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FOCUS ON EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

Attending to Emotionality in Exceptional Children in Individual and Small-Group Work

Sal Mendaglio

Teachers of exceptional children continue to have concerns regarding the social and emotional needs of their students. Selected techniques used in individual and group counseling can be useful for classroom application. This paper presents the application of such techniques to gifted learning disabled students. In the first part of the paper, there is discussion of concepts that form a context for the techniques used. This part emphasizes a central premise of this paper: techniques, in and of themselves, are not effective. Two other contributing factors are presented as essential in determining the level of effectiveness of any technique, and both refer to the person implementing the technique in question.

These are the person's knowledge of the child and the attitudes that accompany the application of the techniques. With respect to knowledge of the child this includes both general academic information *and* the knowledge of the unique student with whom we are concerned. This paper's treatment of gifted learning disabled (e.g., definition, self-conception) illustrates a general academic knowledge. Some of the techniques presented later are aimed at gaining an understanding of the uniqueness of each student.

The techniques themselves are described and illustrated with dialogue excerpted from actual counseling sessions conducted by the author with a group of gifted learning disabled students. Because the concern here is the emotionality associated with poor school performance, it is felt that these techniques are applicable to other children. However, it will be noted that knowledge of the particular exceptionality is reflected in the dialogues reported.

Gifted Learning Disabled Students

In the last decade, a new label has been born—the gifted learning disabled. Like other labels in special education, the definition is imprecise. Essentially, it refers to those children who meet the criteria for definitions of both "gifted" and "learning disabled." A perusal of various conceptualizations of learning disabled (LD) suggests that writers in the field agree on the presence of three main criteria for inclusion. First, the student must possess an average or above average level of intelligence. Second, the individual is to be characterized by significant underachievement. For some, this means that the individual is to be at least one grade level below his or her peers in areas such as language arts or mathematics. For others, this is expressed in more statistical terms, such as performance at least one standard deviation below the mean on an achievement test. Third, the student must have difficulties with skills such as encoding and decoding of language.

Sal Mendaglio is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. This article is an adaptation of a chapter in a new book, *Counseling the Gifted and Talented*, edited by Linda Silverman, which will be published in 1993 by Love Publishing Company, Denver, CO 80222.

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After reviewing twenty-eight recent editions of textbooks dealing with LD, Hammill (1990) reports that eleven definitions of LD are currently prominent. Hammill prefers the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities definition (NJCLD):

> Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences. (NJCLD, 1988, cited in Hammill, 1990, p. 77)

Mercer (1986) states that the various definitions of LD may be categorized into three groups: brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, and learning disabilities. He suggests that terms such as *brain injury* and *minimal brain dysfunction* have been discarded because of negative reactions from parents and professionals. Parents disliked the term *brain injury* because of the permanence it implied. Professionals found both *brain injury* and *minimal brain dysfunction* of little value in categorizing or teaching these students. As to the question of incidence of LD, Mercer reports that estimates vary from 1.5 to 4.63 percent of the population, depending on how stringently the criteria are applied.

Gifted Learning Disabled and Underachieving Gifted

For purposes of counseling, students who possess the dual exceptionalities may be viewed as a subcategory of underachieving gifted students. Support for this perspective stems from recent literature on LD as well as literature on the gifted learning disabled (Silverman, 1989). Hammill (1990) believes that there is a growing consensus regarding the definition of LD; others, however, view with concern the problems resulting from the confusing number of definitions and identification processes used. Samuel Kirk (1987), who coined the term *learning disability*, stated recently: "Surveys of children placed in public school classes for LD have demonstrated that approximately half of the children assigned to these classes are underachievers, but are not necessarily learning disabled" (p. 174). After a thorough review of the history and various definitions of LD, Berk (1983) concluded that LD has become a category of underachievement.

Silverman (1989) contrasted Whitmore's (1980) characteristics of gifted underachievers with a list of characteristics of gifted learning disabled. She concluded:

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Glenn A. Vergason, Georgia State University
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> The lists of key characteristics of learning-disabled gifted children and gifted underachievers derived from various studies are virtually identical. This may seem less surprising when one realizes that both populations have been identified through discrepancies between performance on measures of aptitude and achievement and thus the groups overlap. (p. 37)

SELF-PERCEPTION: AN ACCURATE REFLECTION OF SIGNIFICANT OTHERS' CONFUSION?

It seems that school professionals, including teachers, counselors, psychologists, and administrators, are still perplexed by dual exceptionality. Even some academics in special education speak of gifted *or* learning disabled, and it is difficult to convey to them the notion of gifted *and* learning disabled. This is particularly true when programs for gifted students are, in fact, programs for high achieving students only. And so, some bewilderment and resistance from these professionals is to be anticipated initially, even though the notion of gifted learning disabled has been discussed in the literature since the early 1980s (Fox, Brody, & Tobin, 1983).

Parents may also have some difficulty understanding the label; though, given their vested interest, they are usually more receptive. Like other parents of exceptional children, they tend to be highly motivated to read and learn as much as they can about the label.

Confusion over gifted learning disabled is also evident in the self-referent statements made by these children. This is best illustrated by the words some of the students use to describe themselves. During one-on-one interviews, ten gifted learning disabled adolescents were asked about their reactions to the label. The responses were summed up by Chris, who responded, "How can I be dumb and smart at the same time?" Poor self-esteem is said to characterize children who experience difficulties with school achievement. In addition, it seems that gifted children with learning disabilities have an added dimension of uncertainty with respect to their self-perception.

Outside of school, these children may have a different perception of self, with an accompanying higher level of self-esteem. Some speak with great enthusiasm about their abilities in other areas, such as computer games, athletics, and hobbies. For example, young adolescent students have described their escapades as a "skater" (one who skateboards), or their involvement in role-playing games (of the Dungeons and Dragons variety). Still others described their sophisticated electronics projects using lasers, and hobbies such as clock-making. It is difficult to tell whether their enthusiasm is merely bravado—a defensive facade to protect themselves against the anxiety associated with poor school performance—or a genuine sense of well-being derived from their achievements in nonschool areas. There is some indication that gifted learning disabled students are more creative and have more productive extracurricular interests than other gifted students (Baum, 1988).

EMOTIONAL AND INTERPERSONAL ASPECTS

Possessing both superior potential and learning disability results in the experiencing of a variety of negative reactions toward school achievement. These include frustration, anger, and resentment. Lewis and Michaelson (1983) note that emotions are evaluative responses of relatively short duration. The emotional experiences that are discussed here are better represented as "chronic" emotions. Kemper (1978) suggests the term *affects* for such recurring emotions.

School and academic achievement represent a recursive reality in young people's lives: each day gifted learning disabled students are confronted with a series of stimuli that activate their negative emotions. At home, they may also experience this activation through regular reminders of their weak school performance, such as questioning about school by well-intentioned parents. The scenario tends to result in negative affective experiences. Often these affective reactions go unexpressed, contributing to poor family and social interactions. When the affects are manifested they may take the form of aggressive, acting-out behavior. Frustration may be displaced onto classmates or siblings.

Emotions and affects that go unexpressed for long periods of time eventually have their day. These children may overreact to objectively trivial demands or comments from parents. These infrequent explosions may give the child a "Jekyl and Hyde" quality. It is disturbing to see a usually easygoing child transformed into a furious one. Parents, teachers, siblings, and classmates tend to develop reduced tolerance for such a child. If the behaviors persist, adults soon become discouraged and may even begin to avoid the young person. At school, the child's behavior may become a source of stress for the teacher. At home, it may negatively affect the quality of the marital relationship. Observations of this type lead to the conclusion that counseling with gifted learning disabled children needs also to focus on parents, family members, and teachers. A primary objective here is to assist these significant others in understanding the emotional experience of the child. When parents and teachers begin to identify their overreactions, they can, with assistance, be of greater therapeutic value, since such a process forestalls the adult's emotional reaction to the child.

ISSUES RELATING TO INTERVENTION

There are several issues in counseling these students that need to be addressed: the necessity of focusing on the affective domain, the importance of a multidimensional approach, and the relationship between the counselor's attitude and technique.

Necessity of Focusing on the Affective Domain

A perusal of the literature in LD (e.g., Wong, 1987) and gifted learning disabled (Baum, 1984, 1988) suggests that insufficient attention has been paid to the affective domain. The perspective adopted in this chapter is that the affective domain, and by implication the interpersonal sphere of functioning, takes priority over other foci of intervention. Whereas direct teaching is an integral part of certain approaches to counseling, here the "curricula" consist of topics such as *communication skills, concepts relating to behavioral change, self-esteem, self-awareness and acceptance of self and others*. By the time a gifted child with learning disabilities is referred for counseling, the emotional reactions and patterns of interaction among the child, parents, and teachers are well established. These entrenched patterns become serious obstacles to all forms of intervention. The barriers need to be removed before change in academic achievement can be expected. School-related matters such as study skills may be treated, but the professional counselor should not be expected to deal with academic concerns directly. These are the teacher's, or tutor's, responsibility. In a very real sense, the counselor plays an important supportive role to the teacher's efforts to instruct the gifted learning disabled student.

A primary task of counselors is the education of parents and teachers vis a vis the goals of the counseling process. Counselors need sufficient self-awareness and security to acknowledge what they can and cannot deliver. Furthermore, they must direct the counseling process toward an in-depth exploration of the affective domain, facilitating appropriate expression of emotion and the reduction of tensions among the student, parents, and teachers, and eventually engage them in problem-solving activities.

Multidimensional Approach

The counselor should implement a multidimensional approach with these students. Giftedness and learning disabilities are conditions residing within the child, but they have multiple implications for the child and his family and teachers. Given the central importance of the school experience for a child, these exceptionalities affect not only the child's learning, but the quality of his family and peer relations. The context of giftedness and learning disabilities is social in nature.

The view implicit in this discussion is that this dual exceptionality exerts an interactive influence on all of the parties involved. The parents are negatively affected by the child's difficulties. After some time they may feel discouraged and helpless. Given the characteristics of giftedness, the child feels frustrated when the attention is focused on her deficits and not on her abilities. Also, she may be affected by perceived criticism or impatience from parents and teachers whose own feelings of frustration are inappropriately expressed toward her.

In this analysis, it is more appropriate to use the term *student system*, rather than student. The problem may be resident within the child, but the intervention requires the designation of parents and teachers as clients of the counselor as well. This does not mean that parents and teachers are the cause of the problem. It is difficult to ascertain its etiology. However, parents and teachers may unwittingly exacerbate the problem. One of the preliminary functions of the counselor is to enhance the significant adults' awareness of their style of interaction with the child to determine its level of effectiveness. Specifically, it is essential to investigate the extent to which parents and teachers encourage appropriate emotional expression in the child. In addition, it is important to assess the degree to which communication with the child is pressuresome and negatively toned.

It must be emphasized that in this writer's approach, direct work with the child is not necessarily the main function of the counseling process. A general rule of thumb is: The younger the child, the more work is done through the adults. Of course, the child is certainly a focus of the counselor's attention. Interviews with the child are necessary to provide the counselor with a direct observational base for generating hypotheses regarding the child's attitudes, values, and self-perceptions. Furthermore, the child requires an opportunity to present his perspective.

Attitudinal Context

Prior to presenting selected interviewing techniques, it is necessary to note the central role attitudes play in their administration. The counselor's attitudes toward the student system, the presenting problem, giftedness, and learning disabilities are all vital considerations in the success or failure of techniques. We know some of this from our own day-to-day experience—the impact of interpersonal communication is not in what people say to us but in how they say it. For example, when one spouse asks another "What's wrong?"

the verbal response "Nothing" may be strongly contradicted, depending on how it is said. The counselor's attitudes contribute to *how* a technique is used. Both clinical experience with clients and supervisory experience with counseling students have shown that a well-established technique or strategy may prove useless if a counselor administers it in an atmosphere of impatience with, intolerance for, or misunderstanding of the client.

INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP PLACEMENT?

A primary consideration is the selection of either group or individual counseling. This depends on a number of factors, such as the status of the individual student, the availability of sufficient students to form a group, and the feasibility of scheduling in a school setting. Both counseling modalities require regular parental involvement in the interventions used.

Proponents of specific counseling approaches will advocate the use of their particular choice of one-on-one, family, and group modalities for all counseling situations and presenting problems. By adopting an eclectic approach to counseling we are not bound by the constraints of one position. Although some counselors believe that a "case" must be made for the use of group counseling, human beings are essentially social animals whose daily transactions involve small groups. This is particularly true of children and adolescents.

A major reason for using group work is the therapeutic value in students learning that others share similar problems. This is supported by the success of many self-help groups that have developed over the years. When one finds that he or she is "not the only one" there is an immediate sense of relief, particularly for gifted children with learning disabilities, a group with relatively low incidence within a school jurisdiction. These students often have deficits in social skills, or, at times, display antisocial behavior. The small group is an ideal vehicle for learning and practicing social competencies such as communication skills. It may also prove useful in developing fundamental attitudes such as empathy for others.

Counseling groups can also be applied effectively to gifted children who have experienced chronic ostracism from their classmates. Here they can engage in social interaction with intellectual peers, which often results in the development of friendships and provides a break from the child's usual sense of isolation. Daily school experience for gifted learning disabled students is likely to be frustrating because of their inability to shine in academic pursuits, and painful if they are rejected by their peers. Even when attempting to make social contact with classmates these children may be greeted with obvious disdain.

In observing young people in the group setting, it can be seen that students are more receptive to each other than to adults. Feedback from a peer may be more potent, or may be accepted sooner in the process than it would be from an adult professional. Similarly, a parent attempting to change a teenager's behavior may face verbal resistance, whereas the same request made by another teenager results in compliance. This is particularly true in early adolescence—thirteen to fifteen years of age—when the effects of the peer group are said to be most powerful. However, peers do not necessarily provide curative feedback to each other. The counselor needs to guide the process so that constructive rather than destructive comments are made.

With some students, one-on-one counseling is preferred. It may then be followed up with group sessions. The gifted learning disabled child who has a need to experience catharsis because of emotional trauma should be seen individually. Here the counselor has an opportunity to focus exclusively on the needs of that child. Also, students who display aggressive behavior in classrooms are probably best served in one-on-one sessions. The shy, withdrawn child should receive individual treatment because the demands of the group situation may be particularly stressful. It must be emphasized that the "extreme" types of students described here may eventually benefit from group sessions. Initially, however, these students seem to require more attention from the counselor, especially when they have experienced rejection from significant adults. Counselors who wish to use group methods with such students should use individual counseling sessions as a form of pre-training for their participation in a group.

Sometimes the initial demeanor of the participants in a group is such that, regardless of the skill of the counselor, very little work can be accomplished. Conducting group sessions with ten children seeking attention and displaying a variety of disruptive behaviors may prove challenging and somewhat frustrating for the counselor. Experience in small-group counseling with adolescents suggests that, for gifted learning disabled students who are deficient in social skills or who engage in inappropriate behaviors, the group process benefits greatly from the involvement of peers who possess better attitudes and skills and can thereby serve as role models.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Whether one uses an individual or group modality, confidentiality is an important consideration. This is a complex

matter, especially when one is working with young people. The counselor is ethically bound to protect information that a client reveals, whether that client is a child or an adult. On the other hand, parents as well as teachers and other school personnel need information gleaned in the counseling process. In order to foster a trusting relationship, the child or adolescent must be convinced that the counselor will not divulge information to others without his or her permission. By protecting the student's privacy, the counselor displays respect for the young person.

Here is a straightforward way of handling the demands of codes of ethics regarding confidentiality and the significant adults' need to know. The counselor can make the following type of statement to the child during their initial encounter:

Counselor: The way I help people is by having them talk to me about things they usually don't tell others. They need to talk about their thoughts and feelings. I would like you to understand that what people tell me is confidential. That means that what you tell me will not be told to anybody else without your permission.

When I work with kids your age I have found that it is helpful if their parents and their teachers know some of the things they tell me. It's best when the kids can tell their parents themselves. Sometimes they find it easier if I tell them.

When I feel it is important that your mom and dad know something, I will ask you: "Would you mind if I told your parents, [child's name]?" If you say no, I promise that I will not tell them. Do you understand this?

Student: Yes.

Counselor: Do you have any questions about this?

When the counselor encounters some significant information that is unknown to parents, she may approach the student in the following manner:

Counselor: You know, K . . . , we've been talking about your relationship with your father. I wonder, do you think he knows how hurt you feel because he doesn't do things with you?

K: No, I don't think he knows that. It's not the kind of thing we talk about.

Counselor: I think it would be very helpful if he did know. I would like it if you told him how you felt.

K: I'm not sure I can do that.

Counselor: I can help you do that or I can tell him for you.

It is also important to explain to the young person the limits of confidentiality: that it is necessary to report if individuals are planning to harm themselves or others. The counselor has an ethical responsibility to protect students from harm.

GROUP CHARACTERISTICS

There are several key characteristics of groups: composition, size, cohesion, and level of structure.

Composition and Size

Anyone who has experience using groups with children and adolescents knows that composition of the group is an important element in determining its evolution and ultimate success. A group composed of only highly aggressive or uncommunicative members will prove extremely challenging to the group leader. As mentioned, counselors are urged to ensure that the group include some individuals who can act as role models, or at least who are more adept socially than others. This is not always easy to arrange. In a school setting, particularly one with programming for gifted students, this can be done, especially if the school also has an established peer-helping program.

With respect to the size of the group, it seems that an optimal range is eight to twelve members. Experience suggests that an ideal size is ten.

Cohesion

Cohesion refers to the feeling of togetherness that should develop in a group. Cohesion is the "psychological glue" (Blocher, 1987) that holds a group of individuals together. This has been associated with a variety of positive group counseling aspects, from enhancing self-disclosure among members (Yalom, 1985) to successful outcomes (Kapp, Glasser, & Brissenden, 1964). The mutual bonding that occurs motivates members to become active participants in the group process.

Some factors that may facilitate the development of cohesion are student-dependent while others are related to the counseling process. The cluster of characteristics shared among the students may foster a sense of togetherness. Perceived similarity serves to engender a feeling of solidarity.

The counselor's initial approach to the group can be critical. The group members need to learn about each other quickly and feel mutually accepted. The counselor needs to facilitate group members' appropriate self-disclosure. Group discussion must be guided from an initial superficial level—factual information—to more meaningful self-disclosure as the group process develops. In addition, mutual

acceptance among members will be encouraged as the counselor models a nonevaluative attitude in the course of interacting with each member.

Level of Structure

One of the methods of categorizing various approaches to group counseling is through the amount of structure that group members experience. At the highly structured extreme are guidance groups whose purpose is to dispense information, usually dealing with educational or vocational planning. At the other extreme are encounter groups, where group members grapple with ambiguity and the focus is the process itself toward some general therapeutic goal. Neither of these extremes is considered appropriate for use with the type of student and problems under discussion in this chapter. As indicated below, the type of group described here reflects a flexible structured approach.

INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

In this section we discuss techniques used in individual and group counseling. Some of these arise out of general counseling practices; others have been developed as a result of counseling experience with gifted children—gifted children with learning disabilities. Techniques used in group counseling are a combination of those used in individual counseling and some others that are appropriate when counselors need to contend with more people. This is not surprising since theoretical approaches to group counseling essentially reflect theories of counseling. And so we have, for example, psychoanalytic, person-centered, gestalt, and transactional analysis approaches to group counseling. The selected techniques discussed below are based on an eclectic view of group counseling.

Pre-Group Session

The purpose of the pre-group session is to prepare the student for participation in the group and to indicate the general goal of the group. The counselor uses this meeting to initiate the establishment of rapport with each student and to assess the student's suitability and motivation for becoming a member of the group.

Counselor: I believe your teacher and parents have told you about the group I am forming to try to help some kids.

K: Yeah, they both told me something about that.

Counselor: What did they tell you?

K: Not much except that you're trying to help some kids with problems.

Counselor: Did they tell you that I am interested in working with gifted kids who have learning difficulties?

K: Actually they said gifted learning disabled.

Counselor: Yes, that's right.

K: I guess that means me. What are we going to do in this group? Are you going to help us with our spelling? Stuff like that?

Counselor: No, my purpose is different. I'm more into helping people understand themselves and express their feelings. I'm a counseling psychologist working with gifted individuals and I am interested in helping kids like you talk about things like their reactions to being gifted and learning disabled. . . .

K: Yeah, have I got reactions!

Counselor: Well, that's the kind of thing I'm interested in. You know, expressing your reactions and opinions about that. I arranged to meet with you to give you an idea of the kinds of things I would ask you to talk about and to see whether you would be interested in joining us. Shall we give it a shot for a few minutes right now?

K: Okay.

Counselor: Each session will begin with a topic that I will present and we'll talk about various things that the members might bring up as well. Let's start right now with reactions to the two labels. What do you think about being labeled "gifted" and "learning disabled?"

K: Well, it's really confusing to me. (pause)

Counselor: (allows pause to continue, then) Please tell me more about that.

K: (pause) It's just really confusing, that's all. I'm supposed to be gifted, yet I can't get good marks. I have a lot of trouble with writing and I can't do math.

Counselor: It sounds to me like you're confused and frustrated.

K: Yeah, I'm really frustrated, especially when my teachers and parents expect so much from me. Why can't they just leave me alone.

Counselor: (after pursuing the conversation a little longer) Well, K . . . , that's the kind of talking that would happen in the group. I'll try my best to help you talk about your feelings and how your school performance is affecting you. In my experience, talking about these things, and doing that in a group, can be very helpful to kids.

K . . ., you seemed to talk very freely just now. Do you think you would be able to talk like that with other kids?

K: I think so as long as I kind of knew them. Who would be in the group?

Counselor: Well, there would be other kids from your school. You probably know some already. There would be about ten or maybe twelve. And I think you are absolutely right—you have to get to know somebody first before expressing your feelings to them. I really appreciate how you have been able to talk so freely with me today.

There are a couple of other things that I want you to know. I plan to videotape the group sessions. And, we would meet once a week for about an hour for the next few months. . . .

K: What will you do with the tapes?

Counselor: Well, I was coming to that. I will do two things. The tapes will be useful in helping me to understand how well we are all working. No one else will see them. The other thing is probably more interesting. I plan to use segments of our sessions to show in some of our group meetings.

K: We get to see ourselves? That's going to be different!

Counselor: Yes, I will use some segments to help you see yourself as others in the group may see you. I would expect you and the others to do things like take turns speaking, trying your best to listen, and make helpful comments during our meetings. Do you have any other questions?

K: No.

Counselor: Well, I have one for you: Would you like to participate in our group?

K: O.K.—especially if this is in class time.

Techniques for Either Individual or Group Counseling

This excerpt illustrates several techniques that are applied in a one-on-one interview, but that are equally applicable in group counseling, particularly in the early stages of the process.

Structuring

This refers to the counselors' outlining of the various pragmatic aspects of the process—purpose of the sessions; number in group; duration of meetings; expectations of the group leader. In addition, special matters are mentioned. In this case, videotaping is noted since permission is needed from the members. K's question allows the counselor to ensure that permission is given with informed consent. An important part of the structuring is providing the student with a sense of the type of talking that he will be engaged in, as a basis for informed consent when he is asked if he wishes to participate.

The pre-session interview with each student is an excellent opportunity for the counselor to engage in structuring. It is a half-hour worth spending. It also affords students the occasion to have specific questions answered and the opportunity to decline participation. Regardless of age, this approach communicates directly to the student that his or her opinions are valued, and it reinforces freedom of choice, which is essential to the group process.

A final point on structuring—it is not to be confused with the counselor's approach to counseling. Whether one is, relatively speaking, directive or nondirective in one's approach, the notion of structuring is still important. Structuring does not mean that the counselor necessarily directs the content of future sessions—she may or may not. Alternatively, she may adopt, as is done here, a "semi-directive" approach. In this chapter, structuring refers to the provision of information useful to students in deciding whether to become involved, and then guidance about the process they will experience.

Perception Checking

It is important for the counselor to know what the student understands about the group. Often, parents and teachers who have decided that some intervention will be beneficial for a child neglect to pass on to the child the information provided by the counselor. In the course of many initial interviews, it becomes clear that young students have been told nothing, or very little, about the process or the reason for being brought to the counselor. By first establishing how the child or adolescent perceives the program, the counselor can clarify misperceptions.

Open and Closed Questions

Counselors should use open questions to encourage elaboration on a topic and closed when a yes or a no is sufficient. "What are your reactions to being gifted and learning disabled?" is an example of an open question. This invites the student to elaborate on that issue. "Would you like to join our group?" is a closed question. It is acceptable because the counselor merely needs to hear a yes or a no from the student.

Some professionals place a great deal of emphasis on the issue of questioning in counseling. This may be a confusing matter for novice counselors. Questioning, like so many other techniques in counseling, is inexorably bound to the

notion of timing. The counselor needs to be mindful of distinctions such as closed and open questions—and the entire matter of the use of questions—in the initial phases of the process. Early on, especially in the first few sessions, or even in the first few minutes of a single interview contact, the counselor must acknowledge his ignorance of the student before him. It is important to use open questions and reflective-type comments to encourage the child's communication. Closed questions as a rule should be used as little as possible at this point because they may serve to reinforce a passive, minimally responsive stance. Once the counseling relationship is established and the student is communicating freely and spontaneously, counselors need not concern themselves with this matter. At that stage, closed questions will elicit as much material as open.

Exploration Phase

Elaboration on other issues will be presented under two broad phases of the counseling process: exploration and action. Of course, the content and purpose of sessions will vary from one phase to another. In the first sessions of the exploratory phase, such topics as the introduction of members and establishing the purpose of the group are discussed.

One of the difficulties in dealing with young people, especially in a group situation, is learning the jargon or latest adolescent argot. For example, when introducing himself, Kevin, fourteen, said, ". . . and I'm a D and D freak." Nick, fifteen, said, "My name is Nick and I'm a skater." For many adults these expressions are unfamiliar. The counselor should seek clarification rather than fake understanding.

Technique 1. Counseling in a Group

In the approach taken to the group situation, the initial phase, especially the first group session, is more "counseling in a group" than group counseling. That is, the counselor, in essence, uses individual interviewing techniques to assist participants in elaborating their opinions, rather than attempting to facilitate interaction between and among group members. This "counseling in a group" also allows the counselor to model effective communication, particularly effective listening, and to demonstrate pragmatic matters such as communication protocol within the group (e.g., others listen while one person speaks; everyone is given the opportunity to speak). With gifted children and adolescents who may have developed a low tolerance for rules, this approach is preferred to one in which the group members are presented with a list of do's and don'ts in the first session.

Technique 2. Flexible Structure and Counselor-Initiated Topics

This "interviewing with an audience" technique is done in a flexibly structured atmosphere that should permeate the entire group process. Sessions need some structure, and this is the counselor's responsibility—much like preparing a lesson plan—but the counselor, like any effective teacher, needs to take into account new information and adjust accordingly within the parameters of the process. Specifically, the counselor prepares topics for group discussion that are salient to the group and that are used to focus group participation, especially in the beginning phase of the group. The intent is to encourage group members to take responsibility and to initiate self-disclosure. The work of the group is to create a climate in which concerns can be shared, emotions associated with giftedness and learning disabilities expressed, and self-disclosure facilitated. The creation of such an atmosphere is a responsibility shared by all participants, with the counselor guiding the process toward that end.

Counselor-Initiated Topic: Dealing with Dual Exceptionalities

Counselor: You have been described using two labels: "gifted" and "learning disabled." What do these mean to you? Let's begin with "gifted."

T: You're better at things, better than the average person.

J: I think it's very complicated to go into every detail but . . . I think basically you have talents but it doesn't mean you'll do better than other kids. Like C . . . has a good vocabulary and he has put it to good use BUT he doesn't have to if he doesn't want to. He has to decide to do the work. It basically is a capacity.

Counselor: A potential to . . .

J: Yeah.

Counselor: It doesn't mean you will automatically do well.

J: Right.

Another member continues:

N: Nothing! I think it's a crock.

Counselor: It's a crock.

N: It's just a bunch of crap.

Counselor: It has no meaning for you.

N: It has meaning for me but I don't think it means much.

Counselor: It seems to me that you're saying that it means something pretty bad to you.

N: No, I'd rather be gifted than stupid or learning disabled completely.

The counselor should expect to hear the repetition of textbook definitions but elicit the students' own views:

K: Talented in a particular area.
Counselor: I'm getting confused. Some of you say gifted means being above average, K . . . , you're saying that gifted means talented. . . .
K: Well, O.K., Mrs. T says that. Like talented is like you're talented in a few things. Gifted means that you're a bit better in everything.
Counselor: Yes, but what does it mean to you, K . . . ?
K: I don't know, I've been gifted since grade three. I don't know anymore.

The above is one example of a counselor-initiated topic. A counselor working with a group should create her own list of topics for the sessions. These can be selected from lists of characteristics of gifted learning disabled students, from problems associated with either of these labels, and from recent research. The works of Whitmore (1980), Silverman (1989), and Baum (1984) are excellent sources for this purpose. (Also, see suggested topics in chapters 4 and 5.) The approach would be the same for each session: present topic, encourage expression of thoughts and feelings surrounding it; foster student-to-student interaction; and allow for the introduction of other meaningful topics by group members. Much like a good teacher who prepares a lesson plan but displays flexibility when the students' needs are different, the counselor initiates a topic but relinquishes it when another emerges. The rationale for this is simply that the goals of the group session are the important consideration—a topic is a means to an end. Here, the goals are self-disclosure and effective communication among group members who are learning to express their feelings appropriately and discovering that other children have similar difficulties.

Technique 3. Inclusion of Silent Members

Counselor: Let's give some others a chance to express their views. I'd like to hear from those who have not yet had a chance to speak. (pause).

This usually results in silent members speaking and voicing their opinions. If there is no response from those members targeted, then no pressure is applied and the discussion is turned back to the topic in general.

Counselor: I guess some of you have nothing to say at this point. (pause to allow reaction) Well, let's get back to what you were saying. Do you have anything further to add to this topic?

End of Exploration Phase

The exploration phase ends after sound working relationships are well established and group members have become proficient at self-disclosure and capable of appropriate emotional expression in the sessions. By the end of this phase, pertinent issues for each participant will have been identified. Further, the students' concerns are understood by both counselor and group members. When counseling is effective, the counselors' direction of this phase results in the students' acknowledging their contribution to their problems. Students become more responsible. In the approach to group counseling used here, it is the counselor's responsibility to assess whether the group has completed the exploratory phase. Counselors need to be prepared for the occurrence of some errors in judgment on their part. When these occur, it is important for the counselor to acknowledge this to the group and to return to unresolved issues before proceeding further.

The exploration phase concerns itself, by and large, with behavior and goals relevant to the facilitation of group cohesion and mutual understanding among group members. The goals of the action phase shift attention to the students' behavior in the outside world. Students are encouraged to take major responsibility for this phase, with the counselor acting as facilitator.

Action Phase

Once affective expression regarding the topics considered salient by the counselor has occurred, group members are directed to create plans of action for their individual situations. Here the focus is on what each student can do to improve his or her situation. These include improving relationships with parents, siblings, and teachers; achieving appropriate emotional expression outside of counseling; improving study habits; completing assignments and handing them in; and the like. It is important to urge participants to propose their own agendas, rather than the counselor preparing or suggesting plans of action. When students propose some course of action there is greater likelihood of their implementing it.

This request for student-initiated plans of action serves an important assessment function for the counselor. The students' response to this request indicates the level of responsibility that each participant is willing to adopt, the degree of intrinsic motivation within each student, and whether it is, indeed, time to progress to the action phase of counsel-

ing. One of the challenges in conducting effective counseling relates to the matter of timing. Throughout the process, counselors are constantly faced with the question: "Is this the right time for me to do or say this?" which essentially can be translated, "Is the student ready for this?"

The participants' responses to such requests alert the counselor to whether they are ready for this phase. If they demonstrate resistance, then the issues raised need to take precedence in the sessions. If no resistance is encountered, counselors proceed *as if* the students are ready. The term *as if* is used because only future student behavior will ensure that they are, in fact, ready for creating plans and refining them, and subsequent implementation and evaluation. The counselor needs to approach this entire matter with the knowledge that effective counseling often involves false starts. When participants experience these, the counselor needs to respond supportively and engage in an exploration of the obstacles impeding progress.

From a different vantage point, this issue relates to a discrepancy between the counselor's perception and the student's reality. When a counselor chooses to initiate an action phase, such a decision has been arrived at based on her perception of the student. Whether implicitly or explicitly, the counselor has made observations of the student that indicate a readiness for action. This matter is raised here because of a potential problem—the counselor might try to convince the student that he is ready—through logical analyses and the reporting of earlier student statements. In an extreme situation, the discrepancy between the student's reality—expressed as not being prepared for action—and the counselor's judgment may lead to a power struggle between the counselor and the student. Obviously, this must be avoided, since it would wreak havoc on the relationship between counselor and student.

Refinement and Support of Action Plans

Both the transitions from stage to stage and the early part of each stage clearly evidence that counseling is an art as well as a science. Once the counselor has ascertained that it is appropriate to engage participants in action, they need assistance in refining their plans. Students should be helped to ensure that plans are specific and attainable. Furthermore, the counselor seeks to support the students in their implementation of the plans. In general, the concept of "successive approximations of the goal" is useful here. Behaviorists take credit for this notion, but the writer prefers an earlier version, namely, the Taoist saying as paraphrased "A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step." The first step in any action is of crucial importance.

In this case, the first step is the counselor's assisting students in the anticipation of the implementation of their plans. Once a realistic plan has been identified, the counselor asks the students to anticipate the outcome of their attempt to implement their first steps. In the course of this discussion, the counselor needs to focus attention on three possibilities: (1) success, (2) failure, and (3) lack of effort.

In general, the procedure involves asking the participants to imagine themselves implementing their plans. Their feelings associated with the imagery are explored. Then they are asked: "How would you feel if you succeed, fail, or if you decided not to try?" Each possibility is discussed in turn. It is very important in these discussions that the counselor communicate an understanding of the difficulty involved in overcoming the initial inertia or resistance to implementation. Furthermore, the young people need reassurance that any eventuality will be acceptable. Essentially, the counselor is required to provide a balance between encouraging students to implement their plans and simultaneously communicating that failure will not lead to criticism or disapproval. All of the counselor's behavior is geared to helping the students overcome the difficulties involved in the beginning stages of behavior change. The implementation is then assigned as homework.

In subsequent sessions, students are asked to report on their homework. They are asked for details of the events, and encouraged to disclose associated emotions. It is important to explore the rationales for successes as well as failures or no attempts. For successes to be sustained the participants need to know the reasons why they succeeded. Success needs to be the consequence of students' efforts and not simply chance or behavior changes in others. Failures need to be understood and encouragement to try again provided. When a student does not attempt the homework, one needs to investigate the issues of motivation, and possible social or environmental impediments to change. If genuine change is to occur and persist, it is important to instruct the students in the importance of conscious, deliberate effort on their part. Changes that occur by chance may not necessarily be maintained. The counselor assists the participants by this continuous interplay among being assigned homework, reporting on it, and articulation of the rationale for the performance and the emotions experienced during the performance.

CONCLUSION

Several issues related to intervention with gifted learning disabled students have been discussed in this paper. First, counselor attitudes influence counselor communication pat-

terns with the student system. A second issue is the primacy of the affective reactions of the child, parents, and teachers. Implicit in this is the need for a multifaceted approach when counseling with gifted learning disabled students. A number of strategies and interview techniques have been described. Many prove useful when applied appropriately and when parents and teachers are actively involved in the counseling process. Finally, the counselor must not forget the "gifted" aspect of these students, and efforts need to be made to help students use their gifts to help themselves.

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