School Violence Prevention: Teachers Establishing Relationships with Students Using Counseling Strategies

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School Violence

- Statistically, schools are still safer than out in the community... but students still spend a significant portion of their waking hours in school
  - Significant proportion of social interactions take place in school

- High profile shootings in the 1990s (e.g., Littleton, CO) to the present (Chardon, OH) has raised public awareness of school violence

- School violence is not just “school shootings” – can range from verbal abuse, bullying, to other physical acts of violence (e.g., Long Beach, CA)
School Connectedness - Quality of relationships between students and school personnel
- Student perception of belonging/acceptance, trust, dignity/respect, safety within the school context

Associated with social and emotional well-being, academic achievement, and resiliency (e.g., Shochet et al., 2006; Smith & Sandhu, 2004)

Vital role in preventing school (and community) violence (e.g., Brookmeyer et al., 2006; Resnick et al., 1997; Volungis, 2012)
Goal of Paper

- Enhancing school connectedness is more effective than such approaches as “zero tolerance” and profiling students.

- Although there is a plethora of research recommending teachers/schools to have “high” levels of school connectedness (the “what”), the literature on actual mechanisms to develop this key construct (the “how”) is sparse.

- Primary Goal: Translation of counseling strategies for teachers to utilize in their day-to-day interactions with students as a means to developing and enhancing school connectedness.
  - Macro-level problem (school violence) that can be implemented through micro-level interactions with students.
Developing a Teacher-Student Alliance

- Teacher-student alliance is a necessary first step in creating strong attachments that build school connectedness
  - An open and trusting relationship that is collaborative in nature

- Nurturant alliance (Bachelor, 1995)
  - Respect, nonjudgmental, empathic understanding, and attentive listening
  - Other related factors: dignity and genuineness
Facilitating Change-Inducing Relationships

- The expectation is not for teachers to play the role of counselors but rather to develop and maintain relationships with students that foster open communication.

- Although not always possible, it is highly recommended that teachers find a time to get to know their students when other competing interests are not fighting for their attention.

- Interactions can take place beyond the classroom... hallways, cafeteria, extracurricular activities.
Facilitating Change-Inducing Relationships

- Attending & Listening
  - Proxemics – awareness of physical presence
  - Eye contact – gaze aversion
  - Nonverbal – important part of listening and communicating
  - Paralanguage – tone, pitch; use of “uh-huh” and “yes”
  - Silence – is okay
Facilitating Change-Inducing Relationships

- Reflection and Validation of Feelings:
  - The goal is not to intellectualize the student’s feelings but to encourage more free expression
  - Experience feelings in a safe and non-rejecting manner
  - Most students want validation and understanding before employing intervention or problem solving strategies
  - Validation does not equate to agreeing
Facilitating Change-Inducing Relationships

- **Restatements**
  - Repeating back to the student the content and meaning of the statement, but in a clearer way
  - Conveys curiosity and interest in what the student is saying vs. interpreting or reacting quickly

- **Reframing**
  - Explains and clarifies the student’s meaning of the message
  - Often adds a new context through which the behavior or incident is looked through
    - Shifts meaning/understanding in new direction for the student
Facilitating Change-Inducing Relationships

- **Self-disclosure**
  - Helps students gain a better understanding of their own experience (and teacher’s perspective)
  - Helps students cope with challenges better and feel less alone

- **Challenge**
  - Intended to foster increased awareness of students’ feelings and experience
  - Using humor or confronting defenses in a gentle way
Teacher-Student Alliance Outcomes – Preventing School Violence

- Broad/Implicit outcome
  - Students who feel like they have close relationships with teachers they can trust and look up to, along with having their own thoughts/feelings validated, the less prone they are to contemplate acts of violence when distressed
Teacher-Student Alliance Outcomes – Preventing School Violence

- A more salient outcome of strong teacher-student alliances
  - Students are more willing to speak up when there is knowledge of a potential violent act

- Oftentimes perpetrators, or would-be perpetrators, share their plans of a violent act with other students before it takes place (e.g., Daniels et al., 2010; O’Toole, 2000)
  - “leakage”

- However, although leakage is a common occurrence, there are many times when students have prior knowledge of a violent act, but never report it to school personnel (O’Toole, 2000)
  - “code of silence”
Students who may be hesitant to share any leakage have a greater proclivity to communicate such knowledge with a trusted teacher (Brinkley & Saarino, 2006; Daniels et al., 2010; Yablon, 2010).

In other words, a strong teacher-student alliance, built upon basic relationship building and communication skills, may be a key factor in breaking the code of silence.