

MERGING GROUP COUNSELLING INTO SERVICE LEARNING: INSIGHTS FROM COUNSELLING EDUCATORS

Dr Azzahrah Anuar aazzahrah@unimas.my

Dr Nor Mazlina Ghazali gnmazlina@unimas.my

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

Group counselling provides the group members a unique opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings with a group of individuals who have homogenous goals or objectives. Developing group counselling skills for students can be very taxing and it demands comprehensive training from the counseling 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 continuously 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, & Aleksandrova-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 (Altosino & 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) of 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 some are 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 counseling skills since they were exposed to dealing with the adult participants.

Group counselling provides a unique opportunity for students to develop leadership skills and enter group counselling practice. Moreover, a variety of group counselling approaches is expected to be used in different groups. For example, group counselling should be used with drug-related clients, drug addicts, and individuals with addiction to understand the clients during the counselling process.

When students are in group counselling situations, they may confront different disadvantages and behaviors as members and take on different problems. Reflection is a group counselling process.