges should be addressed by specialists with mental health professional training and skills, teachers are often at the frontline of identifying, monitoring as well as supporting at-risk students. Teachers are being recognized as first responders to any psychological issue in schools.¹¹ However, a lack of training in the requisite skills and the lack of resources to equip them with mental health services is causing a considerable and urgent gap.¹²⁻¹⁴ Hence, there is a continuous demand for pedagogical teacher training programs to equip teachers with counseling skills or methods to enhance their pedagogy and support student well-being.

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The context is set to underscore the variables needed to meet the goal of pedagogical training of teachers in mental health. It was explored that a positive teacher-student relationship has its benefits in promoting student well-being. Also, autonomy-supportive teaching is a strong variable to strengthen student well-being. Moving forward, this section explores and further discusses the professional development of teachers in evidence-based counseling skills set in the relationship between teacher and the student. This will help further to assign counseling skills or a method for teachers that can fall in line with autonomy teaching to support student well-being.¹⁴ The American Psychological Association defines counseling as “professional assistance in coping with personal problems, including emotional, behavioral, vocational, marital, educational, rehabilitation, and life-stage (e.g., retirement) problems.”¹ Counselor makes use of such techniques as **active listening**, guidance, advice, discussion, **clarification**, and the administration of tests.¹ The treatment can change how a client thinks, feels, and behaves regarding an upsetting experience. In the context of this study, the goal is not to introduce or provide skills to teachers in the background or expertise in counseling or to function as the school counselor, psychologist, or social worker.¹⁵ The goal is to equip them to introduce them to the basic methodology of counseling skills to sensitize them to the needs of students and to the basic skills and ideas that are involved in responding to students interpersonal, social and emotional needs. In other words, it is to integrate counseling and guidance into teacher training and learning to prevent and avoid student psychological problems and to improve effective teacher practices. Also, in doing so teachers become aware of their practices as reflective practitioners to improve their practice.

In teacher-student bonding, the two prerequisites that are required to build as well as strengthen it are relationship and communication skills which also form the basis for a therapeutic relationship between a client and a therapist or a counselor.^{11,13} The relationship skills foster the relational alliance to nurture understanding between the two beings with basic human needs of dignity and respect.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ These skills can also be used to enhance teacher-student relationships, such as therapeutic relationships. Teachers must have a foundation of trust with their students to build strong attachments that encourage school connectedness. Fostering strengths and providing hope through connectedness cannot be accomplished without teachers establishing a foundation of trust and understanding with their students.¹⁷ These key core features comprise a nurturing alliance that includes genuineness, empathic understanding, and neutrality.¹⁶ These core features also have important implications for developing a strong teacher-student alliance.^{18,19}

Teacher-student communication skills are important for all students' daily interactions. Some techniques in attending and listening are relatively common for most teachers in their daily

interactions and are more effective when supplemented with other skills, such as reframing and challenging.²⁰ Effective implementation of such skills with a student has the potential for the greatest impact during day-to-day interpersonal interactions and critical emotional distress events. There are enough opportunities during school for a teacher to observe and engage with a student in emotional distress and can provide validation and alternative perspectives for effective problem-solving. In knowing that relationship and communication are two important variables, four basic counseling skills are highlighted and they are listening and attending, understanding, and empathetic acceptance.²¹⁻²³ Counseling skills creating and fostering safe, supportive and challenging learning environments. Therefore, learning and applying basic counseling skills is important to prevent and avoid psychological problems and to improve effective teacher practices.^{21,23} From this perspective, basic counseling skills that focus on listening and attending, understanding and empathetic acceptance are important in changing teacher behavior and improving teacher practices. Below is a detailed exploration of these skills in literature.

Listening and Attending

Listening and attending are cited as the most important aspects of a counseling process as a set of basic counseling skills to promote effective therapeutic relationships and enhance client engagement.¹⁶⁻¹⁹ By mindful and skilled listening clients feel heard, respected and validated. Active listening among many other things includes eye contact, nodding, facial expressions and body language. Active listening shows that one is engaged and focused on what the client is saying. Active listening models propose a rapport-building effect of active listening.^{16,18}

Listening is multipurpose as it not only aural attention but full focus and observation of a client's appearance and behavior.²⁴ Constructive listening is synonymous with well-being, feelings of closeness and shared effort and is seen as the quality listeners convey three qualities to their speakers: undivided attention, comprehension, and positive intention.²² Listening involves several different non-verbal and more verbal behaviors wherein the speakers tend to form a holistic perception of whether they were listened to well or not.^{14,24,25} Carl Roger's empathetic and non-judgemental approach is understood to constitute high-quality listening for the clinician to respond so the client feels acknowledged in his or her experiences.^{16,18,19} Active listening allows the clinician to gather critical information, including the perspectives and priorities of the client. The act of active listening also provides an opportunity for the client to confirm or clarify the information relayed to the clinician.^{14,24}

Attending focuses on what the other person is saying and tries to communicate with undivided attention. Good attendance will show the client they are respected and encourage them to talk about their thoughts and feelings.^{16,18,19} As detailed by

listening theorists and aligned with self-deterministic theory (SDT) concepts, high-quality listeners use non-verbal along with a small set of verbal behaviors that give voice to the speaker, demonstrate their willingness to take the speaker's perspective, show they understand the speaker's worldview, and encourage the speaker to drive the conversation volitionally.^{14,26} Attending includes nonverbal behavior, experiences and empathy communication, and active listening, a powerful foundational skill supporting other counseling skills. In other words, active listening is also essential for gathering and providing information and promoting change. Two fundamental skills comprise active listening-reflection and summarization. A reflection is a response that acknowledges the key elements of the heard message with a word, short phrase, or sentence. It can be verbatim a paraphrased response of what was relayed, or a short statement that reflects a combination of verbal and nonverbal messages. Reflection is to demonstrate attention to and validation of the content provided by the client. Summarizing can contain reflective information and similarly pull together verbal and nonverbal information.

Listening helps teachers build healthy teacher-child relationships based on mutual respect.²⁷ Children need to be listened to as they share their real-life experiences with others, including their teacher. Attending and listening can also be viewed as a bridge between developing a teacher-student alliance and teacher-student communication skills.²⁷ The teacher as a listener needs to be attuned to what the student is saying verbally, as well as non-verbally, to receive the full message.²⁸ It is also seen how teachers communicate interest in and value of what the client or family member has to say. Good communication skills as seen in basic counseling skills on the part of the teacher can involve asking open ended questions to encourage exploration, reflecting and validation of feelings which involves repeating the statement made by students back to them with a clear emphasis on their feelings, summarizing, reframing is more skills of communication skills known to provide good understanding between student and teacher.²⁹

Understanding

The process of understanding is an invaluable skill of the counseling process, for both the client and the counselor.^{16,18,19,30} Through self-awareness, counselors grow by understanding client's beliefs, values, and biases and by understanding their clients they can foster trust and deep relationships. The process of understanding involves taking a genuine interest in a person, their strengths, their fears, and their concerns.²⁵ It further recognizes their feelings and perspectives on something. It is *a mental grasp of the client's situation and an accurate tuning in with their needs*. There is engagement in the counselor's ability to ask questions and think about situations impacting the quality of the relationship and ultimately supporting the overall well-being of the client. Understanding is depicted in conversational interaction

terms with situational, dispositional, and relational factors. It is noted that when people feel understood, their relationships are positively influenced whereas when they feel misunderstood their relationships are negatively influenced.²⁵

Feeling understood might "act as a social reward, reinforcing and strengthening the social relationship" The theoretical model of perceived understanding by Reis, 2017 further supports our proposed pathway. It suggests that signals of understanding by one party promote the perceptions of being understood by the other party, which in turn leads to positive relational outcomes which in turn leads to positive relational outcomes. Indeed, a positive relationship between feeling understood and social connectedness has been reported repeatedly.²⁵ The fact that greater intimacy in relationships is often characterized by more extensive self-disclosure, reciprocity and positive affect supports the idea that intimacy is closely associated with the formation and deepening of interpersonal connections which can be rightly attained by feelings of being understood.

Teachers, by having a deeper understanding of their students' needs and abilities can guide them like a mentor to help them change their beliefs, behaviors and attitudes. This will not only help to keep students highly engaged in learning but will also provide a safe space for them when navigating tough times.³¹ They can work on their emerging identities and build on their strengths. Research suggests that students benefit from having their values, personal stories, and identities lifted and respected in schools. Reflective teachers understand how the context and situation that influence their thinking impact their decision making and reactions, and consequently their students.³¹ Teachers can be skilled in improving their understanding of their students and making them feel that they are understood. Respect, trust and a safe place to communicate are basic needs asked by students. By understanding the psychology of their students, teachers can find ways to foster these needs. Students feel valued, acknowledged, and appreciated, which leads to a positive and meaningful relationship with their teacher.^{22,27} Respectful and positive teacher-student interactions foster a sense of safety, encourage students to participate actively in class, and contribute to the creation of a positive, supportive and inclusive classroom climate. Respectful communication is also essential for effective teacher-student interactions. When teachers listen attentively and respond respectfully, it fosters open and meaningful conversations and builds a sense of connection and understanding between teacher and student.^{22,27} A safe learning environment promotes a positive classroom climate where students feel safe to participate, express their thoughts and opinions, ask questions, and take risks. The teacher plays a major role in ensuring the classroom is a safe space by building a culture of trust and mutual respect. Also, to create a safe and welcoming space, teachers should celebrate diversity, address bullying, encourage questioning, reframe mistakes as learning opportunities and celebrate student achievements.^{22,27,31}

Empathetic Acceptance

The process of accepting others with empathy is conducive to building strong relationships in a trusting and safe environment. Empathy is defined as the ability to emotionally understand others' feelings and see things from others' point of view by putting oneself in their place. It is a way of understanding others' internal world and comprehending the feelings of people's experiences without judging them. Empathy can either be cognitive, emotional and compassionate.¹⁹ Psychologists, counselors and other mental health professionals display empathy to foster relationships with their clients to understand them by being genuine and authentic. It is this genuineness and authenticity that is essential for all forms of counseling to build a solid foundation of trust. Also, it can be conducive to enhancing self-worth by expressing warmth and respect for the client. In this relationship, the client must feel safe and nurtured.²⁹ To attain this goal, the skills used by helping professionals can be developing listening and attending skills, paying attention to body language and increasing emotional intelligence.^{17,29} Ultimately, this expression of empathy is a catalyst for client engagement and improved treatment response.

Much research has suggested that empathetic acceptance is built by unconditional positive regard.^{16,18,19} There are skills and techniques to build empathetic acceptance which include self-disclosure, reflection, affirmation, and reflecting.³² These few skills are valuable in creating trusting relationships and bringing in change. Self-disclosure is to create an atmosphere of sharing. Reflection is the process of responding to the client's feelings rather than the content of their statement for greater self-awareness and understanding.²³ Affirmation is to encourage clients to improve their behavior, choices or knowledge, which can help foster the bond between counselor and client. Reflecting allows clients to hear the feelings they have just expressed can help them better understand their emotional responses to various stimuli.³² Research in child and developmental psychology has suggested that children have a strong urge and need for their teacher to respect as well as understand their feelings and perspectives to feel valued and safe. This involves a considerable depth of understanding of and emotional engagement with the child's world.^{33,34}

Teachers play a crucial role in the individual development of children and in integrating them with society. This is to underscore again that the role of the teacher in students learning process is important due to the interactive mutual interaction between the student and the teacher. Especially for children who seek help need to be guided about behavior in a loving and caring way.^{12,33} Hence, teachers must develop skills recognized by the students for students to feel accepted, respected and safe. Teachers with high empathy skills affect children's development positively.^{12,33} By reflecting as well as validating the feelings of students, they can help them introspect and explore their feelings.³⁵⁻⁴⁰ Reflecting on

feelings involves repeating the statement made by students back to them with a clear emphasis on their feelings and also experiencing their feelings in a safe environment. The goal is not to support students in expressing their feelings in a cathartic relief than intellectualizing feelings. Reframing can further help to validate a student's experience and can be a valuable guide to deciding how best to address the situation in alternate ways. Self-disclosure can help students recognize their own feelings and experiences and gain a better understanding of them as well as the teacher's. Although seemingly simplistic, these skills are valuable in autonomy support.^{12,22} The results of the above exploration demonstrate the need for using basic counseling skills with students. Though several conclusions and implications can be derived from these discussions, the most important conclusion is that teachers need to be supported and provided with professional and practical training in basic counseling skills to help them gain knowledge and skills in psychology and counseling. For example, having psychological knowledge that emotions are not linear but conflicting can help teachers understand and support their students.⁴⁰⁻⁴⁵

Discussion

The above discussion has explored a few essential skills that teachers can utilize to support the well-being of their students. These skills include listening and attending, understanding, and empathetic acceptance, which are also employed by counselors and other mental health workers and are recognized as basic counseling skills.^{23,33,34} Moreover, the techniques not limited to these but recognized in this exploration are self-disclosure, reflection, affirmation, and reflecting, which are also effective in counseling. There are a few gaps in this article review and exploration. It would also be beneficial to analyze the links between teacher teaching and student learning strategies in further research as the teaching strategies used by teachers and their implications for the learning strategies applied by students would affect the applicability of skills in supporting student well-being. Also, in a meaningful continuation of this study exploration of a teacher's education level, experience in the field, and cultural background would add usefulness. The further goal is to identify a counseling approach or method incorporating these skills and techniques into teaching and training.⁴⁵⁻⁵¹

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Conflicts of Interest

Regarding the publication of this article, the author declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

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