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The Copper River Project: Laying the foundation for School-Based Family Counseling with Alaska's indigenous populations

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The Copper River Project was a collaborative effort between the Copper River School District (CRSD) and the Professional School Counseling Program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks to create a culturally responsive K-8 comprehensive developmental guidance and counseling program in the CRSD. Three hundred and eighty one K-8 students, 25 percent of whom identified as Alaska Native, attended eight schools in the district, which covers 24, 663 square miles. One project goal was to increase parent and community involvement in the education of these children. Various school-based family counseling strategies were utilized to help achieve this goal, including family counseling, psycho-educational presentations, and school/community agency partnerships. The project was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

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The Copper River School District (CRSD), in collaboration with the Professional School Counseling Program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, developed and implemented a K-8 elementary school comprehensive guidance and counseling program. The project was funded through a $585,000.00 federal grant from the United States Department of Education under the Elementary School Counseling Demonstration Act. The grant, which was awarded at the beginning of the 2000-01 academic year, was intended to run for three years; however, due to carryover funds, it was permitted to continue through the 2003-04 term.

While the Copper River Project (CRP) was conceptualized as a comprehensiveguidance and counseling program, being preventive in nature and built on academic, career, and personal/social development domains (American School Counselor

Association, 2003; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000), in reality it also served as a mental health delivery system for students, parents, and school personnel in the region by utilizing many school-based family counseling (SBFC) principles. SBFC is an approach to helping children succeed at school and overcome personal and interpersonal problems. SBFC integrates school counseling and family counseling models within a broad based systems meta-model that is used to conceptualize the child's problems in the context of all his or her interpersonal networks: family, peer group, classroom, school (teacher, principal, other students), and community (Gerrard, 2008, p. 6).

Professional school counselors are trained in developmental psychology and while they traditionally engage in many therapeutic-like services during the school day, they are not charged with the responsibility of being mental health providers. However, the mental health needs of rural Alaskans often go unmet because of a shortage of trained professionals. In the Copper River region there are some agencies that do provide counseling services; however, individuals in need of services do not always believe that what they share at these agencies will be kept confidential, and therefore under utilize the available resources. School counseling services are no exception.

Developing trust between the school and the community is critical for the successful delivery of all social and educational services to Alaska's indigenous populations (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2004; Erickson, 1987; Lipka, 2002; Villegas & Prieto, 2006). To lay the foundation for building trust and encouraging active parent and community involvement in the creation of the Copper River school counseling program, the two professional school counselors hired under the grant were asked to live in one of the smaller communities outside of Glennallen and to participate actively in as many of the region's community events as possible.

Through participation in community events such as the Copper Basin 300 Dogsled Race, the Chistochina Fun Days, and attendance at many sporting events, the school counselors were able to make contact with families not regularly involved in the school experiences of their children. They also made home visits and contacted parents by telephone on a regular basis. They coordinated the Copper Center Potlatch and met with Native elders and other community members to organize a variety of cultural events through the After School Club (e.g., Native dancing and singing, beading, and ice fishing) and the Bridging the Gap organization. The counselors were able to bridge many of the cultural gaps that existed between the school system and the community by displaying a willingness to become active members of their communities. These contacts helped to foster stronger parent and community relations with the school district, paralleling many of the recommendations found in the literature identified as ways to help build a SBFC program (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Edwards & Foster, 1995; Evans & Carter, 1997). Furthermore, Carter and Perluss (2008) note that professional school counselors are "in a unique position to provide support and direction to families and schools in their mutual goal of maximizing the development of children….because of their daily presence at the school and their institutional role within the school system" (p. 49-50).

Community Background

The Copper River Valley is located in interior rural Alaska. Its largest town, Glennallen, has a population of 450 inhabitants and is situated 200 miles northeast of Anchorage and 250 miles southeast of Fairbanks. The Copper River Valley and School District covers a land area of 24,663 square miles with a population of approximately 3,100 residents. This area is larger than the combined land mass of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Delaware. The primary means for accessing the major communities of this region is by the Alaska Highway system. There is no public transportation or taxi service and the only airport in the area is unmanned and has no regularly scheduled flights. The typical ambulance run is approximately two hours. The roads are snow and ice-covered much of the year and daylight is limited to a few hours per day from November to March. Also, sustained sub-zero temperatures are the norm and cold spells of 50 degrees below zero (Fahrenheit scale) are not an uncommon experience.

Most communities in this area receive telephone service; however, there is no local television and only one local radio station. Municipal or borough governments are non-existent. On a voluntary basis citizens provide traditional public services (e.g., The Crossroads Medical Center). Weather permitting, itinerant medical professionals visit the region on a regular basis. Alaska Natives, predominately Athabaskan, comprise a considerable portion of the area's citizenry and cultural aspects of their heritage play an important role in the region's development. Alaska Native students constitute approximately 25% of the total pupil enrollment in the CRSD.

Building Trust: Making Education Culturally Responsive

Alaska Natives were once the dominant culture of the arctic and sub-arctic regions of North America, but are now a small sub-population of the American culture. Like every other indigenous group in what is now the United States, Alaska Natives have been exposed to numerous assimilation strategies (e.g., boarding schools) since coming under the rule of the federal government (Clarke, 2002: Klug & Whitfield, 2003; D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003). The debilitating effects of these assimilation efforts have resulted in multiple acculturation stressors leading to high suicide rates, substance abuse, and loss of traditional cultural practices (Manson, 2000; D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

Although many Alaska Native communities continue to contend with such issues, their cultural traditions are embedded into the very fabric of the Alaskan way of life. Education continues to serve as one avenue open to Alaska Native youth for integrating two distinct ways of being, cultural traditions, values, and differing world views (e.g., traditional subsistence lifestyle versus American consumerism). Culturally congruent educational practices provide Alaska Native youth with one such way to realize this goal of merging cultures and avoiding a bifurcated sense of self (Morotti, 2006).

Alaska Native children are often described as being unmotivated in school due to their reluctance to compete against one another. In Native cultures, being competitive means putting oneself above the tribe and implies that the person is better than the tribe (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003). This is one of the many value conflicts that indigenous

youth face in school today. The underlying message for these youth is that, to achieve academic success, they must assimilate into the mainstream society (Kawagley, 1999). However, a person's identity and culture are intertwined, and a student with a strong sense of culture and self-worth does better socially and academically. Research studies indicate that Alaska Native children are more successful academically when their families maintain strong traditional values. (Barnhardt, 1981; Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Barnhardt, Kawagley & Hill, 2000; Chance, 1966; Harkins, 1975: Kawagley, Norris-Tull, & Norris-Tull, 1998; Kleinfeld, 1979; Reyhner & Jacobs, 2002; Theobald & Howley, 1998).

To lessen the cultural conflict between the goals of public education and indigenous students' value systems, a goal like academic achievement can be presented as an extension of the traditional Native value of self-sufficiency through being able to help others. This process of value restructuring allows a student the opportunity to develop a framework of "stable core values that produces what education is all about—flexible personalities able to adapt to change, cope with special demands and stresses, and yet maintain coherent identity" (Kleinfeld, 1979, p. 133).

The validation of self and culture by representatives of the dominant society helps indigenous students to develop a secure sense of identity, confidence in abilities, and dignity of personhood (Kawagley, 1999). This is critical for healthy psychological development of the individual, because often times the messages indigenous and other ethnic minority youth receive from the dominant society are ones that disregard their value as members of the mainstream society.

The messages from the school and the media, and other manifestations of Eurocentric society, present Yupiaq students with an unreal picture of the outside world as well as a distorted view of their own, which leads to a great deal of confusion for students about who they are and where they fit in the world. This loss of Yupiaq identity leads to guilt and shame at being Yupiaq. The resultant feelings of hurt, grief, and pain are locked in the mind to emerge as depression and apathy, which is further reinforced by the fear of failure in school, by ridicule from non-Natives, and by loss of spirituality (Kawagley, 1999, p. 37).

Identity and culture are intrinsically linked. Therefore, educational experiences need to acknowledge the value of the student's culture of origin to help promote development of a more holistic self. It is not uncommon for the culturally diverse individual to feel competent among his or her own people, but experience feelings of inadequacy when interacting with representatives from the dominant culture. The dissonance created by this interface of cultures can result in the culturally diverse individual forming negative appraisals of self. Cultural differences affect an individual's perceptions and interactions with the environment, impacting all aspects of a person's life, including how one learns (Barnhardt, 1997).

One way to offset the negative effects of cultural dissonance for Alaska Native youth is the development of a collaborative working relationship between all parties (i.e.,

teachers, students, parents, community members) affected by the school system (Agbo, 2001; Bemak & Cornely, 2002; Keys & Bemak, 1997; Lipka, 1998; Yazzie, 1999). This collaboration is necessary for creating a sense of ownership and responsibility towards students' academic success (Villegas & Prieto, 2006). "Support of the schools by the community and parents is tied to the success of both schools and students" (Alaska Native Policy Center at the First Alaskans Institute, 2004, p. 95). This underscores the belief that "individual success and community success are interdependent and the recognition of community and school interdependence is vital for student success" (Russell, 2008, p.26). A result of this collaboration is the development of trust between all the stakeholders, because it signals a willingness to work together as equals demonstrating mutual respect towards all parties, which is necessary for successful relationship building (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

Copper River Project

A theoretical underpinning of all professional school counseling programs is the premise that every student can benefit from school-wide guidance activities. In other words, guidance is prevention. Prevention activities often focus on addressing emerging critical issues that impact the entire school and surrounding community, as well as individual students and their families. Among K-12 students, these issues are frequently ecological in nature in that they concern factors that affect the general atmosphere of the schools and homes in which children and youth learn.,,, (Carter & Evans, 2008, p.26).

A primary goal of all prevention activities is to help students develop skills that will assist them in making socially responsible and well-reasoned decisions throughout their lifetimes. Nevertheless, for comprehensive school counseling programs to be effective, they must be tailored to meet the individual educational and developmental needs of each school population.

The grant writers realized from the outset of conceptualizing this program that all stakeholders in the CRSD educational mission would have to have a voice and be asked to participate if the program was to meet with success. Building trust with the Alaska Native students and their families was central to program implementation. Teacher turnover in rural Alaskan school districts can run as high as 40% in any given year (Alaska Teacher Placement, 2008). Teachers coming from outside Alaska often lack the knowledge of how to teach in a culturally responsive manner. What the CRSD school counselors had to demonstrate to all stakeholders in the school system was a willingness to learn from them and then incorporate that learning into the counseling program.

The average K-8 student population in the district during the Copper River Project (CRP) was 380 students, spread across eight schools with the largest student population at the Glennallen schools (N=198) and the smallest at Chistochina and Gakona (N=11 students each). In addition to addressing the academic, career, and personal/social developmental concerns of the students, the CRP also addressed issues unique to rural schools in Alaska with a large Alaska Native population. Two of the most critical issues the CRP focused on were: (1) the cultural relevance of the program activities, and (2) the

myriad of challenges facing school personnel, students and their families resulting from the effects of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

Public education in Alaska, like the rest of the United States, is built on a western scientific understanding of the world and is embedded with mainstream American values and cultural traditions. Many of these values and traditions are different from those held by indigenous youth. For example, two major differences apparent in the educational system are indigenous children's preference for working cooperatively with others as opposed to being in competition with them, and an emphasis on nonverbal communication (Garrett & Myers, 1996; Herring 1997; D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003).

Additionally, Alaska has been known for its high rate of children and adults afflicted with FASD for many years. In an assessment conducted by the Copper River Native Association during 1998, residents of all the Alaska Native villages in the region indicated that alcohol is a major social problem. Of 21 health and social problems respondents were asked to rate, lack of treatment for alcohol and alcohol abuse ranked as the number one threat to communities (James Lorence, personal communication, 5/28/2000). Furthermore, a 2002 study conducted by the State of Alaska found that 1.4 infants per 1000 live births were alcohol affected, and among Alaska Natives the rate was 4.8 infants per 1000 live births (State of Alaska Office of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, 2005). In the Copper River Valley, the prevalence of FASD was estimated to be as high as 35% in children born to Alaska Native mothers (Alaska Native Commission, 2002). In one classroom of nine students, four of the children were identified as being FASD affected.

Students in rural communities face numerous challenges to realizing their academic goals (e.g., high absenteeism due to family responsibilities). To identify factors that might pose potential obstacles to student academic success, a needs assessment was conducted as the first step in developing the counseling program. School district personnel, students, parents and community members in the CRSD were surveyed, using a modified version of the Rye and Sparks (1999) needs assessment instruments. Eighty-five completed student responses were received for a 56.7% return rate. Sixty-four adults completed the survey for a 58.2% return rate. The assessment was conducted at the end of the 1999-2000 academic year and included in the grant proposal.

A sampling of student responses indicated that: 95% wanted help dealing with their feelings—especially anger; 94% wanted help understanding themselves; 94% wanted help understanding the dangers of drugs; 91% wanted help learning how to solve conflicts; 75% wanted help knowing how to deal with death and dying; and 66% wanted help in learning how to deal with parental divorce.

Over 75% of the adult respondents thought students needed assistance understanding self; handling feelings positively; understanding the dangers of drugs; death and dying issues; parental divorce; conflict resolution; peer pressure; learning how to respond to people using drugs; and career opportunities in the community. Forty-

seven percent of the adult respondents identified needing personal help with developing effective parenting skills.

While *The Comprehensive Counseling Program for Alaska Public School* (Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, 2001) provided the cornerstone for building the school counseling program, the success of the program was dependent on community acceptance. Therefore, a local advisory board was created to offer input on what the board members understood the needs of the children to be and what methods of education would most likely be successful. Counselors attended the annual advisory board meetings, besides meeting individually with community members when needed. In addition, the grant called for working closely with the local Native organizations, including the Copper River Native Association, the Mount Sanford Tribal Consortium, and the Chistochina Village Council. By working with these local agencies and organizations, counselors were able to develop a resource list of social services available in the area. This list was made available to all school personnel and community members for their use. Many of the key components of the CRP, if not all, are firmly based in the practice of SBFC. These included: classroom guidance activities addressing topics identified in the needs assessment; individual and small group counseling; integration of cultural awareness/appreciation activities into school activities; mentorships—adult-to-student and student-to-student; school counselor involvement in a variety of community activities; family education activities/presentations; crisis/trauma counseling services; and collaboration with community service agencies and other professionals, especially the Copper River region's Fetal Alcohol Syndrome/Effects Team.

Time and task analyses for the grant overall showed that program services fell into four basic categories: Classroom guidance activities (27%), focusing primarily on anger management, conflict resolution, and character education/social skills development; individual and small group counseling (28%), focusing primarily on in-school behavioral disruptions or crisis/traumatic events happening outside the school setting; system support services (27%), which included dissemination of psycho-educational information to school personnel, parent education meetings/groups, family counseling, and participation in community events; and other activities (18%), such as travel between sites, professional development/supervision, and program paperwork. As can be seen from these figures, 82% of all program activities dealt with the delivery of counseling services to students, parents, community members-at-large and school personnel.

The Mental Health Profile (MHP) (Roberts & Morotti, 2001), a tracking instrument for identifying students' presenting concerns, was utilized as a starting point for developing many of the classroom activities and community presentations. On a yearly basis, approximately 45% of all CRSD elementary school children participated in either individual or small group counseling. Of those students receiving counseling services, approximately half were seen for in-school behavioral disruptions. In addition, according to the MHP, over 45% of those students receiving individual counseling presented with two or more major life stressors (e.g., parental divorce + physical abuse). "There is considerable research demonstrating that dysfunctional families (characterized

by conflict, anxiety, low cohesion, and emotional problems of parents) are associated with a variety of problems affecting children" (Gerrard, 2008, p. 6). Other prominent presenting concerns included: all forms of child abuse; death or illness in family; potential harm to self or others through high risk behaviors; parental separation, divorce and remarriage issues; custody or other judicial proceedings; suicidal ideation; victimization; eating disorders; and depression.

Furthermore, the school counselors regularly provided counseling services to all community members during times of crisis. Grief recovery groups were open to all community members. These groups met weekly and were held from December through February and March to May. One of the school counselors pursued specialized training in grief and loss therapy during the first summer the grant was in operation and was responsible for developing the community workshops on this topic. In 2001, information on basic grief responses of children, adolescents, and adults was made available to all community members at the funeral of a Glennallen high school student who died after a short illness.

Counseling services outside the school setting took many forms. The school counselors developed workshops on various topics and presented them in a variety of community settings. Some of these activities included: The Parent Resource Center; the Parent Resource Hour offered bimonthly; workshops for Head Start parents on child development; community workshops on parenting skills and family relations, the effects of alcohol and drug use on children; and grief recovery work. Communication with parents on many psycho-educational topics was also achieved through articles (e.g., the importance of children's play) in the local newspapers and school papers. In addition, a photography wall was created at each school so parents could see many of the activities the students took part in during the academic year.

Filial therapy was used to incorporate parents into the counseling process. Parents were taught how to communicate with their children through play. Counselors also visited homes and places of work to discuss counseling issues when requested by parents. Family counseling services were provided by one of the counselors, who received specialized training in play therapy, on a regular basis to eight families throughout the life of the grant.

Addressing ways to work more effectively with children impacted by FASD was a primary goal of the grant. Counselors participated in numerous professional trainings on FASD. They worked closely with local agencies especially the Copper River Native Association (CRNA). The counselors assisted in the delivery of services to identified individuals, besides taking an active role in developing various program activities to assist these individuals in improving their social skills.

Working with the CRNA, the counselors set up a FASD summer camp for children (ages 8 to 13) and their care providers, emphasizing traditional Athabascan ways of life as demonstrated by community Elders. Counselors also taught transition skills to Head Start children identified as FASD throughout the school year. Likewise, to address

the educational needs of this population counselors assisted in the facilitation of wrap-around services for these children.

On a school-wide basis challenge course activities (i.e., portable ropes course) were instituted as part of the regular academic program to address the unique learning needs of FASD children. These experiential learning tasks helped to promote social skills development among all students. In a sampling of 21 students who participated in these activities, 76% reported that the felt it helped them to learn how to work together better.

Summary

During the four year time span (2000-04) of the Copper River School District's (CRSD) Elementary School Counseling Demonstration Grant (ESCDG), all the goals identified in the initial grant application were met, with varying degrees of success. Overall, 10 of the 14 program objectives were accomplished as initially conceptualized in the grant application. These included: development and delivery of guidance activities addressing topics identified in the needs assessment; delivery of individual and small group counseling services; reduction of student behaviors impeding academic performance; educational needs of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disordered (FASD) youth were addressed; development of a mentoring and transition program for the junior high school students; participation in numerous activities to bridge cultural gaps with local Alaska Native community; supervision and professional development opportunities for the elementary school counselors; dissemination of psycho-educational information to families; dissemination of information related to grant; and development of program accountability measures. Objectives partially met included: increasing students' awareness of career/occupational choices; increasing parent involvement in their students' educational experiences; ongoing meetings with the ocal advisory board; and the development of a model for working with local agencies on an ongoing basis.

In reviewing the time and task analysis documentation throughout the life of the grant, it was determined that the counselors spent 27% of their time delivering large group guidance activities, 28% in responsive services (i.e., individual and small group counseling), 27% in providing support services to teachers, administrators, and parents; this totals 82% of their time being spent in direct student contact activities. The remainder of their time was spent in traveling from site to site (10%), other assigned duties (7.25), and student assessments (.75%).

Community building was a primary objective of the grant. This was approached from a variety of perspectives. A local advisory board was formed, parent education activities were initiated, adult-child mentorships were formed, and the counselors worked closely with numerous community agencies (e.g., Copper River Native Association, the Cross Road Medical Clinic, and Head Start) to more fully integrate the educational objectives of the school system into the wider community setting. The CRSD has a large Alaska Native population and their support of the counseling program's objectives was

critical to its success. To facilitate this process, the counselors engaged in many activities that utilized Native Elders to teach traditional cultural practices (e.g., dance, weaving, ice fishing). Counselors also incorporated Athabaskan values into their classroom guidance units to help bridge the cultural gap between school and the Native community.

Another primary goal of the CRSD school counseling program was to find more effective ways to meet the educational needs of FASD affected youth. The Copper River region has an exceptionally high rate of FASD children. Through the grant Deb Ivenson, a recognized expert in the State of Alaska on FASD, provided training and supervision on this subject to counselors, teachers, and parents. During the 2002-03 academic year, Ms. Ivenson met with the counselors on a regular basis to provide technical assistance, in addition to conducting a weeklong training on FASD.

Exposure to aggressive acts (e.g., bullying) was another obstacle to the development of a positive learning climate for CRSD students. To address this issue, the school counselors participated in specialized training on how to do functional behavioral assessments. Counselors learned how to develop individual student behavioral plans from this assessment process. Using the Mental Health Profile (Roberts & Morotti, 2001) as an indicator for counseling referrals, approximately 50% of all individual and small group counseling sessions dealt with in-school behavioral disruptions caused by poor social skills development or peer relations. Other counseling needs identified through the use of this instrument included: divorce/family issues, high-risk behaviors, high stress life experiences, all forms of abuse, and suicidal ideation. On average each year 45% of all elementary school-aged children in CRSD participated in one-on-one or small group counseling activities.

Upon review of the grant and its impact on the lives of the children attending the CRSD schools, it was the opinion of teachers, administrators, and students alike that this program produced positive change in the educational experiences of all parties involved. Due to a statewide budgetary shortfall in 2004, the CRSD was not able to continue funding the position of an elementary school counselor for the 2004-05 academic year, having to eliminate five certified teaching positions. However, support still remains high among administrators, teachers, and other educational personnel for seeking funding for at least a half-time counseling position in the elementary schools. Currently, one professional school counselor still continues to serve the educational needs of all 550 of the district's students.

In summary, the school is at the center of most community activities in rural Alaska. Even though the local school district was not able to continue funding the elementary school counseling position, the CRP did demonstrate that the theory and practice of SBFC could be successfully implemented in a rural Alaska school district with a sizeable indigenous population. This was accomplished largely through the efforts of the two grant funded school counselors, as demonstrated through their active participation in a variety of community activities. This engagement helped to facilitate the trust building process between school personnel and community members. It also made it possible for school and university personnel to more easily engage in ongoing

evaluation of the program's effectiveness and to suggest new strategies for integrating school and community resources to all parties participating in the project. It is this very process of integrating school and community systems for the benefit of the child and his or her family that sets SBFC apart from traditional school counseling programs.

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