

TOUR 1

Preparation for Departure

Who Am I and How Do I Interact With Others?

Learning Objectives

- Explore personal beliefs and values related to helping children and adolescents
- Understand the intra- and interpersonal skills necessary for successful work with students, their parents, and their teachers
- Consider ways to give and receive feedback
- Explore manifestations of cultural difference

The relationships you develop with students as well as adults will be central to your work in schools. As a school-based professional, you are a key component of those relationships with primary responsibility for building them. Throughout your preparation program, you will likely encounter invitations to examine your own thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and reactions—perhaps at deeper levels than you have previously explored. You may be asked to do so with your peers, your instructors, and your supervisors, which can be uncomfortable at first.

We often show only one part of ourselves in our professional and academic communities. Bringing our personal components to university settings may be unfamiliar, and it may produce discomfort. However, to become an effective helper, you must be willing to reflect, to consider the intention of your responses, and to continually challenge yourself to take personal risks to understand yourself as well as the student clients with whom you will work.

We encourage you to engage in a process of self-evaluation and self-monitoring now, and throughout your career, so you can continue to grow as a professional and a person.

It is important to identify your current beliefs about children and adolescents, your ideas about how people change, and your understanding of the context of schools.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: FOR NOW, IT IS ALL ABOUT YOU!

What do we mean by reflection and why is it so important? Literally, *self-reflection* means self-examination or introspection. It is intentional consideration of why we do the things we do. According to Schon (1987), we learn best through continuous action and reflection about everyday concerns in life. From his perspective, new professionals use a blend of knowledge, theory, and values to understand new situations that arise in practice. Over time, these components blend into personal theories that guide actions.

The reflective process brings these personal theories into awareness. Through active reflection, individuals entertain a “sorting” process during which aspects of personal and professional theories that seem sound are maintained, and those components without veracity are discarded. With time and experience, and through the process of reflection, practitioners begin to reliably and intentionally use their personal theories, in combination with established counseling approaches, when deciding on an appropriate course of action for novel situations. Thus, self-reflection is critical to professional growth and ongoing development.

Sometimes, as we move into demanding professional positions, we feel pressed for time and believe that self-reflection is no longer necessary. However, it is even more critical that we continue to evaluate our thoughts and actions as we continue to face the complex and challenging issues presented by students in school settings.

Self-reflection is not easily explained or taught. However, exercises such as small group discussion, journal writing, case analyses, and role play often facilitate reflection (Stickel & Trimmer, 1994). We encourage you to participate in these activities in order to develop the habit of continuous professional self-reflection.

In addition to participating in the guided reflection opportunities provided in this practice guide, in the accompanying textbook, and through your classes, we encourage you to maintain a reflective journal. After counseling sessions, you may achieve clarity as you journal your thoughts and feelings about the session in response to a sequence of questions: What’s going on with you *right now*? What did you do well? When did you struggle? What do you wish you would have done differently? When did your personal experiences hinder *and* when did they help?

Your journal will also document your growth over time. As you periodically read your entries (e.g., every few weeks during an academic term, at the end of a term, after your first year), you will have additional opportunities to reflect on your growth and the areas in which you have been challenged.

Smyth (1989) recommended the following structure for analyzing professional development, particularly after role plays and counseling sessions, with a series of four questions related to one’s work:

- (a) Describing: What do I do?
- (b) Informing: What does this mean?

- (c) Confronting: How did I come to be like this?
- (d) Reconstructing: How might I do things differently? (p. 2)

Through this type of synthesis, both new and experienced practitioners continually explore their own beliefs and the ways in which they impact their practice.

Preparing for Guided Reflection

Visit with your instructor or supervisor about his or her recommendations, preferences, and requirements regarding a journal. Some instructors invite a written dialogue as they periodically collect journals and respond to students' entries. Others regard the journals as students' private records.



1. Purchase a composition book, create a notebook, or create an electronic file for your journal.
2. Prepare a cover or title page. You may want to compose a title that personalizes your journal. For example, I (S.M.) titled one of my journals as *Sandy: From the Country to the Clinic. Practicum I, Summer 1982.*
3. Date the first or second blank page, and allow your thoughts and feelings about what you've read thus far to flow through your pen and on to the paper. If you cannot think of anything to write, begin by answering questions raised in the previous section. Try to avoid censoring or attempting to "look good."



EXPLORING YOUR OWN BELIEFS

One of the first areas to consider includes your personal beliefs about children and adolescents. Do you see children as weak and vulnerable beings who need to be protected? Are adolescents unpredictable and difficult? Your response to both of these questions may fluctuate among yes, no, and maybe.

What *do* I believe about kids?

As you build the theoretical foundation of your counseling practice, you should examine your beliefs not only about people in general but also about children as opposed to adults. One of the beliefs that I (R.S.H.) have encountered with graduate students is the idea that children don't really experience awful things in their lives or have anything "wrong" with them. This belief is likely related to their own comfortable childhood experiences as well as inexperience. Our generalized beliefs are often inaccurate or faulty.

When faulty beliefs are not challenged, preservice, as well as inservice, professionals are more likely to miss important information that students and adults directly or indirectly provide. For example, in some instances, children may not be able to directly share that they are being hurt. Instead, they may provide only hints or clues about their fear and pain. The faulty belief that "children don't experience problems" might result in the helper missing these important clues. Conversely, if you believe that all children are likely victims of abusive families, you may find yourself overreacting to a bruise on a child's arm.





Can people change?

How?!

What roles and tools do professional helpers hold in the process?

Your ideas about change and what helps people make changes are other areas to explore. Do people change only when given the tools? Do people have to figure out their own paths to change? Are people able to change? Can education be a transformational experience? Can school psychologists and school counselors do things to help children and youth make changes to improve their lives? We hope you answered yes to the last question. If you didn't, you may need to rethink your career path.

Regardless of your theoretical orientation, it is helpful if you believe that children and adolescents can change. By saying this, we are not implying that something is wrong with the young person sitting across from you, only that there is something in that individual's life that is contributing to a feeling of discomfort and unhappiness. The "change" may be facilitated by helping that young person develop a different perspective of the issue or a new strategy for coping with a difficult situation.

An additional area for exploration falls into the more nebulous areas of beliefs related to contemporary, value laden, controversial topics. Students in the schools often come from different socioeconomic, cultural, and religious backgrounds than your own. They may be questioning their sexual orientation, experimenting with drugs and alcohol, or engaging in premarital sex. They may harbor prejudice against minority populations or be members of gangs. How will you respond? How will your beliefs and values guide you? More important, how can you acknowledge your own beliefs and values yet not impose them on students?



What values do you hold that might interfere with your ability to form a therapeutic alliance with a student client?

I (S.M.) remember visiting a counselor who had decorated her office with Biblical quotes and praying hands on the wall. Further, a Bible was prominently displayed on her desk. When I mentioned the decor of the office to my preservice school counselors, they struggled with my concerns. They contended that she was simply "being herself." They thought authenticity was appropriate and important. They ultimately began to grapple with ways those symbols would affect the students who come to see her, especially if they didn't share similar beliefs. Over time, they were able to achieve objectivity as they considered the prominence of Christian symbols in the context of school counselors' ethical guidelines and values related to access, unconditional positive regard, and respect for all students.

Various instruments have been developed to help beginning practitioners think about their beliefs related to multicultural issues. For example, the Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge-Skills Survey ([MAKSS]; D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991) is an instrument designed to gather information on the effect of different instructional strategies on improving the cultural awareness and sensitivity of preservice practitioners (although this self-assessment was published over 20 years ago, it is often referenced in current publications). There are many other informal instruments that also help pre- and inservice professionals think about their values and beliefs related to aspects of counseling such as silence and resistance.

GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

As you explore your own beliefs and values, your peers in the class or group will be engaged in similar pursuits. Throughout your career, but particularly during graduate school, you will have many opportunities not only to grow personally and professionally, but also to support the growth of others. Many skills classes, practica, internships, and supervision groups are structured to include peer feedback as an important part of the learning process. You will likely engage in role plays with your peers and have opportunities to observe videotaped or live role plays as well as counseling sessions.

Giving feedback to peers can be difficult, and your inclination may be to refrain from giving any type of reaction or opinion that might be viewed as negative. Often preservice professionals believe that they are such novices at counseling that they don't have helpful comments to provide. On the contrary, preservice professionals appreciate the diverse perspectives of their peers. Every individual attends to different aspects of the observed session. Taken together, these insights create a more detailed and comprehensive picture of the developing professional's strengths and areas for growth.

As you consider the type of feedback to provide and the manner in which it is given, it is important to remember that the ultimate purpose is to facilitate continued growth. When feedback is provided with this intent, it is likely to be well received. We also provide these guidelines to assist you in giving your opinions and reactions to peer counseling sessions.

- Limit the amount of feedback given at any one time. It can be overwhelming to your peers. Select one or two key areas on which to focus.
- Be sure to note positive aspects of the session as well as areas for growth.
- In your feedback, be clear and descriptive. It is helpful if you can provide an example from the session that illustrates your point.
- When your feedback is corrective, provide an example of the type of behavior that could be used instead.
- Address behaviors that can be altered rather than personal attributes of an individual.

Not only will you provide feedback to your peers, but you will also be a recipient of this type of critique. It can be difficult to sit back and hear about the many aspects of your session that did not go the way you had hoped. A natural inclination is to defend and explain. Alternatively, you may feel discouraged by comments that you view as negative. Although it might be difficult at first, it is best to listen to the feedback with an open attitude. If you disagree, you do not need to share that with the person providing the feedback. Sometimes, it is helpful to write the comments you receive. Later, when you are watching your tape or meeting with your supervisor, you can decide whether you want to incorporate the suggestion into future sessions.

We encourage you to maintain the same mind-set as when you are providing feedback to others. The purpose of this information is to facilitate growth. As you come to trust your peers and your supervisor on this point, you will likely find that you request suggestions and strategies for improving your skills.



Complete the Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge-Skills Survey (D'Andrea et al., 1991) or a similar inventory.



1. What did you learn about yourself as you responded to the items on the inventory?

2. What surprised you?

3. How can you broaden your experiences with diverse groups?

4. How can you enhance your knowledge, awareness, and skills?

5. What personal attributes and abilities will be your assets as a professional helper in schools?

6. Consider a time when you experienced significant personal growth. What was the impetus for the growth? What did you do to perpetuate and reinforce it?

7. Consider your responses to crises in your life. How have you responded? What have you done to resolve the difficult time?

8. For a moment or two, think about the counseling experiences you may have in the next few weeks and the requirements you must meet this term. What thoughts come to your mind?

9. Imagine yourself providing individual counseling to a student and thinking, "Things are going well! This is working!" What are you doing and what is the student doing?

10. Imagine that suddenly the student client becomes silent. How will that experience be for you?

11. Imagine that the student does not wish to return for additional counseling after one or two sessions. How will that be for you?

12. Try to create an image of a student client sitting in your office with you and your thoughts being, "Please! Not this!" Who is the student (e.g., in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, financial status, and so forth), and what is the issue or problem that this individual is presenting?

13. Try to create an image of an adult in your office who evokes the same reaction. Who is the adult, and what prompted the interaction?

14. As you examine and identify your personal spiritual, religious, and ethical values, list those that will contribute to your effectiveness as a professional helper and those that may interfere.
