

The School Counselor as Reflective Practitioner

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“I hate my life! Nobody likes me. My mother will kill me 'cause I'm failing everything and I look like a fat pig.”

The above was the “greeting” the counselor received as he sat down to speak with a tearful eighth grader named Katie.¹ Perhaps as you read the above quote, you began to generate a number of “hypotheses” about what may be going on, as well as what you, as a counselor, would need to do.

While trained to be good listeners, school counselors understand that listening is but the vehicle to understanding, and that understanding is the base from which we formulate our helping strategies. The current chapter presents school counseling as a reflective practice. The reflective school counselor gathers student data and employs those data to shape and adjust his or her treatment plans and guide moment-to-moment counseling interactions.

COUNSELORS IN SEARCH OF MEANING

In the course of any one day, school counselors may engage with students whose stories are often unclear, complicated, and even convoluted. In the privacy of their offices or in the brief encounters in the hallways, effective school counselors are able to move quickly beyond listening, and attending to understanding the “real” story embedded in the students’ words and actions.

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A simple statement such as, “Hi, can I talk with you?” or “My teacher sent me down,” are actually invitations to the school counselor to engage in a search for meaning. The effective counselor responds to this invitation by eliciting the student’s story while at the same time attempting to (1) discern what is important from what is not, (2) understand the “what is” and the “what is hoped for,” and (3) develop connections that will guide the student to this desired outcome.

A counselor working with Katie may, for example, attempt to discern the depth of Katie’s “hatred.” Was this a preamble to suicidal ideation and action? Or was it simply the adolescent’s dramatic response to a momentary “crisis”? Perhaps the counselor working with Katie may confront the validity of her conclusions regarding the absence of friendship or the failing of “everything.” Or, perhaps the counselor relying on previous knowledge and experience working with Katie may interpret her response as simply one reflecting the melodrama of a “typical” teen. With this latter interpretation, the counselor may feel no need to test for suicidal ideation, or confront the reality of her conclusions, but rather simply recognize the value of providing an attending and supportive ear. But which direction should the counselor take? How should the counselor understand Katie’s disclosures?

The effective school counselor certainly listens to a student’s story—but does so with a discerning ear in search of meaning. Listening to students’ disclosures and attempting to make meaning of those disclosures requires that a school counselor employ a model, a guide, and an orienting framework that places these disclosures into some meaningful context. The current text focuses upon the use of a *solution-focused* orienting framework to guide this discernment, this search for meaning. However, prior to getting into the theory and its application to school counseling, it is important to first highlight the value of a reflective process for all counselors, regardless of theoretical orientation.

COUNSELOR REFLECTIONS GUIDING PRACTICE DECISIONS

The counselor’s ability to reflect on his or her counseling has been identified as an essential component to effective practice (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). This reflection provides the counselor the means to make sense of all the data presented by a student and to connect those data with a specific counselor response both at the macrolevel of treatment planning and at the microlevel of moment-to-moment interaction that occurs within a session.

Reflection at the Macrolevel: Case Conceptualization and Treatment Planning

It is clear that not all student information is of equal value or importance to the process and outcome of the counseling. Using an orienting framework, such as the solution-focused model, the school counselor reflects on the student's disclosures and formulates these data into a coherent, yet tentative, conceptualization of what is, what is desired, and how to move from "A" to "B."

This ability to conceptualize "what is" in terms of presenting concerns and student's resources, and the "what is hoped for," that is, the goals and outcomes for the counseling, sets the framework for consideration of strategies and techniques needed to move the student toward the desired outcome. With this conceptualization in mind, the counselor will call upon previous experience as well as knowledge of current research to begin selecting the strategies to employ.

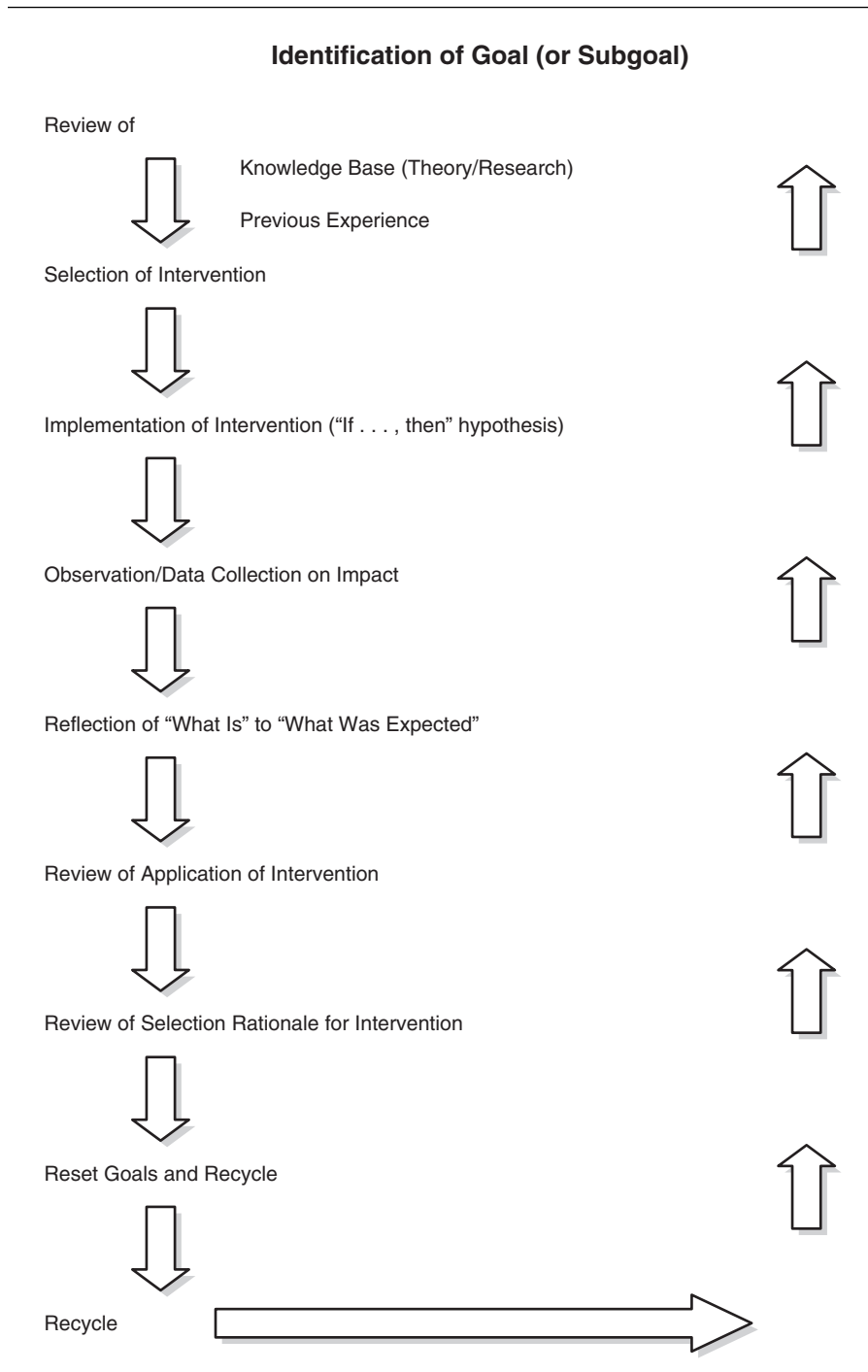
This reflection and planning is not a static, one-time process—rather, it refers to the thinking that takes place following a session or an encounter that allows the counselor to review what he or she did, what he or she anticipated would happen, and what in fact did happen. Taking time to reflect upon and consider the "experience" of the session helps provide data from which to judge the direction the sessions are taking, determine the rate that the student is moving in the desired direction, and even helps the counselor develop a set of questions, ideas, and propositions to be tested in the next encounter. This reflection on practice allows the counselor to refine the case conceptualization and reframe the direction of the strategies employed. This process of reflection "on" practice is depicted in Figure 1.1, and further illustrated by the following case.

Rick, a bright, successful, and well-liked eleventh-grade student came to counseling seeking assistance with his college selection process. Having served as Rick's counselor since his entrance into the school in ninth-grade, Mr. "P" felt that he had a good handle on Rick and had established an excellent working relationship. With these historic data as his bases, Mr. P approached the session with the intent of directing Rick to the self-search program as an initial step to identifying a pool of colleges of interest (*Step 1: Identification of goal [or subgoal]*). In preparing to develop a treatment plan, the counselor relied on two sources of knowledge (*Step 2: Review of knowledge base/experience*):

- a. A review of Rick's cumulative folder revealed that he was an honor student; successful athlete lettering in both varsity basketball and football; and a star socially, being class president and voted

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Figure 1.1 Reflection “on” Practice



“homecoming king.” Rick’s mom and dad were both successful professionals (mom a physician and dad CEO for a financial company) and were very supportive of Rick, their eldest son.

- b. Prior to meeting with Rick, Mr. P reviewed Rick’s interest inventory, noting that he had consistently expressed an interest in medicine and, as such, Mr. P researched universities with good track records placing students into medical schools

With this information as the knowledge base, Mr. P proposed that Rick start with a listing of highly competitive and competitive schools, and with the aid of the computerized self-search program, review university descriptions, requirements, etc. (*Step 3: Select intervention*). The plan was enacted using the following steps (*Step 4: Intervention implementation*):

- a. First, Mr. P explained the search process.
- b. Rick sat and simply “played” with program options as Mr. P provided instruction and support.
- c. Once comfortable with the program, Rick would use his study hall over the course of the next two weeks to begin to identify universities “of interest,” which he and Mr. P. would review, together.

Both Mr. P and Rick felt good about the program and thus, it was implemented. Over the course of the next couple of days, Rick would come to the counseling office during his study period and, after saying hi to Mr. P., would proceed to the career center and the self-directed search. Early in the second week, when Rick stopped in, Mr. P greeted him and asked how it was going. Rick’s response, while stating “okay,” was couched in a tone and body language that suggested it was anything but okay! (*Step 4: Observation and data collection*.)

While Mr. P had anticipated that by this point in the process, Rick would be getting excited about his finds, the lack of enthusiasm was significant (*Step 5: Comparison of “what is” to “what was expected”*). Sitting with Rick, it was clear he had no problem using the self-directed search and in fact was able to read about a variety of university programs; thus, the initial “intervention” was implemented (*Step 6: Review of application*) and it should have worked, given the counselor’s experience and the extensive supportive research (*Step 7: Review rationale*). The question of course is, “Why wasn’t it?” Why wasn’t he becoming excited and more focused on specific programs? (*Step 8: Reset goals and recycle*.)

As a result of meeting with Rick and asking him about his experience, it became clear that finding a specific college of choice was *not* the desired

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goal. Rather, Rick began to share that he really wasn't sure that he wanted to go to college right after graduation, but felt that this would devastate his parents and subsequently was becoming increasingly anxious and depressed about having to do something he truly did not want to do. As evidenced by this case illustration, an essential component to our reflection "on" practice is our awareness of movement toward desired outcome. Reflecting "on" these new data resulted in the resetting of the goals of counseling and the interventions to be employed.

Ridley (1995) stated that many counselors assume that their good intentions make them helpful clinicians. This oftentimes gets translated into the "it felt good" approach to counseling in which as long as the student appeared to "enjoy" the exchange, then a positive outcome could be assumed. This assumption can lead to the use of bad, although well intended, interventions. To avoid the good intentions-bad interventions scenario, Ridley (1995) urged counselors to evaluate the effectiveness of their interventions regarding their helpfulness. This is the crux of reflection "on" practice.

While some school counselors may attempt to use formal assessment tools to assess movement toward outcome, valuable reflection can be guided by consideration of questions such as:

1. What is my formulation of the problem or issue of concern?
2. What specific student factors (readiness, motivation, levels of awareness, specific resources, etc.) do I need to consider?
3. Do I have enough information to start the case conceptualization and treatment planning? What else do I need to know?
4. What is the strength of my relationship with the student? Has our history been positive? Can I move to the work of change or do I need to continue to develop a facilitating relationship? Is the relationship supportive of student disclosure and reception to feedback? What other factors or elements significant to a helping relationship are present? Absent?
5. Given my knowledge, experience, and competency, how best can I assist this student? Do I serve as treatment provider? Is referral-out required? What is my role now and in the future with this student?
6. What are my goals for the next session? How do I proceed? How will I assess the progress of the next session?

School counselors who take time to reflect on practice are more aware of what they did and why they did it. The effective counselor uses this

reflection to not only assess the degree of movement toward the desired goal, but also to serve as the bases from which to make adjustments to the plan and thus increase his or her effectiveness.

Reflection at the Microlevel: Reflection “in” Process

While it is essential to use student data for case conceptualization and intervention planning, school counselors know that counseling is a dynamic process and cannot be staged in nice linear steps. School counselors appreciate that while they may be prepared with a well-thought plan and a well-stocked “intervention toolbox,” these cannot simply be applied in a one-size-fits-all approach to counseling. The subtleties of each relationship, the unique characteristics of both participants, and the context of time and place all contribute to the need for counselors to fine-tune and adjust these plans, and often devise strategies right at the moment of interaction.

The effective counselor not only reflects on his or her counseling outside of the session, but does so while in the process of interacting with a student, within any one session. Approaching the situation as a reflective conversation, the expert school counselor views each exchange—each moment of interaction—as an intervention, an intervention that needs to be observed and assessed for effectiveness. Thus, counselors reflecting in process are simultaneously involved in design and implementation of action, “[...] while at the same time remaining detached enough to observe and feel the action that is occurring, and to respond” (Tremmel, 1993, p. 436). Consider the simple example of offering a tissue to a tearful student. What is the intent of such a gesture? While such a gesture appears perhaps caring and helpful, might it signal that tears are not allowed? Could offering the tissue highlight and thus sensitize a student who feels somewhat embarrassed by the tears? Is this the purpose of the activity?

The reflective counselor knows what he or she expected to achieve by this gesture and will rapidly process the student’s reactions, contrasting it to what was expected, and adjust accordingly. Therefore, the counselor who is providing the tissue as an invitation to share feelings may note the student’s dismissal of that invitation and, in turn, simply state, “Ginny, you seem upset. Would you like to tell me what’s going on?” Or, perhaps the counselor offers the tissues as a simple physical comfort, but notes that the client becomes embarrassed by the counselor’s recognition of the apparent upset. Under these conditions, the counselor may simply lower the box and place it on the table, redirecting the student with the comment, “Ginny, I’m glad you are here. Have a seat (pointing to a chair)

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and make yourself comfortable.” These are not actions that can be prescribed nor even anticipated, but require the rapid processing of data and comparison of *what is* to *what was hoped for*, with the end result being an adjustment of counselor action.

ORIENTING FRAMEWORKS GUIDING REFLECTION

In order for the counselor’s reflections to result in meaningful adjustment in counselor style or interventions, the counselor needs to be aware of the disparity between what is and what was expected. But how does a counselor know what to expect? What are the standards, the measures, against which to contrast actual events to expected events and outcomes? It is in answering these questions that one’s orienting framework or counseling model comes to play.

Our counseling models not only place the student’s issues within a meaningful context, but also establish what to expect when stimuli for change are introduced (Irving & Williams, 1995). Without such an orienting framework or theory, we truly can become “directionless creatures bombarded with literally hundreds of impressions and pieces of information in a single session” (Procaska & Norcross, 1994, p. 3).

The remainder of this book is devoted to the presentation of one such orienting framework, *solution-focused counseling*. In the chapters to follow, not only will the tenants of a solution-focused model to school counseling be presented, but also the value of this orienting framework as a guide to reflective practice will be illustrated.

SUMMARY

Counselors in Search of Meaning

- Listening to student disclosure, and attempting to make meaning of those disclosures, requires that a school counselor employ a model, a guide, and an orienting framework to place these disclosures into some meaningful context.

Counselor Reflections Guiding Practice Decisions

- The counselor’s ability to reflect on his or her counseling has been identified as an essential component of effective practice.