

Professional Identity Development for the School Counselor

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Abstract

In this article the authors address specific issues that affect the development of professional identity in the school counselor. These issues include the misperceptions of the role of the school counselor by school administrators and personnel, other mental health professionals, and school counselors themselves. It is necessary for school counselors to develop the means necessary to promote and support themselves, along with acquiring a knowledge consisting of skills and techniques, they must also learn who they are and what they do (Remley & Herlihy, 2001). Once the school counselor understands this vital concept it will be easy to articulate it to other school and mental health professionals.

As school counseling continues to be emphasized more and more as a vital component of the counseling profession, it is essential that the issue of professional identity development of school counselors be addressed in training and educational programs. Specific issues related to the professional identity development of school counselors that must be examined include: (1) the continued uncertainty about the school counselor=s role in the school setting; (2) the lack of agreement among school counselors concerning their specific role and function; and (3) specialty areas within the counseling profession unwilling to view school counselors as equally competent mental health professionals (Schmidt, 1999).

Perceptions of school counselors as substitute teachers, administrators, or clerks within the school severely hinder the main role of the school counselor in developing a comprehensive counseling program (Schmidt, 1999). As long as other school professionals treat school counselors as less than professional and these beliefs are perpetuated within the school environment, the role of the 21st century school counselor as an integral component in the academic and personal success of every student will never be achieved.

School counselors must be able to define and adequately describe their role to other mental health professionals and the general public. As the profession of school counseling evolves it is imperative that school counselors promote and support themselves in developing strong and positive characteristics that can be identified with who they are and what they do. In order for this to occur, school counselors must understand their unique role and function within the mental health profession. According to Remley and Herlihy (2001), school counselors must be able to explain the following:

(a) the philosophy that underlies the activities of their professional group; (b) services rendered by school counselors and other mental health professionals (e.g. school social workers, school psychologists). Most importantly counselors must exhibit and communicate their pride in being school counselors (Remley & Herlihy, 2001).

Throughout the history of the counseling profession, school counselors have been viewed as second class counselors by other specialty areas within the profession. In order for school counselors to gain more acceptance in the field of counseling and to develop a strong professional identity, a unified mission must exist within the profession.

The requirements needed to become a school counselor adversely affect the professional identity development of the very people they are designed to protect. With different states requiring varying amounts of education and training to become a school counselor, misunderstanding about the role and function of the school counselor arise both among counselors and the general public (Carlson, 1991). Two steps which can be taken by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and other supporters for the school counseling profession include establishing consistent training standards equivalent to those required by other counseling professionals and advocating for consistent certification standards and guidelines for school counselors throughout all fifty states.

If school counselors are to develop a strong professional identity, then it is essential that they are educated not only in skills and techniques, but also are educated in the knowledge of who they are and what they do (Schmidt, 1999). In addition, they must be able to transfer this unity of philosophy and theory to other mental health professionals and to the general public as a whole.

Whittman (1988) suggested marketing as an effective method to increase professional identity and effectiveness of service delivery. Further, frequent communication about the counseling program between school professionals, school social workers, school administrators, and school counselors is absolutely necessary so that each understands how the others function (Humes & Hohensel, 1987). Before any effective communication can occur, the school counselor must be able to verbalize to others how the responsibilities of the counseling program can affect the overall health of the school (Schmidt, 1999).

Conclusion

The duties of the school counselor have multiplied over the years, requiring the counselor to be involved with nearly every aspect of school operation (Murray, 1995). As a result, these tasks severely hinder the main role of the school counselor in promoting the academic, career, and personal/social development of every child (ASCA, 1999). This, along with the misperception of school administrators and personnel, other mental health professionals, and even school counselors themselves, about the specific role school counselors play in the school, has led to ambiguity of the school counselors' function and identity. For school counselors to realize their necessity in school, as well as in the counseling profession, the development of a strong professional identity is essential. This development requires more than competency in techniques and skills but also a knowledge of who they are and what they do. Once the school counselor is aware of these responsibilities, they can be articulated to other school professionals, mental health professionals, parents, and the community at large (McCollum, Gray, & Blanchard, 2002).

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