Principals' Perceptions of School Counselor Roles and Satisfaction With

School Counseling Services

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Abstract

This study surveyed principals ($N = 303$) across the nation about their perceptions of

school counselor roles and satisfaction with counseling services. Results from this

exploratory study revealed that principals reported overall satisfaction with counseling

services, although satisfaction varied across levels (elementary, middle school/junior

high, high school) and service area. Suggestions are offered by principals for improving

counseling services. Implications for school counselor training, opportunities for

collaborative school counselor-principal partnerships, and the need for additional

research are also presented.

Principals' Perceptions of School Counselor Roles and Satisfaction

With School Counseling Services

The emphasis on accountability in the latest educational reforms (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act) (U. S. Department of Education, 2002) has led to a renewed interest in counselor education, role functioning, and comprehensive developmental guidance models (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Erford, House, & Martin, 2003; Guerra, 1998a; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Myrick, 2003; Schmidt, 2003; Sears, 1999; Sink, 2005). Along with this interest and the pressures of increased accountability, comes the need for school counselors to reevaluate their roles and demonstrate that the comprehensive guidance services they help develop and administer make a positive difference in the lives of all students.

Historical Perspectives

The role, functioning, and training of school counselors have been directly influenced by societal changes and fluctuating social concerns. In addition, media attention, technological advancements, and current educational reforms have led to an increase in expectations for school counselors. These additional expectations will require school counselors to periodically reevaluate guidance program priorities and their own productivity and effectiveness (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Erford et al., 2003; Myrick, 2003; Schmidt, 2003; Sink, 2005; Sink & MacDonald, 1998).

Other important historical events have also helped to shape the profession. For example, the focus on testing/assessment during and shortly after World War I gave rise to the use of psychological assessment as a core feature of vocational guidance (Sciarra, 2004). The mental health services movements of the 1930s and 1940s,

however, shifted the focus from career to personal adjustment (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Herr, 2003; Myrick, 2003; Schmidt, 2003; Sciarra; Sink, 2005). Several years later, the race to space in the 1950s brought to light concerns about the quality of educational standards in America, which led to the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958. This legislation provided funding for developing school counseling graduate programs for training counselors in secondary settings (Baker & Gerler; Gysbers & Henderson; Herr; Myrick; Paisley & Borders, 1995; Schmidt; Sciarra; Sink). Shortly thereafter, amendments to the NDEA allocated funds for counselor education programs to train elementary school counselors as well (Baker & Gerler; Gysbers & Henderson; Herr; Myrick; Schmidt; Sink).

The school counseling profession has, however, seen some challenging times. For example, a decline in student enrollment during the 1970s and 1980s led to a reduction in the number of school counseling positions. In response to this reduction in force, several professional organizations including the American Association of Counseling and Development (AACD), the American School Counseling Association (ASCA), and the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) focused their energies on developing a strategic plan to clarify and redefine school counseling competencies (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Paisley & Borders, 1995). ASCA's National Standards for School Counseling Programs, a template for implementing changes and reshaping counselor education curriculum for the new millennium, represents the culmination of these efforts (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Dahir & Goldberg, 2000).

Recent Trends

Despite renewed interest in school counselor role functioning and comprehensive developmental guidance models, concerns still exist related to role ambiguity and the lack of professional identity among school counselors (Agresta, 2004; Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Guerra, 1998b; Johnson, 2000; Lieberman, 2004; Paisley & Borders, 1995; Sink & MacDonald, 1998; Vail, 2005). Concerns also exist regarding whether training programs for school counselors adequately prepare them to work effectively with all students in the 21st century (Guerra; Sears, 1999).

In response to these concerns, the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI), supported by the Education Trust (2003) and funding from the Dewitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, conducted a comprehensive review of the school counseling profession. As part of this review, the Education Trust (1997; 1998) solicited input from counselor educators, school counselors, principals, teachers, and related counseling professionals across the United States. This inquiry resulted in recommendations for retooling school counselor education programs to better meet the needs of counselors in training. To this end, ASCA developed the National Model (2003), which includes the National Standards for School Counseling Programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). The model defines and encompasses all the necessary components of a comprehensive developmental guidance program and utilizes the concepts of the TSCI (i.e., system change, advocacy, leadership, and collaboration) as its organizing framework. In addition, the Education Trust offers training to counselor education programs and schools in how to maximize their counseling services to keep pace with societal changes and educational reforms (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Guerra, 1998b; Sears, 1999).

Rationale for the Study

The school counseling profession has always had close ties with administrators. In fact, the first official school guidance program was developed and implemented at the beginning of the 20th century by a Detroit principal, Jesse B. Davis, as an integral part of his high school English class (Coy, 1999; Herr, 2003; Myrick, 2003; Sink, 2005). Thus, it seems obvious that principals and school counselors should be natural partners in the guidance process (Wesley, 2001). Both parties have unique perspectives and specialized talents that are crucial to developing and managing viable comprehensive developmental guidance programs (Myrick; Ponec & Brock, 2000). However, it has also been suggested that school counselor role functioning may be compromised by administrators who lack knowledge and understanding about what school counselors are trained to do (Borders, 2002; Fitch, Newby, Ballestero, & Marshall, 2001). Limited training in the area of developmental guidance and lack of exposure to recent counseling initiatives (i.e., ASCA role statements, ASCA's National Model, and the TSCI) may help explain why some administrators fail to support school counselors in their appropriate role functioning.

From their historical connection with vocational guidance to their continued commitment to student achievement and functioning (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Herr, 2003; Muro & Kottman, 1995; Myrick, 2003; Schmidt, 2003; Sink, 2005), principals and school counselors share the same deep commitment to student success. Since the goal of guidance and counseling is to enhance students' personal, social, vocational, and academic achievement, principals must be utilized as an integral part of the guidance process. Thus, this study was designed to survey certified principals across the United

States concerning their perceptions of school counselor roles, satisfaction with school counseling services, and suggestions for improving service provision in specific areas. To this end, the following research questions were proposed:

1. Overall, how satisfied are principals with the services their school counselors provide?

2. How satisfied are principals with specific areas of service provided by their school counselors?

3. What do principals identify as the major roles of school counselors?

4. What suggestions do principals have for improving school counseling services?

<div align="center">Method</div>

Participants

The sample surveyed for this study consisted of 500 certified principals across the United States. Participants were identified and recruited through the listservs of the National Associations for Elementary and Secondary School Principals. Thirty-nine percent of the principals who responded worked in elementary schools, 33% at middle schools/junior highs, and 28% at high schools. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents were male and 41% were female. The predominant ethnic make up of respondents was Caucasian/White (71%), African American (9%), Hispanic/Latino (8%), and American Indian/Alaskan (5%), and Asian (5%). The average age of participants was 46, and 98% had completed a master's degree or higher. Participating principals reported that 72% of the counselors they work with had previous teaching experience, and 83% reported that they had not been exposed to information on school counseling roles or comprehensive

guidance programs during their administrative training. The average reported counselor-student ratio was 1:417 (range 1:85 to 1:876). There were no significant differences in counselor-student ratios across levels (i.e., elementary, middle school/junior high, high school). Finally, survey responses were sorted into geographic regions based on U. S. 2000 Census criteria. The following geographic regions were represented by survey responses: West (31%), Midwest (20%), Northeast (19%), and South (30%).

Survey Instrument

A review of the literature revealed no existing validated instruments to measure principals' perceptions of counselor roles and satisfaction with counseling services. Thus, a survey was designed by the researchers based on information gleaned from existing research, ASCA role statements, ASCA's National Model, and the Transforming School Counseling Initiative. The items were designed to elicit feedback about counselor roles, overall satisfaction with counseling services, satisfaction with specific counseling service areas, and suggestions for improving counseling services. A panel of three certified principals (one elementary, one middle school/junior high, and one high school) reviewed the items to provide additional feedback and to confirm face validity. The principals were selected to review the survey due to their extensive experience and knowledge of appropriate school counselor roles. Suggested revisions were then incorporated into the final instrument.

The final survey consisted of a total of 28 items. The first group of items asked respondents to provide demographic information (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, work setting, highest degree, counselor to student ratio, geographical region, etc.). The second group of items asked principals to rate overall satisfaction with counselors and

the adequacy of counseling services in specific areas using a 4-point scale ranging from

1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 4 (*very satisfied*). Internal consistency reliability for the

satisfaction with counseling items was .91. Two questions asked principals whether the

school counselor they worked with had previous teaching experience and whether the

administrator had been exposed to any pre-service training related to school counseling

or information about guidance and counseling programs. Finally, two open-ended items

were included: (a) What do you believe are the major roles of a school counselor?; and

(b) What suggestions do you have for how to improve school counseling services?

Procedures

A sampling of 500 certified principals (250 elementary and 250 secondary)

across the U. S. were randomly selected through two national principal association

listservs to receive a solicitation e-mail describing the research and offering the option

of participating in the online survey. The first e-mail solicitation resulted in the return of

183 surveys. Two follow-up e-mails resulted in receiving an additional 120 surveys,

putting the total number of surveys returned over a three-month period at 303, a return

rate of approximately 61%.

<div align="center">Results</div>

The first survey question asked: Overall, how satisfied are principals with the

services their school counselors provide? Principals' overall level of satisfaction with

school counseling services was examined using frequencies and percentages. The

results revealed that 73% of principals reported being somewhat satisfied to very

satisfied with the counseling services in their school. Twenty-seven percent of the

respondents reported that they were somewhat to very dissatisfied with school

counseling services. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to discern

whether satisfaction with counseling services differed across levels. Results revealed

that elementary school principals reported significantly greater satisfaction with

counseling services than either middle school/junior high or high school principals, F(2,

300) = 34.81, $p < .001$, eta^2 = .18. Principal satisfaction with counseling services did not

differ between counselors with or without previous teaching experience.

The second survey question asked: How satisfied are principals with specific

areas of service provided by school counselors? Table 1 outlines principals' responses

by representing frequencies and percentages of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. At least

two thirds of the principals surveyed, reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the

following counseling services: Staff Development, Peer Mediation/Conflict Resolution,

Scheduling/Enrollment, Career Counseling, Special Education Placement,

Testing/Appraisal, Academic Placement/College Preparation, Individual Counseling,

Program Coordination, Group Counseling, Consultation, and Classroom Guidance. At

least one third of the principals surveyed reported being dissatisfied to very dissatisfied

with school counseling services in the areas of Multicultural Counseling/Diversity

Awareness, Program Evaluation/Accountability, Public Relations/Community Outreach,

and Parent Education.

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages for Ratings of Satisfaction with Counseling Service Areas

Service Areas	Frequency		Percentage	
	Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Satisfied
Classroom Guidance	61	242	20	80
Group Counseling	67	236	22	78
Consultation	67	236	22	78
Individual Counseling	73	230	24	76
Program Coordination	73	230	24	76
Academic Planning/ College Preparation	85	218	28	72
Testing/Appraisal	87	216	29	71
Career Counseling	90	213	30	70
Special Ed. Placement	91	212	30	70
Peer Mediation/Conflict Resolution	93	210	31	69
Scheduling/Enrollment	94	209	31	69
Staff Development	97	206	32	68
Parent Education	126	177	42	58
Public Relations & Community Outreach	136	167	45	55
Program Evaluation and Accountability	142	161	47	53
Multicultural Counseling/Diversity Awareness	167	136	55	45

The third survey question asked: What do principals identify as the major roles of school counselors? Responses to this question were organized by developing domains based on raters' independent judgments of response content and a review of current literature related to school counselor role functioning (ASCA, 1999; Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Erford et al., 2003; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Myrick, 2003; Schmidt, 2003; Sink, 2005). One of the researchers (a counselor educator) and two certified principals (one K-8 and one high school) served as raters. Raters reviewed and categorized the responses independently, then met jointly to review the results. Discussion among raters was used to resolve discrepancies in response assignment. Table 2 shows that two thirds of more of the principals identified the following school counselor role domains: Classroom Guidance, Group Counseling, Program Coordination, Consultation, Individual Counseling, Academic Planning/College Preparation, Career Counseling, Multicultural Counseling/Diversity Awareness, Program Evaluation/Accountability, and Public Relations/Community Outreach. Less than two thirds perceived Parent Education, Peer Mediation/Conflict Resolution, Staff Development, Testing/Appraisal, Special Education Placement, Scheduling/Enrollment, or Student Advocate/Leader as major roles for the school counselor.

Table 2

Perceived Major Roles for School Counselors

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Classroom Guidance	280	92%
Group Counseling	272	90%
Program Coordination	264	87%
Consultation	258	85%
Individual Counseling	233	77%
Academic Planning/College Preparation	231	76%
Career Counseling	227	75%
Multicultural Counseling/Diversity Awareness	218	72%
Program Evaluation/Accountability	209	69%
Public Relations/Community Outreach	199	66%
Parent Education	194	64%
Peer Mediation/Conflict Resolution	145	48%
Staff Development	118	39%
Testing/Appraisal	94	31%
Special Education Placement	91	30%
Scheduling/Enrollment	73	24%
Student Advocate/Leader	67	22%

The fourth survey question asked: What suggestions do principals have for improving school counseling services? Principals' responses were organized into several domains using the same procedure as described for the question three. Table 3 outlines sample responses provided by principals within several domains including Multicultural Counseling/Diversity Awareness, Program Evaluation/Accountability, Public Relations/Community Outreach, Parent Education, and Miscellaneous.

Table 3

Sample Responses for Principals' Suggestions for Improving Counseling Services

Multicultural/Diversity Issues

1. …work more with minority students

2. …explore ways to harness resources in the community to help our Hispanic students stay in school

3. …develop groups to promote tolerance and appreciation of diversity

4. …provide workshops for teachers on how to work more effectively with minority at-risk students

Program Evaluation/Accountability

1. …do regular needs assessments and evaluations of counseling services

2. …evaluate what she's doing to see if it's helpful to students

3. …develop some simple checklists so students, teachers, and parents can provide specific feedback on how to improve services

4. …partner with a professor from the local university to develop and conduct some outcome research on guidance and group work

Table 3 (continued)

Public Relations/Community Outreach

1. …let parents and the community know more what school counseling is all about

2. …contact business and community leaders to give them information about the school counseling program and to elicit their support for the school projects

3. …collaborate more with counseling services within the community

4. …use students from the Leadership Class to promote school programs in the community

Parent Education

1. …organize a parent resource center at the school to help parents with computer access and supportive information on parenting issues

2. …use PTO meetings to encourage parent involvement in the guidance program

3. …provide parents with information on how to motivate and promote student learning

4. …offer a support group for parents with children with ADHD

Miscellaneous

1. …spend less time on non-counseling activities

2. …another full-time counselor for our 600 elementary students

3. …clone her so I have another counselor just like her

4. …go back to school to get training about how to work effectively in a school setting

Discussion

This survey research was designed to elicit feedback from principals in the following areas: (a) overall satisfaction with school counseling services, (b) satisfaction with specific counseling service areas, (c) perceived roles for school counselors, and (d) suggestions for improving counseling services. The results of this exploratory survey echo the fact that principals are in a primary position to provide pertinent feedback on school counseling services. According to this study, principals across the U. S. are generally satisfied with school counseling services and report satisfaction in several areas of service provision, including classroom guidance, individual and group counseling, consultation, and program coordination. Satisfaction with services did not differ between counselors with previous teaching experience and those without. These trends are consistent with other research related to counselor functioning and satisfaction with counseling services (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Beesley, 2004; Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Olson & Allen, 1993; Zalaquett, 2005).

Satisfaction ratings were highest for elementary counselors. This may be due to the fact that the elementary setting is more conducive to developing and implementing more traditional comprehensive developmental guidance services (e.g., self-contained classrooms, less emphasis on clerical duties such as scheduling and maintaining and monitoring student transcripts and records, etc.). It may also reflect, to some extent, the reality of school counselor training curricula and continued emphasis on the more traditional roles of counseling, coordination, and consultation.

Despite the fact that principals endorsed overall satisfaction with school counseling services, they also acknowledged the need for improvement in several

specified service areas. These areas included multicultural counseling/diversity awareness, program evaluation/accountability, public relations/community outreach, and parent education.

Encouraging News

It is encouraging that principals in this study demonstrated an awareness of appropriate roles for school counselors, including counseling and guidance, coordination, consultation, accountability, assessment, advocacy, and leadership as well as the need to minimize non-counseling duties and reduce student to counselor ratios. Obviously, administrators and school counselors are trained to work in the school setting and are committed to the overarching goal of meeting the diverse achievement needs of the range of students they serve. To accomplish this worthy mission, school counselors and administrators must be leadership partners invested in building a collaborative relationship reflecting a shared vision (Brock & Ponec, 1998; Davis, 2005; Erford et al., 2003; Hatch & Bowers, 2002; Niebuhr, Niebuhr, & Cleveland, 1999; O'Connor, 2002; Ponec & Brock, 2000; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000; Schmidt, 2003; Sink, 2005). Collaborative relationships, however, require ongoing open dialogue. Scheduling meetings to discuss student issues, school policies, programs, etc.; sharing information about students' progress, needs, and concerns; soliciting administrative feedback on program development and implementation; and cultivating and demonstrating mutual professional and personal respect between principals and school counselors will do much to promote an atmosphere of collaboration and cooperation (Davis; Ponec & Brock).

Implications for Training

The role of school counselor continues to evolve and be redefined (ASCA, 1999; Davis, 2005; Erford et al., 2003; Hines & Fields, 2004; Myrick, 2003; Paisley & Borders, 1995; Schmidt, 2003; Schmidt, Lanier, & Cope; 1999; Sink, 2005). ASCA's National Model for School Counseling Programs (2003) and the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (Education Trust, 2003) provide a synergistic structure for developing, implementing, and maintaining consistent, comprehensive training standards for school counselors. However, school counselors, administrators, teachers, parents, community leaders, state departments of education, and professional organizations must make a concerted effort to work together to develop criteria for revitalized training programs based on evidenced-based research and practice. Thus, the top priorities of university educators must be to (a) utilize school counselors and administrators as advisors and consultants in the process of evaluating and modifying existing training programs, (b) promote professional accountability, and (c) provide school counselors and administrators with the necessary collaborative skills to support each other and foster academic success among all the students they serve (Fitch et al., 2001; Schmidt). Promoting student achievement is a team effort and the success of any comprehensive developmental guidance program depends heavily on support from administrators who, like their counseling colleagues, are invested in the academic, career, and personal/social achievement of all students (Brock & Ponec, 1998; Niebuhr et al., 1999; O'Connor, 2002; Ponec & Brock, 2000).

In order to meet the educational challenges of the 21st century, school counselor and educational administration training faculty need to join forces to provide training that

promotes mutual understanding of the complementary roles and functions of principals and school counselors. The results of this survey revealed that only 17% of the principals had any coursework exposing them to information on school counselor roles or comprehensive guidance programs. Ideally, both administrators and counselors in training should be exposed to at least one course providing cross training related to the essential roles and services of each respective profession. Programs should begin by (a) developing and promoting collaborative training models for principals and school counselors to better prepare them to function as part of a multidisciplinary team, and (b) creating an advisory board composed of practicing school counselors, administrators, teachers, counselor educators, and community representatives to provide a forum for addressing issues related to current educational reform and accountability and to ensure that counselor and administrative training accurately reflects current educational trends and real world demands (Beesley, 2004; Fitch et al., 2001; Schmidt, 2003).

Limitations and Contributions

This study is limited in that its descriptive nature provides only speculative results, and the feedback elicited reflects only principals' perceptions regarding school counseling services. However, it is the first survey in many years to elicit crucial information from principals across the country as to their perceptions of satisfaction with school counseling services. Future research should focus on obtaining information from educational administration and school counselor training programs to investigate the existence or potential for collaborative training opportunities. Also, a nationwide qualitative study targeting principals and school counselors and designed to gather data on counseling program effectiveness and suggestions on optimizing collaboration

among educational professionals to better promote and implement comprehensive developmental guidance models would contribute significantly to existing research.

Conclusions

As this research suggests, there is room for improvement in guidance program service provision. Among the areas of potential focus are the following: (a) the need for comprehensive, well organized guidance programs reflective of the school's mission; (b) the need for collaboration among all educational stakeholders, i.e., administrators, teachers, parents, and community and business leaders; (c) the need to educate administration and other school personnel, the community, and the general public about appropriate roles for school counselors; (d) the need to assess each school and/or district's specific needs; (e) the need to conduct periodic evaluations of program effectiveness by eliciting feedback from parents, students, school personnel, and community partners in order to fine tune service provision; (f) the need to demonstrate via ongoing process and outcome research the value of guidance programs (g) the need for school counselors to serve as educational leaders and advocate for all students; and (h) the need for legislation at state and national levels to mandate the use of comprehensive developmental guidance and counseling curricula as an integral part of the educational process (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2003; Baker & Gerler 2004; Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Davis, 2005; Erford et al., 2003; Fitch et al., 2001; Guerra, 1998a; Gysbers, 2001; Hines & Fields, 2004; Lusky & Hayes, 2001; Myrick, 2003; O'Connor, 2002; Ponec & Brock, 2000; Schmidt, 2003; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000; Sink, 2005).

Expectations for quality school counseling services will continue to remain high. Given this reality, school counselors must take the lead to promote the profession by educating students, parents, school personnel, and the community about appropriate counseling roles. This process of defining these roles could be facilitated with the aid of up-to-date training programs that emphasize not only the traditional school counselor roles of counseling, coordination, consultation, and classroom guidance, but also the roles of advocate, change agent, and educational leader (ASCA, 1999; Bailey et al., 2003; Baker & Gerler, 2004; Ballard & Murgatroyd, 1999; Erford et al., 2003; Hines & Fields, 2004; Muro & Kottman, 1995; Myrick, 2003; Schmidt, 2003; Sink, 2005).

The first school guidance program was developed and implemented by a principal. Today, the survival of comprehensive developmental guidance programs continues to depend, to a large extent, on the support and commitment of administrators (Brock & Ponec, 1998; Niebuhr et al., 1999; O'Connor, 2002; Ponec & Brock, 2000; Wesley, 2001). Furthermore, the only way to optimally serve students is for principals, school counselors, and university educators to join forces to strengthen their collaborative connection. This will ensure the integrity of the profession and the commitment to promote academic, personal, and career achievement among all students. Finally, it is up to administrator and school counselor education programs to provide quality training that emphasizes collaborative, team-approach models.

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