

## Guidance Programs in Schools: A Shift to Group Music Therapy

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### Abstract

*Guidance programs in school may not be meeting the current needs of students. School counsellors are forced to make decisions about which students should receive services, because of budget cuts and increasing demands placed on counsellors. This article proposes that, in the face of budget cuts to counselling services, students' needs would be better met with the incorporation of group counselling sessions. Music therapy is proposed as a preferred means of group counselling. The universality of music, the high success rate of clinical music therapy, and the strong music-adolescent connection are convincing reasons to incorporate group music therapy in schools.*

Current guidance counselling programs in schools may not be serving the needs of their students. Students' needs, including social, emotional, behavioural, and academic, appear to be increasing. Unfortunately, it has been this author's experience that this increase in student needs has been met with budget cuts to many school counselling services. These budget cuts do not match the mandate of schools to provide adequate guidance services to all students in need. In order to address the current counselling dilemma, there needs to be a change in the current delivery of counselling services. Providing more opportunities for group therapy would enable the guidance counsellor to meet the needs of more students without requiring schools to invest substantial budget dollars for their guidance programs. Music therapy provides a safe medium for communicating feelings because of the universality of music, and it has been used successfully with children and adolescents for a number of years in clinical settings. The addition of group music therapy sessions available in the public school setting would help to meet the increasing needs of more students than the current approach to school counselling.

### Weaknesses in Current Guidance Programming

Current guidance programming in Manitoba schools may be inadequate to meet the increasing needs of students, which has led to a decrease in the accountability of schools to the communities in which they serve. Schools are mandated to provide adequate services for all students, yet they are not supporting this educational policy with their current fiscal policy (Griffin, 2010). School administrators are demanding guidance counsellors to demonstrate that their work contributes to positive student development and success, yet ongoing budget cuts to counselling services have forced guidance counsellors to jeopardize their accountability by making decisions about which students are able to receive services (Gysbers). In many cases, this type of decision-making means that only those students with the most critical needs will receive treatment, and many of those students will not receive an adequate number of counselling sessions (Hui, 2000, p. 71). Students who would benefit from guidance counselling, but who are not regarded by staff as high needs, simply go without therapy at school because the guidance counsellor does not have time to see these students.

In spite of school budget cuts, today's students have higher emotional, behavioural, and academic needs than in the past (Bauer, 2010; Gold et al., 2004; Sausser & Walker, 2006). Students are facing new challenges at a younger age, such as coping with grief, drugs, alcohol, and bullying. Many of these students will not receive treatment because they cope well enough to maintain average grades and do not cause behavioural problems at school. Their need for counselling goes undetected because their difficulties are not known to the counsellor or

teachers. Due to the lack of adequate guidance services for these types of students, families often resort to seeking therapeutic services outside the school. However, in the face of the current economic crisis, many families cannot afford to obtain counselling services outside of the school system (Griffin, 2010). Students should be able to receive these services at the school level. Therefore, schools should endeavour to provide an alternative to the current delivery method of counselling services.

In most guidance programs, individual counselling sessions are the only method of therapy. These one-on-one sessions are not the most practical use of time for the guidance counsellor. An effective guidance program should “address the needs of all students and offer a balanced service to all” (Hui, 2000, p. 80). Many schools, despite having a student base of more than 200, employ only one guidance counsellor. In smaller schools, guidance counsellors are often also employed as part-time teachers, or work as the sole counsellor for several schools. In these situations, it is not reasonable to expect the guidance counsellor to provide services for all students. The reality is that the guidance counsellor’s time is monopolized by a select group of high needs students seen on a regular basis. In seeking a solution to the current lack of balanced guidance services, approaches other than individual counselling should be considered.

### **The Benefits of Group Therapy in Schools**

Group therapy is a practical alternative to the current individual case-file method of counselling that is currently being used in most guidance programs. Group therapy in schools, in addition to individual therapy, can help to meet the needs of more of the student population. The inclusion of group therapy is a viable option for many schools because of its cost efficiency and its ability to increase accountability to the school community. School counsellors maintain the flexibility to meet with students requiring individual counselling, as well as have the ability to create focused therapy groups to help the needs of students dealing with similar issues. An example of a focused therapy group that could be created would be for children affected by divorce. This group would give these students a chance to express their feelings, gather support from peers, and receive meaningful feedback from the guidance counsellor. The counsellor is likely to be more effective in delivering services to a greater number of students with the addition of therapy groups. This means of therapy would increase accountability of counsellors to their students.

Group counselling promotes a whole-school approach to counselling. In group therapy programs, counsellors would be able to move from remediation to prevention. This holistic approach enables schools to become more proactive in their method of providing services to students. Counsellors work to help students develop healthy attitudes through group therapy, while maintaining individual curative therapy sessions with those in need. One of the goals of group therapy in schools would be to create communities of support for students to deal with issues such as grief, bullying, and abuse. Bringing these students together in a group therapy setting can create a school environment that promotes wellness through counselling. Students experience relief and bond with others who have shared similar experiences (Dalton & Krout, 2005). Group therapy, in addition to the individual counselling sessions, improves accountability of counsellors by providing services to more students without requiring schools to dramatically increase their guidance budgets. It promotes the use of counselling services by students through increased awareness in the whole school.

### **The Benefits of Using Music Group Therapy in Schools**

Music therapy is an effective mode of therapy to use in the school system. Music therapy can be seen as “the use of organised sounds within an evolving relationship between client and therapist to support and encourage physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being” (Bunt,

1994, p. 8). The therapist essentially uses music as a medium to develop a helping relationship with a client in order to maximize optimal functioning (Wigram et al., 2002). Music therapy has been used extensively with many populations in clinical settings with dramatic positive results. It has been shown to be particularly effective in treating a number of emotional, behavioural, and social problems in children and adolescents (Accordino et al., 2007).

Music therapy's effectiveness stems from the universality of music. For most people, music is a part of everyday life, and many people find that listening to or creating music is therapeutic. Music is "a non-invasive medium that enhances self-expression, self-esteem, motor skills, coordination, and socialization. It facilitates creativity, inventiveness, independence and success" (Sausser & Walker, 2006, p. 8). The use of music in group therapy provides a sense of safety to participants, because music is a familiar territory (Robarts, 2006).

Adolescents seem to have a particular tie to music, which makes its use for therapy more effective and inviting than possibly other forms of group therapy. Music tends to play a significant role in the lives of teenagers. They often use music to identify themselves with a particular peer group, and express their feelings. The relationship between music and adolescents "serves as a platform for connectedness and emotional expression that is utilised within a therapeutic, support group format" (McFerran et al., 2010, p. 541). Studies have also suggested that young people use music for to discover meaning and purpose (Choi et al., 2010). In this way, group music therapy sessions help students to develop self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence (Chong & Kim, 2010). The role that music plays in the lives of students makes music a useful medium for group therapy.

Music therapy is a viable option for counsellors because of the flexibility of music therapy techniques. Sessions are structured by the guidance counsellor to meet the needs of particular groups of students, which are achieved through the type of music therapy used in each group setting. Counsellors can pull ideas and activities for each group from the two main types of music therapy: active and passive. Active music therapy includes a variety of activities such as singing, drumming, playing wind instruments, and body movement, while passive music therapy involves activities such as lyric analysis, composition, and active listening (Choi et al., 2010). The types of activities done in a group music therapy session also depend on the composition of the group. For example, a counsellor would structure music therapy activities differently for a group of bereaved children than for a group of highly aggressive adolescents. The flexibility of music therapy sessions lends itself to use in the school system in dealing with a variety of student issues.

## **Conclusion**

The current state of guidance counselling programs in schools is inadequate in serving the mandate to provide services to all students. Budget cuts, met by increasing student needs, have decreased the level of accountability that counsellors are able to maintain with the students they serve. The addition of group therapy to the current method of individual counselling enables counsellors to address the needs of more students without requiring schools to increase their guidance budgets. Group therapy helps counsellors to move from dealing with strictly remediation of students to a more preventative approach to counselling. Music therapy has been used as an effective mode of group therapy to treat a number of social, emotional, and behavioural disturbances. The universal nature of music and its strong role in the lives of children and adolescents make music therapy a convincing form of group therapy to use in the school system.

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