Training Pedagogy Students for Counseling in Educational Institutions

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Abstract

Counseling that school counselors provide in educational institutions is only one of their tasks within the very demanding and challenging school setting. Scientific research and pedagogical practice have shown that there is still considerable room for a more comprehensive post-secondary education of future pedagogues. At this level, special attention must be devoted to their training for quality counseling work. Given its sensitivity, responsibility and complexity, counseling work should be founded in the relevant theories that would provide the counselor with a firm foothold and orientation for conducting an effective consultation. Otherwise, all educational efforts could be counterproductive. The paper reports on the experience of training Pedagogy students for the counseling work within the course "Partnership of Family and Educational Institution" at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split (Croatia) in the academic year 2019/20. Acknowledging the complexity of counseling work, an (additional) elective course, which would enable students to acquire the necessary basic counseling competencies, should be introduced in the curriculum.

Keywords: counseling, tertiary education, pedagogue, practice, school counselor

Introduction

The legislation in the Republic of Croatia very clearly and unambiguously defines the school counselor's professional role in educational institutions (Primary and Secondary School Education Act, 2008-2017). However, it is almost impossible to list all his/her roles and tasks due to the great diversity of the types of institutions and their respective characteristics, e.g. kindergarten vs. primary or secondary school, the size of the institution, its location, support within the local community, spatial and material environment, staff requirements, etc., and the uniqueness of their culture and relationships. However, a consensus can be relatively quickly reached that a school counselor is perceived as an "advisor, advocate, agent, believer, collaborator, conductor, consultant, coordinator, diplomat, educator, enthusiast, expert, explorer, guide, initiator, leader... teacher" (Popov & Spasenović, 2020, p. 34) or more simply put the omnipresent "soul of the institution" (Ljubetić, Mandarić Vukušić & Pezo, 2017). It should be emphasized that pedagogues working in the Croatian education system in addition to their other tasks also provide counseling. In addition, it should also be pointed out that pedagogues-counselors working in educational institutions (kindergartens, schools) receive no specific education on or

training in counseling. If pedagogues cannot successfully respond to a specific situation in practice, then local community experts are involved. Graduate pedagogues sometimes, on their own initiative, attend training courses in one of the psychological theories in order to acquire counseling skills.

If we tried to rigorously group the school counselor's tasks, then they would be connected with: 1. children/students, 2. their parents/guardians, 3. educators/teachers, 4. principals and other members of the expert team (and other employees in the institution), 5. professional development activities, 6. cooperation with the local community and scientific institutions, 7. personal career, professional, and/or scientific advancement, and 8. other tasks. All of the above requires the school counselor to have personal and professional competencies (Ledić, Staničić & Turk, 2014; Bohlinger, 2008; Babić, 2007), which continue to develop through continuous (non-)formal and informal education after the basic graduate-level education. The first four groups of tasks require maximum commitment, time, energy, and expertise, and highly developed competencies, since the quality of the institution's culture (Čamber Tambolaš & Vujičić, 2019; Hongboontri & Keawkhong, 2014) and the overall atmosphere, which can be stimulating or inhibiting for the educational process, depends on the quality of the functioning of these subsystems (children, parents, teachers, management).

Zuković and Slijepčević (2017, p. 242) pointed out that "effective school counseling includes the knowledge of the general and unique characteristics of the development of an individual, but also the knowledge of school culture and school processes". Tertiary level teachers, who educate professional associates-pedagogues to effectively participate in the pedagogical practice, have to address two basic questions: does the current curriculum adequately prepare them for the challenges of future practice and what can be done within the relatively passive system of higher education to bring the contents and methods of their education closer to the needs of pedagogical practice? Nikšić (2017) probably faced similar dilemmas. Namely, in her research on pedagogues' attitudes towards counseling in schools, she found that, according to school pedagogues' self-assessment, counseling is the most challenging part of their job that requires most preparation. Research participants also pointed out that the Pedagogy studies had not provided them with practical conditions to apply the theory learned.

Considering the needs of practice on the one hand and the current education of professional associates-pedagogues on the other, it is evident there is a discrepancy with regard to the acquisition of counseling competencies. Pedagogical practice calls attention to the growing trend of children and young people, their parents and their teachers requiring (more) counseling as a result of increased gambling addiction (Ricijaš, Maglica & Dodig Hundrić, 2019; Maglica, 2017; Ricijaš, Krajcer & Bouillet, 2010), addiction to modern technologies (Barling & Fullagar, 1983; Christakis et al., 2004), increased migration (Schlesier-Michel, Titzmann & Silbereisen, 2012; Yakushko, 2009), awareness that there exist individuals with different sexual orientations (Collier et al., 2013; Goodrich & Luke, 2009), etc. At the same time, there

are also young people who need counseling only occasionally, e.g. when planning their future, choosing studies, schools, or employment, facing the challenges of growing up, peer conflicts, misunderstanding between them and their parents and the like (Nurmi, 1991). Sometimes parents also need encouragement or support of professionals to perform their parenting role even better (Sahu & Baghel, 2012) as well as educators/teachers who need a focused conversation and professional support. It is clear that professional associates-pedagogues need systematic and comprehensive preparation and more intensive engagement to build and strengthen their counseling competencies so as to adequately respond to the growing needs of practice.

Observed from a supervisor's perspective in practice, it can be stated that building and strengthening students' competencies for counseling follows two directions. The first is counseling offered on a one-time basis or limited to a small number of meetings dedicated to clear, unambiguous, and very specific issues, which most often requires counselor's specific expertise and thus provides very concrete answers, e.g. how to study effectively, how to help your child to separate from the pacifier, how to help the child-pupil to correct a negative grade, etc. The second direction refers to time-consuming and content-intensive counseling that includes very personal questions, which are necessary to gain a deeper and broader insight into the person's personality and behavior in the counselor-client dyad and to clarify the family and school context, e.g. how to admit a gambling or drug addiction to parents, how to seek help; the teacher wants to help a child growing up in a dysfunctional family, but does not know how to approach the problem; the student is a victim of bullying; the student is insecure about their sexual orientation, etc.

If competencies are understood as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes (Cheetham & Chivers, 1996; Selvi, 2010), it is clear that counselors are expected to have a range of very specific professional knowledge from different scientific disciplines (psychology, (social) pedagogy, etc.) and skills of conducting effective conversations with different stakeholders (students, parents, etc.). They also need to build attitudes (e.g. respect for all human beings regardless of gender, age, religion, orientation, etc.) and internalized generally accepted human values (tolerance, respect, appreciation, etc.). Selvi (2010, p. 167) points out that "teachers' competencies affect their values, behaviors, communication, aims and practices in school and also they support professional development and curricular studies".

To implement quality counseling, all of the above listed dimensions must be present. Therefore, professional associates-pedagogues must be provided with an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary tertiary-level education. It is also important to pay particular attention to the acquisition and improvement of communication skills as a prerequisite for quality counseling (Zuković & Slijepčević, 2017) and for (self-)assessment, which is a very effective mechanism for change and improvement of one's own personality and behavior. Counselors should particularly acquire this dimension, i.e. the permanent self-assessment ability. Otherwise they could do a lot of educational damage.

Partnership of family and educational institution: structural changes

The Faculty of Humanities and Social Science in Split educates future professional associates-pedagogues for working in educational institutions, particularly in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, and dormitories. A course titled *Partnership of Family and Educational Institution* is offered at this Faculty. The learning outcomes listed in the course syllabus state that students will, among other things, be able to: 1. Independently and effectively communicate with both parents and pupils and other participants in the educational process, and 2. Develop a concrete plan of activities aimed at building partnerships, a pedagogical education program for parents, and a counseling program with pupils (parents, teachers).

The ambitiously set plan is realized during one semester at the graduate level of studies through 15 hours of lectures, 15 hours of seminars and 15 hours of exercises. Students' (self-)assessment during and after the course (continuously conducted since the academic year 2006/07) has showed that students feel they lack competencies when providing counseling to pupils (depending on their age and the problems they face). Other employees in the educational institution and pupils' parents also lack these competencies. As counseling is only one of, but an extremely demanding and extensive pedagogue's professional task, the author of this paper tried to find an effective answer, design teaching contents and methods, and adjust (increase) the available number of lessons dedicated to developing competencies of pedagogy students.

Oral and written feedback provided by students over several years encouraged us to introduce structural changes in the course and to make a shift towards counseling:

> *This is a very complex subject. It is slowly becoming clear to me how terribly demanding it is to be a pedagogue in an institution. I am a little bit afraid of whether I will be able to respond to the demands of practice and whether I will be successful at it. My biggest fear is whether I will be able to talk to parents. What if they are aggressive?* (SI/1)

> *Despite all the theory we learned during the 4 years of study, I don't feel ready enough to talk to a pupil who has a more serious problem.* (SK/2)

> *I am afraid of real practice and above all of talking to parents and pupils. What we have done so far in this course is not enough. It seems to me that we have just scratched the surface.* (SK/3)

> *When I come to work in a school as a young pedagogue and I don't have any children of my own, and thus no personal experience, I don't believe that pupils' parents and fellow teachers will take me seriously, and I should be kind of an authority.* (ST/4)

Until now, I thought that the pedagogue's role was a more administrative one, and now I see that it is something completely different. Constant work with people, and from these few examples of what we did in class I learned that it is not easy to help someone at all, even though you really want to. (SM/5)

Mature, thoughtful, and critical student evaluations required immediate teacher intervention. Adapting the course to students' real needs (and interests) as well as to the needs of future pedagogical practice required a systematic analysis of the course and its design and elaboration within the given time, space-material, theoretical-practical and staffing conditions. The activities undertaken resulted in changing/adjusting:

a) Time frame – by redistributing the content within the mandatory schedule, more time is devoted to effective conversation, i.e. counseling of future pedagogues.

b) Spatial-material conditions – they are more flexible and have been adapted to meet the needs of pair work, small group work (3-4 students), larger groups of participants, etc.

c) Theoretical-practical conditions – the theoretical framework of counseling in this course is based on William Glasser's choice theory. The method used is reality therapy, or more precisely, its elements adapted to students' competencies. It is important to point out that during one semester students cannot acquire competencies that choice theory and reality therapy students acquire during three years of formal education. Pedagogy students can nonetheless gain insights into the pillars of the theory and apply its principles to conduct an effective conversation. It is, therefore, continuously emphasized to students that they are being trained to lead an effective, not a counseling or therapeutic interview, which requires significantly greater competencies and a systematic formal education outside the Faculty.

d) Staffing conditions – have not changed since the lecturer is a certified teacher of William Glasser's choice theory and reality therapy.

Partnership and counseling under distance learning conditions

From the very beginning of the winter semester of the academic year 2019/20 in the course "Partnership of Family and Educational Institution" students were introduced to problem situations (e.g. a pupil who refuses to come to class, a pupil who fails to master the curriculum, a parent who does not accept child's failure, a parent who is aggressive towards the teacher, a pupil who is under the measure of intensified care and supervision by the Center of Social Care, etc.) and to the issues of counseling so students could: 1. face real challenging situations of future practice, 2. accept the importance of attending classes and continuously working on acquiring competencies in counseling, and 3. better understand the content of lectures and apply it in exercises (counseling) and in their term papers. Unfortunately, after only

a few lessons of direct teaching in college, we had to switch to asynchronous distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This type of teaching posed a new challenge (Bao, 2020; Shahabadi & Uplane, 2015; Hrastinski, 2008), especially for courses that required direct contact and teaching that should prepare students for counseling. However, this challenge was also turned into an advantage. The teacher produced written materials, which described the problem situation, provided details needed to understand the individual receiving counseling, and included detailed instructions (theory) necessary to conduct an effective conversation. Students had one to two weeks to conduct a counseling interview (depending on the complexity of the situation and the task). In the initial phase of distance learning, students conducted an imaginary conversation where both students played the role of counselor and the role of student/parent, then in pairs via Skype (with shared roles), and finally in groups of three (counselor, student/parent and feedback provider) communicating via some of the platforms. After completing the spoken part of the assignment, students provided the teacher with a written feedback in which they presented their conversations through dialogues and gave their reflection on their own respective roles. Having reviewed all assignments and having provided each student with an individual feedback, the teacher informed the whole group of the examples of excellent counseling practice, problematized and further clarified and explained certain questions that were difficult for some or most students, answered questions asked by individuals or groups, etc. At the same time, self-assessment was a part of each task, so it was an additional opportunity for students to learn. Although self-assessment is an effective technique that students usually do not accept with joy at first, they eventually realize its importance. A comment by a female student from the 2019/2020 generation illustrates this point. She said:

> *I might single out self-reflection, as something more difficult… which was more challenging than other tasks at the beginning. I know that self-reflection is very important and useful for further progress, but it is always difficult to assess yourself and your work. However, as we have had the opportunity to face this type of task many times, it is no longer a big problem for me.* (S/16)

Although this form of teaching required a lot of effort and was time-consuming for both students and the teacher, the students assessed that the time available enabled them to learn and progress at their own pace. It also left them with enough space to study each counseling conversation, and correct the written version in accordance with the newly acquired knowledge and feedback received from the teacher on previous tasks. Joint efforts to overcome the challenges of counseling in the context of distance learning have resulted in a University Handbook titled "Co-construction of knowledge and acquisition of pedagogical skills in distance learning" (Maja Ljubetić and students of Pedagogy – generation 2016/2017). We believe that this handbook will significantly contribute to the acquisition of counseling competencies for future generations of Pedagogy students.

What have we learned?

Towards the end of the distance learning and the realized course content related to counseling, students were administered a questionnaire on the importance of counseling and their experience as counselors, where they assessed their strengths, weaknesses, and their willingness to improve their counseling competencies. A few examples illustrate the most common student responses.

Counseling is extremely important. We are the first ones, after kindergarten and school teachers that pupils and parents should turn to and that is why I will try to create a pleasant atmosphere in which both parents and pupils can relax. I want to build warm relationships, but on a professional level (so that the parents do not feel uncomfortable and that we exchange thoughts without prejudice or negative emotions, or that we easily engage in critical thinking, keeping in mind the child is the priority affected by our relationships and thoughts). I want to get to know their family culture slowly and carefully without pressure, that is, without them feeling threatened, attacked or criticized. I want to actively listen to them and show understanding, but think rationally and earn their respect. I want to let parents know that they are a big part of a child's life, so they need to be active participants in the upbringing and education. I want to do all this for my pupils because they motivate us to constantly put in effort and work harder. (S/23)

I am ready to learn a lot more. Only now is it clear to me how demanding, complex and responsible counseling is. I still don't feel completely ready, but I have a desire. (S12)

When I think about my future role as a pedagogue, I would like parents not to think negatively about the pedagogue and I wish there is no stigma related to "going to see the pedagogue", as if it were something negative. My wish is that one day, as a pedagogue, my parents will not hesitate to contact me when they encounter a problem. I would also like the pedagogue not to be perceived as an individual who only conveys information to pupils and does paperwork. I believe that this is a very responsible, complex and diverse profession, which as such should be recognized by the local community, and of course the pupil's family. In order to meet their expectations, I still need to acquire competencies in counseling, but I am well on my way. I know which direction to follow. (S/17)

Counseling is very demanding. It scares me a bit, but I'm getting better at it, although I'm aware that I still have a lot to learn. It's interesting. I'm just afraid I might be too sympathetic. Will that be an obstacle for me? (S/25)

Students have recognized that the following qualities would enable them to provide quality counseling: patience, real willingness to help, self-confidence, acceptance, respect, and the abilities to actively listen, think critically, and create a pleasant and warm atmosphere, and, last but not least, as one student stated, "*I always do my best*" (S/23). Students most often consider self-doubt, withdrawal, pessimism, excessive sensitivity, fear of error, "*the belief that I am not taken seriously*

given my age, which could have a negative effect on my performance" (S/23) and "*a lack of self-confidence*" (S/25) as their weaknesses in counseling. All surveyed students expressed their readiness to improve both their own general professional and their counseling competencies as well as to systematically work to reduce and/or eliminate their weaknesses. A student concludes:

> *Furthermore, I learned through assignments and elaboration of the theory that both counseling and partnership relationship with parents, children and colleagues in an educational institution are the key to success in pedagogue's work and that it is necessary to work hard and be persistent no matter how many obstacles you encounter.* (S/15)

Looking from the teacher's perspective, it can be concluded that the correct choice of teaching methods and content can achieve the desired outcomes in students in extraordinary circumstances and arouse their real interest in studying subjects that they value as being highly useful. Furthermore, counseling is a complex area of practical work whose quality implementation requires a strong theoretical support – an "anchor". A good "anchor" provides the counselor with a sense of security and enables him/her to develop the skills necessary for simultaneously maintaining quality relationships and guiding interlocutors to seek possible solutions to their problem(s). Resman (2000) emphasizes that the counselor's task is to direct the interlocutor towards different perspectives and possible answers, giving him/her the freedom to independently choose the solution s/he considers most appropriate.

Conclusion

The issue of students' and practitioners' competencies required for quality counseling in pedagogical practice still does not receive enough attention given the complexity and responsibility that arises from this role. Existing courses should be analyzed and improved and new (elective) courses should be designed to include counseling in their respective syllabuses. This would enable Pedagogy students to acquire the competencies necessary for effective counseling of pupils and their parents and teachers. When conducting these changes, it is important to rely on one of the relevant contemporary theories as it will provide the counselor with security and support in the moments when s/he hesitates how to continue conducting an effective conversation. It is also necessary to appropriately supervise students as they acquire these competencies. Relevant theories are also important to practitioners as it enables them to further improve in practice.

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