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Out of the Ivory Tower and Into the School-Based Practicum

Paper based on a program presented at the 2007 Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Conference, October 11-14, Columbus, Ohio.

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This paper describes a successful *faculty-taught school-based practicum model*. The effective collaboration that emerges from this innovative blend of school-based instruction and supervision positively impacts schools and helps develop exemplary counselors who are critical thinkers, leaders and advocates. The reader will be provided with: (I) an introduction framing issues critical to the development of school counselors-in-training; (II) information regarding the structure of an integrative and collaborative school-based practicum targeting high need schools; and (III) a description of key issues in initiating similar practica in schools serving highly diverse, at-risk students and families. The authors also discuss the notion of *'continuity of pedagogy'*—the instructional corollary to 'continuity of care' in counseling.

Introduction

Every school counselor remembers the first time they set foot in a school as a graduate student and their first clinical experiences as a school counselor-in-training. For many, this formative experience is also remembered by what was learned *despite* their placement, *despite* the chaos of a large educational institution, or *despite* the shifting of counseling personnel that attends changing administrative priorities or predominates in schools that serve the least well off.

A significant contributor to this type of learn-as-you-go process is the common disconnect between the Ivory Tower (where the didactic school-counseling training occurs) and the K-12 school's unique ecosystem (wherein field placement experience eventually occurs). While models such as the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) National Model (American School Counselor Association, 2003; Murphy & Kaffenberger, 2007) and The Education Trust model (The Education Trust, 2003, 2004) detail the aspirational goal of connecting school counselors-in-training to the schools, neither articulate the process of building clinical training into the natural school setting

nor place emphasis on the need to bring the University school counseling faculty into the school to provide direct supervision. Others (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000; Worsham, 2005; Zalaquett, 2005) document the benefit of onsite training to the counselor-in-training and school administrative staff alike without describing how this onsite presence can be achieved. Still others (Roberts & Morotti, 2001) lament the fact that the relationship between the University-based clinical instructor and school-based counselor is a complex ethico-legal one presenting confusion in terms of clinical 'chain-of-command,' but attempt to resolve the issue with strategies that maintain the geographic pedagogical and clinical disconnect. And still others (Lazovsky & Shimoni, 2007) note a significant desire on the part of school counseling students in field placements to receive onsite mentoring directly from University faculty.

These findings beg the following framing questions:

1. What model could accomplish this transfer of information and supervisory support from the Ivory Tower to the school setting that has been given this clear mandate by National Associations, school counselors-in-training, and school clinical and administrative staff?

   In addressing this, a balance must be struck between the need to provide school counselors-in-training pedagogy and clinical training – where 'pedagogy' refers to the purely didactic foundational coursework that counselors must receive, and 'clinical training' refers to the increasing exposure to clinical work and gradual titrating down of supervision from live to taped or recorded, to self-reported, and onwards towards the school counselor's clinical autonomy.

2. As training shifts in focus (pedagogy to clinical practice) and locus of learning shifts geographically (Ivory Tower to school-based experience), how are the transitions to clinical practice and school-based experience bridged?

   Just as a client transitioning from one level of care to another requires 'continuity of care' in the form of a consistent treatment or provider, what continuity of pedagogy must be provided to ensure that (a) there is continuity of what is being taught in the Ivory Tower in the school setting; and (b) the nature of the school setting is considered and being taught towards in the Ivory Tower.

While there is a paucity of literature regarding the components of an effective school-based practicum, a few notable papers touch upon pitfalls elucidated in the two framing questions. In one instance (Hayes, Paisley, Phelps, Pearson, & Salter, 1997), the authors describe a model that tries to move the *entire* training of school counselors out of the Ivory Tower and into the schools. However, this defeats the efficiency garnered by so many Counselor Education programs when providing purely didactic training to cohorts of counselors-in-training who come from various sub-disciplines in counseling (e.g., Community/Agency Counseling, School Counseling, Career Counseling, etc.). In another instance (Coker & Schrader, 2004), in an attempt to answer the question *"what practicum*

experience is the best preparation for internship," the model moves practicum out of the Counselor Education program's University campus-based clinic to a University campus-based professional development K-5 school, with practicum supervision being provided by the school's on-site counselor. While this transition embraces the idea that there is a need for a geographic transition to a new locus of learning, it falls short of continuity of pedagogy in that the site is a campus-based incubator (versus a district-based school) and there is a supervisory disconnect (from the Counselor Education faculty to a site-based practicum supervisor).

The review of the literature and the emergent framing questions support coupling a school-based practicum for school counselors-in-training with a regular faculty member teaching and supervising onsite in the school. This paper describes just such a faculty-taught school-based practicum.

The School Based Practicum - Targeting High Need Schools

> *I can honestly say that <u>all</u> of the families in my school have special needs and many challenges. With one counselor for over 600 children, the school benefits tremendously from the support we receive from the practicum instructor and students. The Practicum serves children and families identified as having even greater needs than most. Students are typically referred to counseling for social and emotional issues that are interfering with academic and social success. These include family issues, behavior and/or academic issues, social and peer relationship issues, anger management, or recovering from past trauma and neglect, and just need someone safe to share about past hurts and issues. Many of our families have a history of poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, substance abuse, parental incarceration and these factors all contribute to the critical counseling needs of our students — Karen Murphy, School Counselor (personal communication, October 15, 2008)*

The counseling needs of children and youth in schools are daunting, with at least 52% of a school counselor's time spent providing mental health services (Foster et al., 2005). Schools are also the ideal locus for providing prevention initiatives, but the increasing focus on a narrow academic bandwidth that attends the No Child Left Behind Act has made it difficult for many districts to take the initiative and *increase* emotional support to increase academic functioning. Given this, and given the often extreme differences between schools on markers of need and privilege, school counselors themselves have had to find adaptive responses to an onslaught of counseling needs.

The Department of Counselor Education at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS), a Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) approved master's program in counseling, has been implementing a school-based practicum model for almost two decades as part of its community partnership with the San Juan Unified School District, a district comprising 72 schools in Sacramento and neighboring municipalities. The model is continuously

evolving to accommodate changes in the schools as well as changes in CACREP training standards. The overarching objectives are to maximize the quality of training that counseling students receive while simultaneously maximizing the counseling and support services children and their families receive.

What makes this model unique is that it bridges the gap between the Ivory Tower and the school, providing continuity of pedagogy by bringing the University faculty directly into the school setting. Further, it interfaces with the school setting and the professional school counselor working onsite so that they eventually supervise internship placements, therefore embodying a continuity of pedagogy. Essentially, the University faculty person who is working onsite ensures that student learning is consistent with the overall corpus of knowledge that represents their degree, but in a real-world setting. It further allows the University faculty to ensure that school-based counselors are working as an extension of that same corpus of knowledge – which, by definition, is continuity of pedagogy.

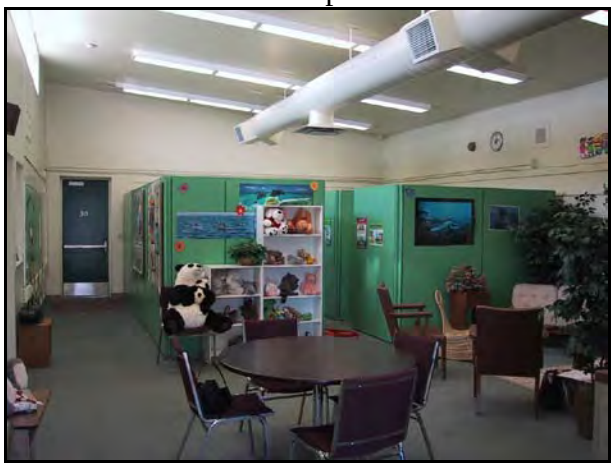
This model can be universalized to any school counseling setting, from the most impoverished and marginalized populations of children to the most affluent and privileged populations. However, and consistent with the philosophy of ASCA and the Education Trust, the Counselor Education program at CSUS has a long history of targeting and forming collaborative partnerships with schools that have the greatest needs for services. There is a strong commitment to "bringing the practicum to the community" (K. Murphy, personal communication, October 15, 2008) rather than requiring the community to come to practicum. Thus, children and families who may otherwise not receive services have access to important counseling and support services (i.e., many of these families do not own cars or telephones). Currently, CSUS offers four school-based counseling practicum classes in Title I schools (i.e., Federally assisted due to the concentration of poverty in the district). The following discussion will feature the original school-based practicum site, *Howe Avenue Elementary School*, a Title I, "low achievement school" with a broad range of needs where the vast majority of the children come from socio-economically disadvantaged families (95%), qualify for free or reduced lunch (100%), and are children of color (83%).

Key Issues in Implementation

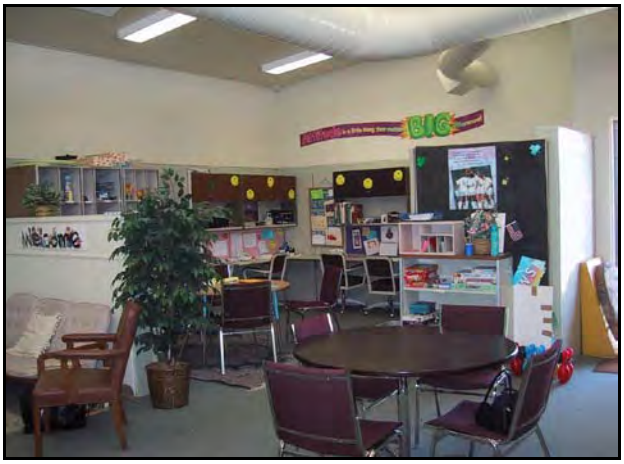
The practicum meets all of the requirements of the CACREP standards for practicum experiences, including a minimum of 100 clock hours and 40 direct client contact hours. In this model, the entire practicum experience is held *onsite* during and after school, within a designated time block one day per week. A University faculty member works onsite and is actively involved in managing the class of five students, collaborating with the school personnel and administration, observing live counseling sessions, and providing counseling supervision to the practicum students. Each week all of the students see children for 3 hours of direct contact and receive 1½ hours of group supervision with the University faculty member during the 15-week semester. Students also arrange to meet with the University faculty member (or the onsite school counselor) for 1 hour per week of individual or triadic supervision outside of the designated time

frame. Evaluation of students is the responsibility of the designated University faculty member; however, the onsite school counselor provides important input. Students accrue additional practicum hours via ongoing consultation and collaboration with the school counselor, school psychologist, administration, staff (e.g., school nurse, bi-lingual parent liaison), and advanced internship students who are also working onsite. Importantly, the practicum schedule is convenient for working parents, since they can come in for collateral visits after school and typically after their work hours.

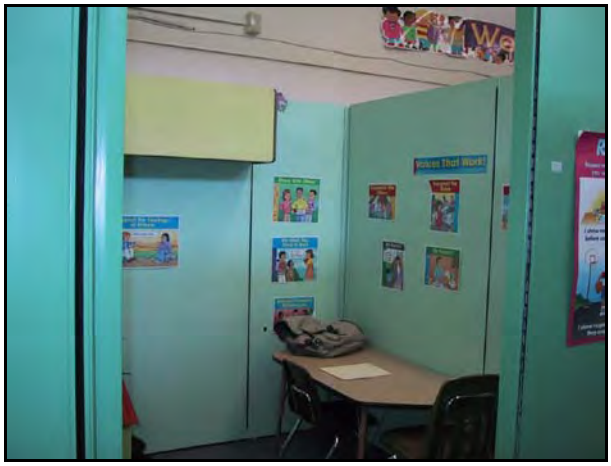
The practicum is held in the school's Counseling Center. The Center, a former classroom, has six counseling cubicles, a practicum student work station, play/art supplies, phones, and a computer. Surveillance cameras and baby monitors in the cubicles allow for live supervision.



Howe Avenue Counseling Center



Practicum Student & Intern Station



Sample: Counseling Cubicle

Sample: Affordable Toys

The faculty-taught school-based practicum engenders a great deal of support from students and school personnel alike. For example, seeing 15 students per week in practicum brings the ratio of school counselor to students well below 600. But, more important than ratios, onsite presence of faculty and graduate students "magnifies the

impact and diversifies the range of services and solutions… it's a wonderful and supportive team approach… practicum students, the University professor, the school staff and administration all work together to resolve problems. Everyone contributes and benefits in a group learning process" (K. Murphy, personal communication, October 15, 2008).

Further, continuity of pedagogy occurs when students transition from practicum to internship. For those transitioning to an internship in the same district "the transition is seamless" (K. Murphy, personal communication, October 15, 2008). And School Counselors from all districts report that interns coming to placements after a school-based practicum taught by their University professor "hit the ground running and are ready to expand their roles and take counseling to a new level… understand the dynamics of students and the school [and] know the benefit of establishing a relationship with the school's staff and administration" (K. Murphy, personal communication, October 15, 2008).

And finally, this model further 'legitimizes' the faculty person in the eyes of the counselor-in-training since they observe them dealing with new clinical scenarios 'on the fly' outside the Ivory Tower, thereby providing a living example as the basis for *in vivo* learning versus the often-scripted scenarios common in University lecture halls.

At a minimum, a University-taught school-based practicum relies on *(1) committed individuals, (2) strong ongoing collaborative relationships,* and *(3) common vision*.

> (1) Committed individuals include professionals who are ultimately responsible for developing and maintaining the collaborative practicum. Therefore, starting this practicum requires a faculty person who is willing to teach in school setting with live clients, a school counselor willing to coordinate the practicum with the school's counseling program, and a school administrator willing to host the practicum.
> (2) The ongoing collaborative relationships that undergird this program require strong, positive, committed relationships between systems and individuals within the systems. These relational foundations cannot be overemphasized, with the faculty person's consistent presence and unvarying commitment being the primary factor.
> (3) And the concept of a common vision refers both to a belief in the benefits of continuity of pedagogy as well as the belief that this process is clinically efficacious.

Graduate programs considering school-based practica must *(1) coordinate services, (2) help both students and schools develop, (3) provide culturally appropriate interventions,* and *(4) incorporate feedback into continuous improvement.*

> (1) Coordination of services includes developing and evaluating programs that provide *counseling* services to individuals and families, and *consultation* services to systems and their personnel.

(2) Helping students and schools develop refers to being able to identify and document the simultaneous benefit of training to counseling students as well as to the schools in which they are being trained.
(3) Culturally appropriate interventions refer to the provision of interventions tailored to the specific needs of the clinical cohort (be they age-related, ethnicity-related, related to socio-economic status, functional status of the clients, or another key cultural marker).
(4) Programs should continuously evaluate their effectiveness and find ways to incorporate these results into future practice. To this end, practicum students are objectively assessed using a Counseling Skills Checklist during and at the end of the semester, and paired samples analysis are used to indicate change over time (the Counseling Skills Checklist and practicum data reflecting intra-semester change in clinical acumen are available for viewing and/or download at http://edweb.csus.edu/edc/evaluations/). The positive effects of evaluation may also provide operational support for the school-based practicum. In one recent example, one school upgraded video equipment to augment live supervision since the onsite practicum has such apparent positive impact on student/family functioning.

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