THE IMPACT OF COVID ON ADOLESCENTS: AN INTERVIEW WITH OMAR RUIZ

JEREMIAH GIBSON, MMFT
Editorial Team – *New England Journal of Relational and Systemic Practice*

Jeremiah Gibson: Omar Ruiz provides individual and group counseling to 7th and 8th graders at the Boston Collegiate Charter School. Before we move into questions about adolescents, would you mind describing what a typical day working at BCCS involves? What kind of work do you find most intriguing? Most challenging?

Omar Ruiz: A typical day looks like me having several scheduled student counseling sessions, standing around different locations as part of having some adult presence (i.e. standing in the hallway during transitions, in the cafeteria during lunch and outside during recess), providing emotional/behavioral crisis intervention when needed, attending meetings and overseeing plus supervising a counseling intern. Students are referred for counseling either through their individualized education plan (IEP), 504 accommodation plan, or referred by the teachers, parents or students themselves. The most challenging part is working with a student who does not want to partake in counseling as they are mandated to engage either because services are listed within their IEP or they genuinely do not believe they need services.

Jeremiah Gibson: How do you engage with students who don't want to participate in counseling?

Omar Ruiz: First, I ask them questions about what is their understanding as to why their teachers or parents have requested them to be in counseling. I would then ask about their history of receiving counseling in the past. Finally, I will work on acknowledging their discontent about having to be forced to be in counseling due to their disagreement around why they need it. I do this by sharing how there are students who truly believe they are ok and it's the adults that have the issue. I spent most of my time during the first few sessions trying to build a relationship. I do not engage in the actual work of treatment because I believe that treatment is only as successful as the therapeutic relationship that I am able to build with the student. I have had students who completely hated the idea of counseling. I knew it wasn't about me as they never met me before.

Their emotions and discontent about counseling was more to do with their disagreement towards how other adults in their lives have told them that they needed help. There will always be students who, regardless of all the work I do to build connection and relationship, will not want to engage. That is okay because I do not want to partake in forcing anyone to engage in a conversation whereby they have no buy-in towards the process of counseling.

Jeremiah Gibson: I want to break this interview into two parts: talking about the emotional, relational, and social needs of junior-high-age kids in general, and then exploring how the pandemic has impacted these needs. So the first question is, leaving the pandemic out of the equation, what are the most common needs and stressors that you experience middle schoolers engaging with?

Omar Ruiz: The most common needs for middle school aged kids are that they struggle with building and maintaining healthy relationships. Due to their brain's frontal cortex not being fully developed, middle school students tend to respond more emotionally to adults and peers. This is increased when such interactions happen online or on social media (i.e. SnapChat, TikTok, Discord, etc). For students at a charter school, the main stressors they experience is the rigor of academic expectations.

Jeremiah Gibson: What are common ways that you observe middle schoolers creating relationships? How has the rise of social media platforms impacted the ways that relationships get developed?

Omar Ruiz: As with most people, middle schoolers create relationships based on common interests that they may share with others within their classroom. The rise of social media has created a different platform for bullying and unhealthy interactions between students. Now, students can record videos and post pictures of one another to try to make it go viral as a way to make fun of or intimate others. Students can create relationships through these platforms; however students tend to not understand that whatever they post is still traceable and others can still take a screenshot, regardless if they are aware that some platforms (SnapChat) send a warning that a screenshot was taken.

Jeremiah Gibson: What are ways that you and your colleagues are discussing the negative impacts of social media that you mentioned with middle schoolers?

Omar Ruiz: This happens on a regular basis because students engage in social media (Tiktok, Snapchat, etc.) in ways that other generations did not. Cyberbullying, and its impact on students, has significantly increased. It's evolved from receiving secretive messages/emails from peers making fun of them to capturing peers on video, editing those clips within the social media platform, and posting it as a way for it to go viral where not just kids at their school will notice them but kids across the nation and even globally. This then heightens the impact of bullying to a

massive degree. I work a lot with the Dean of Students to try to mitigate some of these actions, especially if they take place within the school building. There have been instances where we have had to connect with the local police department, cyber unit, to track down some of these pictures, videos and posts especially if any of them contain explicit photos of underaged students.

Jeremiah Gibson: The most common stereotype around middle schoolers is the impact of puberty. Systems therapy suggests that family issues arise when families get stuck in previous developmental stages. What are the most common ways that you see families struggle to transition to meeting the developmental needs of middle schoolers?

Within a middle school system (school culture), I can not say that I have witnessed families struggle within the developmental needs because I am not interacting with families as much as if I were to be doing outpatient family therapy. Most of my interactions with parents are around phone calls about safety issues or service goal updates. What I can say is if families are having issues, those issues impact the students academic performance and motivation. Issues can be going through a divorce, distance in family connection/bonding, trauma related situations, etc.

Jeremiah Gibson: What are common ways that you hear students alluding to (directly or indirectly) problems in family systems, especially during the pandemic?

Omar Ruiz: Many students talk about the concerns they have about certain family members, especially if they were more at risk due to existing health conditions or if their parents or family members worked in healthcare.

Jeremiah Gibson: Two years ago, we started the pandemic. NEJRSP has referenced, alongside other folks, that the pandemic has been a developmental loss for children and adolescents. What are the most common losses that middle schoolers have experienced during the pandemic?

Omar Ruiz: When students re-entered in-person, especially the 7th grade students who missed an entire year of in-person learning during their 6th grade year, they showed major signs of immaturity among one another. Their behavior and responses mirror that of a 5th grader, where students would not be able to keep their hands to themselves and physical fights would slowly begin to rear their heads because students did not realize that "play fighting" can lead to actual physical fighting. Another loss was connection between other students. Many students struggled to create friendships with others because they never met their classmates. Most students would have their cameras off during their remote learning. Students would also not engage with one another when they were not in remote classes, which did not allow them the opportunity to foster a more human connection to their classmates.

Jeremiah Gibson: That's a fantastic point about turning cameras off during virtual learning: that it creates a relational distance between students. What are ways that you and your colleagues

are encouraging your students to develop relationships, both virtual and live?

Omar Ruiz: Currently, we aren't partaking in remote learning as all students have returned back in-person for the 2021-2022 academic year. It was difficult to create and foster relationships with students because there is a human element that is important when providing counseling that you cannot get from an online space. Now, I am all for online counseling. My private practice is majority online. However, students need that human interaction as part of their development because there are real world social aspects that you cannot experience in an online setting, such as them showing affection towards one another through hugging, high fiving or play fighting. It was hard to create such relationships when students could easily zone out and be on their phone or play video games while in session or class because their screens were off.

Jeremiah Gibson: What are ways that you've observed schools, teachers, and administrative systems struggling? What are ways that the therapeutic community may be able to collaborate with education systems and provide support?

Omar Ruiz: Teachers and administrative staff have tried their best with adjusting their teaching and support styles to address the needs of students, especially those who have lost a lot of their skills due to having to transition to remote learning. I believe that teachers still require some more training and professional development around mental health to best explain why some students are unable to perform their best academically in the way they hope they could. Unfortunately, many teachers and staff are burnt out. With so much pressure to get students to a certain level in their learning, teachers are a victim to the evolving education system that pushes an agenda of students needing to go to college, as though college will make them successful. In my humble opinion, college is not the answer. I do agree that many people do benefit from higher education and exposure to different fields of work. But, to push students to get certain levels of academic achievement does not correlate to the real world. An example of this is in my very own private practice. College and graduate school prepared me to build a business. I had to learn a lot from watching youtube videos and asking around about what other people have done. Schools don't truly prepare students for the real world. They don't teach you how to file taxes, invest your money into stocks/bonds/real estate, how to open up a checking/savings account, or even build a business.

Jeremiah Gibson: You're speaking to a really important issue: The limitations of a liberal arts education, particularly when it lacks some of the more fundamental elements of "adulting", such as financial and relational health. What are ways that the mental health community can collaborate with schools to fill these gaps?

Omar Ruiz: Groups. I think any school can allocate interns and licensed professionals to come in and provide direct clinical support to its students. Some schools have a higher need and require more on-site clinical staff. I believe that providing more group counseling might be the best route

to tackle bigger social issues within students relationships and might be the best support that the mental health community can do to fill in gaps with schools. Groups can include social skills, bereavement, and substance abuse, as some examples.

Jeremiah Gibson: I'm thinking about your comments about burnout in the workforce. So many educators are hanging on for dear life, and while some folks have been seeking out acute mental health services, most folks are just trying to get through the day. I believe in the next 2-4 years, we're going to see the evolution of ongoing relational issues in helping professions, including our own, as the chaos of the pandemic sets in post-pandemic. What are specific stressors that educators have experienced during the pandemic that family therapists can be aware of?

Omar Ruiz: I have learned that some places have providers who specialize in what is called "burn out therapy." I believe family therapists need to learn more about this specialization as it may be helpful when one's work experience begins to impact their intimate relationships. I work with couples who become so stressed about work that it impacts their ability to be both a parent and a partner. They are so tired, overwhelmed, and stressed that they aren't able to be their best self with the loved ones and thus resulting in the breakdown of significant relationships. Educators are currently dealing with what is now being called the great resignation, where they are now making active choices to choose their own mental health over the need for educating the next generation of citizens. It was stressful for many of them to try to shift their teaching model from in-person to online, and now that we are back, many of them have shared feelings not as appreciated both from a personal and financial perspective. They also spend so much time having to work on lesson plans outside of their working hours that it takes away time for them to develop an outside fruitful life.

Jeremiah Gibson: Thanks so much Omar, for providing your insight about the impact of the pandemic on middle schoolers, and ways that family therapists can enter and engage with multiple systems.