

Expanding Educational Methods for Students and Staff: Exploring Non-traditional Methods

Honors Thesis Synopsis

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This synopsis is an extension of both the portfolio and written thesis, “Expanding Educational Methods for Students and Staff: Exploring Non-traditional Methods”. Each of the interviews I participated in will be summarized below. Following the summaries are common themes that were found throughout this interview process, methods or interventions that are used in the field, and programs that schools have developed to help students, concluding with a discussion about what these findings mean.

**Synopsis of Interviews:****Meri Lederer**

Meri Lederer is the school social worker at Lenape Elementary School in New Paltz, with an educational background in philosophy, social work, and educational administration. She works with students in grades three through five, and views her profession as school social worker through both the teaching and therapeutic models. At Lenape, she is the only social worker and there are no school counselors to assist with mental health related work. However, New Paltz follows the Responsive Classroom model and she felt that mental health and social and emotional learning were more integrated into the curriculum through this model. She felt that there are places for non-traditional models of education in society as everything is fluid and adaptable. Daily issues include anxiety, autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, crisis intervention, and bullying and harassment. In order to address these issues, she noted the school's anti-bullying policy, professional development programs, parental involvement and overall just being flexible and educating oneself about the changing world. In response to being asked about human rights she acknowledged how human rights are the driving force behind the social work profession and they are upheld through advocacy, being a conduit for community resources, and the Responsive Classroom model.

**Eileen Ploetz**

Eileen Ploetz is a school social worker for the Arlington School District at Overlook Primary School and La Grange Middle School, with an educational background in sociology and a social work degree with a macro level focus. Working in two different schools allows her to work with younger and teenage students with diverse socioeconomic status. Due to a large and

diverse population and limited human services staff she felt that the ability to do her job was restricted within the current education system, as there is an imbalance between the time spent on IEP caseloads and students in crisis. Incorporating non-traditional methods of education would be difficult at this time due to the number of kids within Arlington Schools, however she noted how mindfulness is being integrated into their curriculum. She highlighted her use of solution focused therapy with students and how she works with them to think through the steps of finding solutions. Issues she faces include homelessness, hunger, mental health crises, and lack of resources, but she works to resolve them through advocacy, community resources such as weekend backpack programs, and mindfulness. Human rights are acknowledged through the self-determination she allows her students and she avoids stress and burnout through scheduling time to decompress and times to look forward to doing something.

### **Rich Silverman**

Rich Silverman is a social worker at KidsPeace, a therapeutic foster care agency in Kingston. He has educational experience in psychology, education, and social work and has worked with various populations throughout his career, but through KidsPeace primarily works with children who have experienced trauma or have PTSD. Within the KidsPeace agency he did not feel restricted in his job as a social worker, but noted that working with different counties can place restrictions that are different from the agency. He advocated for non-traditional methods of education, especially for the children at KidsPeace and how they might create an atmosphere of learning where everyone feels comfortable and confident to learn. He also highlighted the use of Solution Oriented Therapy and one his academic influences is Irvin Yalom. The issues he deals with include behavioral and cognitive changes and accountability in behavior, and he address them through clinical therapy and enhancing case management as the basic therapy work in the

field. Human Rights are upheld at KidsPeace through advocacy and allowing children to have agency in their decisions by treating them as individual human beings. Rich believes that to deal with stress and burnout one has to leave work at work, and go in with the mindset that the individuals we work with are the same as we are.

### **Lizbeth Madara**

Lizbeth Madara is a social worker at Poughkeepsie High School, where she works with special education and regular education students. In regards to being restricted within the current education system she just advocated for more school social workers, as there is currently not enough to meet the needs of all the students. She thought that non-traditional methods of education were not accessible to students as they are seen in more affluent areas, but that more students could benefit from vocational training. She focuses on resilience building and deals with issues like poverty, homelessness, psychiatric problems, gangs, violence, and social pressures from peers and families. In order to help students with these issues, she uses tiered interventions and goes into ELA classrooms to teach about mental health and wellness and resiliency. She felt that Poughkeepsie students' human rights were not being upheld because of lack of access to quality services in the community. To deal with stress and burnout she changes the environment or scenery of her office to tend to the space for herself and her students and feels that having an intern is helpful and refreshing for this profession.

### **Bri Kane**

Bri Kane is the school counselor at Pawling Elementary school and works with around four hundred students in kindergarten through fourth grade. She uses tiered interventions and does a mix of preventative and responsive work. She expressed a need for another counselor as this caseload does not meet the requirements outline in the ASCA model. Furthermore, she

called for more support both from her colleagues and in understanding mental health. She also mentioned how mindfulness is starting to be used in curriculum and noted how education is always changing so there needs to be flexibility in models of approach. Her academic influence is Carl Rodgers from whom she uses humanistic approach and unconditional positive regard. Some issues she faces include domestic violence and family issues, anxiety, and trauma and works to address these issues through getting students to normalize talking about their problems. Additionally, she implements various group sessions and meets with at risk students. Human rights are addressed through her advocacy work for the students and getting what they need. She noted that in order to deal with stress and avoid burnout that you need to establish a network, set boundaries, and prioritize selfcare in that once something becomes mundane something new should be found to continue the selfcare work.

### **Common themes**

#### **Call for more School Social Workers:**

The call for more school social workers was a common theme across these interviews. In most of these schools there was only one social worker per building or per several grade levels, and most expressed the need for more than one social worker, specifically at least two social workers as a means to better serve students. This was backed by the increase in IEP caseloads and the increase in diagnoses among students. Furthermore, some of these social workers suggested that one focus just on special education and IEP students and one focus on prevention work and crisis management with students. This division would decrease caseloads and allow social workers to be able to meet with students more often and specialize in their areas of needs. It also significant to note how the call for more school counselors was also seen in the interview with Bri Kane, the school counselor in Pawling. If more social workers and school counselors

are hired and able to work together than more mental health support to reframe tiered intervention work and be able to do more prevention and less reactionary intervention.

### **Human Rights:**

The question about human rights gave a lot of insight into how knowledge about human rights is lacking. Although human rights are inherent in these human services professions, it was interesting to hear about explicit human rights vocabulary is missing in schools. This was not that surprising to me, as I did not learn explicitly about human rights until I was in college. However, after studying abroad in Denmark and seeing how schools there post the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and use human rights language, I look for this type of knowledge and awareness in every school I visit. While I did not see this exactly, I saw the small ways that social workers and school counselors incorporate human rights into education. The main avenue for this was advocacy. Every person I interviewed mentioned the importance of advocacy and getting what their students need.

### **Self-care, Stress and burnout:**

Asking about selfcare, stress, and burnout arguably became one of the most significant questions. I am glad I added this question as it proved to me that we cannot care for others until we care for ourselves. In order to prevent stress and burnout setting the boundary between work and home was highly recommended, but is not always as easy as it seems. Leaving work at work is something that comes with experience and takes practice to not bring it home with you. However, to help prevent stress and burnout interviewees stressed the importance of creating a network of support to vent and talk about problems with and how finding a therapist can be also

be helpful. Furthermore, the interviewees recommended finding hobbies that interest you and tend to your needs whether its knitting or yoga or planning fun things to do with friends. No matter the activity it was noted that as long as it is beneficial to your wellness it should be prioritized and that once it becomes mundane something new should be sought out. Learning about self-care is also something I did not encounter until my college career in the human services field, but something that I wonder if it was talked about earlier in education that it might benefit all parties involved.

### **Methods/Interventions:**

#### **Solution Focused/Oriented Therapy**

This type of therapy was recommended by multiple interviewees and highlighted the importance of values like agency and choice. Solution oriented therapy as one social worker summarized it, is donating five minutes of the session to identifying the problem and the other fifty-five minutes to finding solutions to the problem. Working alongside the students to come up with solutions in their own terms gives them power, control, and choice to determine what is best for them. Furthermore, it allows them to feel the support from the human services professional and not feel as if they are being told what to do. This type of therapy was used with various age groups of students therefore making it a transferable option to use across schools. Solution oriented therapy could become a small-scale intervention in schools that could plant the seeds of transformation in education through providing agency, meaning, and choice to students.

#### **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness was mentioned by all interviewees and demonstrated how universal this practice could be. In some instances, schools were implementing mindfulness in the classrooms

through curriculum, but others were just beginning to incorporate mindfulness as an intervention. It was noted how mindfulness helps with awareness about one's body, mind, and spirit, but also to how it can be used as an additional coping skill. Mindfulness is something that can be practiced in many ways and therefore be used across school ages groups but also for students with various needs. The practice of mindfulness is also something that can be implemented as a method of prevention or as a reactive method since it can help with focus and attention but also with stress and trauma. Furthermore, since mindfulness is not restricted to one form of practice it can take on various forms that are meaningful to students in their own way. Using mindfulness in the school setting not only allows for students and staff to get in touch with themselves, but also with each other as it can be used as a method to check in with one another.

### **Group Therapies**

The use of group therapy was also a common connection across the interviews. Some noted how groups can be beneficial to those involved and connect students, while others noted how groups can be overused and forced to make the most of limited time. This dynamic highlighted the ranging focuses of education and how there can be an emphasis on numbers and results rather than the means of getting there. For example, the use of group therapies to build social skills, self-esteem, conflict resolution skills, and support with family changes can help students to not feel alone and know there are others that are going through similar situations. However, when groups are prioritized to meet with as many students as possible, they may not actually help the students in need. Group therapy highlights the importance of creating community and the need for a network of support to be built within classrooms and schools so that all students can feel cared for.

### **Programs:**

#### **Backpack program to target food insecurity**

A backpack program to help students who are dealing with food insecurity was one additional program that was mentioned by multiple interviewees. This type of program involves sending backpacks of food home with students over the weekend so that they have guaranteed meals during that time frame. While this type of program is significant it is also disheartening to know that so many students are faced with food insecurity and may not know when or where their next meal is coming from. Creating a program like this requires organizing a budget or a steady donation supply to support it, but also requires the coming together of school personnel to provide for their students. Furthermore, this highlights how schools are aware of students cannot learn at their best when they are hungry and that their basic needs have to be met before they can meet academic needs.

#### **Going into classrooms to teach lessons**

Having social workers and counselors go into classrooms to teach lessons was also common across the interviews. The lessons revolved around mental health and wellness, mindfulness, resilience building, and coping skills. Each of these works to meet students social, emotional, and other basic health needs, which in turn can boost their academic goals. Additionally, focusing these lessons on social and emotional well being demonstrates how there is a place for this within the education system. It also works to fit the tiered intervention system that is used in most schools and can help students who are in the first or second tiers and not receiving services build their own coping mechanisms and small solutions. Going into classrooms also allows for the social worker or counselor to be more integrated into the school

environment and not be isolated to an office. Furthermore, it can decrease the stigma of meeting with the social worker or counselor if everyone is familiar with them and able to talk about their problems.

### **Discussion**

All of the common themes, methods or interventions, and programs demonstrate how even when schools serve entirely different populations of students, similar modalities and qualities of care can be used to help meet the students needs. This is not to say that these methods will work in every school for every student, but that basic concepts from these themes can be seen and used to help better meet the needs of students. Underlying each of these themes, methods, and programs are qualities such as empathy, care, agency, and choice. These qualities are exactly what can be found in non-traditional methods of education such as The Montessori Method, Reggio Emilia Approach, and Social Pedagogy, highlighting how they can be transferable into a traditional school. However, they also demonstrate how schools can create their own micro level changes using these underlying qualities to form their own solutions to problems in the education system. Additionally, these interviews demonstrated the importance of the work that social workers and school counselors do and how that work can be incorporated into the classroom or expanded to build a network of care within schools. Each school environment is its own and should be meaningful to its community in order to build up its students and staff to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.