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## **Study on the professional competences of the school counselor**

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**Abstract.** Psycho-pedagogical counseling, an integral part of the educational process, represents an optimal form of psychosocial modeling, having as its main objective the beneficial change in the student's attitude and behavior. It is a special pedagogical communication experience, a way to optimize interpersonal relationships, an important factor in preventing difficulties in school adaptation and integration, but also physical, mental and emotional health problems. The effectiveness of psycho-pedagogical counseling actions largely depends on the quality of the counseling relationship, but also on the professional skills of the school counselor (psychologist, pedagogue, psycho-pedagogue). The present study, as a structured essay, addresses the need to learn and practice specific psychopedagogical knowledge, skills and attitudes by the school counselor in specific educational contexts. In this sense, I presented, along with aspects related to the structure of counseling skills, data regarding the approach to counseling methods and techniques, inspired, on the one hand, from psychotherapy practice, and from educational practice, on the other hand. Also, the work includes a case study about identifying and understanding the meaning of the life experiences of an 8-year-old child, in which the school counselor's mode of action in managing the student's problem is exemplified.

**Keywords:** counselling, psycho-pedagogical counselling, school counsellor, professional skills

### **1. Introduction**

Psycho-pedagogical counseling is a special pedagogical communication experience, a way to optimize interpersonal relationships, a means of learning positive behavioral and attitudinal models, an important factor in preventing difficulties in school adaptation and integration, but also physical health problems, mental and emotional.

The efficiency of psycho-pedagogical counseling actions largely depends on the quality of the counseling relationship. It must be based on alliance, mutual participation and collaboration, mutual respect and trust, so as to facilitate the expression of values, convictions, feelings, in a word, communication. The focus on the student's experience, on the cultivation of certain qualities and



abilities, reflects the concern for the valorization of the human dignity and quality of those who dedicate their lives to shaping the human personality through education. The acceptance of the student as a unique, valuable person is an indisputable principle in the action of school counseling, it represents the fundamental premise of the process of personal, educational, professional and socio-cultural development of students. Thus, the professional qualities of a good school counselor (psychologist, pedagogue, psycho-pedagogue) must aim at: empathy and sensitivity, honesty, sobriety, but also joviality, observational spirit, professionalism, responsibility.

The present study, as a structured essay, addresses the need for school counselors to learn and practice professional skills in specific educational contexts. In this sense, we will present, along with aspects related to the structure of counseling skills, data regarding the approach to counseling methods and techniques, inspired, on the one hand, from psychotherapy practice, and from educational practice, on the other. Also, the paper includes a case study about identifying and understanding the meaning of the life experiences of an 8-year-old child, in which we exemplify the school counselor's mode of action in managing the student's problems.

## **2. The professional competences of the school counsellor**

Training programs for school counselors involve, on the one hand, psychopedagogical knowledge, but, above all, attitudes and relational skills, such as (Moraru, 2013, pp. 113-114):

- a) unconditional acceptance of the student - recognition of the student's uniqueness, dignity and personal value;
- b) authenticity / congruence in the relationship with oneself and with the student / class of students;
- c) positive valorization of students' psycho-social and learning resources;
- d) empathy and sensitivity for the student's problems - understanding the way the student thinks, feels and behaves, which facilitates teacher-student/student communication;
- e) active listening by focusing attention on the relationship with the student / class of students;
- f) verbal and non-verbal communication skills - the proper formulation and addressing of questions, especially open-ended hypothetical ones that favor the identification and clarification of problems; the very infrequent use of the closed question "Why?", as it has been found to block communication; careful observation of the student; avoiding criticism etc.
- g) offering specific and concrete feed-back, by focusing on the positive aspects of the student's behavior; feedback must not be evaluative or critical, but must be offered for those behaviors and attitudes that can be changed; must offer behavioral alternatives,
- h) interpretation - a different perspective is offered on the problem of the advised student; it is achieved through redefinition, renaming, reformulation, re-signification (Zdreheș, 2004, p. 103):
  - redefining problems in positive terms: "I can't learn..." - "Would you like to learn...";
  - renaming a situation, state, etc.: "I don't feel well because..." - "You are embarrassed because...";
  - reformulating the student's account or his problems in a clear and concise way;
  - re-meaning through a story or metaphor.

The British Association for Counselling, founded in 1977, defines counseling as "the skillful and principled use of interpersonal relationships to facilitate self-knowledge, emotional acceptance and maturation, the optimal development of personal resources" (B.A.C., 1989, apud



Clarkson and Pokorny, 1994, page 8). Thus, a counselor must be able to foster and maintain an authentic relationship of therapeutic alliance. This involves four core competencies:

a) Paying attention - is ensured through verbal responses, facial expressions, eye contact and body posture that counselees are shown that they are in a relationship that provides them with support, respect and acceptance, which leads to trust.

b) Observation - it is necessary to identify the verbal and physical expressions of the advised person; helps to fully understand his experience. We thus build a relationship of greater relational depth that allows the counselee to feel safe enough to try new ways of being.

c) Active listening to the counselee's life story, trying to understand the message conveyed. Active listening and affirming that they have been heard gives the person a sense of being understood and accepted. People who have been listened to in this special way become more emotionally mature, more open to their experiences, less defensive, more democratic and less authoritarian.

d) The answer - involves reflection, summarizing the content, giving the counselee the opportunity to express and explore the way in which he wishes to present current or past experiences. The answer also offers the opportunity to change one's internal view of life experiences.

Counseling thus offers the possibility of self-knowledge, development and maturation of the personality, facilitating the person's adaptation to the demands and tasks of everyday life and, implicitly, improving the quality of life.

### **3. Psycho-pedagogical counseling methods and techniques**

In the following, we will focus on some of the most used psychopedagogical counseling methods and techniques. These, inspired, on the one hand, by psychotherapeutic theory and practice, and on the other hand, by educational theory and practice, offer the teacher-counselor the opportunity to test his professional skills, embodied in knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. Methods "help solve clients' problems, while theories allow us to explain why they need help. (...). Effective counseling is the one that capitalizes on ideas and practices from various theoretical and practical theories and approaches" (Dumitru, 2008, p. 50). The teacher-counselor will select the most suitable psychopedagogical counseling methods as rigorously as possible and in accordance with the students' personality, age, education and level of culture.

*Active listening technique.* Inspired by the methodology of approaching counseling and experiential psychotherapy, the technique of active listening specifies the importance of the attention given by the teacher-counselor to the students' attitudes and behaviors, gestures, facial expressions, posture, movements, changes in flow and intensity in speech in order to identify problems, feelings, but also to encourage, to support expression and involvement. Questions such as "What is the student actually saying?", "What are the student's real messages?" must concern the teacher-counselor. He must show interest in what the student expresses, positive attitude, attention and solicitude.



Ion Al. Dumitru (2008, p. 81) shows that active listening is possible if the counselor has the skills to: "establish visual contact with the client"; "use of attentive body language"; "tracking the customer's verbal message"; "deciphering the meaning of his voice and gestures"; "minimum incentives". Using active listening skills expresses empathy and paying attention to the counselee.

Walker et al (2005, p. 15) also argue that we need to reflect on our own perceptions and beliefs about child development and avoid rigid understandings. We need to ensure that we have an open, curious and culturally flexible stance.

Ways of active listening: confirmations - verbal and non-verbal: approving words and sounds, smile, open position, interested facial expression, moderate eye contact, etc.; attentive silence; open questions - offer the opportunity to freely express the point of view; paraphrasing – summarizing what was expressed by the subject, in order to clarify or confirm them; mirroring – the counselor's reflection, in brief comments, of the informational and emotional material expressed by the subject, etc.

*Techniques of reflection and reformulation.* These techniques have the role of helping the student to clarify and better understand the problems he is facing. R. Mucchielli (1994) highlights "three main processes" of reformulation (apud Dafinoiu, 2000, pp. 126-127):

a) "reformulation-reflection" - procedure by which the counselor emphasizes the essential words / ideas from the person's account, keeping the frame of reference proposed by him. By doing so, the counselor proves to the person that he is listened to, understood, supported within the counseling relationship;

b) "reformulation as an inversion of the figure-ground ratio" - a procedure that allows the person to highlight a new perspective on the problem situation (eg: Student: "I am the only student in the class who obtained unsatisfactory results in mathematics!" Counselor: " In your opinion, do all your colleagues have better results?");

c) "reformulation-clarification" - a complex process by which the essence and meaning of the message expressed by the person, which he intuited but cannot express, is reproduced. Reframing-clarification takes two forms: paraphrasing and summarizing.

- paraphrasing involves reformulating what the person said by using words and expressions that have the role of synthesizing the ideas expressed;

- summarizing involves the succinct expression of the person's thoughts and emotions.

*The method of positive and negative reinforcement* consists in the presentation of positive and negative stimuli, respectively, after certain behavioral responses of the subject, with the aim of increasing the frequency of positive attitudes and behaviors and decreasing the negative ones (eg: encouragement, praise, positive assessments, symbolic rewards, materials, prohibitions, disapprovals, penalties, responsibilities, etc.).

Rules for applying negative reinforcement: to be applied constantly, immediately, calmly; not to criticize the person, but his behavior; the prohibition to be preceded by a warning; to be necessarily accompanied by the reinforcement of positive, accepted behaviors.

*Attention!!! Do not use corporal punishment!* These are not effective for several reasons: they attack the person and not the behavior; does not determine the identification of the causes of the behavior; causes a decrease in the subject's self-esteem, increasing the frequency of disruptive



behaviors; may result in physical injury; it is a subtle message through which we convey to the subject that the best method of solving problems is physical force; has negative emotional consequences on the subject: fear, irritability, isolation.

Also, the use of behavioral labeling as a way to eliminate undesirable behaviors is contraindicated. Behavioral labels reinforce inappropriate behavior, reduce the chances of personal development ("You are a poor student in mathematics!" - the student will not make efforts to improve his school performance); they reduce the motivation to change ("I'm not good at math anyway, it doesn't make sense to make efforts to be better!").

The process of changing undesirable behaviors involves the following stages: monitoring the behavior (frequency, context, intensity); establishing objectives (realistic, measurable, planned in time, specified simply and clearly - e.g.: the student must pay attention to the teacher's instructions; show respect for colleagues and teachers, etc.); establishing positive or negative reinforcements and how to apply them; evaluating the effectiveness of the behavioral modification program.

*Modeling* involves the acquisition of desirable behavioral models, through social learning by model (imitation of model people for the advised student: parents, colleagues, friends, teachers, etc.). Modeling can be done in the form of role play. For example, the teacher-counselor can serve as a behavioral model for the student, showing him how conflict situations can be overcome, by verbalizing the inner strategies for processing and overcoming a problematic situation. Thus, the teacher helps the student to constantly check his own ineffective strategies and, by comparison, to change or improve them (Moraru, 2013, p. 83).

*The technique of stopping negative thinking.* It applies to people who insistently think about certain mistakes from the past. She will be instructed that whenever these thoughts appear, she should stop with the command "Stop!", change the direction of her thoughts and orient herself towards situations in which she was happy.

*Problem-solving* is a variant of heuristics or discovery learning. It pursues the development of abilities to solve specific problems. The problematization consists in creating some difficulties/dilemmas whose solution is the result of the students' own research activity. Ex.: "Soldier's Dilemma" - "Each soldier may be personally better off avoiding battle, but if no soldier in the army chooses to fight, the battle will surely be lost and all soldiers may be killed" (Negret-Dobridor, Pânișoara, 2005, p. 204). By successively issuing the hypotheses and refuting some of them, the students gradually arrive at the identification of the solutions to the problem.

Stages: identification of the problem; data restructuring; establishing solution options and choosing the optimal solution; experimental verification of the chosen solution.

The method can be applied individually, but also within the group.

*Brainstorming* (storming ideas/deferred evaluation method) is a method of stimulating creativity and solving problems in a team. It was initiated by the psychologist A. Osborn. The brainstorming group consists of 5-12 members, with an optimal structure between 5 and 8 members. The principle of brainstorming is to postpone criticism for a later stage of elaborating solutions to the problem to be solved. During the brainstorming session, each member of the group



can say anything about the proposed problem. The goal is to create a relational framework favorable to the spontaneous expression of ideas. Also, each member of the group can take an idea from their colleagues, exploring it to its final consequences. The aim is to develop as many solutions as possible. Afterwards, the best ideas are selected.

By using this method, students' active participation is challenged and requested, their personal experience is valued, creative attitude and personality expression are practiced.

The methods recommended for psycho-pedagogical counseling activities respect the principle of student-centered learning and lead to the development of integrative, transferable skills and competences, useful both in school and professional life.

*Gallery tour.* Students, in groups of 3 or 4, work on a problem / learning task that can materialize in a product - diagram, drawing, inventory of ideas - made on a sheet of paper. The products of the groups' activity are displayed on the classroom walls, transformed into a real exhibition gallery. At the teacher's signal, the groups go, one by one, to each product to examine and discuss the products proposed by their colleagues. I can note observations on the exposed materials. After the gallery tour is over, the groups re-examine their own products.

#### **4. Case study**

In what follows, we present a case study of how the teacher-counselor managed the problem of a student, whom we have named Patrik, in terms of identifying and making sense of his life experiences.

Patrik was 8 years old when he was sent to Elena, his school counselor. He had been moved to the new school five months after his mother had moved to the area looking for a fresh start after the end of her marriage. Patrik's father kept in touch with him, but negatively influenced the child's relationship with his mother. The reason why the mother's consent was sought for him to have counseling at school was that Patrik was more often mentally absent from what was going on in the classroom: he had a blank stare, was observed talking to himself, could not to focus on class activities.

The first aspect that caught Elena's attention was the child's physical presence. Patrik looked far too mature for his age and could easily have passed for a young man in a child's body. It was the child's position, attitude and general manner of behavior in the middle of a conversation that seemed to demonstrate a particular control of the child over what he presented in the discussions.

Elena described the early stages of her work with Patrik reflecting on why Patrik came to counselling. Elena explained that she felt that their meeting was forced, imposed from the outside. She revealed her own dissatisfaction with this and explained that one of the fundamental principles of counseling is that it must be a voluntary process. Patrik stated that he had no problem attending counselling, but did not understand why others thought he needed counselling. Despite his physical appearance, Elena noticed that Patrik looked like a small child, his posture hunched over and almost fetal when he said these. Patrik then gave an outline of his life, explaining that the last two years had been deeply marked by the lack of an authentic male role model, for which he felt an acute sense of guilt.

Elena invited Patrik to explore how he felt about "not being wanted around," which he brought up. Through observation, Elena realized that Patrik was showing early signs of PTSD and



that daydreaming seemed to be an indicator of intrusive images during the day. Thus, Elena decided to give Patrik more space to explore his dreams. Patrik explained that daydreaming was why he felt like he was "left out" of the class. He was seen as uncooperative and had been described as blatantly ignoring classroom instructions. In fact, Patrik stated that he thus "moved away" from thoughts of his parents' divorce and moving.

Slowly, prompted by the precise reflections from the teacher-counselor, Patrik understood the internal conflict he experienced between his physical appearance and his interiority where he felt small and scared. The counseling process then focused on the attributes that Patrik wanted people to see in him. Patrik said he wanted people to see his athletic and artistic abilities.

In the following weeks, Patrik's image of who he is and could become was revisited and possibilities explored to facilitate his life change. Throughout the counseling sessions, Elena used active listening to understand Patrik's world and consistently worked with the dissonance between his developmental levels.

### **Conclusions**

The main representative of the psychopedagogical counseling process is the teacher-counselor. Through his skills and attitudes, the teacher-counselor decisively influences the student's personality, by facilitating the free and creative expression of his cognitions, emotions and feelings, maximizing his intellectual, affective and volitional availability, changing maladaptive attitudes and behaviors, achieving self-knowledge, forming relationship skills social environment favorable to teamwork, cooperation and collaboration, the acquisition of effective learning techniques, etc. Thus, psychopedagogical counseling, an integral part of the educational process, represents an optimal form of psychosocial modeling, having as its main objective the beneficial change in the student's attitude and behavior.

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