

The Voices of High School Counselors: Lived Experience of Job Stress

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### Abstract

There is a paucity of literature addressing high school counselors' experiences of job stress. Our qualitative phenomenological study adds to the professions' knowledge of job stress as experienced by counselors in large suburban high schools. Our study illustrates the job stress phenomenon in the counselors' own voices, identifies situations (role ambiguity, role conflict, and work overload) contributing to job stress, and discusses implications for future research and practice.

### The Voices of High School Counselors: Lived Experience of Job Stress

Situations involving high external demands and low perceived control and support lead to job stress, and chronic job stress can lead to burnout (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Sauter & Murphy, 1995; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999). Evidence has suggested school counselors regularly experience situations of high demand and low control, due to the complex and diverse nature of the work they perform and the populations with which they work (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Bluestein, 2001; Borders, 2002; Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001; Constantine & Gainor, 2001; Dahir, Sheldon, & Valiga, 1998; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Israelashvili, 1998; Mullis & Edwards, 2001; Parr, Montgomery, & DeBell, 1998; Rowley, Sink, & Macdonald, 2002; Sandhu & Aspy, 2000). Additionally, school counselors often experience a lack of support and a general feeling of low self-efficacy due to role ambiguity, role conflicts, and work overload (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005; Davis & Garrett, 1998; Herr, 2002; Sears & Granello, 2002; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006). These chronically stressful situations lead to school counselors who are at risk for job stress, a precursor to burnout (Herlihy, Gray, & McCollum, 2002; Paisley & McMahon, 2001; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006).

Due to the paucity of literature directly related to describing the nature of job stress among school counseling professionals, our study sought to describe the lived experience of high school counselors undergoing chronic job stress. We conducted interviews with school counselors who have experienced the symptoms of job stress previously identified by research with other professions. We examined these

counselors' experiences regarding demands on their time and on their perceived levels of control over role definition and job activities. We also explored their perceptions of support from administration, parents, and colleagues and how their experience of support, or lack thereof, affected their level of job related stress.

### Research Questions

1. How do counselors' in large high schools (3000+ students) experience job stress (situations of high demand and low control or support)?
2. What job related situations contribute to high school counselors' developing job stress?

### Theoretical Framework

We used the job demand-control-support model as our framework for conceptualizing issues of job stress among school counselors. Karasek's job demand-job control model of stress (JDACS) was developed over 25 years ago and has been researched extensively in a number of countries (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). "The model posits that job strain (stress) results when job-decision latitude (control) is not commensurate with the psychological demands imposed by the job" (Sauter & Murphy, 1995, p. 2). The model was expanded to include the support variable when research indicated low support or isolation (iso-strain) in combination with low control in high demand situations increased the predictive value of the model.

### Methodology

Given the lack of understanding of the phenomenon of job stress as it is experienced by high school counselors, our research was designed to contribute to the knowledge base regarding this experience such that it will assist school counselors and

those who train and supervise school counselors in understanding how job stress develops and is experienced within the context of working in a large suburban high school. Our research was informed by a phenomenological design in an effort to carefully and thoughtfully capture the experiences of these school counselors.

### *Participants*

Due to literature indicating school counselors in urban settings, those working with high school populations (Butler & Constantine, 2005), and those with large (300+) caseloads tend to report higher rates of burnout symptomology (Kendrick, Chandler, & Hatcher, 1994; Paisley & McMahon, 2001), we chose to interview school counselors who fell within these parameters. Initial interviews were one hour to ninety minutes in length. Member checks were conducted by the first author e-mailing each participant first their transcribed interviews and then the preliminary manuscript as a whole for review and feedback to ensure the participants' experiences were accurately reflected. Participants e-mailed back their comments, which were incorporated into the final report.

Four high school counselors from two high schools were interviewed who work in the suburbs of a very large southwestern city in the United States, from a convenience sample whom we knew professionally. We used purposeful sampling to choose school counselors who represented male (1) and female (3) perspectives, a range of experience (a few months to over 20 years), and both African-American (2) and Caucasian (2) ethnicities. Two of the participants were in their thirties, one having less than one year experience as a school counselor and the other in her second year of school counseling. Two of the participants are in their fifties, having fourteen and

twenty-five years' experience. Forty to sixty percent of the students in the schools where the participants work represent ethnic minorities and one-third to one-half are of lower socioeconomic status, as identified by the counselors interviewed. Each participant possesses a bachelor's degree in education, at least three years teaching experience, a master's degree in counseling, and licensure as a school counselor in the state of their employment. Participants volunteered and were informed they could withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities.

### *Data Collection*

The first author conducted in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol with high school counselors who directly experienced the phenomena of job stress. The counselors chose to be interviewed in their offices. The interviews were audio taped, and the tapes were coded so as not to reveal the identities of the participants and transcribed by the first author. Following transcription, the tapes were destroyed in accordance with our institution's institutional review board approval and the American Counseling Association's code of ethics.

The interview protocol included open-ended questions in order to encourage the participants to describe what was meaningful and salient to them in their own experiences of job related stress. The areas chosen for exploration were drawn from the existing literature on job stress. The protocol included seven questions about the participants' backgrounds regarding their journey to becoming school counselors, as well as their training and experience as school counselors; nine questions regarding their experience of external demands on their time, the amount of control they feel they have regarding these demands, and the level and source(s) of support they experience

related to reduction of job stress (How do you think administrators, parents, teachers, and students perceive your role as a school counselor? Are you aware of others' perceptions regarding your role changing over time, if so, please describe in what ways this has happened? How are others' perceptions consistent or inconsistent with your view of your role? How do others' expectations impact your stress level at work? In what ways do you feel you have control or lack control over how your role is defined? What would you change about how your role is defined, if you could? Describe in detail the ways you contribute to the school as a counselor. In what ways are your contributions acknowledged or supported by your colleagues, administrators, teachers, parents, or students? How has your experience of support or lack thereof impacted your level of stress?); and ten questions regarding workload and specific situations leading to increases in stress levels (Please describe the workload you experience, how you manage it, and your reactions to what is expected of you. How does the workload affect your stress level, emotional state, level of energy and motivation? In general, what types of situations lead to your experiencing stress on the job? Think of an occasion when you experienced stress on the job as a school counselor and describe the experience in detail. In what ways has your stress level at work impacted your personal life and health? In what ways has your stress level at work impacted the way you approach your job? How do you manage stress? What are your observations of how your school counseling colleagues manage their stress levels? If you had a magic wand and could change something about your job which would result in less stress what would that be?).

Prior to use, the interview protocol was reviewed by six professional school counselors not associated with our study in order to gain and incorporate feedback on its clarity and reliability for gathering the desired data. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, follow up questions and prompts varied depending on the individual interview situation.

### *Data Analysis*

The transcribed interviews were studied by two researchers independently using comparative methods to identify core themes shared by the school counselors regarding their experiences of job stress. Codes were developed by the first author from existing literature on job stress to structure initial coding efforts. Subsequently, using open coding (Patton, 2002), each transcribed interview was read individually by the researchers and coded for themes by marking passages, writing memos in the margins, and comparing each transcript to the others. The themes from each transcript were grouped and sorted by thematic groupings shared by two or more transcribed interviews.

We employed deductive analysis of the data to note themes resonating with the JDACS model; however inductive analysis was also employed to determine any themes emerging from the data that deviated from the current literature on job stress, particularly as it relates to school counselors. Researcher triangulation was incorporated by having two researchers independently review and code the data, as previously described. Following researcher triangulation, (Johnson, 1997), the themes agreed upon by the researchers were documented using low inference descriptors in order to capture the essence of the lived experience of the school counselors sampled. The

initial written documentation of core themes was shared with the participants in an effort to gain their feedback regarding the accuracy of the written representation of their experiences. Feedback from the participants was incorporated into the final report of these findings.

### *Credibility and Trustworthiness*

Researcher triangulation, where multiple researchers analyzed the data, strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Additionally, member checks were employed to ensure the essence of the participants' lived experiences was communicated accurately. Through a process called pattern matching, we attempted to identify patterns or themes in how job stress is experienced by high school counselors. This was done in order to describe more fully the commonalities between the varied participant experiences.

Considering that providing a deep and meaningful description of the participant's lived experience of the phenomenon being studied is the primary goal of phenomenological research, generalization is not a primary concern. However, given that the sample reflected in our research represents the experiences of a diverse group of high school counselors working in large suburban high schools with a significant population from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in a large southwestern city, our understanding of the experiences of other school counselors from similar contexts can be informed by our study's findings. Our study is limited in that it relies solely on self-report to understand the job stress phenomenon.

## Results

The themes identified by literature and supported through our individual analysis of each transcript include situations of job stress, role ambiguity, role conflict, and job overload. However, we found considerable overlap between these themes, resulting in discussions regarding how to best code certain data.

Job stress includes situations involving high external demands from principals, teachers, parents, or students and low personal control regarding how their time is spent. Role ambiguity exists when the counselor's perception of his or her role and that of external stakeholders (principals, parents, teachers, and students) are inconsistent. School counselors experience role conflict when they are expected to complete two or more tasks simultaneously, often lacking the necessary resources to complete their expected tasks. When school counselors are simply given too much to realistically accomplish within an allotted amount of time, they experience job overload. In order to understand the essence of the experiences of the high school counselors interviewed, we have documented their experiences in their own words. Hearing their voices illustrates a picture of their day to day lived realities of job stress.

### *Job Stress*

Job stress is defined as situations involving high external demands and low perceived control or support (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Quick, Quick, Nelson, & Hurell, 1997). The school counselors we interviewed discussed experiencing stress due to constant changes in district policies, often in response to new federal mandates. Dot talked about a recent district meeting she went to,

Decisions are made someplace else, but where everything really happens is right here with these kids, you know, on a day to day basis . . . it concerns me . . . how much thought they really put into things. And I think that's a federal thing. No Child Left Behind and those kinds of things . . . how much thought do these people really put into this before they . . . impose this on us?

District mandates at times give the impression of having included the counselors in decision making, but counselors sometimes experience their participation in the process as one more way the district is pulling them away from their counseling duties, usually for the purpose of avoiding blame if the policy is not successful. Bob talked about wanting to change that process.

I don't like to serve on committee after committee after committee. (pause). . . I think . . . our administration has become . . . if the committee makes the decision nobody can get the blame for a bad decision. And [the district administrator] can get the credit for a good decision, if the committee makes it, then 'well the committee made it, and I didn't make that decision, so I'm not the bad guy.

Stress resulting from federal and district mandates is compounded by building administrators in a similar manner.

According to the interviewees, new, and often inadequately tested, educational theories are implemented as policy in school buildings resulting in more upheaval without fully exploring how these changes may negatively affect the students. The counselors we interviewed are paired with assistant principals (AP) who share the same students in "houses," in an effort to help students in large schools feel more connected by providing them with smaller learning communities. Carole reported that working in

the houses with administrators resulted in more tension. Dot discussed her belief “that a counselor should *never* have their office next to the principal because [students] associate (pause) you with, um, discipline.” Bob stated his belief that this pairing is negatively affecting counselors’ ability to work with students,

I think the students view us as an AP, and that this is a bad office to go to. Before . . . I would say maybe there was a 50-50 chance that they would say that it was a bad office to go to, that I never saw you because I was a good kid. Even as a counselor, I think now it’s probably 100% I never see you because I’m a, a good kid. (Pause)

The school structure along with non-counseling related duties exacerbates the role ambiguity, role conflict, and work overload counselors’ experience.

District and building administration often place non-counseling related duties on counselors without supplying adequate support. Carole discussed her belief that administrators give counselors jobs the administrators do not want to do,

I know now they think that we . . . need to do more . . . duties, like lunch duty. They probably will have us doing bus duty soon and duties that we really shouldn’t have because of the discipline part of it. But now they’re thinking, hey [counselors] need to do more of what [administrators are] doing. . . We can’t discipline students because that takes away from our relationship with our students. So truly they’re looking at they need help, and we’re the ones to back them up . . . You can take this off my workload . . . not realizing that our workload is increasing as theirs’ are increasing.

Dot reported being concerned that although these extra responsibilities, such as testing, are given to the counselor, they are not acknowledged in the counselor's evaluation.

Because I have been responsible for testing on this campus, that's a big stressor. And being the perfectionist that I am, it takes a great toll on me. . . . It would be something that I would change . . . because . . . I spend a month on something I'm not even getting evaluated on.

Some of the responsibilities that are imposed on counselors result in increased stress because they seem to be meaningless clerical duties, according to Carole,

We've been doing reports . . . instead of working on our kids . . . Show me something that you're using these statistics for . . . Show us an after school program that you're using these reports for. Show us *something*. Don't just having us do this so you can put together a nice chart. And that's what you did. You put together a chart.

The lack of support counselors experience demonstrates that those in power in schools do not value the school counseling function. This sends a message to parents, teachers, and students that school counseling role is not respected by some administrators.

Situations of high demand and low support (respect or value for the school counselor's role and point of view) appear to result in high levels of stress. Bob stated his belief that "parents have dropped in their respect for counselors. I think 10, 10-15 years ago, counselors had a higher esteem in the school than they do now." When a counselor deals with parents, kids, or administrators that are not happy, generally resulting from the counselor following a district or school policy that he/she has no

control over, regarding calculation of grade point or rank, class placement, or schedule changes, the counselor's stress level increases. Bob identified that his stress results from,

confrontations with parents, confrontations with administrators . . . Uh, that could happen five times a day. That could happen one time a month. . . . There's absolutely no telling at all (long pause). . . . Parent comes in and . . . student's having trouble with a teacher. Parent wants the kid out of the class without discussing with the teacher or without discussing with the associate principal or hearing both the student and the teacher's side of the story. And it's a demand at that time, 'Get 'em out and do it immediately, if not we're going upstairs.' And that kind of stuff never sits very easily with me. . . . It makes me anxious even though that doesn't really involve me. It's between the student and the teacher and the parent. I'm just thrown into the middle of the mix, and I'm supposed to solve the problem for all three of them.

Externally imposed demands, whether from the federal government, district or building administrators, or colleagues, parents, and students, coupled with little de facto control or adequate support result in job stress that is illustrated in the areas of role ambiguity, role conflict, and job overload experienced by school counselors daily.

### *Role Ambiguity*

Role ambiguity is "an incomplete sort of role sending, where the information necessary to carry out one's job is not available or incomplete" (Thompson & Powers, 1983, p. 239). Ambiguity begins with the school counselor's beliefs about his or her role.

School counselors, like Dot, are often motivated to enter the field because they believe they can make a difference.

I think just knowing that I enjoyed being with kids. . . . I'd known since I was a little thing that I had a *tremendous* amount of empathy . . . and just thought that that I could be effective. Helping, you know, just listening to kids, helping them deal and get through things 'cause you know adolescence . . . is a tough time.

Idealistic prospective school counselors enter graduate school where their preparation is focused on counseling theories and skills, rather than the day to day duties they will be expected to do. Carole, a recent graduate, discussed her lack of preparation,

(Laughs) Truly . . . in graduate school, it didn't prepare me to become a school counselor. . . all our preparation was in the counseling skills and I truly loved it, got into it. We did this role playing . . . it really had me believing I'll go and make a difference. I'm truly going to counsel these kids. . . . I even e-mailed the professor and said, uh you need to teach a class in how to change schedules (laugh) . . . she actually said, you know, principals are supposed to do master schedules. We weren't supposed to do those jobs. And so I was like, o.k. I'll just tell the principal you're supposed to do the master schedule when I start workin' as a counselor. That didn't happen.

Dot, a more experienced counselor, remembers a similar dissonance upon entering the real world of school counseling.

The experience that I had in [graduate school] . . . was good because I actually got to sit in front of some adolescents, and talk with them, and practice listening skills. But as far as actual day to day work that goes on in an office . . . I can

remember when I got to be a counselor saying, wow they never taught me any of this stuff in grad school. (laughs) Like hello . . . where were they? (laughs) You know it was all the theory and everything

Bob emphasized that his “training was very good in the theories, in the actual application of counseling students,” but “in the job itself . . . there’s an unbelievable amount of administrative jobs. . . which was . . . not taught at all in grad school.” Dot suggested school counselor preparation programs should make some changes,

I think maybe instead of . . . focusing so much on the true counseling . . . looking at what a real counselor in a high school really does, because I had no clue prior to getting into the situation. Really, I thought I was gonna get to sit and be a little therapist, listen to the kids. And . . . that isn’t the case at all . . . I mean there are so many hats that we wear that, um, you’re constantly switching out of one position, one role to another role, and you don’t even realize that you’re doing it . . . the constant moving around. (pause)

The variety of jobs experienced by school counselors is another area illustrative of existing role ambiguity.

School counselors’ duties often are not clearly defined. Carole expressed her exasperation with the lack of direction. “If the district would actually just provide us with, hey these are your duties . . . instead of every week we get something else added to our list of duties.” Bob, a veteran counselor, reported that counselors are,

pulled out a lot of times for things I don’t feel is the counselor’s responsibility. Like lunch room duty . . . Going over and working on a transcript for the computer program so that it looks correct.

Preparation for and administration of state mandated testing has become a source of stress with the increasing emphasis on school accountability. Ann, a first year school counselor, described the expectations that she experienced,

Prepare the kids for [state mandated testing], and make sure that they take it and pass it, which I don't think is, a lot of times, the counselor's job. We may be able to set it up . . . then we can talk to the kids and encourage them to come to tutorials. But we can't go pick them up, and drop them off, and stand at the door to make sure that they are doing it.

Creating and maintaining a master schedule, scheduling students and making changes when students, parents, teachers, or administrators deem it is necessary are inappropriate duties which place huge time demands on many high school counselors. Carole discussed her frustration with scheduling.

Even administrators [believe] counselors do this paperwork, testing, changing schedules, and that's how they perceive us. I think we need to get our image out there a little more, hey we actually do counseling on this campus also.

Carole described her frustration that her view of how she should spend her time and the teachers' views are so different. "The teachers think [counselors are] here to see that [their] schedules are not messed up and that [they] don't have 40 students in a class."

Dot expressed feeling undervalued when counselors are,

seen sometimes, especially by teachers . . . that we kinda sit around and eat bon bons and paint our nails . . . and that *isn't* true. Uh, in the 25 years that I've been a counselor, I've *never* had two days that were exactly the same. Usually when I walk in the door I hit the ground running and, and it doesn't stop, you know, there

are some days that are less stressful than others, but they're pretty much all, you know, gung ho all the time.

Bob also believes teachers, parents and administrators often view the counselor as the person who will relieve them of their responsibilities.

Teachers see [the counselor's role] as a problem solver for the kids. Parents see it as . . . my kid isn't doing well with that teacher, fix the teacher. Get me a different teacher. Administrators see it as (pause) one of them in many ways, but also one that is not one of them. You're on their side when they need you. You're a non entity when . . . they don't have that need. I think when they have a problem with a teacher or a student, or they need help from downtown working on curriculum, and they could use you, they utilize you. Otherwise . . . you're just a body floating around the school. Go do something else until I call on you to help me again.

Dot discussed parents as "think[ing] that we are therapists, and we're not. We are (pause) guidance counselors, and we have the training to do those kinds of things but not the time to do it." The confusion over what a school counselor should be doing results in multiple external demands on school counselors coming from administrators, teachers, parents, and students that are often in conflict with the school counselors' understanding from their didactic and experiential training of their role on the school campus.

### *Role Conflict*

Role conflict is "the simultaneous occurrence of two or more role pressures so that compliance with one would make it more difficult to comply with the other"

(Thompson & Powers, 1983, p. 239). It has been found to be a bigger problem with high school counselors rather than those in elementary schools (Culbreth et al., 2005). Role conflict often overlaps with and contributes to work overload. Ann discussed the multiple conflicting demands on her time,

[W]e are supposed to be on duty, but while we're on duty we are supposed to be available in the office to the parents who may be calling in. And with students, we are supposed to see every single one, and make sure they're back in class or disciplined. If they don't come to school we're supposed to find them and get them back at school . . . we have those expectations.

She went on to explain how, as a new school counselor, she is trying to manage the fact that she has no control over her time due to competing externally imposed demands.

[O]nce you get started on something then that's when somebody walks in. Well, I don't turn them away. Obviously, if they're here then I go ahead and see them. . . . You know, the last couple of occasions it's been an hour on one student, so the day is, uh, shot.

Bob used the metaphor of a firefighter to illustrate how, as an experienced school counselor he deals with the constant demands on his time.

As soon as you finish one task, there's another task waiting for you at that time. I put out fires all the time. A kid comes in, it's a fire. A parent comes in, that's a fire. You become a firefighter the whole time. There's not much (pause) time that you have control over what's going on in your office. The lack of control is the

people who come and visit and walk in the door at any moment, any time, any place . . .

Ann reported that her “biggest stress is if I can’t help them right then.” Carole described the stress of the onslaught of assignments and requests from different people, all of whom feel their needs are most pressing:

everyone is giving us so much stuff to do with deadlines . . . They’re [administrators and teachers] constantly harassing us saying hey we need this, we need that, and then those counselors still didn’t do this and that. And it’s really stressful because (pause) . . . we can do it but we want them to understand that you’re not the only people that have the high demands on us. We also have to stop whatever we’re doing and deal with our students *when* they have issues. So, it’s, it’s very stressful.

The constant demands on school counselors’ time results in a situation where they are exposed continuously to chronic stress on the job.

High school counselors use a variety of methods to attempt to keep up with all of the demands on their time. Bob described how his campus designated one counselor for administrative duties with a lower caseload, but they ended up neglecting their students,

The administrative stuff I’d love to pass on to the administration, you know. Yes the counselor can be involved, but that counselor should be a full time administrator then. . . . And we’ve seen that in lead counselors before where lead counselors went down to just a hundred kids and end up doing 90% administrative, and they left their hundred kids behind. They often drifted off to

other counselors who were there more often, as opposed to off campus or off in meetings all the time.

Carole described how some counselors try to multi-task in order to meet the non-counseling demands and still pursue their counseling related duties.

We stand in the cafeteria and talk to [students], because see, we are forced to do duty. . . We walk around and say, 'how's everything going'. . . I target my kids that I know are doing poorly in school. 'Hey how's it going' . . . and they shockingly start talking to us because they can't believe we're talking to them about something other than discipline. . . We have to [reach out to them in a more positive way] because they have to know, hey these ladies truly care about us. I think we're catching them off guard.

However, the pull school counselors feel to reach out to the students, to make a difference for those who really need adult intervention to get them on track academically, socially, or emotionally often ends up being placed on hold until non-counseling demands are met.

Dot fantasized about all she could accomplish, if she could relieve herself of some of the externally imposed non-counseling demands.

I would have time to run 15 groups, and see every one of my kids who was failing every six weeks. . . . I would call parents myself more, go to parent conferences, *call* parent conferences when I thought that parents needed to be involved . . .

Working at a large high school with 40% or more of the student population coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, results in an increased need for school counseling prevention and intervention programs. When school counselors in these schools feel

pulled away from their counseling functions, as Carole described, they feel they are not meeting the needs of the same students who first motivated them to become school counselors, needs such as,

more programs for the students, because we really don't have much out there. We need to focus on tutorials for the kids . . . There's so much more that we can do that we're not having time to do. More guidance lessons in the classroom. . . We're just getting that together because of the fact that we've been swamped . . . [T]here's so much more that we can be doing as counseling duties, but ultimately we're tied up with schedules. . . . We need to do it, especially for our population. (pause) On a regular day . . and even after the first month of school we're still spending, *after* the first month, at least 50% of our time on schedules, and that's not exaggerating at all, in some sort of way dealing with schedules. Some days it may be the whole day.

Conflicting demands on the counselor's time often results in the counselor feeling overwhelmed and frustrated that they do not have the resources necessary to complete the jobs they are assigned, whether appropriate to their role or not.

### *Job Overload*

Job overload exists "when there is a sense on the part of the individual that there is too much to realistically accomplish given existing time and resource constraints" (Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006, p. 441). The amount of work needing to be done, coupled with limited time, energy, and support, often results in chronically stressful situations for high school counselors. Counselors, like Ann, often feel there isn't enough time to accomplish everything.

I think I stress *every* day about what I didn't get done . . . and I have to say, you know, I'm not even worrying about that. . . . Some days I feel like, you know, I'm gonna stop trying, and then the next day, I'm right back.

As a more experienced school counselor, Bob reported similar experiences,

The workload shows up the minute you walk in the door. I've had plans every week to get to something, and I never seem to get to it because a kid will take up 5 minutes, a kid will take up 4 hours, a suicide will take up 2 days. You may need to go in and be doing guidance, and that can take up 3 days. So, I've given up for the most part planning doing things in a timely manner for myself. . . . So I don't have that control over my time as much as I wish that I had.

Assignments given by administrators with unrealistic time frames without knowing the purpose behind the activities are stressful for Carole and often feel like a waste of time.

The last minute reports that you do with, you know, how many failures you have in English, math, science . . . we need it by tomorrow . . . You're stressed out trying to do it, and then you're trying to figure out what are they going to do with this afterwards . . . because we would take something like that and try to build a program around it. . . . And I think that truly stresses me out more than doing the report.

At other times counselors feel like they are wasting time because policies set by administrators may not be enforced. When the counselors cannot rely on administrators as a resource to support them, it results in more stress. Carole discussed feeling undermined when she was not supported by her administrators,

Once we set something in place that this is a policy that this is your schedule . . . especially when it comes down to the schedule changes, the way [counselors] lack control is that when we say no and then it's not backed up by an administrator, and we're forced to do it. We lack control right now because our kids say hey she's not the final say so . . . we can go . . .

Whether counselors feel they are wasting time during the day or simply going from one activity to the next attempting to get everything done, each of the counselors we interviewed, like Ann, reported trying to make up the time after normal work hours,

I was here almost every day until after five. And I need to . . . I chose to go home . . . 'cause it's not gonna get done. . . . I was here some Saturdays, some Sundays, feeling like I'm not getting enough done.

Some counselors feel that the limited amount of time is only part of the problem. The amount of work also contributes to their stress.

Counselors often feel they simply have too much work to realistically accomplish and that the people asking them to take on more work do not understand the counselors' workload. Carole explained that she attempts to prioritize the non-counseling related work, so she can still see the students she needs to see, often resulting in working late,

[E]very Thursday we're handed something new to do. O.K., and the way I handle it is I need to know the deadlines for everything, most important to least . . . and then I work from deadlines. . . . I pace it knowing that . . . I have students that come in that need to talk every now and then. And sometimes I'm here until six

or seven o'clock . . . I would like to see everyone's duties truly because I'm like, I bet [the counselors'] list would just tip over a scale.

Ann discussed her frustration with the amount of work,

It's just so much. I still feel like every day that I haven't gotten something done.

And then I think that's just the job. . . Towards the job, some days I, I feel like it's, it's overwhelming. Other days I feel like I almost accomplished something, so it's almost up and down, a rollercoaster.

She also articulated a concern all the counselors interviewed expressed about the size of their caseloads. The counselors interviewed average approximately 450 students on their caseloads, 40% to 60% being from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, therefore generally having more counseling needs.

Um, I think even with the reducing to the 200, even with the same population, it would still be much more manageable. . . . (pause) I guess if we didn't have to wear so many hats that would help also.

The large workload coupled with limited time is only exacerbated when other resources are also lacking.

Counselors who do not have support staff to help manage the workload often end up feeling more burdened by clerical duties. New counselors also rely on experienced counselors for ongoing guidance in how to manage the workload. Carole discussed losing this support when her school moved to counselors being paired with principals.

[W]e did have our paraprofessional staff who truly helped us. I didn't realize until this year, how much they helped us. They eliminated 40% of our work. And now

we're having to do that. And [the counselors] were all in one suite, and we could always consult with each other. Now we have to walk the campus to look for each other, or call on the cell phone. . . . I didn't realize what I was missing . . . in terms of the support.

Bob recognized that new counselors in particular feel the weight of job overload because they do not know how to manage it.

New people are so stressed out that they don't even know up from down when they hit . . . certain times of the year, that they just have glazed over eyes, too much information, too much stuff to do, don't know which task to attempt to begin with, which one to prioritize.

Counselors interviewed indicate consistently feeling overwhelmed by the demands on their time due to both the number of students and the depth of student needs and unrealistic expectations by administrators of what can be accomplished with very limited resources, leading to their attempts to work longer and on their own time, ultimately resulting in chronic job stress.

### Discussion

School counselors' experiences of job stress, illustrated through the words of our interviewees, indicate initial experiences of job stress result from the cognitive dissonance they experience between their preparation as school counselors and their actual day-to-day job realities. Role ambiguity results when there is not a clear understanding of the school counselor's role. School counselors often come into the profession with their own idealized version of counseling. Their graduate school preparation is rooted in theory and practice of counseling with little consideration for the

day to day tasks they will be asked to perform. Additionally, school districts often do not have clearly identified counseling duties, leaving administrators who have little, if any, understanding of the school counseling function to assign duties they think are appropriate such as testing, scheduling, and monitoring class sizes, among others. Administrators, teachers, and parents often have conflicting beliefs about the school counselor's role, resulting in an overwhelming demand on the counselor's time with limited resources.

Overlap exists in the everyday manifestations of role ambiguity, role conflict, and work overload that together create situations of high external demands and low control or support, leading to job stress for high school counselors. Job stress is associated with external demands from administrators, teachers, parents, and students, who all think their needs are most important. School counselors face such challenges as: limited human resources due to high counselor student ratios, lack of paraprofessional help, marginal support of administrators, and poor parent and teacher cooperation; limited monetary resources for adequate program funding aimed at students from low socioeconomic backgrounds or funds for adequate counseling staff; and limited time to complete their assigned job duties, whether appropriate or not.

#### *Implications for Research and Practice*

Future studies would add to our understanding by triangulating data sources through fieldwork and interviews with colleagues or administrators who work with school counselors in order to gain a broader perspective of the job stress phenomenon. Additional research exploring the phenomenon of school counselor burnout as it relates to job stress would help complete the developmental cycle of burnout among school

counselors. It is also important for professional school counselors to understand how job stress affects the individuals suffering from it as well as the organizations and populations they serve. Future research also needs to explore the variables which may help prevent development of job stress or moderate the effects of job stress among school counselors.

In order to decrease the cognitive dissonance experienced by new school counselors, our interviewees indicated that school counselor education programs should make adjustments to more closely reflect real life demands experienced by school counselors, rather than relying solely on teaching theory and counseling skills. Additionally, since administrators tend to make decisions regarding how school counselors spend their time, our research indicates administrators in training and current educational administrators would benefit from information regarding the role and appropriate duties for school counselors. Providing information to parents and students regarding the appropriate role of the counselor may lessen the burden on counselors expected to do therapy with students or who are expected to change schedules in order to facilitate the parent, student, administrator or teacher from having to address interpersonal conflicts. Although counselors can facilitate the explanation of how to use testing data to inform teaching or need for tutoring and can facilitate scheduling through academic advising, duties such as organizing testing and developing a master schedule should be conducted by administrators, and schedule changes or re-shuffling students to level classes could be completed by trained clerical staff answering to an administrator. Finally, lower caseloads, particularly for counselors working with students

from lower SES backgrounds with more needs, would be helpful in lessening the demands and making the workload more realistic for these counselors.

School counselors can advocate for proper role assignment by providing information to administrators and the school board regarding appropriate duties and the demonstrated impact of school counseling on academic achievement and student retention. The manner in which advocacy may occur is, of course, dependent on the unique culture of the district and the school itself. Some states have laws mandating that school counselors are engaged in development and management of comprehensive school counseling programs; however, some administrators are not even aware of the law. Providing copies of the law and information from the American School Counseling Association about school counseling may help pave the way for school counselors to complete their mission. Ideally, advocacy efforts would be coordinated by the district's administrator supervising school counselors, when one exists. If the district supervisor for counselors does not seem to advocate for proper role assignments for school counselors, then the counselors themselves may need to organize a grass roots effort to educate their building administrators, students and parents, first.

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