The School Counselor as Reflective Practitioner

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"No I'm not going. I can't go. Please, please don't make me go! Please . . . please, I'll do anything you want."

—William P., eight years old[1]

The anguish conveyed by William's plea to stay home rather than go to school speaks to the intensity of his experience. However, this simple disclosure provides little insight into why this process of attending school would elicit such a strong, aversive response—or, more importantly, what the counselor could do to reduce this anguish.

Perhaps as you read the above you began to generate a number of "hypotheses" about what may be going on . . . and what needs to be done. As school counselors, we do not, nor can we, sit as simple passive recipients of comments such as these. Our job, our calling, is to do more than listen. While trained to be good listeners, we know that listening is but the vehicle to understanding, and that understanding is the base from which we formulate our helping strategies.

A statement such as that provided by William invites the school counselor into a process of reflection and search for meaning. Through the process of reflection, the school counselor identifies what is important from what is not, understands the "what is" and the "what is hoped for," and develops connections that will guide the student to this desired outcome.

For example, a counselor hearing William's plea may attempt to discern whether this is a manifestation of panic—or perhaps, the manipulation of a child who has found such pleas to be effective strategies for gaining a day off from school. Perhaps the school counselor questions the possibility of the existence of noxious experiences encountered in school, which may serve as the impetus for this resistance. Is there bullying occurring? Is the child misplaced and thus feeling like a failure? Or, are there concerns about what may be going on at home while the child is away at school? What is the nature of the relationship of his parents? How is the health of his mother? What is his role in the family? These reflections, these internal questions, serve as the bases from which the counselor's actions and interventions emerge.

The ability to listen—receive, and most importantly, make meaning out of the student's disclosure—is essential to the helping process. While the current text focuses upon the use of a behavioral-orienting framework to guide these processes, it is important to first understand the value of this reflection and meaning making to all counselors, regardless of theoretical orientation.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The processes of *attending to* and then *responding to* our students' information are linked by our ability to reflect on these data. The counselor engaged in the dynamic of a counseling relationship is engaged in a search, a reflective process. It is a process that will give direction to the way he or she responds to any one student, at any one moment in a counseling session as he or she attempts to facilitate movement from the "what is" to the "what is desired."

Reflection on our counseling has been identified as an essential component to effective practice (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). To be successful, a school counselor has to have the ability to scrutinize the nature and impact of his or her interventions—both at the macro level (e.g., in developing a treatment plan) and at the micro level (e.g., with each interactive exchange in a counseling session).

Reflection at the Global Level: Case Conceptualization

Unlike the counselor-in-training who may find him- or herself overwhelmed by client disclosure and unclear where or how to proceed, the effective school counselor is able to navigate through student

disclosures in order to identify those data that are significant from those data that are superfluous. It is clear that not all client information is of equal value or importance to the process and outcome of the counseling. The effective 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 the student's resources and the "*what is hoped for,*" as 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 the selection of the strategies to be employed.

Perhaps a school counselor has worked with numerous students who present as "nonmotivated," and as a result, have failing grades. While the problem is labeled with the same term, "nonmotivated," the cause for this lack of motivation is idiosyncratic to each student and thus the intervention employed must similarly be shaped in response to the uniqueness of that individual. The effective school counselor reflects upon the data at his or her disposal to shape the best intervention possible for any one student at any one time.

This planning and reflection is not a static, one-time process—rather, it refers to the thinking that takes place following a session or an encounter. This then allows the counselor to review what he or she did, what was anticipated to happen, and what in fact happened. From the initial meeting through to the ending of any one "contract," the effective school counselor must gather and analyze case information, formulate new hypotheses, and develop and implement intervention decisions.

The reflective counselor will observe the effect of his or her intervention and collect data, either formal or anecdotal, in order to test the observed outcome against what was hypothesized. 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, the rate with which 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.

Figure 1.1   Reflection "on" Practice

Identification of Goal (or Subgoal)

Review of

                  Knowledge Base (Theory/Research)

                  Previous Experience

Selection of Intervention

Implementation of Intervention ("If . . . , then" hypothesis)

Observation/Data Collection on Impact

Reflection of "What Is" to "What Was Expected"

Review of Application of Intervention

Review of Selection Rationale for Intervention

Reset Goals and Recycle

Recycle

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's student; successful athlete lettering in both varsity basketball and football; and a star socially, being class president and voted "homecoming king." Rick's mom and dad were both successful professionals (mom, a physician, and dad, a CEO of 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 which had good track records placing students in 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: Selection of 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 is it 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 Rick 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 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 as such, he 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.

Reflection at the Microlevel: Reflection "in" Process

Counseling is a dynamic process. Engaging with a student in a helping relationship cannot be staged in nice linear steps. A school counselor may come to a session prepared with a "plan" and a toolbox of wonderful interventions. However, while having a clear sense of both what is and what is needed is essential to be an effective counselor, school counselors know things rarely go as planned.

Being aware that at any one moment things are not as one expects, and allowing those data and that awareness to guide adjustments in the process, is another time when a counselor needs to rely on reflective practice. This time, however, the reflection occurs in the session and quite often on the fly.

This process of reflection in practice is a complex metacognitive process that happens very quickly and most often below the counselor's immediate level of awareness. A simple illustration of reflection "in" process can be found in the activity of riding a bike. While a person may be a "seasoned" bike rider, having previously successfully balanced the two

wheel vehicle and joyfully proceeded down a park pathway, the experience of encountering loose gravel as he or she begins to turn a corner may demand some adjustment to move from what is (i.e., sliding) to what is desired (i.e., upright riding). Becoming aware of a number of unexpected events—for example, the bike leaning too far left, or the sound of wheels slipping, or the sensation of falling—will serve as data that stimulates the rider to adjust and shift body weight and perhaps begin a slow process of breaking. Each of these adjustments in response to the awareness of the new and unexpected direction the bike riding appears to be taking allows the rider to right the process and return to the desired joyful ride. This is *reflection in process*. It is a process that occurs quickly and perhaps only as a result of after-the-fact reflection—knowingly. It is a process that can be learned. It is a process we need to nurture in order to be more effective within our moment-to-moment interactions with our students.

Counseling as a reflective process is one in which the counselor is 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? Are these the purpose of the activity?

The counselor who is reflective 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 adjusting accordingly. Therefore, the counselor who is providing the tissue as 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 is offering 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] and make yourself comfortable." These are not actions that can be prescribed nor even anticipated, but require that rapid processing of data and comparison of what is to what was hoped for, with the result being an adjustment of counselor action.

As may be apparent from the brief illustrations, reflection in practice is often stimulated by the counselor's experience of dissonance and emotional discomfort in response to an exchange. Whether it is the student's unexpected embarrassment when offered a tissue box, or the

strong resistance and denial in response to the counselor's "therapeutic" confrontation, the experience of what is when conflicting with what was expected creates the dissonance and discomfort that stimulates reflection in practice. With this discomfort as the stimulant for reflection, the counselor will critically (although nonjudgmentally) analyze the initial assumptions and beliefs about the student and the processes being employed.

Consider the case of the counselor working with Lisa, an eighth grader who was sent to the counselor because she was being "disrespectful" to her Spanish teacher. Having previously worked with Lisa and feeling that she had a strong, trusting relationship, Ms. "D" attempted to confront Lisa when she stated, "I didn't say or do anything disrespectful. I just told her it wasn't me making the noise!" Ms. D responded, "Lisa, I know you said you simply stated it wasn't you making the noise, but even when telling me, you sounded really angry. Is it possible that is how it sounded to Mrs. Johnson and that is what she meant by disrespectful?"

While the hope of this confrontation was to open Lisa to the possibility that it is not just words, but the way they are delivered that may have an impact, the response from Lisa suggested this intervention was ineffective. Lisa stated, emphatically, "No! I said it real nice. Why don't you believe me [said very defensively]?" Clearly, the strength of the relationship or the timing of this confrontation was not right for it to be effective. Surprised by Lisa's reaction, Ms. D neither blamed the student (What's wrong with her?) or became overly self-critical (Blew that one!). Rather, Ms. D attempted to hypothesize about what happened and what she could do next in response. Concluding that Lisa was too defensive at this point to embrace her role in this situation, Ms. D decided to simply encourage her to share her story—and provide Lisa with evidence of her care, concern, and unconditional valuing. It was hoped that as the relationship strengthened, and Lisa had increased evidence of being heard and valued, that then a confrontation may prove effective.

ORIENTING FRAMEWORKS: GUIDING REFLECTION

Essential to reflective practice is the counselor's awareness of a disparity between what is and what is expected. But how does a counselor know what to expect? What are the standards, the measures, against which to contrast actual events? While there are no single set of universal markers of what should be expected at any one point in our counseling, expectations of what "should be" can be established as outgrowth of the counselor's model or orienting framework. 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).

So, prior to making any meaningful reflections and procedural decisions, the effective school counselor needs a framework—a schema or a rough template—that helps him or her make sense of the data being gathered.

WHICH ORIENTATION?

Given the more than 130 extant theories of counseling, is there one or a few that a school counselor should employ? While proponents of various schools of thought may argue the differential value of their particular theories, that type of discussion falls outside of the purpose of this text. The purpose of this book is not the validation of a theory or the analysis of the comparative utility of various theories, rather the purpose and focus taken here it is to demonstrate the impact of employing a particular orienting framework—behavioral—has on the process and outcome of school counseling.

The chapters to follow will introduce you to the theory, philosophy, fundamental concepts, and intervention strategies employed by school counselors operating from a behavioral orientation. However, as stated, the value is not simply in knowing—but in applying and, as such, throughout the chapters, you will be invited to step into a behavioral orienting framework as you reflect on the cases presented and anticipate the decisions to be made.

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, or an orienting framework that places this disclosure into some meaningful context.

Counselor Reflections Guiding Practice

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

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