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Article 58

Transient Students: Addressing Relocation to a New High School Through Group Counseling

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School personnel in districts across the country are reporting higher numbers of students transferring to new schools during the course of the year. Reported mobility rates vary, but there is evidence that the number of children changing schools is on the rise (Black, 2006). Stover (2000) suggests that children sometimes change schools six or seven times in a single year. Some transfers are the result of students seeking a different type of school environment but the most common reason for transitioning to a new school is family relocation. As reported in Popp, Stronge, & Hindman (2003), 2000 U.S. Census data indicated that nearly 12 million school-age children changed residences during 1999-2000. Families in the military move even more frequently; sometimes as many as ten or more times before finishing high school (Bartolomeo, 2006). In some states, such as California, as many as 75% of all students move unexpectedly at least once during their K-12 year experience (Lesisko & Wright, 2009). Children of migrant workers, homeless children, and children from low-income families are more likely to switch schools throughout the academic year.

Family relocation is not a new phenomenon. In the United States, geographic mobility has been a long standing tradition. In 1980, Lyons, Nam, and Ockay reported that the average American is likely to move more than three times during their school-age years. Historically, such mobility has been more often associated with prosperity; a consequence of positive outcomes such as a new job and higher income levels. In more recent times, however, reasons for mobility are just as likely to be the result of economic instability, or negative social factors. Black (2006) reports that families in one study shared that their reasons for relocating included stressful life events such as loss of income, divorce, abuse, substandard housing, and forced evictions. Armour (2008) concludes that growing numbers of foreclosures may contribute to families feeling forced

to move. Schafft (2006) suggests that residential mobility resulting from economic distress or poverty is characterized by short-distance and high frequency moves. Such movement can be especially challenging for families that experience unplanned financial insecurity and who have limited resources. In the past, the trend has been to see higher mobility rates in large, predominately minority urban school districts with higher numbers of student transfers during elementary school. This, however, is also changing. There are increasing numbers of transient student enrollment at the middle and high school levels in rural, suburban, and urban areas.

Consequences of Student Mobility

Schools that experience higher rates of student mobility must also address serious consequences associated with these changes. Increased school turnover causes major disruptions for all participants in the school environment. Some of the inherent challenges in school transition involve adjusting to a new school environment. Students must learn new course structures, policies, and procedures. Teachers may need to adapt their instructional methods and must find ways to integrate the new students into the classroom. At the same time, they must also try to maintain a sense of continuity for the students already in the class. Maintaining high levels of student performance are often a struggle. Students who have moved frequently through a variety of different schools often have gaps in their academic foundation. They may need remediation or extra time to meet expected skill levels. Much of the recent literature on student mobility focuses on how it negatively affects achievement. Evidence includes reports of poor performance on proficiency exams, increased likelihood of dropping out, lower levels of achievement and disengagement from classes (Black, 2006; District Administration, 2005; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Sanderson, 2003).

Another major area of student transfer adjustment involves the establishment of relationships. Assimilating into a peer group and gaining social support is crucial; especially at the high school level. Developmentally, adolescence is a period when the importance of peer acceptance and peer interaction increases. Students tend to withdraw more from their parents and associate more with peers. Student identity, self-esteem, and self-concept are related to their peer connections (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). Peers become highly influential. Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) note that peer conformity is at its highest levels at the ninth grade level.

Given this emphasis on social acceptance, it is easy to see that for newcomers, an unfamiliar school community can feel like a hostile environment, especially in common areas such as the lunch room, where students tend to organize into small groups. Feeling like an outsider and not being welcomed can take a toll on the emotional health. According to one professional school counselor, , having to leave friends and familiar surroundings and change schools is very similar to the grieving process and produces a great deal of anxiety (Jacobson, 2001). Especially frightening is the thought of interacting with unknown peers. Rumberger (as cited in Black, 2006) shares the feelings of one student who switched schools frequently and during midyear. “Moving and changing schools shattered my personality... I feel disoriented all the time. There is no grounding... I always feel like I’m floating. I feel fragmented. Every time I moved, I felt less and less important” (p. 48).

In addition to feelings of disengagement, concerns about attitude and behaviors are frequently associated with student mobility. It is generally expected that transient students, especially those entering at mid-year are likely to exhibit negative attitudes and behavioral problems. Sanderson (2003) reports that her results from interviews with teachers revealed a common theme of negativity and sometimes aggression from their transfer students. Comments included the following: "The kids are coming in, come in with a real attitude. Kind of fight attitude." "Children that have been in and out of a number of different schools for whatever reason, this is how they make their presence felt in the classroom." "I believe many discipline problems stem from their belief that it doesn't matter how they act, because they are moving anyway" (p. 603). These statements confirm and stress the demand for support and services to address the personal and social needs of transfer students.

While some schools may have services available to students transferring in, they can be rare or sporadic. The school may or may not have a student-guided tour, a buddy system, an orientation session, or welcome lunch for new students. If programs are available, they may only last the first day or first couple of weeks of the school year and then the new student is left to figure things out on their own. However, students who relocate as a result of parents in the military might have access to a computer-based system that helps with the transition. Students can meet with the school counselor and students from the school they will be transferring to prior to the move (Davis, 2003). Similar to the computer-based orientation, the first connection the student usually encounters at a new school is with an adult, not another student, and the school counselor is often the first point of contact because of the registration process, identification of classes, scheduling, and providing a tour of the school.

Although some schools have programs available, it does not mean the personal and social needs of every student are being met. Professional school counselors are in an excellent position to develop and to offer strategies and programs designed to help transient students become personally grounded and positively integrated into the school environment.

Utilization of a Process Group for Assisting Transfer Students

School counselors can help students with the transition through the implementation of group counseling. Group counseling is when a counselor works with at least two students at the same time (Bishop Stone & Dahir, 2006). A counseling group differs from a psychoeducational group or group consultation in that a counseling group "is a confidential helping relationship in which the counselor encourages members to focus on developmental, preventive, or remedial issues in which they are concerned" whereas psychoeducational groups or "group consultation encompasses a range of activities that utilize instructional, informational, and problem solving processes" (Schmidt, 2003, p. 147). Counseling groups have been implemented in schools for a variety of reasons and are a supported delivery method for school counselors implementing a comprehensive counseling program (American School Counseling Association, 2005).

Information regarding the utilization of groups to ease transitions between schools or moving from one state across the country to another is very difficult to find. One

school counselor who worked in a highly mobile school implemented a new student group for transfer students “to provide information about the school and the community, and to provide a setting for students to discuss their concerns about relocating” (Wilson, 1993, ¶ 11). When evaluating the current economic system and realizing families are relocating to find employment; school counselors recognize how students are affected in the transition not only academically, but more importantly in their personal/social development. The counseling process group can help students explore the personal and emotional difficulties with transitioning to the school including dealing with the loss of leaving their previous school, making new friends, and sharing their feelings of isolation and concerns about catching up academically. According to Sigelman and Rider (2009), the group which a student belongs to could have a long-term impact on their success and self-concept later in life. In addition, Bishop Stone and Dahir (2006) identify benefits of facilitating a group for school age students as allowing them to identify their feelings, practice skills, provide and receive feedback, as well as thinking about their goals. Arman (as cited by Bishop Stone and Dahir, 2006) states group counseling can “reduce social isolation and build skills in peer relations to create a sense of belonging” (p. 71). Yalom and Leszcz (2005) identify 11 therapeutic factors that help facilitate the group process. Some of the therapeutic factors that are immediately helpful for students in transition include universality, instillation of hope, and development of socializing techniques. Students transferring to a new school are likely to be relieved to know that other students are in a similar situation (universality) or the simple idea that things might just get better for the new student who is struggling with the transfer (instillation of hope). The group also allows for new students to practice socializing techniques. This includes introducing themselves to others sitting next to them in class, discussing how to approach a table of students eating lunch to ask if they can sit with them, or finding a group of people to attend the next school event. Group cohesiveness, another therapeutic factor, gives the students the sense of belonging or a place where they are important, even if outside of the group they are unsure of how they fit into the new school.

The North High New Student Process Group: Organization and Facilitation

At the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year, it seemed as though each time one of the four counselors at Fargo, North Dakota North High finished enrolling a new student, another family and student were waiting to meet with a counselor. The new students entering the school seemed to have an uncertainty about what to expect in their classes, how to find their way around the school and how to get involved in activities. Although the school counselors offer an orientation session and the student council hosts a “new student lunch,” many new students were still arriving after these services had already taken place. How was the counseling department going to meet the needs of the transfer students?

As a result of accepting a school counseling intern prior to the start of the school year, it was determined that the school counseling intern facilitating a group would be the best way to meet the needs of the new students. Although the school counseling intern had the background and skills to facilitate a group without a co-facilitator, the importance and benefits of having a co-facilitator determined the result of the professional school counselor and the intern co-facilitating the “New to North” group.

Organization of the Group

The “New to North” group was held weekly during one 50-minute period in the counseling office conference room, which seats 10 individuals comfortably around a large table, and is a neutral location for all members. Arrangements were made with support staff to reserve the room each week; however, an alternate location was determined in case the room was unavailable. The group sessions would rotate through the class schedule, so that students would not consistently miss the same class which could create academic or attendance issues.

The counseling intern then gathered the new student information from the registrar and composed a recruitment letter. A letter containing the nature of the group, anticipated length (4-6 weeks), scheduling procedures, facilitator backgrounds and contact information, and professional disclosure statement was sent to the lockers of all new students. Due to the nature of the group and that sessions would be rotated through the schedule, it was deemed that parental consent would not be necessary as group participation is covered and consented to by parents in the student handbook. Although school policy did not require parent/guardian permission for this group, the students were asked to share their participation of the group with their parents/guardians. The bottom of the letter had a tear-off slip for students to return to the counseling office if they were interested in participating.

Upon collection of the responses returned from students, the counseling intern scheduled screening interviews with each student. The components of the session included: professional disclosure of mandated reporting, identifying student comfort with maintaining confidentiality, informing the student of group procedures, asking the student to share information about themselves, inquiring what the student hoped to gain from the group experience and the availability of individual counseling if the group was not an appropriate placement. The interviews lasted between 10-50 minutes based on student concerns. Students were then informed of the group start date and the location. Students were also notified how they would be reminded of the group meetings and the procedure to inform their teachers of their appointment with student services.

A locker note containing the date and period of group was designed and sent out prior to each group session. The note indicated the student had an appointment with student services. The note also functioned as a pass and had a space for teachers to sign excusing the student from class. In the event of a test or quiz held the same time as the group session, students were instructed to make up all work prior to attending group by making arrangements with the teacher and to receive teacher permission to attend the group.

Facilitation of the Group

The role of the co-facilitators of the “New to North” group was to provide a safe environment where the new students could meet and discuss the difficulties associated with moving, keep the students in the here and now, and remain aware of how the therapeutic factors help with the group process. The facilitators would start each session by reminding the members that the purpose of the group was for the members to decide what would take place. Both the school counselor and the school counseling intern focused on keeping the students in the here and now and helped to maintain a safe environment for participation. The facilitators reminded students about keeping group

information in the group and bringing things about the group that happen outside the group back into group. The co-facilitators placed themselves across the group from each other with one person able to see the clock. The co-facilitators worked together in the session to help the members of the group process what was taking place during group. While one facilitator responded to a group member's statements or non-verbal behaviors, the other counseling facilitator would observe the group for reactions. In order to keep alliances from being established with one co-facilitator and to help prevent sub-grouping, the group members were asked to switch seating each week and sit next to someone new. The co-facilitators processed after each group experience with each other what had taken place in group, what they appreciated about the other facilitator's role in group and personal struggles they encountered during the group. By processing after each group, the co-facilitators created a strong working relationship that was useful during the group sessions. An understanding of how the other counselor worked was a strong piece in co-facilitating the "New to North" group.

At the beginning of the first group session, students completed an anonymous survey with questions about their feelings of transferring from their old school, the transition between schools, and their experiences and comfort level so far with the new school. The students were informed the survey would be used to demonstrate the importance of having a group for new students in the future and that their responses would not be used to identify them.

The co-facilitators again discussed the importance of confidentiality and its limits (intent of harm and in the instance of the intern receiving supervision) with the participants of the group. The facilitators allowed the group to create norms and goals. The group was also given the right to determine whether or not the group would be closed or open to newly arriving students. Although the facilitators were open to providing a psychoeducational group experience to discuss certain aspects of the school, including organizations, clubs, and other extra-curricular activities, the group remained a process group.

At week four of the group, the co-facilitators began to prepare the group members for termination. Due to the concerns of the group members with the obstacles they were still experiencing from the transition, the group decided to continue to meet weekly until the end of first semester so the students would have a place to share their feelings, perceptions, and concerns. At that time, termination of the group will take place.

Implications

Even though the "New to North" group is still being implemented, benefits of the group are being acknowledged by the students, the co-facilitators, and the counseling staff. A student population that was previously overlooked in the school is receiving attention and support with difficulties experienced during transition. Although the counseling department understood the importance of new students making a connection in the school, the extent of the difficulties for a new student to do so was unknown prior to this group. As a result of the success of this process group, the counseling department is currently advertising a second new student group for the students who have arrived midway through the semester and will again facilitate it at the beginning of second semester, if needed. Similar to Wilson (1993), the experience has provided the new

students the opportunity to make a connection with the counseling staff by bringing them into the counseling center each week. The group also allows the students to have an interaction, other than scheduling, with a school counselor. The possibility of expanding participation in the future to include new students with students who were previously part of the “New to North” group is being considered a new programmatic piece of the counseling department.

The school counselors co-facilitating a group in a school also needed to be flexible and aware of daily school activities throughout the group process. Changes made by the co-facilitators throughout the group experience included the location of group, teacher notification, efficiency of group time, and the number of sessions. The group was moved from the conference room with a table to an office where chairs could be set in a circle with no obstructions between members. Teacher notification was improved by e-mailing each teacher one day before group to notify them of the student’s absence from class. Students no longer needed to check into class and could come directly to group, and allowing for full 50 minute sessions.

Recommendations

A recruitment letter inviting new students to join the new student process group should be provided to each family at registration. During the planning and implementation of the “New to North” group, the co-facilitators learned that students may not always reply to the first notification of a group and therefore sending out a reminder note may be beneficial. With an emphasis on data driven counseling programs, it is recommended prior to the start of the first session, students complete a survey regarding their experience in the new school. The results of the survey instrument should be compared to a post-assessment to determine whether or not the new student group will be offered in the future. Instrument questions might include items about the student’s previous school, their acclimation to the new school, and their comfort with new peers and teachers. Due to the variety of difficulties experienced by transfer students, an appropriate length of a new student group might be six to eight weeks. However, each counselor should make the determination based on the group and school counseling program while keeping in mind the possibility of dependency of the group forming.

Although the school has a policy that the school counselors can work with students through individual, classrooms or small group settings, gaining staff support would be recommended. Greenberg (2003) suggests that a school counselor builds a positive relationship with the administration to prevent jeopardizing a school counseling program and with teachers to avoid resistance to the services offered. Discussing the implementation of a group with the counseling department, teachers, and administration without breaking confidentiality is encouraged.

Screening of participants is also an important aspect of group counseling regarding the inclusion or exclusion of individuals in the group, determining whether or not they will be able to participate in the group process and to begin building trust (Corey, 2004; Corey, Schneider Corey, Callanan, & Russell, 1992; & Greenberg, 2003). Interviews with students to screen for possible relationships including family or previous experience outside of the school is important as external contact may contribute to sub-grouping. Students who are currently involved in other group counseling or students who

are returning from treatment programs (residential or day) should be screened to determine whether or not the new student group is an appropriate placement.

Determining a delivery method for transfer students may depend on the size of the school or number of students in transition during a school year. If a school has one or two new students transferring in each year, it may be reasonable for a school counselor to meet individually with each student to help make the transition to the school. However, in a school where several new students transfer in each year, a better use of the school counselor's time may be spent implementing a group and helping new students integrate into the new system. While keeping group members in the here and now can be a difficult process and a lot of work during the group session, providing an environment where new students can build relationships with students in a similar situation may be beneficial. Few high schools implement group counseling (Ripley & Goodnough, 2001); however, with the rising number of transfer students, school counselors may be able to meet their needs through the implementation of process groups.

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