

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: BUILDING COUNSELING SKILLS THROUGH CLINICAL FIELD EXPERIENCES

Sofie Ricca

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Pompeo-Fargnoli
Monmouth University, West Long Branch, NJ



Defining the Role of a School Counselor

In 1990, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) called for a terminology shift from “guidance counselor” to “school counselor”, as the guidance counselor role was primarily reactive, served only some students, and often operated in isolation. In contrast, the modern school counselor is proactive, data-driven, and serves as a school leader who develops, implements, and evaluates a comprehensive school counseling program (American School Counselor Association, n.d.). As a student engaged in clinical field experiences, the goal is to embody these responsibilities to effectively support students, schools, and communities. Graduate-level coursework emphasizes the development of practical counseling skills, particularly those grounded in person-centered strategies such as empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness. However, true mastery and practical application are impossible without hands-on experience. Clinical experiences provide the essential opportunity to build, refine, and apply these skills and theories in real-world settings.

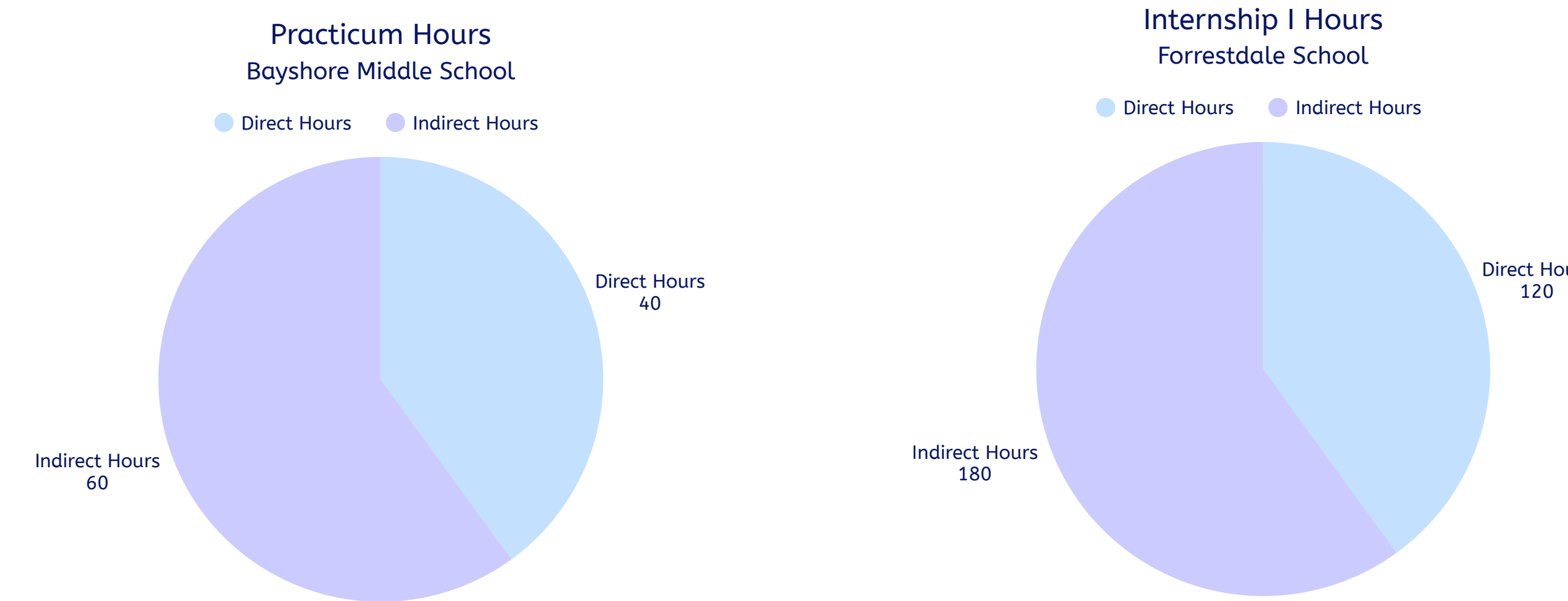
Clinical Field Experience Details

Title: School Counseling Intern

School Locations:

- **Practicum:** Bayshore Middle School, Middletown, NJ
 - **Grade(s):** 8th Grade
 - **Demographics:**
 - 81% White
 - 56% Male; 44% Female
 - About 14% are identified as economically disadvantaged
- **Internship I:** Forrestdale School, Rumson, NJ
 - **Grade(s):** 4th–5th Grade
 - **Demographics:**
 - High-Performing National Blue Ribbon School
 - 92% White
 - 54% Male, 46% Female
 - About 1% are identified as economically disadvantaged

Field Experience Hours



Overview of Experiences & Accomplishments

Groups & Lessons

- Led study skills group independently for 5th grade students
- Co-facilitated character education lessons for 100+ students weekly

Student Support

- Managed caseload of 5-10 students per semester, providing individualized counseling interventions focused on social-emotional and academic growth
- Developed and implemented 504 plans and behavior intervention plans using Frontline and Genesis
- Tracked and analyzed student progress through observations & individual meetings

Leadership & Collaboration

- Supervised peer leader meetings
- Communicated daily with parents, teachers, and administrators

Professional Growth

- Engaged in ongoing professional development (i.e. NJSLA and Wayfinder Training)
- Participated in weekly supervision with site-supervisor and university professor to receive feedback

Reflection & Key Takeaways

- **The therapeutic relationship is the most effective intervention.** Aligned with person-centered theory, connection comes first.
- **Evidence alone isn't enough.** Interventions must be tested and adapted to each student, not applied universally.
- **Tailor and be culturally responsive.** Strategies should meet students where they are.
- **Experiment and learn.** Try approaches, make mistakes, reflect, and adjust.
- **Anchor in theory, but stay flexible.** Grounding in a counseling model helps, but don't limit yourself to one framework.
- **Mindset matters.** Be humble, proactive, and positive.
- **Know yourself and your limits.** Self-awareness and boundaries are essential.
- **Prioritize Self-Care.** Effective counseling starts with caring for yourself.

Aspirations for Internship II

- Continue **developing deep relationships** with students to foster trust, engagement, and lasting impact.
- Refine **individualized interventions** that respond to **unique needs**.
- Expand **cultural competence** to better support **diverse** student backgrounds and experiences.
- Embrace **experimentation** and **feedback** to improve counseling techniques.
- Integrate **multiple counseling approaches** to increase **flexibility and adaptability** in practice.
- Strengthen presence by being **confident, proactive, and approachable**.
- Develop better **self-awareness** and **boundaries** to ensure ethical practice.
- Prioritize **personal wellness** strategies to remain resilient.

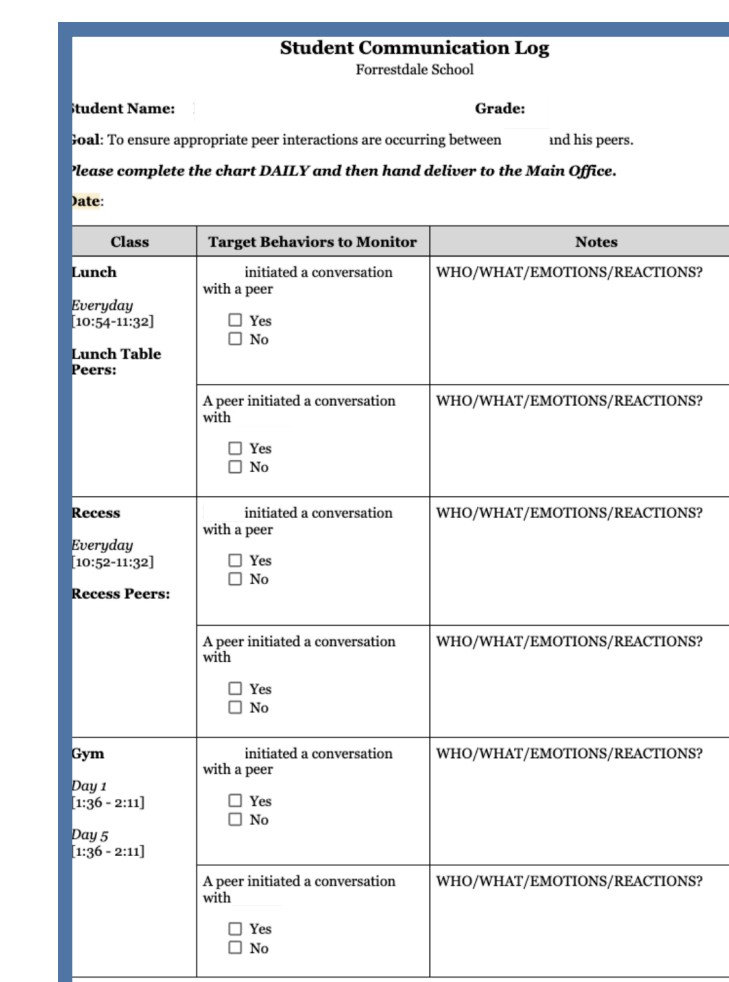
On-Site Action



Sample Behavior Intervention Plan Reward Menu



Counseling Office Space for Individual and Group Counseling



Sample Student Observation Log & Data Monitoring Tool



Bulletin Board Highlighting School Staff Excellence and Positive Work Environment

Reference

American School Counselor Association. (n.d.). *Guidance counselor vs. school counselor [PDF]*. School Counselor. <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/c8d97962-905f-4a33-958b-744a770d71c6/Guidance-Counselor-vs-School-Counselor.pdf>

Suggested Readings

- *The Gift of Therapy* by Irving Yalom
- *Letters to a Young Therapist* by Mary Pipher