MERGING GROUP COUNSELLING INTO SERVICE LEARNING: INSIGHTS FROM COUNSELLING EDUCATORS

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Group counselling provides the group members a unique opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings with a group of individuals who have homogeneous goals or objectives. Developing group counselling skills for students can be very taxing, and it demands comprehensive training from the counselling educators. One reason why teaching group counselling skills may be challenging is the complex nature of the subject that requires experience beyond the classroom. Dealing with different populations (such as teenagers, adults, and the elderly) demands specific group approaches. These are crucial to be demonstrated continually by the students in enhancing their growth in group counselling practice.

Another possible method of increasing group counselling competence is service learning. Service learning allows the students to seek balance between learning and community service. According to Koch, Ross, Wendell, & Aleksandrovich-Howell (2014), service learning benefits the counselors-in-training in terms of their preparation in working with their actual clients. Students benefit in terms of personal development (such as positive self-esteem), achieving certain cognitive abilities (such as higher level thinking), developing their employment skills in advance while attending to the needs of community members and utilising their academic knowledge through service learning experiences (Alfonsino & Armstrong, 2014). Through such experiences, students learn to engage in a collaborative partnership with people from outside campus.

As part of the counselling programme curriculum, students must fulfill 96 credit hours of face-to-face counselling (which also includes group counselling). Prior to counselling implementation, students were trained to write project proposals and present their proposals to organisations such as schools, government, and non-government agencies.

One of the most significant service-learning activities that have been conducted by the students was their psychoeducational project with the rehabilitation clients at the National Anti-drugs Agency (AADK) Kuching Branch. Students spent their group counselling hours on a weekly basis with groups of clients. These clients are among those who are in the rehabilitation-recovery programme and were rehabilitated drug addicts who have stayed clean for a minimum of one year and are monitored closely by the AADK. Topics such as self-concept, self-esteem and personality are among themes discussed by the students with their clients.

Students have also conducted another group counselling project with volunteers from Nur Hikmah Women’s Center (HELWA HIKMAH). The volunteers consist of working and retired professionals who are avid in learning about helping skills as they realise that it is imperative to possess such skills. Students indicated growth in their group counselling skills since they were exposed to dealing with the adult participants.

When students confront the variety of situations, confront the problem with the group members and take actions, reflection is a group counsellor's role.