Are School Counselors Sufficiently Prepared to

Serve Students with Disabilities?

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single-case study was to examine how school counselors from a master's level counselor education program are trained to work with PreK-12 students with disabilities. Transcripts from semi-structured interviews with nine school counselors-in-training and course syllabi were analyzed using embedded analysis and pattern matching analysis techniques. A key finding was that school counselor trainees drew on prior knowledge and experiences rather than education to work with PreK-12 students with disabilities. Recommendations for school counselor training focused on better serving PreK-12 students with disabilities are provided.

Keywords: school counselors, training, students with disabilities

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Individuals with disabilities are the largest minority population (Kraus 2015; Olkin 2002, 2007). Kraus (2015) reported a national percentage of 12.6 for adults, adolescents, and children with disabilities, an increase from a 2010 survey. The effective education of students with disabilities is connected to the role of school counselor and has been a topic of discussion in the literature and profession (Frye-Myers, 2005; Leggett, Shea, & Leggett, 2011; Milsom, 2002, 2006; Milsom & Akos, 2003; Milsom, Goodnough, & Akos, 2007; Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009; Owens, Thomas, & Strong, 2011).

The goal of school counselors is to serve all students, including students with disabilities, and to take an active role in advocating for the rights of students (ASCA, 2016a). If school counselors are to effectively collaborate with parents and special educators to support the best interests of students with disabilities, they need to have knowledge about disabilities, disability laws, and district policies (ASCA, 2016b). Consequently, it would also be important to reduce the practice of ableism (discrimination in favor of able-bodied people) wherever possible. Van Aswegen and Shevlin (2019) highlighted, "ableism is visible in the ideals of the normal mind, appropriate behaviors, and by the extensions, an ableist discourse that suggests an ideal to be constantly striven for, but impossible to attain" (p. 639).

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) makes it clear that school counselors should be knowledgeable about and competent to serve students with disabilities (ASCA, 2016b). However, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and

Related Educational Programs (CACREP) – the accrediting organization that oversees counseling programs – does not specifically mention students with disabilities (2020). Research is mixed concerning school counselors' perception of their role in working with students with disabilities (Frye-Myers, 2005; Milsom, 2002), level of competence about the needs of students with disabilities by grade level (Frye-Myers, 2005; Milsom, 2002), and the recommendations related to involvement with students with disabilities (Milsom et al., 2007; Owens et al., 2011).

The purpose of this study was to examine the training of school counselors from a single counselor education program in the Midwest. Specifically, the study focused on the training of school counselors concerning students with disabilities, which has been identified as a disadvantaged student population in PreK-12 schools (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). The two research questions that guided the study were:

1. In what ways are school counselor trainees in a single counselor education program in the Midwest currently prepared to work effectively with PreK-12 students with disabilities?

2. What is the potential impact of disability training on school counselor trainees' interactions and experiences with students with disabilities?

Disability culture is a term that describes individuals who are born with a disability or who acquire a disability as being members of a distinctive cultural group (Hays, 2016; Olkin, 2002; 2007). Olkin (2007) highlighted the similarities of a disability culture to other minority cultures, such as cultures of race/ethnicity while recognizing the distinctiveness of the disability culture. For example, a student could have a disability but may not identify their disability as indicative of membership within a cultural group. Often, students with disabilities who are the sole person in their family system with a disability

do not label themselves as members of this culture (Olkin, 2007). In the current study, a disability is regarded as a specific sub-culture within a school system. The sub-culture perspective is a nuanced way of approaching the topic of student and family definitions of disability. This study seeks to enable school counselors to begin conversations about disability empowerment.

School counselors can have a positive impact on PreK-12 students with disabilities when the counselor engages with students (Frye-Myers, 2005; Milsom & Akos, 2003). In fact, school counselors who promote awareness and acceptance of unique abilities bolster a positive school climate and may positively impact students with disabilities (Milsom, 2006). It is necessary for school counselors to be trained to understand the needs of students with disabilities and to advocate for this student population (Milsom, 2006).

For example, ASCA's School Counselor Professional Standards and Competencies suggest that school counselors are trained to address the inclusion of students from minority culture groups (ASCA, 2019a). One way the inclusion of minority students should be enacted is through the use of appropriate language and labels when working with and advocating for students with disabilities. In education, the use of person-first language (i.e., referring to the person first and the disability second) is recommended to meet this goal. However, Hays (2016) addresses the shift back to disability-first and person-second language by some subgroups of the disability culture. School counselors must simultaneously navigate language preferences of students with disabilities and adhere to societal expectations of person-first language within legal documents, such as 504 plans and individualized education programs (IEPs). This

example demonstrates the complexities of the interactions between school counselors and students with disabilities.

In addition to language and labeling complexities, school counselors are often misguided about their assumptions of students with disabilities. Rawlings and Longhurst (2011) taught master's level counseling trainees about working with individuals with disabilities and reported that many trainees had limited knowledge and misconceptions about this population. For example, counselor trainees were initially unaware of the appropriate terms to be used when engaging with individuals with disabilities. Many counselor trainees also believed that all individuals with a disability engaged in counseling for reasons related to their disability (Rawlings & Longhurst, 2011). However, many individuals with a childhood-identified disability typically have developed well-managed coping skills. As such, they may seek counseling for other reasons (Hays, 2016). By contrast, individuals who acquired a disability in adolescence or adulthood are more likely to seek counseling related to their disability (Hays, 2016; Olkin, 2007). In addition to misconceptions about students with disabilities, school counselors within high schools believe they lack adequate training to help students with disabilities make successful post-high school transitions into adulthood (Milsom, 2002). In fact, many school counselors do not fully engage with PreK-12 students with disabilities due to a lack of training and limited knowledge about disabilities (Dipeolu, Storlie, & Johnson, 2014; Leggett et al., 2011; Rawlings & Longhurst, 2011). Consequently, the research suggests that there is a lack of training for school counselors to adequately support students with disabilities. This study seeks to better understand the training of school counselors through semi-structured qualitative

interviews and document analysis in order to understand the training gaps for school counselors related to working with students with disabilities.

Method

Participants

School counselor trainees were recruited for participation in this study from a school counseling graduate program in the Midwest. Eligible participants ($n = 19$) were those who had completed their practicum the previous semester and who had either completed a counseling diverse populations course or were currently enrolled in the course. Nine individuals agreed to participate in the study, ranging in age from 20 to 40 years old. Participants identified their gender as female (78%, $n = 7$) and male (22%, $n = 2$). Participants identified as White (78%, $n = 7$), and Black/African-American (22%, $n = 2$). The following additional participant information is noted due to the current study's goals of understanding the impact of training and prior knowledge related to students with disabilities: one participant was bilingual in English and Spanish and one was a licensed teacher who had taught students with disabilities in an urban setting.

Materials

Fourteen semi-structured interview questions were developed and used to interview the nine participants. The questions used in the interviews were modeled after the interview protocol for a study about rehabilitation counselors who work with the deaf and hard of hearing community (Schoffstall, Cawthon, Tarantolo-Leppo, & Wendel, 2015). The lead researcher in this study piloted the interview questions before establishing the final questions. The interview questions addressed participants' experiences of working with students with disabilities, their knowledge of disability and

disability culture, reasons for wanting to be a school counselor, and their perceptions of their preparation to work with students with disabilities.

Data Collection

After receiving institutional review board approval, potential participants were contacted via email inviting them to participate in the study. The nine participants who consented to participate in the study were interviewed by the first researcher. The interviews were audio-recorded, and each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. After each interview was transcribed, the transcript was sent to the participant for member checking and any necessary edits were made.

Next, the course syllabi ($n = 23$) for the school counseling program were collected. The syllabi came from all courses that had been taught since the beginning of the participants' program to when the study was conducted. The syllabi from this time span included duplicate courses taught in separate semesters. This included syllabi of courses that were taught within five semesters, including summer, which was 100% of courses taught in the school counseling program to date of the study. Due to rolling admissions in the program, the syllabi included duplicate courses that all or some of the participants had already taken. The only courses not included in the study were internship syllabi as that course had never been taught within the five-semester period and was scheduled for the following academic year.

Data Analysis

An embedded analysis (Creswell, 2013) and a pattern matching analytic approach (Yin, 2018) were used to analyze the data from nine semi-structured interviews and 23 school counseling program syllabi. The goal of embedded analysis

was to analyze data found within the actual document, which in this study were the program syllabi (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018).

A pattern matching analytic approach was used to strengthen the internal validity of this study. Predicted patterns were identified before conducting the interviews (Yin, 2018). After the interviews were conducted, the transcriptions were compared to the syllabi. The combined data were then compared to each predicted pattern to determine if the pattern was confirmed or if a rival pattern emerged. In other words, after both data collections were complete, the actual data patterns were substantiated to the original predicted patterns (Yin, 2018). Three predicted patterns included:

1. School counselor trainee participants are not prepared to work effectively with PreK-12 students with disabilities.

2. School counselor trainee participants are likely to only have surface knowledge about disability culture based on their previous experiences and practicum experiences.

3. School counselor trainee participants would demonstrate a heightened awareness of the importance of understanding disability culture due to their knowledge that the first researcher subscribes to disability culture.

Researcher Reflexivity Statements

As the lead researcher, I identify as a White female counselor educator who is a content expert in school counseling with three years of prior experience as a school counselor. Additionally, I have three years of experience as an intervention specialist. I have a disability and disclosed this while serving as an instructor prior to the formation of this study which may have increased my credibility and trustworthiness with participants.

As the second researcher on this project, I self-identify as Asian Indian and female. This is my 16th year as a school counselor educator. I do not have a disability but served as advisor and mentor to the lead researcher during her doctoral work. I believe that school counselor trainees should be aware, knowledgeable, and competent about the needs of PreK-12 students with disabilities.

As the third researcher, I identify as a White, non-Hispanic female. I was a secondary special educator for seven years in one of the most ethnically diverse states, and I have worked in higher education for 13 years researching topics in special education and teaching higher education faculty, pre-service educators, and in-service educators about educating children and young adults with disabilities. I do not have a disability, but I do have close family members who have disabilities including autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, speech or language impairments, specific learning disabilities, and orthopedic disabilities.

Results

Pattern One

The first pattern predicted that participants would not be prepared to work effectively with PreK-12 students with disabilities. The finding matched the prediction, as participants reported that they were not prepared to work effectively with PreK-12 students with disabilities.

Participants were asked, "Where in the program does a student learn about disability culture, and how much time have you spent learning about this culture?" All of the school counseling trainees discussed the multicultural course in their response to this question. One participant mentioned a course focused on children and adolescents.

Three participants thought that a connection to disability culture was made in every course. Additionally, three participants reported that disability culture was covered in an introductory school counseling course. Finally, two participants mentioned a class focused on consultation and collaboration. Participants were also asked about the length of time that disability culture was discussed in school counseling programs. The responses varied from numerical values (minutes, hours, days, months) to verbally confirming that disability culture was discussed in each course. Regardless of the allotted time or frequency to the discussion of disability culture, several participants reported wanting more activities focused on how the school counselor could more effectively support students with disabilities.

The syllabi also supported the first predicted pattern because school counseling trainees were exposed to disability culture in three different courses: school counseling, multicultural counseling, and consultation and collaboration. However, participants were exposed to disability topics in only one class meeting during each of these courses. In a course focused on learning about children and adolescents, students were exposed to content from the DSM 5 related to social emotional disabilities, such as ADHD and anxiety (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Disconnection. The participants discussed that special educators did not understand the school counselor's role and vice versa. One participant spoke about role confusion and how the purpose of an intervention specialist was a "button-pushing" topic at her school. In other words, when working with students who have been identified for services under an IEP, the participant talked about how those students automatically were assumed to be the special educators' sole responsibility. The vague

roles made everyone upset and frustrated. The participant went on to explain how her site supervisor did not have much involvement in the integration of special educators in the classroom or with students with disabilities. However, another participant noted that her site supervisor shared a room with a special educator, which allowed for collaboration. However, she described the school counselor's role as "the catch-all" in the school. The participant meant that the school counselor is responsible for many diverse situations that arose in the school. These examples demonstrate the disconnect between the roles of special educators and school counselors.

Parental collaboration. Seven of the nine participants identified working with parents of students with disabilities as an area of need for increased training. Two participants described feeling uncomfortable working with parents of students with disabilities. Participants also mentioned a need for training related to parent collaboration, especially related to negotiating support related to aspects of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). There were several participants who expressed feeling uncomfortable in these situations out of fear that they would "mess up" or "accidentally deny" student accommodations. Specifically, five participants expressed fear of the outcome if they unintentionally blocked access due to parent-school counselor relationship.

Pattern Two

For the second pattern, it was expected that participants would be likely to only have *surface* knowledge about disability culture based on their previous personal experiences and their practicum experiences. Surface knowledge is defined as having remedial understanding of the connections between their role as a school counselor and

working with PreK-12 students with disabilities in the areas of IDEA, the best practices for students with disabilities, the accommodation process for academic success, 504 plans meant to support students through documented accommodations, and identification of key stakeholders necessary to support student success.

The amount of exposure to disability culture did vary from participant to participant. Specifically, the study found that experiences prior to entering the school counseling program directly influenced disability knowledge. For example, one participant said, "I know a fairly significant amount. My brother was diagnosed with autism, at a very young age. I myself was diagnosed with bipolar, so I've been living this for a while, of knowing limits, and seeing him struggle academically." This participant has a family- and student-based understanding of disability culture. However, she stated during the interview that she has a basic understanding of IDEA and limited knowledge related to working with individuals with physical disabilities, despite having family and personal exposure to the culture. Another participant had very limited exposure to disability culture, when asked to share what they knew about disability culture, they stated, "I can't say much." All participants knew about IDEA but were unable to connect the federal act to the role of the school counselor. Milsom (2002) discussed similar discrepancies and noted that most school counselors reported supporting students with disabilities through individual sessions and small groups. However, school counselors reported being the least involved in transition planning (Milsom, 2002). Additionally, Milsom reported that counselors had mixed feelings related to their preparedness, noting school counselors felt only "somewhat" prepared.

The course syllabi also supported the predicted pattern because IDEA was only briefly discussed in one course. In a course focused on comprehensive school counseling programs and data collection, school counseling trainees had to create curriculum lesson plans with an accommodation section for each lesson related to students with disabilities. However, students were not supplied with additional directions or information related to this request. Trainees also took a course focused on consultation and collaboration which featured case studies about collaboration related to students with disabilities. However, not all participants mentioned this course.

All the participants described varying situations of ableism related to disability culture. The participants that did witness or experience ableism were aware and displayed a heightened understanding for the importance of recognizing these situations as a school counselor trainee. For example, "separateness" still exists in schools for students with disabilities. Another participant was comfortable disclosing, "I wouldn't have known where it [classrooms for students with disabilities] was in the building that I worked in." For example, Lalvani and Bacon (2019) discussed how including students with disabilities in the general classroom is not enough and more exposure to diverse learners is necessary in addressing ableism.

Exposure. All participants expressed the belief that exposure to disability culture would be critical to their future professional roles. Many participants did not feel competent working with students with disabilities because of their lack of exposure to disability culture. For example, one participant described feeling completely lost supporting students with emotional needs and autism. Another described having a lot of exposure but felt overwhelmed when during an incident a student was experiencing

emotional distress and began throwing chairs. Leggett et al. (2011) noted similar experiences of school counselor trainees working with twice-exceptional students (students who are gifted and also have a special need or disability). For example, trainees had limited knowledge about twice-exceptional students and misconceptions of their involvement in teaching advocacy skills (Leggett et al., 2011).

A third participant described how her site supervisor was the school counselor for all students with disabilities. In this case, her exposure to students with disabilities did not change her discomfort of working with students with disabilities because she was unsure as to how to help the students. Moreover, a fourth participant spoke about how her special education background supported her ability to help students with disabilities. However, she still felt uncomfortable because she recognized the difference between the school counselor's and special educator's roles with students with disabilities. Two participants mentioned placement in a parochial school was a limiting factor due to less exposure of working with students with disabilities. Another participant mentioned being conscientious about working with students with disabilities due to her personal background. As an example of endorsing a disability culture, she discussed that she supports students with disabilities to help them learn and grasp concepts.

Pattern Three

It was predicted that participants would demonstrate a heightened awareness of the importance of understanding disability culture as the lead researcher has a disability. Whereas this predictor is more open ended, the study found that all participants recognized the importance of understanding disability as an actual culture like others such as racial and ethnic cultures. This is a critical point, as research

indicates that having a disability is not always viewed as a *culture* in society or in family systems (Hays, 2016; Olkin, 2002; Olkin, 2007).

School culture. All participants remarked that the school culture had a major impact on school counselors' ability to serve students with disability through individual, small group, and classroom lessons. The culture, climate, and staff of the school each contributed to school counselors' ability to serve students with disabilities. One participant experienced a school culture that impacted students with disabilities negatively because many students were denied access to the parochial school because of a biased interview process. This participant demonstrated a heightened awareness when they recognized that the interview process was biased against students with disabilities.

Other participants experienced a similar school culture, reporting statements of coworkers such as, "Well, we don't do it for mental health. Mental health doesn't need a 504. They just need to kind of get over it." Some participants discussed troubling situations involving students with disabilities: they were confined to one area of the school, they would not have known where those students were located if they had not already worked in the building, and the school staff used a derogatory nickname for the hallway where the special education resource room was located.

Milsom (2006) explained how school counselors can work to create a positive experience for students with disabilities. When discussing school culture, one participant described the fully inclusive environment of the parochial school at his practicum site. The school had on-staff special educators and other support services. The special education staff pulled students out of class only when necessary for one-

on-one services. The participant spoke about how the mission of the school was to educate all students and use accommodations appropriately.

Exposure to disability culture. All the participants desired more exposure to disability culture in schools to increase knowledge and competence of working with students with disabilities. For example, one participant discussed that leading a professional development workshop related to working with diverse populations could help increase school counselors' knowledge and confidence. Another participant mentioned that more applied experiences with students who had a range of different disabilities would be beneficial. Despite desire for more exposure, the participants described feeling uncomfortable working with students who were identified with disabilities outside of learning or other health impaired disabilities. For instance, participants explained wanting more exposure to deaf culture, emotional disturbances, and physical disabilities. Whereas all the participants expressed a desire for varied experiences of disability culture, the position statement provided by ASCA focuses solely on IDEA disabilities and excludes the mention of school counselors working with students with physical disabilities ASCA (2016b).

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine training experiences of school counselor trainees from a single counselor education program in working with PreK-12 students with disabilities. The study used semi-structured interviews and syllabi from the courses within the training program. Students with disabilities can benefit from the services provided by a school counselor. Thus, it is imperative that school counselor

education programs work to address training gaps related to PreK-12 students with disabilities.

It is troubling that the 2016 CACREP standards (general program or school counseling specialty) do not address or contain language that focuses upon school counselor competence associated with working with PreK-12 students with disabilities (CACREP, 2020). The absence of a specialty standards related to serving students with disabilities was apparent throughout the interviews and the syllabi. The lack of training for school counseling trainees to work with PreK-12 students with disabilities supported the first predicted pattern. It is recommended that this glaring omission be addressed in the next revision of CACREP standards for school counselors. Further, the ASCA and Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) partnership to establish training standards for school counseling programs presents an opportunity to address the lack of training standards related to PreK-12 students with disabilities while providing clear delineation of roles of school counselors and special educators.

The ASCA national model and ASCA counselor competencies do not detail standards regarding the school counselor's responsibilities or expectations for working with PreK-12 students with disabilities, yet school counselors are still expected to serve all students with disabilities (ASCA, 2019a; 2019b). Comprehensive school counseling programs that also serve PreK-12 students with disabilities may be lacking even though Milsom and Akos (2003) noted a lack of enough training related to work with PreK-12 students with disabilities.

School counselors are expected to provide *all* students with services that are informed by data, related to national standards, and reflected within a comprehensive

school counseling program (ASCA, 2019a; 2019b). These objectives recognize the importance of current and relevant school counselor competencies. ASCA (2018) published a draft of the ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards and Competencies, requesting feedback from members on the standards. While the draft included the word disability, the final version omitted the term disability and only included the term ability. ASCA's professional standard related to cultural influence on student success and opportunities states that school counselors should: "Demonstrate basic knowledge and respect of differences in customs, communications, traditions, values, and other traits among students based on race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical or intellectual ability and other factors" (ASCA standard B-PF 6.a, 2019a, p. 3). Regardless of the terms (disability or ability), the current behavioral standard does not call for school counselors to receive training about students with physical disabilities (ASCA, 2016b, 2018, 2019a). Counselor educators need to continue to be diligent to ensure they are providing educational opportunities related to the potential needs of students with disabilities.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The limitations of the current study provide direction for future research about school counselors and students with disabilities. The focus on a single program in a single state in the Midwest is a limitation. Future research could be conducted using a multiple-site recruitment design to determine if the themes found in this study are consistent with other school counseling programs nationally. If the patterns are confirmed at multiple sites, the findings could support curriculum changes for school counseling programs. The first author was a member of the institution from which

participants were selected and this circumstance may have precipitated socially desirable responses. Outcomes from future research may be more reliable if they are generated from anonymous research.

Conclusion

Disability is a specific sub-culture within school systems which requires increased attention from school counselors to support students with disabilities. Perceiving disability as a sub-culture is a nuanced way of approaching the topic of student and family definitions of disability vs. the traditional IDEA disability categories that are used to identify students in the school system. This study sought to promote conversations among professional school counselors about disability empowerment through an increased awareness of the experiences of nine school counselor trainees' experiences working in various school systems. School counselors who are knowledgeable about and skilled to support students with disabilities will help students to be more successful in schools and will help fulfill their professional mandate to serve all students.

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