

Comparing the Roles of School Counselors and School Psychologists:

A Study of Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

The specific roles of school counselors and school psychologists are frequently misunderstood by students, parents, and other education professionals. This article presents results from a study of preservice teachers' ($N = 111$) views of the functions of school counselors and school psychologists in helping students. Results suggest that preservice teachers distinguish between school counselor and school psychologist roles in promoting student career readiness and personal social development, while no distinctions are made between supporting student academic development and providing counseling services. Implications for professional school counselors and counselor education are discussed.

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In the U.S. public education system, helping professionals from a variety of disciplines share a responsibility to ensure the educational success of students. School counselors and school psychologists often work together in providing support for students' school experiences. Yet the specific roles and functions of school counselors and school psychologists often remain unclear to students, parents, teachers, and other education professionals (Agresta, 2004; Burnham & Jackson, 2000). Role confusion and ambiguity has therefore persisted among school-based helping professionals, particularly among school counselors (Lieberman, 2004). In order to develop a strong professional identity, Humes and Hohenshil (1987) suggested that school counselors must understand the similarities and differences between their contributions and those of other education helping professionals and be able to promote the unique services of the comprehensive school counseling program. Given that teacher consultation has been identified as a key component of helping students succeed, school counselors must ensure that teachers recognize the role of the school counseling program in fostering students' academic, career, and personal-social success (Clark & Amatea, 2004).

School counselors have historically struggled with misperceptions over their roles within education (American School Counselor Association, 2003; Carter, 1993, Napierkowski & Parsons, 1995; Paisley & Borders, 1995). During the latter part of the twentieth century, however, the emergence of comprehensive school counseling models (e.g. Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Gysbers and Henderson, 2000) helped to

promote school counseling as a vital service in elementary and secondary school settings. With the development of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2003) National Model for school counseling programs, today's professional school counselors have a nationally recognized framework to help define and support their role in the education system. The national model emphasizes the school counselor's role in fostering students' academic, career, and personal-social development. In addition, school counselors are identified as having the specialized training and skills necessary for providing direct counseling services to students including individual, small group, and crisis counseling. Despite these professional developments, school counselors' roles in education have often remained unclear, particularly among teachers and administrators (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Lieberman, 2004; Vail, 2005; Zalaquett, 2005).

Paralleling the development and reforms in professional school counseling, school psychology has worked to solidify its identity and integrate its practice into the broader goals of education (Sheridan & D'Amato, 2004). Long connected primarily with special education and assessment, today's school psychologists are promoting a professional identity that emphasizes prevention and school-wide interventions, rather than an exclusive emphasis on individual testing (National Association of School Psychologists, 2005). School psychologists have been called upon to be more proactive and visible in their schools (Poulou, 2003) and to adopt a mental health and public healthcare focus (Nastasi, 2000; Power, 2000). Similar to school counselors, progress toward solidifying the professional identity of school psychologists' in the education

system has occurred in recent years, however, role ambiguity problems remain a challenge to the field (Gilman & Gabriel, 2004).

Although school counselors and school psychologists have advocated for their unique professional identities in the educational setting, a considerable degree of similarity may be found among their professional agendas. For instance, both school counselors and school psychologists are identified as helping professionals who provide individual and small group counseling, consultation, and academic and behavioral support for students (ASCA 2003; Gilman & Gabriel, 2004; NASP, 2005). Furthermore, like professional school counselors, professional school psychologists have been called to focus increasingly on prevention, collaboration, advocacy, and accountability (NASP, 2005; Sheridan & D'Amato, 2004). As a result, a significant concern of both school counselors and school psychologists involves appropriate recognition by other education professionals, particularly teachers, regarding their unique contributions within the educational system (Christiansen, 1997; Davis & Garrett, 1998; Lieberman, 2004; Poulou, 2003). Because school-based helping professionals rely on referrals and consultation as a means for identifying students in need of help, teachers' understanding of the roles of school counselors and school psychologists may help ensure that students receive appropriate counseling and psychological services.

Both ASCA (2003) and NASP (2005) recognize that teachers may play a key role in identifying and referring students for counseling and psychological services, yet only a few studies of teachers' views of school counselors and school psychologists have appeared in the literature. Existing research on teachers' views of school counseling and school psychology suggests role confusion can impact teacher consultation and

referral practices (Lieberman, 2004, Poulou, 2003). In general, teachers have significantly less knowledge about school psychological services than administrators (Clark & Amatea, 2004), and teachers may have mixed views of school psychologists' roles in helping students succeed (Gilman & Gabriel, 2004). School counseling studies (Beesley, 2004; Gibson, 1990; Ginter & Scalise, 1990) have suggested that teachers have generally positive views of school counselors' roles. However, Aluede and Imonikhe (2002) cautioned that teachers' views of school counseling may not always be based on an accurate understanding of what school counselors actually do. In order to address these misperceptions, a few studies (Beesley, 2004; Clark & Amatea, 2004; Gilman & Gabriel, 2004) have suggested that teacher education programs should provide a foundation for preparing future teachers to refer and collaborate with school counselors and school psychologists. To date, no studies of preservice teachers' views of school counselors and school psychologists have appeared in the literature.

Purpose of the Study

Due to continued concerns over role ambiguity among helping professionals in the education system, a study was developed to specifically examine preservice teachers' expectations of the helping functions of school counselors and school psychologists. Using the ASCA (2003) National Model's designation of the primary functions of school counselors, the following research questions were developed for this study:

1. What differences exist between preservice teachers' views of school counselors' and school psychologists' roles in promoting student academic achievement?

2. What differences exist between preservice teachers' views of the roles of school counselors and school psychologists in promoting student career development?
3. What differences exist between preservice teachers' views of the roles of school counselors and school psychologists in promoting student personal-social development?
4. What differences exist between preservice teachers' views of the roles of school counselors and school psychologists in providing direct counseling services to students?

Method

Participants

Participants for this study ($N = 111$) were enrolled in an undergraduate counseling and consultation skills course for teachers at an urban southwestern university. The sample included 77 (69%) females and 34 (31%) males with a mean age of 26.23 ($SD = 8.11$) years. The preservice teachers included 78 Caucasians (70%), 13 Latino/Hispanics (12%), 7 Asian Americans (6%), 4 African Americans (4%), 3 Native Americans (3%), and 6 (5%) indicated other ethnicity. Among the participants, 62 (56%) anticipated teaching at elementary level, 36 (32%) expected to teach at high school level, 4 (4%) planned to teach at middle school level, and 9 (8%) did not indicate a level. Furthermore, 99 (89%) planned to teach general education students, 7 (6%) expected to teach special education students, and 5 (5%) did not specify. Of the participants, 108 (97%) had not yet begun their student teaching experience. When asked if they had personally received services from either the school counselor or school psychologist

during their high school education, 66 (60%) indicated working with a school counselor and 7 (6%) reported working with a school psychologist.

Instrument

An instrument was developed for this study to address the primary research questions. Demographic questions included sex, age, ethnicity, anticipated teaching level and student population, student teaching experience, and indication if the participant had utilized the services of a school counselor and/or school psychologist during high school. The instrument assessed four primary helping functions including fostering student's academic achievement, assisting students' career development, promoting students' personal-social development, and provision of direct counseling services to students. For each helping function, three stem items were developed and participants rated each item using a 6-point scale: 6 = strongly agree, 5 = agree, 4 = somewhat agree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree. Participants were first asked to rate their views of the role of school counselors on the 12 items, and then to rate their views of the role of school psychologists using the same 12 items. Composite scores were created for each helping function by averaging responses on the academic achievement, career readiness, personal-social development, and direct counseling service items (see Table 1). Internal consistency reliability measures for the academic achievement items ($\alpha = .78$), career readiness items ($\alpha = .77$), personal-social development items ($\alpha = .85$), and counseling services items ($\alpha = .87$) were all in the acceptable range.

Table 1

Participants' Ratings of the Roles of School Counselors and School Psychologists in Helping Students (N=111)

	School Counselor		School Psychologist	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Academic achievement				
Improve academic self-concept	4.86	0.92	4.79	1.05
Acquire skills for improving learning	4.52	0.98	4.56	1.00
Achieve academic success	4.77	1.01	4.72	1.01
Composite	4.72	0.83	4.69	0.87
Career readiness				
Develop career awareness	5.23	0.78	4.16	1.17
Acquire career information	4.91	1.11	3.90	1.12
Identify career goals	4.96	0.99	4.06	1.15
Composite	5.03	0.86	4.04	1.06
Personal-social development				
Acquire self knowledge	4.69	1.08	5.16	0.82
Develop interpersonal skills	4.68	1.09	5.22	0.77
Apply self knowledge	4.73	0.97	5.19	0.80
Composite	4.70	0.97	5.19	0.74
Counseling services				
Individual counseling	5.28	0.96	5.23	0.90
Small group counseling	4.96	1.19	5.15	0.99
Crisis counseling	5.21	1.06	5.33	0.96
Composite	5.17	0.93	5.23	0.86

Procedure

Participants were invited to complete the instrument prior to an in-class activity on teacher collaboration with school counselors and school psychologists. The instrument contained no personal identifying information and was not included in calculating students' grades. Furthermore, the primary investigators in the study did not teach any of the six sections of the course from which participants were drawn. The instrument provided a springboard for classroom discussions about the unique roles and functions of school counselors and school psychologists.

Results

A 2 (role) x 4 (function) within-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated to determine preservice teachers' perceived differences between the roles of school counselors and school psychologists among the four helping functions. The significance level for all statistical procedures was set at .05. A significant main effect for role, $F(1, 111) = 5.05, p = .03, \eta^2 = .05$, was found, indicating the sample viewed the roles of school counselors and school psychologists differently. A significant main effect was also found for the functions, $F(3, 111) = 29.16, p = .00, \eta^2 = .22$, indicating the participants rated helping roles differently. Furthermore, an interaction effect, $F(3, 111) = 46.00, p = .00, \eta^2 = .31$, was found between role and functions, indicating that the participants rated school counselors and school psychologists differently among the four functions.

Follow-up pairwise tests were performed to further examine the differences between expected roles and functions of school counselors and school psychologists.

Student Academic Achievement

No significant difference, $t(1, 111) = .19, p = .85$, was found between preservice teachers' ratings of the roles of school counselors and school psychologists in fostering student academic achievement. The composite for items rating the roles of school counselors in student academic achievement ($M = 4.72, SD = .83$) was comparable to the mean rating of school psychologists' roles ($M = 4.69, SD = .87$).

Student Career Development

A significant difference, $t(1, 111) = 7.91, p = .00$, was found between preservice teachers' ratings of the roles of school counselors and school psychologists in promoting career development. The composite for items rating the roles of school counselors in promoting career development ($M = 5.03, SD = .86$) was higher than the mean rating of school psychologists' roles ($M = 4.04, SD = 1.06$).

Student Personal-Social Development

A significant difference, $t(1, 111) = 4.90, p = .00$, was found between preservice teachers' ratings of the roles of school counselors and school psychologists in fostering student personal-social development. The composite for items rating the roles of school counselors in fostering student personal-social development ($M = 4.70, SD = .97$) was lower than the mean rating of school psychologists' roles ($M = 5.19, SD = .74$).

Providing Counseling Services to Students

No significant difference, $t(1, 111) = .60, p = .54$, was found between preservice teachers' ratings of the roles of school counselors and school psychologists in providing counseling services to students. The composite for items rating the roles of school

counselors in providing counseling services to students ($M = 5.17$, $SD = .93$) was comparable to the mean rating of school psychologists' roles ($M = 5.23$, $SD = .86$).

Discussion

The sample of preservice teachers rated school counselors' helping roles ($M = 4.92$, $SD = .64$) slightly higher overall than school psychologists ($M = 4.78$, $SD = .59$), however, the only helping function that was significantly higher for school counselors was promoting students' career development. Thus, a main distinction between professional services of school counselors and school psychologists identified by the participants was student career development. This finding supports the ASCA (2003) National Model regarding the career development expertise of school counselors. Indeed, school counseling initially grew out of the vocational guidance movement during the early twentieth century (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). By contrast, school psychologists have not traditionally been identified as career development facilitators.

The preservice teachers comparably rated school counselor and school psychologist roles in supporting students' academic achievement. This result echoes the emphasis by ASCA (2003) and NASP (2005) on the academic achievement of students as a primary professional function. In the current education reform climate, both professions have clearly emphasized their involvement in the academic achievement of students. Participants also rated school counselors and school psychologists similarly on the provision of direct counseling services to students. Both ASCA (2003) and NASP (2005) identify individual, small group and crisis counseling as part of their professional expertise in the education system. Overall, academic

achievement and provision of counseling services were seen as helping functions of both school counselors and school psychologists.

Finally, participants rated school psychologists as having a greater role than school counselors in promoting personal-social development among students. This finding suggests that preservice teachers may not fully recognize the responsibility of school counselors in fostering students' personal-social development. Both ASCA (2003) and NASP (2005) identify supporting the healthy personal-social development of students as a key professional role. In school counseling, the guidance curriculum is a delivery system component that emphasizes the personal-social development of students.

Implications and Recommendations

Given the history of professional identity problems experienced by school counselors, more effort on role clarity among school counseling organizations and practicing school counselors seems critical to help all education professionals develop a better understanding of comprehensive school counseling programs. Clearly the ASCA (2003) National Model has potential to help solidify school counselors' professional identity. Yet many school counselors do not practice from the standards set forth by ASCA and other professional counseling organizations (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Carter, 2003). In order to address this persistent role ambiguity, school counselors and local, state, regional, and national school counseling organizations must support a common mission and vision for the profession.

Professional school counselors should also recognize that other school-based helping professionals are assuming roles traditionally performed exclusively by the

school counselor. Increasingly, the roles of school psychologists promoted by NASP (2005) are similar to ones promoted for school counselors by ASCA (2003). It may be that non-counseling duties have been performed so long by school counselors that service gaps are now being filled by other helping professionals such as school psychologists. This trend has a potentially very significant impact on the future of the school counseling profession. School counseling may continue to be seen as ancillary, or could even cease to exist as a distinct profession, especially as other school-based helping professionals more visibly provide traditional counseling and consultation services to students, parents, and teachers. School counselors must strongly advocate for their professional identity and provide frequent reviews of comprehensive school counseling programs and services to students, parents, and other education professionals. In particular, school counselors should consider working with new teachers to help provide them with information on school counseling services available to students and parents.

Finally, counselor education programs should consider working more closely with teacher preparation programs to help ensure future teachers learn about school counseling services. Teachers' understanding of school counseling roles is essential for the success of comprehensive school counseling programs. Student teaching experiences could provide preservice teachers with practical knowledge and experience in working with school counselors. Teacher education and counselor education faculty must collaborate in order to assure that new teachers have ample opportunities to learn about the services provided to students by the school counselor and to understand the framework of comprehensive school counseling programs.

Limitations and Future Research

Results of this study should be viewed in light of its limitations. The participants comprised a convenience sample of preservice teachers at one university and therefore the results may not be representative of all teachers in training. Also, the differences between participants' expectations of school counselor and school psychologist roles at different school levels were not explored. Finally, none of the participants had begun their student teaching experience, which may impact preservice teachers' views of school counseling and school psychology.

Future studies could examine the methods by which preservice teachers learn about the roles of school counselors during their formal coursework and during student teaching. In particular, studies that examine the impact of the student teaching experience on preservice teachers' expectations of school counselors could identify ways to help new teachers understand and draw upon the resources of comprehensive school counseling programs. Beyond the preservice training period, longitudinal studies examining new teachers' referrals to school-based helping professionals may help identify effective methods for promoting school counseling services among teachers.

Conclusion

As school counselors continue to forge a professional identity that is aligned with the mission of today's schools, the changing roles of other school-based helping professionals must be considered. School psychologists are assuming more visible roles in today's schools and are providing services similar to those traditionally offered by school counselors. It appears paramount that school counselors work to distinguish the services of comprehensive school counseling programs while also working to

collaborate with other school-based helping professionals to promote students' academic, career, and personal-social development. The future success of school counseling programs relies in part on teachers' support and utilization of school counseling services. Ultimately, collaboration between teacher education and counselor education programs may play a central role in preparing future teachers to value and draw upon the resources of professional school counselors.

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