

# Creating a Culture of Belonging: Alternative Strategies for Clinical Engagement in the School Setting

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# What is a School Social Worker?

- The overall truth is that we are what our students and our school needs us to be.
- Our jobs are fluid and flexible. This can be both good and bad.
- There is no real “rulebook” on how we do our job on a daily basis. We can be creative!

# Think outside the “box” (or office) by :

- Using alternative, student-centered engagement techniques and philosophies and their various applications within the school building.
- Being an active presence and agent of change in promoting a positive school culture that includes social justice and equity.

# Clay Analogy

- All of the concepts presented today are “clay” for you create something that you feel passionate about using and that you feel will enhance your engagement and treatment process in a successful and appropriate way



# Social Justice Through Active Prevention

“If you can PREDICT it, you can PREVENT it”

- Parental contact is very important for this.

# Social Justice Through Active Prevention

- What is “Active Prevention”?
  1. Being a highly visible and easily accessible presence for students, parents and teachers.
    - a) Arrival- “snapshot of mental status”, parental engagement
    - b) Transitions- “evolving snapshot”, “quick pull”, “teacher engagement”
    - c) Lunch/Recess- Milieu observation/prevention/intervention, “In Vivo” counseling, “Natural” group formation. “Evolving snapshot”
    - d) Dismissal- Parent contact, Prevention/intervention, Recap/Planning/Expectations for following day, “Final Snapshot”

# What Do You See?

- Do you see a pattern?
  1. Student to student?
  2. Student to group?
  3. Class to student?
  4. Student to class?
  5. Teacher to student?
  6. Student to teacher(s)?
    - ❖ Address the pattern.....seek roots....engage in mediation.....achieve balance!

# Social Justice Through Informed Intervention

- If a student is bothered enough to tell you about it.....usually it's a problem. We all want to help but.....
- If a teacher is bothered enough to tell you about it.....sometimes it's a problem. We all want to help but....
- **INVESTIGATE!!!!!!** Then assess the situation and figure out the next steps before taking any action. Seek administrative help when needed.

# Social Justice Through Informed Intervention

- Sometimes social justice and equity means discipline.
- We must endeavor to maintain an environment that students and teachers are safe and that individuals are accountable for their actions.
- Our role in this is flexible as long as we follow social work values.

# Active Prevention/Informed intervention results

- At Isaac Newton Middle School, the Active Intervention/Informed Intervention initiative was started in the 2015-2016 school year.
- At the end of the 2015-2016 year, the number of incidents and disciplinary interventions decreased by 24% and 52%, respectively.
- At the end of the same time period in the 2016-2017 year, the school had shown a 55% decrease in the number of classroom incidents when compared to the same time period the year before and a 78% decrease for disciplinary interventions for the same time period.

# Lead your school in social-emotional wellness!!!

- ❖ In addition to taking an active hand in observing and influencing the school climate and culture, this approach also allows you to provide staff with feedback and support aligned to classroom management needs and the student's developmental needs.

Why is it Important to use alternative strategies for clinical engagement and treatment?

**Mr. Keating's first class, 3:39**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xv9JOVkr5PQ>

**A Barbaric Yawp, 3:12**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6xyHna-NuM>

## ‘Meet Them Where They’re At’

At the beginning stages of clinical engagement a child's reaction can range from silence/resistance to questions like

- “Why am I here?”
- “Am I in trouble?”
- “Did I do something wrong?”
- “Is there something wrong with me?”



# De-stigmatizing the Counseling Concept

- “Counseling” and “Therapy” often seem to have negative connotations.
- Most students do not wish to attend or admit to attending, needing or having it.
- Working through resistance can be difficult, especially when you only meet for less than an hour 1X a week.

Using alternative mediums can de-stigmatize this process and enhance the clinical experience in a number of ways

***Don't be afraid to make first meetings different or fun!!!!***

## Meet Them Where They're At

If you are met with any of these, try to deemphasize the presenting problem and instead engage them in an alternative medium or activity (though, if they are ready to go for it, by all means!).

Using an alternative medium of your or their choice during the initial engagement period allows you the opportunity to:

- Make the student feel more comfortable during what is an initially awkward and sometimes scary process
- Begin to observe them with their guard down
- Manipulate the medium to gauge reactions, make interventions, and have teachable moments

## Unloading the “Loaded” Relationship

- As counselors, psychologists and social workers we have to let go a little bit of our classical therapeutic modalities during the engagement process and focus on making a **comfortable** connection with the child.

# Unloading the “Loaded” Relationship

Using non-traditional or alternative means to engage the student facilitates the relationship building process in some important ways.

- Kids have interests, and more importantly, kids want adults to know what their interests are. Why?
- So they can try to relate to them
- Common ground
- You know something about them that is fun
- Feel safe

***It is important to have a general working knowledge of what kids in the age group you are working with are into.....You Must Capture Their Interest!!!!***

## Unloading the “Loaded” Relationship

- As long as the intervention is not one that needs to be made in a hurry or is a crisis situation (though sometimes alternative mediums of engagement are excellent tools for initial de-escalation), take the time to try to find out about the child’s passions and interests. Engage them, and build a relationship by using them. The child will begin to feel invested in the interaction and look forward to it.

*When this happens, that is when you try to thread the interventions in.*

# Unloading the “Loaded” Relationship

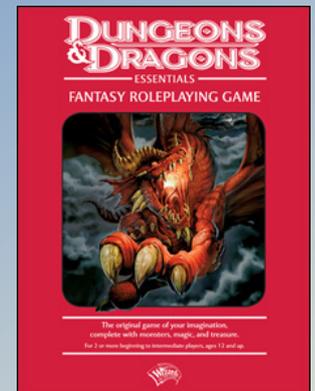
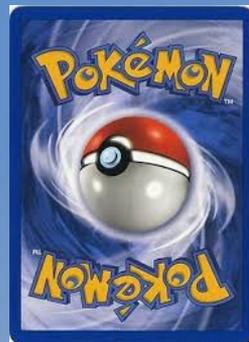
## Case study example “Ike”

- 10 year old boy recently placed in a residential school
- ASD diagnosis- high functioning (Aspergers)
- Presenting problems/behaviors- tremendous difficulty socializing with peers, high level of rigidity of thinking, verbal and sometimes physical aggression when challenged or engaged to do any clinical “work”
- How would you begin to engage this student and “unload” the relationship?



# Beyond Uno!

An introduction to the world of games and their potential uses for engagement and treatment.



# Themes: There's a Game For That

There is a game with a theme for anything the kids might like.  
**Seriously!** All you need to do is look.

Ask yourself:

- What are they into?
- What can you get them interested in?

If you can get them excited and motivated, half your work is done.



# Types of Games

Any of the techniques and rationales can be used with standard games if you are afraid to cross over to the geek side.

Cooperative (Co-op) games- (i.e. Castle Panic, Forbidden Island)

- Social skills
- Impulse control
- Building group cohesion
- Finding group roles and leaders

# Types of Games

Collectible card games (CCG) and Trading Card Games (TCG)- (i.e. Magic, Pokemon)

- Popular and collectible
- Opportunity for “club atmosphere”
- Transferrable outside culture and community
- Tournaments
- Individual components for a reinforcement or reward based behavior program
- Informally assessing/determining and practicing multiple aspects of cognition

# Types of Games

Role Playing Games (RPG)- (i.e. Dungeons and Dragons, any theme you want)

- Social skills
- Cooperation through discussion, agreement and planning
- See what role/character a student chooses and why
- Impulsivity in that your actions can impact the group
- Practicing putting yourself in someone else's shoes

# Types of Games

Hybrid RPG/Co-op board games- (i.e. D&D adventure system, Heroscape)

- All the facets of RPGs, but not as deep/easier to get into and more goal oriented
- Can be used “one-shot” or continuous.
- Often very “cool-looking” with great components

# Types of Games

Deck builders- (i.e. Star realms, DC deck building)

- Easy to play and quick to set up
- Every choice matters
  - Building symmetry
- Resource management
- Highly thematic

# Types of Games

Abstracts and resource management- (i.e. Chess, Duell, Settlers of Catan, Quoridor)

- Theme is either very present or not present at all
- More of an emphasis on strategy and simple rules than complex rules and luck of the draw or dice roll
- Sometimes used as gateway games as the rules are easily explained and the theme is not too deep

# Games as an Alternative Medium to Clinically Engage and Treat Students

## Case Example- INMS- Creating Social Equity and a Culture of Belonging

- HeroScape social support

# Athletics as a Medium

Case Study - Mark, John, Rafael and Mike



# Athletics as a Medium

You don't need to be an athlete, you just need passion and a plan.

- If you or a number of your students identify an athletic or fitness medium as an area of interest, then engage it!
  - What is your goal with this activity?
  - What is the students goal?
  - Even if they have to explain the rules to you from the beginning it does not matter....you are engaging them!!!



# Athletics as a Medium

You are providing a forum to build relationships, community and glean clinical information and treatment opportunities.

Ideas:

- Set up an informal intramural program in any sport.
  - Student interest will get you the biggest buy-in, but may exclude those not in the majority or those who are intimidated by those with more skill.
  - Your interest allows the kids to see your passion/interest and learn something new, but if you don't present it with passion, you may not have buy in.
  - Something new creates a more neutral, level playing field for everyone but may not be catchy or generate enough interest.

# Teams

When making teams:

## **Letting them make teams**

- allows you to see where the natural social alliances are and how they interact with each other as well as possible getting the highest amount of buy in.
- however, as a rule these teams tend to be horribly unfair with the best players knowing who the other best players are and teaming up to crush others rather than be competitive.

## Teams

### **You make teams**

- allows you to make excellent, socially and athletically balanced teams where the treatment possibilities are endless
- Run the risk of the “alpha” players complaining and losing interest if their team is beaten consistently (though this is a treatment issue to address in and of itself).

## Teams

### **Random**

- balances out these approaches.

In all cases, let them name their team and develop a team identity as long as it is appropriate

## Teams

- Keep scores and records- Kids love this! They will ask you what the standings are every day and be more engaged than you think.
- Have the “season” be 2-4 weeks long
  - want to keep them engaged leading toward a final goal, like a championship with a chance for the kids to begin to build relationships with each other on their teams.

## Teams

- Have a rewards party for the winners
  - can mix the fun with process about how they were able to win together. Ask them what they got out of it, and what they found out about each other.
- Change the teams for the next “season” and start fresh



# Additional Goals and Reasons to use Athletics as a Medium

- Inclusion
- Working together/Teambuilding
- Strengths “Olympic Concept”
- A way for the kids to see you in a different light
- Kids get to burn off or redirect energy in a positive manner



# Areas of Clinical Focus

# Relationship Building

- Have fun with them!
- Watch for their interactional style and get a “sense” of them.
- Look for words or actions that may begin to help you formulate a non-intrusive mental status exam.



# Relationship Building

- Seek natural opportunities to ask questions, gently clarify, or seek additional information when you think you hit upon something clinically significant.
- Use the activity as a medium to stimulate group engagement and cohesion.
- Build a common purpose and a sense of belonging to something.
- Take the opportunity to step back and observe the group dynamic “in action” without you leading them.

# Communication and Social Skills Building

- Many games require the ability to communicate and work together with others.
- Sometimes this is better than a classic “social skills group” because it is not as stilted and is masked in a medium.
- Teachable Moments



# Impulse Control

- Most games require the ability to think before you act.
- There are many opportunities to address impulse control issues in individual and group modalities using the game as medium.

# Anger Management and Frustration Tolerance

- A bad hand or a bad roll.
- Getting wiped out
- Losing surprisingly in a game that you are winning.

All are recipes for angry or frustrated feelings. Whether this happens naturally or you set it up on purpose, these are excellent opportunities to practice dealing with and coming to terms with those feelings.

# Anxiety Reduction and School Avoidance

- Sometimes, just sitting down and playing a game or “building a deck” can take the edge off a child that is anxious and get them able to focus on something else long enough to de-escalate enough to be able to process their feelings or use anxiety management techniques.
- Using the game activity or medium to provide a reinforcer for attending school.

## Reinforce and Reward

Whether it is time earned playing a game with peers or adults of their choice or game components earned to improve their game, games provide an excellent platform to reinforce or reward positive behaviors or achievement of clinical treatment goals.

# Critical Thinking, Reading, Comprehension and Math Skills

- Many games have a set of basic rules or a framework that need to be followed, and in many cases, each component breaks the rules in a different way.
- There is a great deal of text to be understood in some of these games and in some cases basic algebra.
- Critical thinking and strategy goes into competing in the game and you have an alternate way to look at a students intellectual functioning and processing as well as any frustrations they may have that can be discussed.

# Ability to “Work” or Stay Focused

Using games as a medium, especially ones that a child is motivated or interested in allows you to take a look at their ability to focus and stay on task as compared to the classroom.



## As a Running Baseline for Mental Status

If you consistently engage a student in a medium or activity that they enjoy or are motivated by, you will get a sense of where that student's range of baseline mood and affect are.

- Loss of interest or pleasure in the activity
- Distraction
- Irritability
- Psychomotor agitation
- Changes in mood
- Affect

# Engagement & Treatment by Diagnostic/Presenting Problem

- Case Example- Special Education School
- ASD, Depression and Anxiety/School avoidance- (Warcraft example)
- Anger Management, Low frustration tolerance, Impulse control disorder
- Blending to create a community of tolerance and respect as well as a forum to work in issues.

# Finding Your Medium

## Be “Real”

**Kids respond to adults that they see as “real” and interesting.**

- What do you love?
- What are your passions/interests/hobbies that would be appropriate sharing with your students?
- What do you feel safe sharing with your students that you would want them to identify with you?

***Most importantly, think....always think.... how can you use it to effectively and innovatively engage and with them? Can you then use it to facilitate a clinical intervention in some way?***

## Be “Real”

**Example:** Make your office a reflection of you and your interests! Some students don't have or are unwilling to share their interests. As sort of a version of lending Ego strength, lend them yours! They might be introduced to something new. They may become inspired. Even if none of these things occur, they at least can begin to see you as “real.”

**Be enthusiastic! Most of the time it has to be “you”  
(it tends to fail if it is not you).**

# What is your “Magic”?

- Dunia’s knitting club
- Charlene’s Double Dutch club
- Amy’s Theatre Club
- Case example- “Anthony, Ben and The Gathering”



# When and How to Introduce Alternative Strategies for Clinical Engagement and Treatment

## When?

School is a great place to engage young people as you have a “captive audience.” However, there are many competing priorities:

- Worker- mandated counseling, weekly meetings, IEP meetings etc...
- Students - class, related services, peers etc.



# When and How to Introduce Alternative Strategies for Clinical Engagement and Treatment

- Lunch
- IR
- Current Events
- Art
- Gym
- During scheduled individual/group sessions
- “0” period (before school)
- After school.

Be mindful of the “48-min session” and that usually the activity has to fit into the time frame of a period.

# When and How to Introduce Alternative Strategies for Clinical Engagement and Treatment

## How?

It is very important to be in touch with what it is the students want to do and what is motivating to them.

- Develop an activity interest survey.
- Make announcements and sign up sheets during a class like IR.
- Run a “demo” during a period like lunch, IR, or current events

# Using a Medium to Create a Community

Using alternative mediums for engagement and treatment in the school setting.

- The most powerful engagement and treatment resource you have is the students themselves.
- If you can find a naturally occurring collective interest (or interests) in a specific medium or stimulate one yourself, you can use it to group kids together and create a therapeutic club based on that medium.

## Why this is an effective strategy?

- Monitor and “coach” live interactions
- Creates a sense of “belonging” to students who have trouble attaining it on their own.
- Establishes behavioral norms
- Reduces behavioral incidences by providing motivation and structure to otherwise relatively unstructured times.
- Can stimulate friendships outside of the group or activity that could serve as strengths and supports.
- With luck, it becomes motivating and self-sustaining.
- It allows you to build relationships with a much larger pool of students
- **(Case Example- INMS soccer club)**

# Considerations, Protocol, and Safety

- **If you are running a group activity:**
  - Do you have staff nearby to support you if you need help?
- If you are running an activity including some sort of fitness or athletic medium:
  - Is there a school nurse available?
- What are the environmental parameters of your chosen location?
- Can you easily keep track of the kids?
- Are there any safety concerns?

## Considerations, Protocol, and Safety

- **Do you have a safe, supportive environment?**
  - Is administration aware of what you are doing?
    - Do you need/have sanction?
  - Does the medium take into account the overall intellectual capacity of each individual student?
  - Is this something you need parental permission for?
  - Can you be consistent and have a consistent place/time? This is particularly important when the medium is being used as a reinforcement in some way

# Conclusions and Questions

