

Preparing Counseling Students to Use Community Resources for a Diverse Client Population: Factors for Counselor Educators to Consider

Sarah Kit-Yee Lam

To provide culturally responsive and sensitive services for families from diverse backgrounds, counselors must reach out to these families' communities for resources that can best help them. Locating appropriate resources is not as simple as going down the list of agencies in different source books. Referring families to community resources is an outcome of a complex process of considering the whole reality of these families. This reality includes a good fit between family needs and available services, and factors affecting accessibility to services such as their cultural beliefs, geographical location of residence, transportation, and affordability. Despite the assertion that community resources are important (Ciavarella, Corrigan, Hilburger, Lam, & Chan, 2004; Rawlings & Carter, 1979; Street, 1994), few counselors systematically consider community resources as an integral component of their treatment plan. Many counselors focus on what they can offer these families on their own. This phenomenon can be traced back to the lack of direct exposure to research and use of community resources while they were trained in the counselor education programs.

When I went through the master's program in counseling, I was exposed to the idea of referring clients to community resources. However, I was not "made" to directly engage in researching community resources for clients. I was left with the impression that community resources are an adjunct to therapy. After finishing the program, I worked as a counselor intern in a nonprofit organization. The training was strong in enhancing my clinical skills and competence. Because of this, I focused on the clinical aspects of intervention. Community resources were not an integral part of my intervention.

Fortunately, the life situations of my clients forced me to look beyond what I could accomplish for them on my own. For example, I worked intensively with a high school student suffering from lupus. Her father emotionally disowned her after learning about her

diagnosis. She suffered from depression and anxiety. She improved steadily in therapy with my use of reflective listening, guided imagery, and intervention in her family system. However, her self-perception and outlook for the future did not improve much. One day, she came to my office looking elated and positive. Someone suggested that she participate in a tae kwon do class. This martial art training has increased her self-confidence and given her a chance to enjoy life.

A preschooler has been screaming and banging her head in class and at home. After getting the referral, I directed a mental health assistant to gather background information. The assistant made a home visit to this child's apartment and reported to me that she smelled gas leakage in the house. I asked this assistant to connect the family with social services regarding gas leakage. After this problem was solved, the child stopped screaming and banging her head in class. Another child has been defiant toward his teacher in class and his mother at home. When I asked the mother if her son looked up to anyone in his life, the mother's eyes sparkled. She suddenly remembered the boy's godfather. After a visit with the godfather, the boy showed significant change in his attitude toward adults.

Many more case scenarios such as these helped to shape my approach in training future counselors. I have learned that lecturing about the importance of using resources in counseling is different from exposing students to direct experiences of using resources. Pedersen (2004) advocated for incorporating experiences into classroom to help students use their learning in future practice of psychology. Direct experience of using community resources can take the form of requiring students to create a resource list of individuals, organizations, print materials, and Web sites, as suggested by Milsom (2002).

Together with another professor, I codesigned a course to prepare school professionals to work with families who have at-risk children. The course requires that students have direct experiences in serving families.

Among the different services, students are required to identify and use community resources in assessment and treatment. Specifically, each student is required to

1. meet with a family that has at-risk children at least four times to identify their needs;
2. visit a local agency that may be helpful to the family;
3. research into resources in the family's immediate community, in the local school and school district, and on the Internet for further resources;
4. present results of his or her research in class; and
5. compile a family resource notebook for the family.

Students reflected on their progress through regular class discussions and expressing concerns in their weekly journals. After analyzing themes expressed in class discussions and students' journals from seven classes of students, I have found the following factors to be valuable for counselor educators to consider: lack of knowledge about community resources, emotional struggles in finding resources, confusion over what resources to recommend and how to approach families, and difficulties in locating resources.

Lack of Knowledge About Community Resources

Counselor educators must not assume that students know what kinds of resources are available in their communities. When students first received the assignment for them to explore resources for the families they work with, they expressed concern over not knowing much about existing resources and not knowing how to find resources. Students expressed comments such as, "I was unaware of support groups," "I did not think of using the Internet, books, articles, community agencies to find resources," and "There are so many programs and resources that I was unaware of, living here my entire life."

Emotional Struggles in Finding Resources

Students who did not have prior knowledge about resources began this process with ambivalence. On the one hand, they knew that resources could be helpful for parents. On the other hand, physically visiting agencies and making phone calls to know what was out there can be overwhelming and threatening. Counselor educators must coach students to sort through emotional struggles and to persevere in researching for resources. The following comments illustrate some emotions along different stages of research:

- "I have found it to be a little frustrating in finding the exact information that I am seeking. It is almost like I have been on a safari hunt."
- "One of the most difficult things for me was being able to get out of the therapist mode and find resources for the family."
- "I worried that I wouldn't find the correct information or enough information for the family."
- "I begin to feel frustrated and really sad that there were not more community services to assist this family."

Confusion Over What Resources to Recommend and How to Approach Families

After learning that many different organizations offer relevant services to their families, students felt challenged in narrowing down to a few services that their families could readily access. They feared overwhelming families with too many resources. They sought guidance on ways to evaluate services from different programs. They also valued instructions about prioritizing the needs of the families and identifying what families are most interested in using. After the project, one student expressed, "The research helped refine my organizational skills and caused me to realize all of the possibilities that are out there to find necessary information."

Difficulties in Locating Resources

Not all students have the same luck in locating appropriate resources for clients. Some students made specific note of the inequity in availability and access to services:

- "Rural communities have few support groups. Families cannot afford to go to the next town for help."
- "There is a lack of additional services in predominately middle to upper income schools."
- "It is difficult for families to access services because of traveling requirements."
- "A lot of minority people are still reluctant to seek community services; the mother has never heard of it and is insecure about joining one."
- "Available and affordable resources are difficult to find."
- "Not many resources use the family's language."

Counselor educators can help students to transform perceived difficulties into learning about advocacy for clients and developing sensitivities to clients from diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. The following realizations from students are illuminating:

- “There is a need for information and advocacy; I wish I could have gone out and started up another chapter of CHADD in the local area.”
- “My current struggle with locating community services has created a deeper sense of empathy for this and other families.”
- “I learned that sometimes people do not use resources because it could be scary. It means having strangers coming in and out of your child’s life. It could be overwhelming to the child and the parent.”

Benefits of Requiring Students to Use Community Resources

Despite difficulties, the benefits of providing students with direct experience in using community resources are many and encompass multiple aspects:

Increase in Self-Efficacy

As students’ sense of preparedness to work with families that have at-risk children increases, their sense of self-efficacy as future counselors also increases. The following comments are representative of many students’ experience:

- “It makes me feel more competent in knowing that I will know to refer people in their time of need.”
- “The more knowledge I have about available resources in the community, the more helpful I can be to my clients.”
- “With the information I collected in this class, I have a wealth of power to impact the lives of children and their families.”

Increase in Valuing First-Hand Knowledge About Resources

Students valued the importance of direct involvement with agencies. Their first-hand experience boosted their belief in their abilities to provide the most appropriate referrals for families. The following comments are some examples:

- “There was so much to be learned by going to the center than just talking about how to find them. I understand that we need to learn how to find these services on our own.”
- “You don’t just send a family blindly to something you know nothing about. It is better to have personal knowledge of the agencies and services you refer families to.”
- “It is important to know the other professionals before making referrals.”

Increase in the Sense of Being a Part of the Community of Care

The more students are aware of community resources that can help families, the less students stress on fixing problems for families on their own. This further increases their hope in families becoming able to resolve their problems:

- “It was a valuable learning experience for me to go with my parent to an agency visit. This reinforced in me the notion of networking and developing community ties.”
- “I feel more prepared to work with my community in the future.”
- “In putting the notebook together, I was more engaged in the community because I now was aware of the many resources and agencies that exist in our city for the purpose of serving people.”
- “While researching information, I gained hope for my family and the child. I learned about the different programs for parents and children.”

Conclusion

Expanding options and support for struggling families from diverse cultural backgrounds requires that counselors stretch their comfort zone, leave the confines of their offices, and reach their clients’ communities. The best opportunity to develop this area of competence is when counselors are under training. With the support and guidance of counselor educators, counselor trainees can work through their insecurity, ambivalence, and struggle over identifying clients’ needs, locating appropriate resources, and facilitating clients’ access to services. Overcoming hurdles in this process leaves trainees gaining in their sense of competence to help clients with the support of a community of partners.

References

- Ciavarella, M., Corrigan, P. W., Hilburger, J., Lam, C. S., & Chan, F. (2004). Counseling intervention and skills training for people with psychiatric disabilities. In F. Chan, N. L. Berven, & K. R. Thomas (Eds.), *Counseling theories and techniques for rehabilitation health professionals*. New York: Springer.
- Milsom, A. S. (2002). Students with disabilities: School counselor involvement and preparation. *Professional School Counseling, 5*(5), 331–338.
- Pedersen, P. B. (2004). *110 experiences for multicultural learning*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Rawlings, E. I., & Carter, D. K. (1979). Divorced women. *Counseling Psychologist, 8*(1), 27–28.
- Street, S. (1994). The school counselor practices wellness. *School Counselor, 41*(3), 171–179