

Supervision of School Counselors: The SAAFT Model

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Abstract

This article provides a description of a qualitative study of supervisees' experiences of supervision in the Professional Academic Response Model (PARM) program, a supervision intervention/program designed for school counselors. Themes from individual interviews included: (a) the supervisee's relationship with the supervisor, (b) the supervisee's relationship with the student, (c) the supervisee's professional role as a school counselor and (d) the supervisee's professional identity as a school counselor. These findings underscore the need for additional research in the field that specifically addresses school counselor supervision.

Keywords: school counselor, supervision, support, advocacy, professionalism, Professional Academic Response Model (PARM)

Supervision of School Counselors: The SAFFT Model

In the mid-seventies, the American Association of Counseling and Development (AACD), now known as the American Counseling Association (ACA), investigated the status of school counseling supervision in the United States. Through their investigation, they determined that “proper supervision of school counselors is lacking at best and non-existent at its worst” (AACD, 1989, p. 20). They concluded that without supervision, the future of the school counseling profession was at risk. Further investigation of the status of school counseling supervision resulted in a number of national (Borders & Usher, 1992; Page et al., 2001) and state surveys (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Roberts & Borders, 1994; Schmidt & Barret, 1983; Sutton & Page, 1994; Wilson & Remley, 1987) related to the topic.

As a result of these studies, benefits of supervision of school counselors were identified as enhancement of professional development (Agnew et al., 2000; Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Henderson & Lampe, 1992; Roberts & Borders, 1994; Sutton & Page, 1994), provision of professional support (Agnew et al., 2000; Crutchfield & Borders, 1997; Henderson & Lampe, 1992; Roberts & Borders, 1994), development of counseling skills (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Page et al., 2001; Sutton & Page, 1994) integration of appropriate responses to client concerns (Page et al., 2001; Sutton & Page, 1994), improvement in professional relationships (Agnew et al., 2000; Henderson & Lampe, 1992), formulation of treatment plans (Sutton & Page, 1994), and refinement of consultation skills (Benshoff & Paisley, 1996).

Obstacles that prevent school counselors from receiving supervision included lack of release time (Agnew et al., 2000; Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Sutton & Page,

1994), cost (Boyd & Walter, 1975; Sutton & Page, 1994), and the obstacle cited most often: lack of access to trained supervisors (Agnew et al., 2000; Benshoff & Paisley, 1996; Crutchfield & Borders, 1997; Henderson & Lampe, 1992; Page et al., 2001; Sutton & Page, 1994). Conclusions drawn from previous research indicate that: (a) school counselors want supervision; (b) most school counselors do not receive supervision.

As a result of these studies and the increased attention, several models of school counselor supervision were proposed (Agnew et al., 2000; Benshoff & Paisley, 1996; Borders, 1991; Boyd & Walter, 1975; Henderson & Lampe, 1992; Luke & Bernard, 2006; Peace, 1995). An empirical study of one of these models, the Professional Assessment Response Model (*PARM*; Henderson & Gysbers, 1998; Henderson & Lampe, 1992), showed that this model could significantly contribute to the profession and address the expressed needs of school counselors regarding supervision.

A thorough description of the *PARM* supervision model is beyond the scope of this article, but has been well documented elsewhere (Henderson & Gybers, 1998). A brief description is offered to provide context. The *PARM* was designed to address the unique needs of school counselors by incorporating concepts from developmental counselor supervision models (Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Stoltenberg, 1981), developmental teacher supervision models (Glickman, 1981; Sergiovanni, 1984), and management supervision (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2001).

Accomplished school counselors within a district are trained to provide supervision using the *PARM* through the use of a 5-step delivery process, including pre-observation, observation, data analysis, provision of feedback, and analysis of the

supervision session (Henderson & Gysbers, 1998). Supervisors introduce the concept that professionalism is comprised of the dual constructs of (a) competence, the degree to which a supervisee is able to meet performance standards, and (b) commitment, or the attitudes the supervisee brings to his or her work. The supervisors use these constructs to determine the level of professionalism the supervisee demonstrates and to develop appropriate responses to the supervisee (Henderson & Gysbers). Anecdotally, supervisors using the PARM model previously indicated that “benefits include respect from counselors, more open relationships with counselors, and a method for carrying out a more clearly identified professional role” (Henderson & Lampe, 1992, p. 154).

Method

The first author (primary investigator, PI) used a mixed research method to explore the experiences of professional school counselors receiving supervision under the PARM model and to develop a model that offers an explanation of their experience. For purposes of this article, only the qualitative portion of the original study will be presented. The PI employed qualitative grounded theory to identify emerging themes and how those themes interrelate to form a theoretical framework that explain the supervisory experience of school counselors (Patton, 2002).

Participants

The PI specifically selected a school district in the Southwest United States that is known to provide supervision for school counselors based on the PARM model. The PI believed that school counselors working within this district would provide information-rich cases regarding their experiences of having received or provided supervision based on the PARM model (Patton, 2002). After IRB approval, the Director of Guidance sent

an e-mail communication to all school counselors in the district informing them of the study. A week later, the PI sent an invitational e-mail to all the school counselors requesting their participation. Those counselors interested in participating in the interview portion of the study notified the PI through e-mail. A total of thirty-five school counselors volunteered to participate in the interviews. From that pool of volunteers, the PI developed a matrix of characteristics to consider in order to select 12 participants for the study (Patton, 2002). Characteristics considered when selecting participants included years of experience as a school counselor, ethnicity, and having an equal number of representatives from each school level (see Appendix A). Eleven of the participants were female and one was male, but only female descriptors are used to protect the identity of the single male participant.

Data Collection

This study involved an in-depth description of the supervision of school counselors using the PARM model, as experienced by a select sample of school counselors. This process began with in-depth personal interviews of each of the 12 participants, followed by member checking (Patton, 2002). The PI scheduled mutually convenient times to meet and individually interview the participants. Each audio-taped interview lasted approximately one hour. Nine of the participants chose to meet in their own offices. Three chose to meet off campus; two for convenience and one to insure that her supervisor did not know of her participation.

The participants' actual words about their experience of the phenomenon under investigation were the data for this study. The PI employed the use of a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide designed to give voice to the participants' experiences with

supervision and provide a framework for the interviews. It also allowed for follow-up questions for clarification (Patton, 2002). The PI began each interview with a Grand Tour, or open ended question, allowing the participants to direct the interview (Siegle, 2007). This Grand Tour introductory question was “How would you describe your experience of supervision while employed at this district?” The interview guide also included invitations for participants to add any comments about their supervision experience that had not already been addressed, allowing them opportunities to describe their experiences without being constrained by the researcher’s specific questions (Patton, 2002). See Appendix B for a copy of the interview guide.

Data Analysis

After transcribing each audio taped interview in its entirety, the PI employed an inductive stance consistent with grounded theory tradition. The PI initiated a preliminary coding system of breaking down the data into discrete units of information, which led to identification and conceptual labeling of those units (Merriam, 1998). Throughout the process of open coding, the PI identified meaning chunks within the raw data as ideas, patterns, and topics began to emerge. Grouping concepts together yielded a total of 33 general categories. Axial coding, or the regrouping and linking categories, was then employed to condense the data and to discover connections between the categories. Five general themes resulted from this process. Constant comparative analysis, used throughout the process, and consultation condensed the five themes into four. After analyzing the first round of interviews, the PI determined that saturation was achieved because the major themes were being repeated and no new themes were emerging (Patton, 2002). The PI employed a member checking process by requesting that the

participants review the data to clarify themes. Therefore, the next step entailed member checking, a process which involves asking participants to verify the findings from their interviews in order to clarify themes (Merriam, 1998). This was accomplished through a member checking process that involved by e-mailing a description of the emergent themes to the participants and asking them to clarify if these themes matched their experiences (Merriam, 1998).

Results

Supervision serves to immerse supervisees in a professional culture where they learn and adopt attitudes, values, and problem solving strategies representative of their profession (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006). The school counselors in this study, hereafter referred to as supervisees, described their experience of supervision using the PARM model as characterized by four themes: (a) the supervisee's relationship with the supervisor, which includes the categories of support, teamwork, the provision of feedback, accessibility, and advocacy, (b) the supervisee's relationship with the student, which includes the categories of support, accessibility, and advocacy, (c) the supervisee's professional role as a school counselor, and (d) the supervisee's professional identity as a school counselor. The themes of the professional role of the school counselors, and the professional identity of school counselors are transcendent themes of the relationship with the supervisor and the relationship with the student themes. In other words, these last two themes have a reciprocal relationship to each other in that as each is influenced by the other. Further, the first two themes related the relationships with the supervisors and students are impacted by the school counselors' ability to fulfill a professional role and professional identity. Descriptions of each theme,

including quotations from the supervisees, are provided to add context, enhance meaning, and offer a thick description of the participants' experiences. A pseudonym, with names beginning with an H representing high school counselors, M representing middle school counselors, and E representing elementary school counselors is used for the presentation of results.

Relationship With the Supervisor

The importance of the relationship between the supervisee and the supervisor emerged as a major theme, including the following categories: (a) support, (b) teamwork, (c) provision of feedback on clinical skills, (d) accessibility, and (e) advocacy.

Support. The word "support" was used by all of the supervisees to describe their experience of supervision. In fact, Eve, Hera, and Helen reported intentionally transferring to this school district because of its reputation for providing support for the professional role of counselors. Those that described the support they experienced spoke of a trusting, non-threatening relationship. As Ellen exclaimed, "I love what I do... because I have so much support." However, the sense of feeling supported by their supervisors was not universal. Helen described a time when she did not feel supported by her supervisor: "I questioned what was happening, because I ... knew it wasn't right. And the supervision I got was I was told I wasn't in charge."

Teamwork. Many participants expressed an appreciation for a collaborative supervisory style, fostering a sense of teamwork, as opposed to an authoritative approach. Participants indicated that working together as a team towards the same goal enhanced their relationship with their supervisors. As Maria stated, "I wouldn't call it supervision as much as just collaboration."

Accessibility. Supervisors' availability to provide guidance in crisis situations or to observe supervisees performing specific role-related activities emerged as a category of the relationship between the supervisee and the supervisor. Supervisees indicated that their supervisors were available to them when needed. Eve and Hilda both gave specific examples of when their supervisors were available to guide them through after-hours crisis situations, such as suspected child abuse. Eve, Meg. Mary, Hilda, Hera, and Helen all indicated that in addition to being available for unexpected crisis situations, supervisors were also available to provide more structured supervision. Eileen explained that she requested and received supervision from her lead counselor during her first year as a counselor. However, supervisees also noted that their supervisors were not as available to them as they had been in previous years. Competing job responsibilities, especially those that conflict with the school counselor's role, were cited as obstacles to supervisory accessibility. Hilda even indicated that her supervisor's lack of availability influenced her level of professionalism by stating, "Because we don't have that one-on-one time [with the head counselor] ... my commitment might have gone down a little bit. [It's] just because, I want to grow as a counselor, not as a test administrator."

Feedback on clinical skills. Supervisees credited direct feedback from their supervisors regarding their clinical skills as enhancing their identities as professional school counselors. This feedback generally occurred through direct observation of the supervisees' group counseling skills and supervisees reported feeling validated and more confident as a result of this individualized and specific feedback. Specific skills that supervisees identified as improving as a result of feedback from their supervisors

included allowing silence in counseling sessions, listening to students more, asking open-ended questions, responding to key points, and moving away from activity-driven counseling groups. Hester stated, “Working with . . . supervisors who are more skilled than I am has helped me to grow”.

Advocacy. Supervisees indicated feeling supported when their supervisors advocated with central office administrators, principals, and parents for the guidance program and their roles as school counselors, as exemplified by this comment from Helen, “If we didn’t have her supporting us, we would just turn into what administrators do.” In turn, supervisees became empowered to advocate for themselves, as illustrated when Meg stated:

[Supervision] made me more confident. It’s made me stronger. Made me not afraid to speak my peace for the guidance department, to be able to stand up for what I think is the role of the guidance counselors and what isn’t.

Relationship With Students

The supervisees’ relationship with their students was the second theme that emerged from the interviews. This theme shares three of the categories identified in the previous theme of the supervisee’s relationships with the supervisor: (a) support, (b) accessibility, and (c) advocacy.

Support. The supervisees expressed a desire to support their students. As Eloisa stressed:

[Supervision is most important because its] more hands on with the kids. That’s where it counts. If you’re managing your program, that’s important too, how you

plan, that you want to get the right skills to be able to teach and present them, but it's that relationship with the children that makes the difference.

Accessibility. Another category promoting the relationship between the supervisee and the students is accessibility. Helen revealed the priority she placed on being available and supporting students when she said:

[Students are] what we're here for. That should be our main focus, although we get side-tracked with other things, but we're here for the well-being of the student.

Yet, Helen and Meg also complained that increasing job demands prevented their availability for student concerns. A diminished ability to be available for students contributed to feelings of bitterness for Hester:

There's so much more paperwork at the high school level.... Nobody really knows that.... It's been crazy. Workload increases. Less time to spend with the kids who you have more of. It's very frustrating.... It's very discouraging. What do you have control of? Can you make a difference with one kid?... I don't want to be bitter. I know I may sound bitter. But ... realistically, what can I do?

Advocacy. Participants described how supervision helped them advocate for their students. Eve expressed the importance of advocating for her students when she stated, "My role is to be there for the students and they need me."

Professional Identity Development and Professional Role

The themes of professional identity development and the professional role of the school counselor appear to be closely related. Adhering to the appropriate role of the school counselor strengthened the professional identities of supervisees, and as their

identities as professional school counselors strengthened, their ability to advocate for appropriate roles was enhanced. These themes have transcendent qualities in that supervision facilitated professional identity development and appropriate roles.

The SAAFT Model

The themes of the school counselor's relationships with the supervisor and with the student are related to the themes of professional role and professional identity. They mutually empower each other and function systemically. As a school counselor is able to advocate for and work in a manner consistent with the role of a school counselor, professional identity is enhanced. As school counselors are able to assert their professional identities, they are more empowered to engage in appropriate professional roles. If the relationships that school counselors develop with their supervisors are characterized by support, accessibility, advocacy, teamwork, and feedback, they in turn feel empowered to provide support, accessibility, and advocacy for their student clients, which many of the participants identified as their most important professional role. When the relationship with the supervisor did not include the qualities of support, accessibility, advocacy, teamwork, and feedback, participants were less able to provide the qualities of support, accessibility and advocacy for their students, which led to expressions of frustration, and bitterness. As participants were less able to fulfill their professional roles, they doubted their professional identities as school counselors.

Figure 1 displays a model that demonstrates the interactions among the themes that emerged from the data. The quality of the relationship between the supervisee and the supervisor based on the categories of (a) support, (b) accessibility, (c) advocacy, (d) teamwork, and (e) feedback, and the quality of the relationship between the supervisor

and students shared the categories of (a) support, (b) accessibility, and (c) advocacy, intersect and support each other. Professional identity development and fulfillment of the professional role of school counselors were impacted by the relational themes. The arrows between these last two themes in the model depict their mutually supportive nature.

This model was shared with the participants through a process of member checking (Merriam, 1998). The seven participants who responded indicated that this model fit their experiences. Ellen even created an acronym to describe the relational qualities between the supervisor and the supervisee: SAAFT, pronounced “safety,” representing support, advocacy, accessibility, feedback, and teamwork. She granted the researchers permission to use this acronym as the title of the model which appears in Figure 1.

Limitations

The researcher, as instrument, lacks objectivity (Merriam, 1998) and in this case the first author had previously worked as a counselor and a counselor supervisor in the district that was the focus of this study, creating preconceived beliefs about the experiences of counselor supervision, and possibly influencing the selection and interpretation of the coding themes and categories (Merriam, 1998). To minimize this, the PI employed a member checking process by requesting that the participants review the data to clarify themes. The first author also employed a triangulation process by asking peers to review the data looking for unacknowledged bias (Merriam, 1998). Another limitation is that the participants in the study may have been influenced to volunteer or to adapt their responses because of a possible bias resulting from their

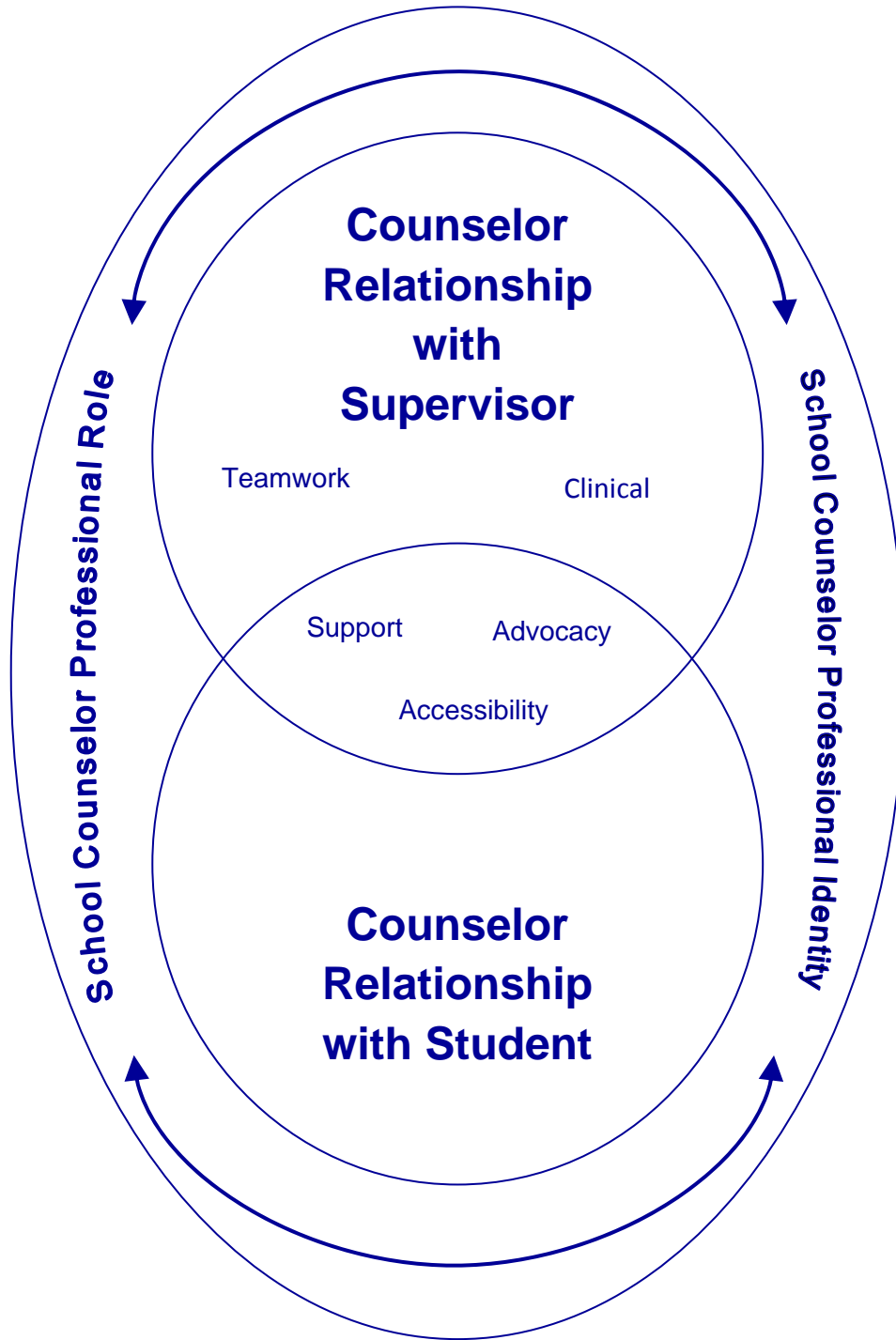


Figure 1. The SAAFT Model

previous knowledge of the developer of the *PARM* model, or previous knowledge of the PI. This may have increased the possibility that interview responses were driven by social desirability (Patton, 2001). The PI sought to minimize the possibility of bias by assuring confidentiality.

Discussion and Recommendations for School Counselors and Supervisors

The SAAFT Model of school counselor supervision has some similarities with the findings of previous research. For example, previous findings point to the importance of providing professional support (Agnew et al., 2000; Crutchfield & Borders, 1997; Henderson & Lampe, 1992; Roberts & Borders, 1994), which is consistent with the Support category of the theme of the relationship between the supervisor and the school counselor. Similarly, development of counseling skills, often cited as a benefit of school counselor supervision (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Page et al., 2001; Sutton & Page, 1994) was achieved through the provision of feedback, another category of the first theme. Enhancement of professional development (Agnew et al., 2000; Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Henderson & Lampe, 1992; Roberts & Borders, 1994; Sutton & Page, 1994), was mirrored in both the third theme of development of professional role and fourth theme of professional identity development.

In previous research, lack of accessibility to a supervisor is most often cited as an obstacle for school counselors who want supervision (Agnew et al., 2000; Benshoff & Paisley, 1996; Crutchfield & Borders, 1997; Henderson & Lampe, 1992; Page et al., 2001; Sutton & Page, 1994), with many school counselors reporting that they do not know how to access supervisors (Henderson & Gysbers, 1998). In contrast,

supervisees in this study identified accessibility as a positive factor contributing to the supervisory relationship.

An expectation that supervisees in this study placed on their supervisors was that of personal and professional advocacy. They expected their supervisors to advocate for them when their roles were threatened by unrealistic expectation from administrators, parents, or community members. As supervisors modeled advocacy, supervisees felt enabled to better advocate for their students. The advocacy competencies endorsed by ACA (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003) stress the importance of initiating systemic change and empowering clients to advocate for themselves.

School counselors want supervision, and those that receive supervision provide more enhanced services for their student clients. School counselors receiving supervision in this district report that they have accessibility to their supervisors, all of whom are also school counselors working within the same district. Through their shared experience as employees within the same district, the supervisors are able to intervene and advocate for their supervisees when job roles or professional identities are being challenged. This advocacy role then translates to the school counselor's ability to better advocate for his or her student clients. Districts that provide for school counseling supervisors from within their own ranks of school counselors would increase accessibility, modeling of advocacy, and enhanced services for students while minimizing the cost of hiring outside personnel to provide supervision.

Appendix A

Characteristics of Selected Participants

Participant	Level	Years as a School Counselor	Ethnicity
Eve	Elementary	1	Hispanic American
Eileen	Elementary	9	Hispanic American
Ellen	Elementary	14	Hispanic American
Eloisa	Elementary	23	European American
Maria	Middle	6	European American
Maya	Middle	9	Asian American
Mary	Middle	19	European American
Meg	Middle	23	European American
Hera	High	4	Hispanic American
Hilda	High	8	Hispanic American
Hester	High	14	Hispanic American
Helen	High	35	European American

Appendix B

Interview Guide

1. Grand Tour Question: How would you describe your experience of supervision while employed at this school district?

Possible sub-questions, if needed:

- a. Describe your last clinical supervision session.
 - b. Describe your last program management or professional development supervision session.
 - c. Describe your last administrative supervision session.
2. Which of the 3 types of supervision (clinical, program management and professional development, or administrative) is most important to you?
 3. Why is this type of supervision more important to you than the others?
 4. How do you perceive your competence has changed as a result of participating in this district's supervision model?
 5. How do you perceive your commitment has changed as a result of participating in this district's supervision model?
 6. What do you perceive as weaknesses of this district's supervision model?
 7. What do you perceive as strengths of this district's supervision model?
 8. Are there any other comments about your experience of this district's supervision model that were not addressed by the previous questions that you would like to add?

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