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Culturally Appropriate Family Systems Consultation in the School Setting

By Bob Conrad

Abstract

School counseling involves consultation as a primary counselor function. School counselors must not only possess competencies with diverse student, teacher and administrator populations, but they must also have awareness of how systemic influences can impact various members of their client population. Systemic influences can have seemingly hidden, unrelated consequences on the counselor's client system, and these conditions can often be treated as the identified problem (e.g., a student behaviorally acting out in class) when less apparent situations may actually be more related to the identified issue than the issue itself (e.g., the acting out student's family recently becoming homeless). School counselors can be most effective with both multicultural and a family systems comprehension of client conditions, and how public schools can have diverse levels of relational dynamics.

Culturally Appropriate Family Systems Consultation in the School Setting

Consultation in the school setting is an evolving specialty by school counselors. As a service delivery approach, consultation is defined as a helping or problem-solving process in which a consultant provides direct or indirect services to a client (Brown, Pryzwansky, & Schulte, 1998). Consultation can be initiated and terminated by either the consultant or consultee. The goal of consultation in schools is to assist consultees and clients to develop skills in order to enable them to function more effectively in the school setting. Consultation as a school counselor's specialty has been consistently documented through over four decades of consultation research with results demonstrating consultation as an effective service delivery method (Erchul & Martens, 1997). Because consultation is inherently a triadic relationship -- as opposed to counseling, which is a counselor-client relationship -- consultation must take into account systemic variables in the three-part relationship.

On one point in the triad is the consultant, the school counselor. The school counselor is an internal consultant because the administration is assumed to be already familiar with the school counselor and what role the counselor plays in the school. Similarly, the counselor as a consultant may already be familiar with the internal workings of the school. In contrast, a school psychologist, who may only frequently visit site, might fit the role as an external consultant, someone who is be "hired" to come into the school and diagnose a problem.



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Knowledge of how the school functions is important to the internal consultant. Sample questions that are imperative to the consultant's knowledge might include:

1. What are the power structures of the school?
2. Does the administrator have an autocratic or laissez-faire approach to administration?
3. Who is aligned with the administration?
4. Who isn't?

Awareness of the dynamics of the school in general will be critical to the internal consultant. If the consultant is perceived to be aligned with the administration, his or her effectiveness with teachers or students may be hindered. Students may view the counselor as someone who will report to the principal if they happen to disclose confidential information; therefore, the counselor would not be viewed as someone students could trust. If teachers, on the other hand, see the counselor as closely aligned to the principal, it could affect the working relationship the counselor may need to establish with teachers in situations where the counselor may need teacher support with a problem. The school counselor as a consultant, then, must work with a keen awareness of the inter-organizational dynamics of the school while remaining close enough and distant enough to teachers, students, families, the administration, and so on to be effective to all relevant subsystems of the school. Another point in the triadic consulting relationship is the school administration (principal, vice principal, etc.). The school administration will generally be the consultee, since the preservation of the health of the school setting is ultimately the administration's responsibility and because the consultant typically answers to the administration. The school counselor is essentially hired by the administration for his or her services. Finally, the client, the third point in the triadic relationship, may consist of teachers, parents, and students; thus, the "client" will most likely take the form of a client system consisting of possibly many members with which the consultant will serve.

School consultation can be viewed in many different paradigms within and outside of the school setting (e.g., a teacher may be viewed as a consultee on occasions when speaking for or having a strong alliance with the administration). There may be many relationships between client and consultee systems, which may change by the day or with the implementation of new administrators, and these changes will change the nature of the consulting process, perhaps even at moment's notice. Nevertheless, a school configuration



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where the school counselor is the internal consultant providing indirect services to student clients, the administration is the consultee, and teachers, other staff, and students and their families are members of a client system will be assumed for the purposes of this article. Additionally, because school consultation can shift into many paradigms, members of the

school form a community and the families of the school community also have a relationship to the school, school consultation is viewed as a process involving many systems and subsystems. Since the author's future position is as a school counselor, and consultation will often elicit involvement with students' families, the author choose family systems theory (FST) as an appropriate conceptual model for school consultation. The goal of this article is to demonstrate how the family system plays an important systemic role in the consultation process. A systemic view of school consultation must involve participants outside the school setting, which will often be students' family. So many possible systems and subsystems raise the issue of confidentiality concerns, which, of course, should always been handled with guardedness. Additionally, it will be noted that a family-systems approach to school consultation has certain considerations that, if neglected, could impede the success of consultation process. Cross-cultural consultation, in which members of the consultation process are of different ethnic backgrounds, is of particular importance to today's school counselor. Consultant awareness of his or her personal and cultural values plays an important role in how effective a consultation will be for members of culturally different populations. With a social climate of communities being increasingly segregated along racial, ethnic, economic, and political lines, a family systems approach to school consultation with multicultural awareness and sensitivity is invaluable in crossings these borders.

An understanding of FST in counseling is critical in order to see how systemic variables of a family can influence the school consultation process. Within FST are some key concepts that distinguish FST from other counseling theories. First, FST is a model in which individuals are assumed to be understood best by assessing the interactions within a family. This approach believes that a client's behavior may serve a function or purpose for the family be a function of the family's inability to operate productively, especially during developmental transitions, or be a symptom of dysfunctional patterns handed down across generations (Bitter & Corey, 1996, p. 367).

Second, the family system will naturally maintain a state of homeostasis, which can be productive or destructive to the health of family (Kraus, 1998). And finally, trauma in families can have lasting effects across multiple family generations (see, e.g., Armsworth & Stronck, 1999; Schützenberger, 1998). Thus, behavior manifested by a student in schools,



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which may have transgenerational roots, can be indicative of a larger, seemingly unrelated issue that is evident in the family or community system. A family constellation intervention, as demonstrated by Hellinger (1999), shows how transgenerational effects of parents or ancestors affect children and other family members. Hellinger's family constellations, in which group members are selected to represent family members, expose hidden family dynamics. A systemic intervention by Hellinger shows how a child's behavior may stem from an unstated desire by the child to identify with a parental situation. Hellinger recounts this story:

I once gave a course in a home for unmanageable girls, for the girls and their parents. I had been invited by the girls' teacher and I did constellations of the families. The same theme was repeated through all the constellations: "Better that I should disappear than you." No one had ever noticed how much these girls loved their parents. As this came to light, the teachers and therapists who had had so much difficulty with the girls were very touched. Suddenly they understood what was really going on with those girls and why they were behaving so badly. ...Some of them had become drug addicts, which for them was an expression of a death wish so that the mother or father wouldn't leave. One of the girls had thrown herself from the roof of the home. In her constellation, it was very clear that her father wanted to die. He, in turn, wanted to follow his own father into death. The child then said (behaviorally), "Better I should die than you." (p. 55)

In this vignette, what Hellinger found was that client behavior had been a result of unconscious parental identification by the clients concomitant with a strive toward homeostasis in the family system.

In a public school, interventions like Hellinger's may not be appropriate due to time constraints that often dictate the need for brief interventions. Nevertheless, in the apparent absence of contributing family variables (e.g., divorce, incest, abuse, socio-economic status, etc.), individual interventions with students may have limited or short-term success. At this point, the inclusion of the family system into the school setting is imperative. "By perceiving each child's family as an individual unit and part of a larger system, family involvement is discussed as activities both inside and outside of the classroom that build on family strengths and foster collaboration with the school" (Katz & Bauch, 1999, p. 56). Failure to intervene at the family system level will often lead to limited resolution of student problems (Lewis, 1996). Therefore, consultants must establish working relationships with families and other community systems so that interventions can take into account systemic variables that may be occurring outside the school. It should also be



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noted that traditional consultation models often

(a) limit the scope of the counselor's impact to the counselor's school or community agency; (b) emphasize the role of the counselor as the expert, with little acknowledgment of the expertise that parents, educators, and other mental health professionals can contribute; and (c) operate under organizational policy constraints such as funding patterns or regulations that inhibit or prevent access to services by designating certain sites for service delivery (e.g., the school is not an "approved site" for a community counselor to counsel a student, so the student must miss a half-day of school to receive an hour of counseling at the community agency (Keys, Bemak,

Carpenter, & King-Sears, 1998, p. 127).

Many other concerns in public schools may also see the need for increased, successful consultation strategies involving family support. Issues school counselors might encounter include school staff shortages, high student-teacher ratios, budget cuts, violence, drug abuse, low-income students, transient students, racial strife, and changing family structures that include single-parent households and households with both parents working. By enlisting support of the family system, the school counselor will have a better understanding of family dynamics, better access to parents and the extended family, greater support of students by parents, and increased parental interaction with the school community.

Reaching out to the family system, however, requires consultant awareness of the changing, modern family. Acknowledging the notion of a reconceptualized family in many environments is critical especially in cross-cultural consultations. Cross-cultural obstacles play important roles in determining client problems. If a consultant believes that a student must possess a strong sense of independence from the family unit, as is often found in Euro-American culture, the consultant's personal values may conflict with the collectivistic values of many non-white cultures which often regard the family over the individual (Sue & Sue, 1999). Furthermore, "one barrier that may face cross-cultural consultants is that consultees may have a history of oppressive relationships with members of the dominant culture" (Brown, 1997, p. 32). This barrier could hinder trust in the Euro-American consultant. Sue and Sue recommend multicultural awareness when invoking FST consultation strategies. Culturally different families may have conflicting values from those of the traditional family systems view. Sue and Sue outline traditional FST views that include:



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- allowing the free expression of emotions
- individuality
- an equal division of labor among family members
- egalitarian gender roles, and
- the notion of the nuclear family.

Consultant awareness of his or her values, and how those values may impact the relationship with culturally different clients, is critical. Thus, to identify the problem, a consultant's value awareness must be to such a degree that the consultant must be careful

not to pathologize an ethnic minority's cultural norm (e.g., corporal punishment). Sue and Sue recommend that in order to be culturally sensitive, the consultant may have to respect an ethnic minority student's family situation by: accepting the student's extended family as critical to the family system; realizing the function of a possible lack of verbal participation; acknowledging the time orientation of the family's culture (e.g., living in the present as opposed to living for the future); arranging meeting around the family's work schedule (home visits could be considered as an alternative); being familiar with the notion of family hierarchies among ethnic minorities; and possessing awareness of the effects of racism and poverty on the ethnic minority's family system. A solution could be to enlist support for a community agency that specializes in working with the client's cultural heritage. Under most circumstances, consultants should gear interventions with clients toward the values and realities of their clients.

If a student is understood as an evolving member of a dynamic family system, the client system, which could include a student, his or her family, and the student's teacher, often resonates from the student's actions. Cause-and-effect is nearly impossible to diagnose in a family, so a client system should be devoid of blaming (Brown, Pryzwansky, & Schulte, 1998). The consultant must consider each member's role in the client system, which may include examining the family hierarchy, boundaries within the family system and how they interact with the overall client system, as well as evaluating what meaning system members place on the student's behavior (Sherman, Shumsky, & Rountree, 1994).

To initiate a FST consultation process, the consultant must first identify the problem. It is at the entry phase when the consultant comes into contact with the consultee or client and



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assistance for a problem will first be sought. Though the consultant's primary entry phase is when he or she is first interviewed for the position of school counselor, entry phases will take place when contact with various members of the school community is initiated. Many variables could impede the entry phase process. In a cross-cultural consultation where the consultant is Euro-American and the consultee is an ethnic minority, Duncan (1995) identifies five stages that are critical to the consultant's entry phase. These are:

1. the appraisal stage, where the ethnic minority consultee "sizes up" the consultant
2. the investigation stage in which the consultee challenges the consultant's values and opinions
3. the involvement stage, where the consultee has favorably evaluated the consultant
4. the commitment stage, which follows only if the consultant is sensitive to the efforts of the consultee, and
5. the engagement stage, to which the consultee and consultant commit to working together.

It is at the engagement stage where problem identification then comes in, but to reach even this stage, when cross-cultural concerns are taken into account, the consultant must demonstrate awareness of his or her own values and sensitivity to the values and concerns of the ethnic minority consultee. A successful consultant will have a positive working relationship with the teacher or consultee after the entry phase. Consultation should then operate under the assumption that consultant serves to facilitate getting the teacher and student to solve the problem themselves.

If the problem is assessed by observation to be serious enough that teacher interventions have been unsuccessful, and consultation strategies with the teacher have also been unsuccessful, an FST intervention should consider enlisting the support of the family. Kraus (1998) stresses the importance of gaining the family's cooperation: "The family that has developed trust in the school counselor through initial interviews will be more likely to cooperate with the referral" (p. 15). In cross-cultural consultation, a Euro-American consultant may initiate dialogue with the family by suggesting having a representative of the client's culture (perhaps from a community agency, a tribe, or church member) be a part of the consultation process. Reasons for collaboration with members of the client's similar background are so that referrals will be culturally-appropriate, languages can be translated,



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and so that trust in the consultant can be gained.

Once the entry phase has been successfully initiated and appropriate contact has been made with the family, a systemic assessment of the problem must be made by the consultant. Kraus (1998) identifies four ways to assess how families deal with conflict:

1. the conflict is correctly perceived and a solution is found
2. the conflict is correctly perceived and a solution is sought
3. the conflict is misperceived, no compromise is reached, and the result is negative, acting-out behavior, and
4. the conflict is misperceived, and this leads to a disorganization of family relations (p. 13).

If the conflict is in the third or fourth method of conflict resolution, implementing a brief, problem-solving approach to consultation is appropriate.

The Brief Therapy Center of the Mental Research Institute (MRI) in Palo Alto, Calif., developed a brief therapy model that is appropriate for the school setting. This model

is based on a view of problems and their resolution that is quite different from that of traditional behavior, psychodynamic, or family systems therapies. Essentially, human problems (those kinds of psychological problems that come to the attention of helping professionals inside or outside the schools) and the ways people attempt to resolve them are viewed as systems of information with negative feedback mechanisms that often produce either chronicity or crisis (Amatea & Sherrard, 1997, p. 60).

The MRI model assumes that student problems are not pathological but rather a consequence of an inappropriate coping with normal life difficulties. An example is a student who may be having difficulty completing schoolwork. Inappropriate actions taken to alleviate this situation to get the student back on track, could be:

- (1) ignoring or denying that anything is wrong and not taking action; (2) attempting to resolve difficulties that need not or cannot be resolved, only endured, until they pass; or (3) taking action that does not fit the situation. The last is the most common form of mishandling (Amatea & Sherrard, p. 61).



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A student who chronically fails to turn in schoolwork may be experiencing one or more of these kinds of reactions to the problem. The following sample consultation illustrates an inappropriate handling of a student who having academic difficulties followed by a culturally sensitive intervention by the school counselor.

A Latino male elementary school student is having academic difficulties that have been affecting in-class behavior. The school counselor, who is a white male, is approached by the teacher, who is a white female, requesting help. In attempting to identify the problem by questioning the teacher, the consultant discovered that the teacher assumed that the student needed more in-class attention and that a lack of attention was the cause for the student not turning in schoolwork. This approach, however, seemed to lead to the student expressing feelings of being stupid, inadequate, and he even accused the teacher of being racist on one occasion. At this point, the consultant explored with the teacher the possibility of calling the student's family. The teacher attempted to reach the family, and, although contact was made with the mother, the teacher said the mother was reluctant to discuss the situation. The teacher approached the counselor again, this time complaining of lack of parental interest. The consultant observed the student in one period of the class to assess the problem. Although the consultant observed that the teacher was focusing extra

attention on the student, she was expressing her wishes to him in an indirect way that focused on a future time-orientation (e.g., "This is important to learn if you want to be successful later in life"). Aside from this, the consultant did not observe any apparent motivations for the student's behavior. The counselor recommended to the teacher a discussion with the student's father and decided to make the call himself. He was aware that the student moved from Mexico a few years earlier and assumed that, as a male, the father might have traditional Latino family values and would respond more favorably to the male counselor, as there was limited male staff at the school. The counselor contacted the father at a time that was arranged outside of his work schedule, and the father appeared concerned and willing to explore the issue with the counselor. No external representative appeared to be needed, though the counselor offered to arrange for one. Through the father, the school counselor discovered that the student's sister, who was about to graduate high school, is an honors student with no record of bad behavior in school. Her school success, in fact, has been a focus of the family since she will be the first of the immediate generations to consider going on to a college. In fact, the extended family, it was found, was generating controversy about the sister focusing on schoolwork rather than making plans to get married, raise a family, and live a traditional lifestyle. At this point, the counselor suggested that perhaps the brother could be rebelling in his schoolwork from the attention given to the sister for doing well in school. In other words, by the family focusing so much



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attention on the sister, the brother was compensating by bringing negative attention to himself by doing poorly in school. The brother was perhaps unconsciously attempting to establish homeostasis in his family. Though this material was not exactly crucial to share with the father in depth, with collaborative effort, the father and counselor agreed that in the presence of the boy, mention of the sister's school success and family controversy would be minimal, and when mentioned, the situation would be minimized to the boy. With further questioning the counselor also discovered that the student identifies with and responds best to the father's direct commands to perform daily chores, tasks, and so on. The counselor and father agreed to talk again in two weeks to discuss how things were progressing.

Relaying the information to the teacher about how the student best responds to his father led to the teacher being more clear and direct with the student during class. Immediately identifying problem behavior (e.g., being off task, not being seated, talking out of turn, and so on) while it was happening, and outlining repeated consequences for not turning in school work (e.g., staying in at recess to complete it) resulted in alleviating the problem the student was experiencing. Furthermore, the counselor worked with the teacher on constructing motivational statements to the student in ways that didn't directly refer to future success, which could trigger an indirect reference to the student's sister. This intervention based around time-orientation was more culturally consistent for the student. The counselor conducted a brief follow up with the teacher and the father two weeks later, and both agreed that no further action needed to be taken at that time.

In this example it was through strategic consultation with, initially, the teacher who outlined the problem, the consultant's observation of the teacher and student in class, and with additional consultation with the father, that the systemic variables were discovered as well as clues toward effective intervention. Enlisting the family system into the situation in a culturally sensitive manner provided the clue for appropriate, and brief, intervention strategies for both the teacher and parents.

As demonstrated, FST can be an effective model for considering how student problems are manifested in schools. With the knowledge that problem behavior may have seemingly unrelated roots, the FST consultant has an added awareness in the arena of problem identification. Likewise, with competent cognizance of multicultural issues, the FST consultant is better prepared for handling situations in which his or her multicultural competency may affect the outcome of consulting situations. Since school consultation inherently involves multiple systems, each of which interrelate, incorporating principles of FST adds to the consultant's level of awareness and makes FST an appropriate model from



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which the school consultant can work from.

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