

Professional School Counselors as Process Observers in the Classroom:

Collaboration with Classroom Teachers

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Abstract

This article defines process observation and how it can be used by professional school counselors to assist classroom teachers in enhancing the learning environment for students. Further, this article elucidates the skills used by process observers. A case illustration is provided to demonstrate application of this service. Finally, practical strategies for implementing this service in the school setting are given as well as implications for counselors and counselor educators.

Professional School Counselors as Process Observers in the Classroom:
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It is critical for professional school counselors (PSCs) to collaborate with teachers and administrators to promote student success in the context of today's educational agenda (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Clark & Amatea, 2004). Collaboration is defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* (2006) as "to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort" (www.dictionary.com). The impetus for professional collaboration among counselors and stakeholders, as a component of the PSC's role, is provided by the American School Counselor Association's (2005) *National Model for School Counseling Programs*. PSCs are expected to demonstrate how their work positively benefits student achievement and development (Foster, Young, & Hermann, 2005; Gysbers, 2004; Webb, Brigman, & Campbell, 2005). With the myriad of potential challenges present in the learning environment, the perspective of all professionals and stakeholders is important in order to accurately design, implement, and evaluate the efficacy of interventions aimed at removing educational barriers and fostering student learning. Specifically, according to Marlow, Bloss, and Bloss (2000)

...it is becoming more evident that it does "take a village" to educate children. In fact, it can be said that it takes a whole school to educate a child...Therefore, teachers and counselors must work to begin to provide information regarding their attitudes towards collaborative teaching, planning and facilitation in order to work together to best produce a nurturing educational environment. (p. 668)

PSCs have the knowledge and skills to facilitate this type of collaboration with teachers (Littrell & Peterson, 2001). One skill in particular is the understanding of group

process and dynamics. The intent of this article is to introduce process observation as a tool for PSCs to use in collaboration with teachers to enhance the educational experiences of students in the classroom setting. In order to create a rationale for the use of process observers in the school setting the authors draw from their own experiences in this role and as teachers who have benefited from the contributions of process observers.

Definition and Role of the Process Observer

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (2007) defines the word process as, "a natural phenomenon marked by gradual changes that lead toward a particular result" (www.merriam-webster.com). The definition of observation, according to Merriam-Webster's is "obtaining a record or description". Therefore, as process observers, PSCs collaborate to apply their understanding of group work as a helpful resource to those leading and facilitating groups. Process observation has been used effectively in therapeutic groups (Zieman, Romano, Blanco, & Linnell, 2005); in fact, Hogan, Harris, and Cassidy (2006) found that 92% of a sample of individuals who had participated in groups receiving process observations had found them to be helpful in enhancing their group experience. However, this technique can also be useful for task groups, including classroom settings. Process observers, in task groups, according to Hulse-Killacky, Killacky and Donigian (2001), serve the following purpose:

A process observer is an important tool for helping members reflect on the work of the group. Process observers serve as the conscience of the group. Their primary role is to help the task group pay attention to how members are interacting and how they are addressing the work of the group. In addition,

process observers can illuminate instances in which group members may be avoiding conflict. The process observer, then, can be a great resource for the task group leader. (p.18)

The majority of a child's school day is spent with teachers --more than any other professionals in the school setting--placing the primary responsibility for student learning on teachers (Clark & Amatea, 2004). One of the challenges facing teachers in classroom settings is balancing the attention to content (i.e. the course curriculum that must be covered) with attention to process (i.e. how things happen in the classroom setting and how students participate). The rationale presented herein reflects the view of these authors that how people learn is very important to the outcomes or content of what people learn. One contribution a school counselor can make is to support classroom teachers by providing process observations about what occurs in the classroom, and how attention to process either enhances or hinders the work of the class members.

When Process Observation is Beneficial to Teachers

School counselors can assist teachers in establishing constructive learning environments by providing them with feedback relative to how learning takes place in their particular classroom. PSCs can provide teachers with an understanding of group dynamics present in the classroom and help teachers promote a sense of universality and connection among students. However, process observation does not necessarily need to be conducted for every teacher in the school system. Indeed, this type of feedback may be especially salient for new teachers, alternatively certified teachers, classrooms with group dynamics that are impeding learning (such as bullying and lack

of social skills), inclusion classrooms with students of diverse abilities, and teachers wishing to gain insight about motivating and engaging learners.

School counselors who have an interest in process observation need to look for avenues to establish relationships with teachers and encourage dialogue about ways to attend to, and enhance, the learning environment for students. An important point to stress to the teacher is that the process observer's role is not to evaluate the teacher's method and style of teaching. The goal is to provide insight to the teacher through concrete feedback on the classroom dynamics that may enhance or impede the learning environment.

How to Conduct Classroom Process Observation

It is crucial that PSCs have a working knowledge of what process observation is and how to implement this service. We recommend setting a designated time for the observation to occur with the classroom teacher (date and time of day). As aforementioned, the teacher should have information about what to expect and type of feedback the counselor will be giving after the observation occurs. Additionally, the teacher needs to work with the process observer to prepare the students in the classroom for the process observers presence. During the actual observation, process observers are silent and do not participate in the class activities or discussions. Process observers should focus on all students in the classroom and should report concrete observation without judgment or personal, subjective interpretation. As school counselors establish the logistics of working with a particular teacher, they need some type of structure to use as they begin their work as process observers. We suggest that PSCs consider using the three-phase model to organize their observations in the

classroom setting (Hulse-Killacky et al., 2001). This model includes the phases: (1) warm-up, (2) action, and (3) closure.

The **warm-up phase** refers to the planning of the classroom activities and how these activities are introduced to the students. Examples of this focus area might include how the teacher begins the class, fosters relationships between the students, makes the purpose of the lesson clear, and interacts with the students. The **action phase** consists of the actual performance of tasks, how they are carried out in the classroom, and how the students react to the implementation of these tasks. Examples of this focus area include how the teacher facilitates learning, how the teacher communicates his or her expectations to the class regarding attendance and participation, how the teacher addresses cultural differences, and how the teacher provides feedback to the students on their work. During this phase, PSCs may particularly note the following communication processes, (a) who talks for how long and how often, (b) whom do people look at when they speak, (c) who talks after whom and who interrupts, (d) what communication strategies are students using (asking questions, contributing comments, non-verbal) (Haas Center for Public Service). In addition, PSCs should note decision making and task engagement processes such as (a) are students in consensus with the teacher about what they are doing, (b) do all students seem engaged in making decisions and participating in tasks, (c) how are individual suggestions or comments received by students and the teacher, (d) how does the class move from one topic to another, and (e) how student contributions acknowledged (Haas.Stanford.edu).

The **closure phase** consists of ending the class session and helping students reflect on their work. Examples of closure include how the teacher prepares to close the class, how students finish up tasks, how the teacher expresses appreciation to the students for their time together and prepares the students for the next lesson or class. Once a structure is in place to organize their observations school counselors can draw on their own skills and ideas in collaboration and consultation with teachers to provide effective process observations.

Suggestions for Reporting Findings to Teachers

In our own work as process observers in school systems we have found the following points to be helpful.

1. Set aside a time to give the feedback to the teacher and to discuss your findings. This is more helpful than handing notes to the teacher for him or her to interpret without you. Also, only report on observations from agreed upon observation times.
2. Report your observations concretely without judgment or evaluation of the teacher's style of teaching.
3. Assist the teacher in developing a plan and strategies to address any concerns identified. This plan can be typed up and used as a method for evaluating and monitoring progress.

In order to demonstrate how process observation may be used by PSCs, we will provide a case illustration. All names have been changed to protect individual identities.

Case Illustration of Process Observation Conducted by a PSC

As a middle school counselor, the second author was called upon to provide process observation to a new, alternatively certified teacher. The teacher, Mr. Dunbar, had a Bachelors degree in political science and was hired to teach 7th grade social studies through an alternative certification program. After the first two weeks of school the principal, Mrs. Sanders, received numerous parent/ caregiver complaints about Mr. Dunbar's classroom. The primary complaint was that the classroom was so out of control that students did not feel that they were learning anything. Mrs. Sanders had met with Mr. Dunbar and provided him with the parent feedback and suggested he read a book about classroom management. However, things only got worse. By the end of the first six weeks of school, over 50% of the students in his classes had Ds or Fs (which further prompted parental complaints), and Mr. Dunbar told me that he felt so defeated he just wanted to quit. He said, "I can't even stand the thought of getting up and coming to work each day".

I offered to visit his class and provide him with process observation in order to help make suggestions for him to implement. He agreed and asked me to come the next week as he was go to be starting a new unit on state government. I agreed to do so.

When I entered his room at the beginning of the class period, I noticed that the students were not seated and most were standing around in groups talking. Some students were yelling and I saw others throwing candy at each other. Mr. Dunbar stood in the back of the room talking with one student and explaining the assignment from the day before which the students had questions about. This continued for nearly 10

minutes. He took up homework from the day before which I noticed very few students turned in. Once Mr. Dunbar began the lesson he lectured for about 30 minutes during which students engaged in a variety of non-learning activities such as talking to each other, passing notes, sleeping, and eating snacks. I only observed two students taking notes. One student asked questions. At the end of this lecture Mr. Dunbar assigned homework. He then sat down at his desk and gave the students time to begin their assignments. A few students started working and the rest resumed socializing.

I thanked Mr. Dunbar for allowing me to visit his room and scheduled a time when I could give him feedback (the following day after school). I went to my office where I typed up my observation and suggestions. I attempted to make my suggestions as concrete as possible.

When I met with Mr. Dunbar I affirmed how overwhelming any professional's first year in the school system can be. I validated his courage in asking for help. I then told him exactly what I saw the students doing. He concurred that he sees the same things but did not know how to change it. I suggested the following: (1) have the class sit down immediately upon entering the room and give them an agenda for the class period including learning objectives, (2) begin the class time by going over homework from the night before and taking questions, (3) engage students by asking about their thoughts on the prior day's lesson, (4) introduce current lecture, (5) condense lecture time and ask students more open ended questions or give discussion prompts throughout lecture, (6) build in one experiential small group activity or project during each class related to the day's topic rather than assigning homework each night, (7) review what is

covered each day before students leave the room and give students the opportunity to ask questions.

After this meeting, Mr. Dunbar implemented the plan and said that he saw change very quickly in the students. I did two subsequent process observations where we focused more on the group dynamics of the students to increase student learning motivation. As a result, Mr. Dunbar tried a variety of other classroom strategies including dyad breakouts, role plays and skits, small group historical structured inquiries, and student taught lesson presentations. Mr. Dunbar reported that this assistance was of great value to him and made the rest of his first year enjoyable. There were progressively fewer parent complaints and student achievement improved substantially.

Implications for Counselors and Educators

School counselors are accountable for helping to improve student academic success and achievement (Foster, Young, & Hermann, 2005; Gysbers, 2004; Webb, Brigman, & Campbell, 2005). The use of school counselors as process observers in the classroom has several implications for the field of education. In counselor education, demonstration groups may be used by school counselor educators in order to train pre-service PSCs to become effective process observers (Gans, Rutan, & Lape, 2002). This strategy may also be useful for principals and school counselors to model process observation in faculty in-service training in order to prepare teachers for what to expect when being observed. Process observers can assist teachers in understanding the dynamics of the class, which in turn can assist them in lesson planning.

School counselors will benefit from their time spent as process observers in several ways. As a result of the changes implemented in classrooms after process observation, school counselors may see a decrease in negative behaviors in the classroom. They may also learn something about students who have been experiencing difficulties by observing their interactions with peers on the classroom setting. PSCs may also enhance their development of group facilitation skills through their role as process observer (Bieschke, Mathews, Wade, & Pricken, 2008). Additionally, school administration personnel may see an increase in standardized test scores, more focused and dedicated teachers, and more engaged students in the classroom. School counselors in partnership with school personnel can use process observation to further expand their role in the school setting and contribute positively to the teaching and learning experience.

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