

Managing Student Behavior During Large

Group Guidance: What Works Best?

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Abstract

Participants provided information pertaining to managing non-task-related behavior of students during large group guidance lessons. In particular, school counselors were asked often how often they provide large group guidance, the frequency of which students exhibit off-task and/or disruptive behavior during guidance lessons, and techniques they use to address such behavior. School counselors also described how they were trained in classroom management and what they perceived to be the most and least effective classroom management techniques.

Managing Student Behavior During Large Group Guidance: What Works Best?

Among the various roles of school counselors is conducting large group guidance (Dahir, 2001; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006). This is a powerful method of helping students develop coping skills, enhance their interpersonal effectiveness and prepare them to deal successfully with challenging developmental transitions (Jacobs & Schimmel, 2005; Sears, 2005). Although school counselors may develop dynamic group activities which they are excited to share with students as part of a developmental guidance program, students may not share their enthusiasm and, thus, engage in non-task-related or disruptive behaviors. As such, the impact of these activities is dependent on how effectively school counselors can manage the behavior of students while they are delivering the material. Indeed, Cowley (2003) and others (Evertson, Emmer & Worsham, 2007; Geltner & Clark, 2005; Marzano, 2003) note that proper learning cannot take place without effective classroom management. Likewise, Sink (2005) maintains that “Good teaching and classroom management skills are needed for the effective delivery of guidance lessons” (pg. 21). In this article, classroom management and classroom discipline are used interchangeably to refer to techniques school counselors use to manage off-task and disruptive behavior of students in the context of large group guidance.)

It has been argued that school counselors who do not possess teaching experience will experience greater difficulty managing disruptive behavior of students during large group/classroom guidance activities (Criswell, 2005), although much of this research is based on the perceptions of teachers and principals. A notable exception is

Peterson, Goodman, Keller and McCauley (2004) who conducted a study with school counselor interns with and without teaching experience. They found that interns without teaching experience reported difficulties with large group/classroom interventions (e.g., managing student behavior) and argued that counselor educators need to help non-teacher trainees compensate for their lack of professional experience in a school context. Perusse, Goodnough, and Noel (2001) conducted a national survey of coordinators of school counseling programs which examined, among other things, the curricular content of these programs. Coordinators were asked if they offered specialization courses and 2% of the respondents indicated they offered a course in “classroom guidance,” although there was no indication if students learned about classroom management techniques in the course.

In a more recent study, Perusse and Goodnough (2005) surveyed elementary and high school counselors with regard to the importance of graduate-level training for 24 content areas including classroom management. Although classroom management was ranked lower than other content areas such as individual counseling, legal and ethical issues, and consultation with parents and teachers, they (in particular, elementary school counselors) still perceived it to be an important area to be covered in the curriculum. Unfortunately, there is no mention in the aforementioned studies how school counselor trainees learned about managing off-task and disruptive behavior of students. This is an important omission given that school counselors as well as teachers (Clark & Amatea, 2004) and principals (Zalaquett, 2005) view classroom guidance and small group counseling as some of the most important functions of school counselors.

Given that a preponderance of the research conducted on classroom discipline pertains to teachers, a brief review of relevant findings is presented next.

Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1993) analyzed 86 chapters from annual research reviews, 44 handbook chapters, 20 government reports, and 11 journal articles as well as the results of 134 separate meta-analyses and found that there were 228 variables which affected student achievement. Based on their findings, they concluded that classroom management had the largest effect on achievement. Stage and Quirzo (1997) conducted a meta-analysis of classroom discipline literature and found that the more teachers can strike a balance between providing clear consequences for unacceptable behavior and recognizing and rewarding good behavior, the more effective their classroom management. Other researchers have found that getting off to a good start at the beginning of the school year is also important. For example, Evertson, Emmer & Worsham (2007) reported that beginning the school year with a positive emphasis on management, arranging the room in a way conducive to effective management, and identifying and implementing rules and operating procedures all played an important role as to what happened later on in the school year.

In a meta-analysis, Marzano (2003a) found that the quality of teacher-student relationships was the foundation for all other types of classroom management. In fact, he noted that teachers who had high-quality relationships with their students had 31% fewer discipline problems, rule violations, and related problems over a year's time than did teachers who did not have high-quality relationships. The most effective teacher-student relationships were characterized by specific teacher behaviors: exhibiting appropriate levels of dominance, exhibiting appropriate levels of cooperation, and being

aware of high-need students (i.e., those with mental, emotional, or behavioral disorders), and having a repertoire of specific techniques for meeting their needs.

Cowley (2003) notes that there are various reasons students exhibit non-task-related or disruptive behavior. In some cases, students become bored because the content of the lesson does not interest them. In other cases, students lack the motivation or self-discipline to perform well in school. Other students bow to peer pressure as a way to be accepted by others or to prevent themselves from experiencing negative repercussions. Whatever the case, school counselors who conduct large group guidance lessons are challenged to develop and employ techniques to effectively manage the behavior of students so all students benefit from the presentations and/or activities. Unfortunately, little is known about this aspect of the school counselor's role.

The purpose of the present study was to determine classroom management techniques used by elementary and middle school counselors during large group guidance activities. In particular, the researcher was interested in determining how school counselors are trained in the use of classroom management techniques, how often students exhibit disruptive or non-task-related behavior during classroom guidance, what school counselors typically do to address such behavior, and school counselors' perceptions of the most effective and ineffective classroom management techniques.

Method

Participants

Participants included 80 school counselors who worked in elementary (K- 8; n = 75) and middle (6 – 8; n = 5) public schools in 41 states. There was a preponderance of

Caucasian (86%) female (79%) participants who worked in rural (41%), suburban (36%) and city (23%) schools. Sixty-five participants (81%) possessed professional teaching experience and the entire sample possessed an average of 9.16 and 12.74 years of school counseling and teaching experience, respectively ($SD = 7.59$ and 11.03).

Schools in which school counselors worked were chosen randomly from the American School Directory, an internet-based web service which lists the names and addresses of over 110,000 elementary and secondary schools across the United States. Only public school counselors were chosen for inclusion in the present study so as to provide some level of standardization among the participants. School counselors provided services to as little as 15 and to as many as 1300 students ($M = 518.58$; $SD = 254.06$).

Instrument

Participants completed the School Counselor Classroom Management Questionnaire (SCCMQ), a twenty-four item questionnaire developed for this study, which was divided into two sections: (a) demographic information and (b) questions pertaining to the nature and frequency of large group guidance services and the best and worst techniques to use to manage off-task or otherwise disruptive behavior during classroom guidance lessons. Specifically, school counselors were asked if they provided large group guidance services at their schools and, if so, to how many different groups of students they offered these services per week, how frequently students exhibited off-task and/or disruptive behavior, and how school counselors typically responded to these behaviors. School counselors were also asked to look over thirteen classroom management techniques that may be employed by school counselors and to rate their [techniques] perceived level of effectiveness in managing off-task/disruptive

behavior of students on a scale from 1 (Very Ineffective) to 6 (Very Effective). The techniques were drawn from the research literature and classroom management and group counseling textbooks and given to two counselor educators with an average of 17 years of university teaching experience in a school counseling program and six years of school counseling experience at the elementary and secondary levels for preliminary review. The techniques were also reviewed by an elementary school counselor with seven years of experience. The educators and school counselor made suggestions as to how a few of the items could be rephrased and recommended the addition of one classroom management technique.

Procedure

Two hundred school counselors located in public schools across the United States were contacted by letter requesting their voluntary participation in the study. School counselors were informed of the nature and purpose of the study and, if they agreed to participate, were asked to sign and return a consent form with their completed questionnaire at their earliest convenience. School counselors did not provide any identifying information so as to ensure confidentiality.

Results

Eighty school counselors returned useable questionnaires reflecting a 40% return rate. Ninety-eight percent of the respondents indicated they provided large group guidance with two-thirds of them providing this service to a minimum of 11 classes within their respective schools; half of the participants provide large group guidance at least once a week. Large group guidance lessons typically do not last longer than 45

minutes. Table 1 provides detailed information regarding large group guidance activities provided by the participants.

Ninety-two percent of the school counselors indicated that students exhibit off-task, disruptive, and/or inappropriate behavior during large group guidance lessons. One to 10% of students in a typical classroom were perceived to exhibit such behavior by the majority (83%) of the sample. School counselors were subsequently asked how often they make a verbal comment or exhibit a non-verbal behavioral response (e.g., direct eye contact, hand gesture) to address off-task/disruptive behavior. The majority indicated they make verbal comments (92%) or non-verbal behavioral responses (84%) between 1 and 5 times per lesson, respectively. Table 2 lists the types of verbal techniques used to address such behavior.

Table 2 results suggest that school counselors gravitate toward altering the volume at which they speak as their primary technique to address disruptive and/or off-task behavior; however it is important to note that one-fifth of the school counselors used some other technique that was not a listed technique. They were subsequently asked to specify what they did to address these problems. Their responses suggest that they engage in behaviors which fall into the direct or indirect verbal technique categories (e.g., Making a friendly reminder to the entire group about being good listeners and watching the school counselor as he/she teaches the lesson; Asking disruptive students a question about the topic at hand so as to reorient them to the lesson; Praising students who exhibit on-task behavior).

School counselors were also asked about non-verbal behaviors used to address disruptive and/or off task behavior and, once again, asked to rank order these methods.

Table 3 lists the types of non-verbal behavioral responses used to address such behavior. Next, school counselors were asked to rate what they perceived to be the most effective techniques with regard to managing off-task, disruptive, and/or inappropriate behavior of students during large group guidance lessons. The results are listed in Table 4.

School counselors perceived the most effective method of managing off-task or disruptive behavior to be walking near a student's desk while continuing to teach the lesson. This is a non-verbal method of behavior control sometimes referred to as "proximity control." School counselors may perceive this to be effective because it does not call attention to the student but still achieves the goal of reorienting them to the lesson so they (i.e., counselors) can proceed in an orderly fashion. This was followed by praising other students who are exhibiting on-task and/or appropriate behavior. Once again, school counselors are using a method that is not directly aimed at the disruptive student. Next, school counselors believed that praising students works well when they exhibit on-task and/or appropriate behavior. This is the first technique which directly addresses students of concern, but does so in a positive way. Redirecting students' attention to the task at hand was rated the fourth most effective technique. Thus, a pattern emerged in which school counselors perceived the most effective techniques to be positive or neutral and, in some cases, non-direct. Techniques which were more punitive in nature were rated as least effective.

Finally, participants were asked how they learned classroom management techniques. Specifically, the investigator was interested in determining whether school counselors were trained in the use of classroom management techniques in their school

counselor training programs. This information was important given that many school counselors have prior teaching experience (an average of twelve years of experience in the current sample) and may have learned these techniques in teacher training programs or, through trial-and-error experiences as teachers, figured out what seemed to work best. Two-thirds (68%) of the school counselors did not learn about classroom management techniques in their school counselor training programs. Of those who were trained in the use of these techniques, the majority learned about them in one of three ways: a) observing teachers or school counselors in the classroom, b) discussing classroom management techniques as part of a class, or c) through assigned readings. School counselors indicated that the most effective method of learning these techniques was by observing teachers and school counselors utilize these techniques in the classroom (61%). There were no differences among participants' perceptions of what constituted the most effective classroom management techniques as a function of prior teaching experience.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to obtain specific information with regard to how often school counselors perceive students to exhibit off-task and/or disruptive behavior during large group guidance lessons. In addition, the examiner sought information pertaining to how school counselors are trained to deal with problematic behavior of students, how they address off-task and/or disruptive behavior, and their perceptions of the most effective and ineffective classroom management techniques.

Given that many states are doing away with teaching experience as a requirement for school counselor licensure, more students will enter school counselor

training programs without ever having stepped foot into a classroom as an educational professional. As such, it is critical they are trained to manage groups of children so all children may benefit from guidance lessons.

Large group guidance is one of the core components of a comprehensive school counseling program which contributes to the academic, emotional and social development of students (American School Counselor Association, 2003). Even principals and teachers perceive this to be an important role of school counselors. Although there were differences among the participants in the study with regard to how often they conduct guidance lessons, nearly all indicated that they provide this service with half of them conducting lessons at least once a week. One-third of the sample indicated they conduct guidance lessons with more than 20 classes. Given that school counselors come into contact with so many students, the likelihood of some of those students displaying non-task-related and/or disruptive behavior is high. In fact, the majority of the participants indicated that between 1 and 10% of the students in their classrooms display such behavior and that they [school counselors] utilize verbal and non-verbal tactics to address these behaviors a few times per lesson.

It is important for school counselors to have a repertoire of techniques they can use to address off-task and/or disruptive behavior of students so as to eliminate barriers to achievement and foster the emotional and social development of students with whom they work. Participants in this study believed that positive and/or non-direct classroom management techniques were most effective (e.g., walking near a disruptive student during a lesson; praising students who are on task or a disruptive student when he/she displays on task behavior) and negative or punitive techniques were least effective.

Given that the majority of the participants had prior teaching experience, their perceptions were likely shaped by interactions with students in two different roles. School counselors learned about classroom management techniques through different methods, but believed the most effective way of learning these techniques was by watching teachers or school counselors utilize the techniques while they taught their lessons (i.e., observational learning). Thus, if counselor educators plan on offering training experiences in classroom management, then it would make sense to structure training experiences such that student counselors have the opportunity to observe master teachers and school counselors teach lessons. Moreover, given that two-thirds of the current sample received no training in classroom management in their school counselor training programs and large group guidance is perceived to be an important function by principals and teachers, it would behoove universities to incorporate this into their curricula as a separate class or within the context of an applied experience such as internship. Stressing which classroom management techniques work best based on the perceptions of practicing school counselors would be an important component of such a class.

There were many limitations of this study. First, the results were descriptive in nature and did not provide answers to questions pertaining to the relationships between variables (e.g., what are the predictors of effective classroom management?). Secondly, the fairly low response rate limits the extent to which one can place confidence in the findings of this study. The conclusions are an extrapolation from a limited sample of school counselors. Finally, although the examiner conducted an exhaustive review of the research literature pertaining to classroom management techniques for inclusion on

the questionnaire, it is possible that other techniques which were as equally or more effective as the ones rated by school counselors in this study were not included.

The results of this study have given rise to new questions which can be investigated in future studies. For instance, what is it about observing teachers or school counselors that makes this such a good method of learning the art of classroom management? In addition, is there a way this could be made into an even more effective training method (e.g., having students co-lead classroom guidance lessons, trying out some of these techniques themselves and being provided with immediate feedback from the school counselor following the lesson *or* during the lesson using technology devices such as the “bug-in-the-ear”)? Schwitzer, Gonzales and Curl (2001) discuss an “expanded simulation” approach to train beginning counselors for professional work environments which may prove to be a particularly effective way of training student counselors in this area. However, student counselors may also benefit from learning how to manage groups of children in other contexts (e.g., summer playground supervisor, sports coach, Boy Scout or Girl Scout leader) which could be applied to the classroom.

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Table 1

Frequency of large group guidance activities

Item	N	%
How many different groups of students/classes do you provide large group guidance?		
1 – 5 groups/classes	17	21
6 – 10 groups/classes	12	15
11 – 15 groups/classes	12	15
16 – 20 groups/classes	10	13
More than 20 groups/classes	29	36
How often do you provide large group guidance?		
Once a month or less	28	35
Once every couple of weeks	14	18
1 – 5 times per week	18	22
6 – 10 times per week	9	11
11 – 15 times per week	4	5
16 – 20 times per week	3	4
More than 20 times per week	4	5
How long do large group guidance sessions last?		
15 – 30 minutes	53	66
31 – 45 minutes	22	28
46 – 60 minutes	5	6

Table 2

Frequency of verbal techniques used to address disruptive behavior

Technique	Frequency of use (%)
Making voice louder and/or softer while speaking to draw attention to you	42
Direct verbal comment (e.g., John, would you please pay attention/stop talking to you neighbor?)	22
Indirect verbal comment (e.g., "There are some people in here who need to start paying attention & stop talking to their neighbors.")	17
Other (specify)	19

Table 3

Frequency of non-verbal techniques used to address disruptive behavior

Technique	Frequency of use (%)
Direct eye contact	50
Walking near the disruptive student while continuing to teach the lesson	30
Silence (i.e., not talking for a few moments during a lesson/session until student discontinues off-task/disruptive behavior)	20

Table 4

Means and standard deviations of behavior management techniques

Item	M	SD
Walking near the disruptive student's seat while continuing to teach the lesson	5.10	1.05
Praising other students who are exhibiting on-task and/or appropriate behavior	4.98	0.90
Praising the student when he or she happens to exhibit an on-task and/or appropriate behavior	4.86	1.05
Redirecting the student's attention to the task at hand	4.75	0.80
Requesting that the student exhibit on-task and/or appropriate behavior	4.48	1.03
Requesting that the student move and/or move closer to you during the lesson	4.46	1.09
Giving the student a warning to discontinue exhibiting the behavior or else be issued a consequence	4.30	1.32
Requesting that the student discontinue the off-task, disruptive and/or inappropriate behavior	4.22	1.04
Giving the student a tangible reward (e.g., sticker) for exhibiting on-task and/or appropriate behavior	3.92	1.27
Withdrawing a privilege (e.g., recess time)	3.68	1.43
Placing the student in a time-out	3.45	1.37
Ignoring the off-task and/or disruptive behavior	2.97	1.28
Requesting that the student place his/her name on the blackboard	2.68	1.46

Biographical Statement

Christopher J. Quarto, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at Middle Tennessee State University. Dr. Quarto teaches practicum and testing courses in the Professional Counseling program and operates a part-time private practice in Murfreesboro. His research interests include school counselor credibility, clinical supervision, and the creative use of brief therapy techniques in counseling.