

School Counselors' Training and Involvement in School-Family-Community Partnership

Roles: An Exploratory Study

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### Abstract

Seventy-two (n = 72) school counselors from South Carolina were surveyed to assess their perceptions of their pre-service training in relation to eight school-family-community partnership roles and their perceived level of involvement in these roles. This exploratory study sought to determine whether school counselors varied by school level in their perceptions of their training and involvement and whether or not significant relationships existed between perceptions of pre-service training and perceived level of involvement in the eight partnership roles. Implications for practice, training, and research are discussed.

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Children's problems cannot be solved with a school-only focus (Hobbs & Collison, 1995; Taylor & Adelman, 2000). School counselors must team and collaborate with schools, families, and communities to help children succeed (ASCA, 2003; Bryan, 2005). When school counselors build partnerships with the school's stakeholders, they are able to meet the needs of larger numbers of students. School-family-community partnerships are defined as collaborative initiatives between school personnel, family members, and community members and organizations. All partners involved work together to identify and achieve mutual goals aimed at the increased academic, emotional, and social success of students (Epstein, 1995). Research has indicated that school-family-community partnerships increase academic achievement, improve school programs and school climate, provide family support, increase parents' skills and involvement in school leadership, and connect families with others in the school and the community (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). School-family-community partnerships seem to fit naturally within the school counseling program of services which is enhanced and complemented by school-family-community partnerships (Walsh, Howard, & Buckley, 1999).

Dedmond (1991) identified school counselors as the person often chosen to coordinate school partnerships with parents, business and industry, volunteers, and institutions of higher education. She attributed this to the counselor's role as child advocate and suggested that the counselor's role in guidance components such as program planning and development, analysis and problem solving, could be expanded to serve school-family-community partnerships. The need for a strong school counseling

roles in school-family-community partnerships is supported by the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) new National Model for School Counseling Programs as a means of helping school counselors provide services to students and reducing barriers to achievement (ASCA, 2003).

As a result of the benefits related to school-family-community partnerships, school counseling professionals have promoted active roles for school counselors in these partnerships. A review of the school counseling literature revealed that there are eight roles being suggested for school counselors in school-family-community partnerships. Those roles include: (1) leader (Bemak, 2000; Colbert, 1996; House & Hayes, 2002; Walsh, Howard, & Buckley, 1999), (2) advocate (House & Martin, 1998; Lee, 2001), (3) team member (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, & Sanders, 1997; West & Idol, 1993), (4) collaborative consultant (Keys, Bemak, Carpenter, & King-Sears, 1998; Taylor & Adelman, 2000), (5) school-home liaison or home visitor (Atkinson & Juntunen, 1994; Cole, Thomas, & Lee, 1988), (6) coordinator (Dedmond, 1991), (7) trainer (Christiansen, 1997; Ritchie, & Partin, 1994), and (8) facilitator (Bemak, 2000; Dedmond, 1991).

In spite of the urgency in the extant literature regarding the proposed roles for school counselors in such partnerships, experience rather than empirical research appears to form the basis for the opinions expressed (Bemak, 2000; Colbert, 1996; Hobbs & Collison, 1995; Holcomb-McCoy, 1998, 2001; Keys & Bemak, 1997, 1998; Taylor & Adelman, 2000; Walsh, Howard, & Buckley, 1999). There is no research to indicate whether or not school counselors believe that it is important for school counselors to be involved in school-family-community partnerships, and if so, what roles they perceive themselves as having in these partnerships and whether or not their

training prepares them for these partnership roles. The purpose of this study was to determine school counselors' perceptions about 1) the importance of their involvement in school-family-community partnerships, 2) their level of involvement in each of the eight school-family-community partnership roles, and 3) the importance of their pre-service training in preparing them for the eight partnership roles.

Except the prescribed partnership roles for school counselors in school-family-community partnerships are validated by empirical research, counselor educators and educational reformers may develop partnership roles and models for school counselors that they resist. This study will provide valuable information about counselors' perspectives of their training and involvement regarding eight school-family-community partnership roles. More specifically, the research questions addressed in this study were as follows:

1. Overall, what are school counselors' perceptions regarding the importance of school counselor involvement in school-family-community partnerships?
2. What are school counselors' perceptions regarding their level of involvement in eight school-family-community partnership roles?
3. What are school counselors' perceptions regarding the importance of their pre-service training in preparing them for eight school-family-community partnership roles?
4. Is there a significant relationship between school counselors' perceptions about the importance of their pre-service training in preparing them for partnership roles and counselors' current level of involvement in school-family-community partnerships roles?

## Method

### *Participants*

A sample of 300 school counselors was randomly drawn from the complete listing of school counselors in South Carolina's public schools by stratified sampling. There were a total of 1641 school counselors in South Carolina: 542 high school counselors, 714 elementary school counselors, and 385 middle or junior high counselors. To enable the strata or subgroups to be compared and to ensure proportional representation, the researchers carried out proportional stratified sampling to permit meaningful comparisons. Within each school level (elementary, middle, and high), the number of counselors chosen were proportional to the representation of each of these subgroups within the entire state sample pool. The sample was stratified by randomly selecting 33% or 99 high school counselors, 44% or 132 elementary school counselors, and 23% or 69 middle or junior high school counselors.

There was a response rate of 25% with 75 surveys being returned. Only 72 or 24% were usable. Of the 72 participants, 86% were females and 12.5 % were male. Compared to the population of South Carolina's school counselors, 37.5% of the respondents worked in elementary schools compared to 44% in the total population, 26.4% worked in middle schools compared to 23% in the total population, and 26.4% worked in high schools compared to 33% in the total population. Additional participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participant Characteristics (n = 72<sup>a</sup>)*

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N<sup>b</sup></i>	%
Gender				
Male	9	12.5		
Female	62	86.1		
School setting of counselor				
Elementary	27	37.5	714	43.5
Middle	19	26.4	385	23.5
High	19	26.4	542	33.0
Years of school counselor experience				
1-5 years	20	27.8		
6-10 years	14	19.4		
11-15 years	21	29.2		
16-20 years	8	11.1		
over 20 years	9	12.5		
Counselor's race/ethnicity				
African American/Black	18	25.0	422	25.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	1.4	3	0.2
White/European	51	70.8	1136	69.2
Native American	1	1.4	–	–
Hispanic	0	0.0	1	0.1
Other	1	1.4	79	4.8

(Table 1 continued)

*Participant Characteristics (n = 72<sup>a</sup>)*

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Highest degree earned				
Masters	57	79.2		
Doctoral	3	4.2		
Other	12	16.6		
Accreditation of graduate program				
CACREP	36	50.0		
CORE	5	6.9		
Not accredited	4	5.6		
Other	8	11.1		
Don't know	19	26.4		

*Note.* Data was unavailable for empty cells.

<sup>a</sup> An *n* less than 72 reflects missing data. <sup>b</sup> This is the total population of counselors (*N* = 1641).

### *Instrumentation*

*Survey development.* Since there was no instrument to assess school counselors' perceptions about their SFC partnership roles and practices, the researchers developed a survey specifically for this study. After a thorough review of the school counseling literature on partnerships and collaboration,, the survey was constructed and piloted on ten master's level and doctoral level students who were currently school counselors. Feedback was given regarding question clarity, comprehensiveness, and acceptability. The pilot study confirmed that the survey had face and content validity. After revisions were made, the final draft of the survey was used for this study.

The final survey consisted of four parts. Part one of the survey elicited demographic data. Part two of the survey consisted of five items that elicited school counselors' perceptions about (1) the overall importance of school counselor involvement in partnerships, (2) the importance of counselors involvement in nine school-family-community partnership programs, (3) the importance of these nine school-family-community partnership programs in their schools, (4) the importance of their personal role in these nine school-family-community partnership programs, and (5) the importance of their pre-service training in preparing them for eight partnership roles. Part three consisted of three items that elicited school counselors' perceptions regarding (1) the extent to which six barriers hindered their involvement in school-family-community partnerships, (2) their willingness to be involved in the nine partnership programs, and (3) their current level of involvement in the eight partnership roles. To answer the research questions addressed here, items one and five on part one of the survey and items one on part two of the survey were used.

## *Measures*

*Demographic data.* Part one of the survey elicited demographic data. This section of the survey consisted of ten items that obtained information about years of school counselor experience, gender, highest degree earned, accreditation of graduate school program, counselor's ethnic background, school setting in which counselor works, type of school, community setting, percentage of students on free or reduced lunch, and percentages of each ethnic category of students. Years of experience were grouped into five categories: 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, 16-20 years, and over 20 years. School setting had three levels: elementary, middle or junior high, and high school. Community type had three levels: urban, rural, and suburban.

*The importance of school counselor involvement in partnerships.* One item measured school counselors' perceptions of the importance of school counselor involvement in partnerships. Participants were asked, "In your opinion how important is it that school counselors be involved in school-family-community partnerships?" Participants rated their perceived importance on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (i.e., 1 = not important, 2 = rarely important, 3 = important, 4 = very important, and 5 = exceptionally important).

*School counselors' involvement in school-family-community partnership roles.* School counselors' perceptions of their involvement in partnership roles were measured by asking participants "In your opinion, to what extent do you play these roles in school-family-community partnerships (i.e., leader, advocate, team member, consultant, school-home liaison/home visitor, coordinator, trainer, and facilitator)? The eight partnership roles made up the sub-items and participants rated their perceptions on a 5 point Likert scale (i.e., 1 = not at all, 2 = infrequently, 3 = frequently, 4 = very frequently,

and 5 = all of the time).

*Importance of pre-service training for partnership roles.* School counselors' perceptions of the importance of their pre-service training for partnership roles were assessed by asking "In your opinion, how important was your counselor education program in preparing you to take these roles in school-family-community partnerships (i.e., leader, advocate, team member, consultant, school-home liaison/home visitor, coordinator, trainer, and facilitator). Once again the eight partnership roles were the sub-items for this question. These sub-items were measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (i.e., 1 = not important, 2 = rarely important, 3 = important, 4 = very important, and 5 = exceptionally important).

### *Procedures*

The survey was mailed to 300 school counselors in South Carolina along with a cover letter and a self-addressed stamped envelope. A definition of school-family-community partnerships was provided along with directions for completion of the survey. In the cover letter, participants were informed of the anonymity, volunteer nature of the study, and that returning the completed survey indicated their consent. No follow-up was done due to lack of funding. Seventy-two usable surveys were returned representing a response rate of 24%.

### *Data Analysis*

A one-way analysis of variance was used to analyze research question one which addresses school counselors' perceptions across school levels regarding their involvement in school-family-community partnerships. Two split-plot analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to address research questions two and three. The split-plot analysis of variance (ANOVA) is referred to by a number of labels including the

mixed randomized repeated design (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001) and the two-way mixed ANOVA (Huck, 2004). This type of ANOVA is appropriate when means are compared across levels of a between-subjects variable (i.e., school level) and a within-subjects variable (i.e., roles and barriers). The assumption of sphericity was violated in these split plot ANOVA models. Girden (1992) pointed out that sphericity is usually violated in these models and that a number of adjustments approaches are available to correct for this violation (e.g., Huynh-Feldt, Greenhouse-Geisser). Therefore, in this study, Huynh-Feldt correction was used to determine the F-value for the within-subject variables. The Huynh-Feldt adjusts the degrees of freedom for the repeated measures factor to correct for departures from sphericity (Girden, 1992).

In analyzing research question two, the eight partnership roles comprised the within-subject measures in the split-plot ANOVA used to examine school counselors' perceptions about the extent to which they are currently involved in these partnership roles. Likewise, in analyzing research question three, the eight partnership roles were the within-subject measures in the split-plot ANOVA used to examine school counselors' perceptions about their pre-service training in relation to eight school-family-community partnership roles. In the data analysis for both questions, school counselors were compared across school level (between-subjects variable) on each of the eight roles.

Since a number of pairwise comparisons were made for each significant mean difference in the repeated measures variable, Type I error was controlled using the Bonferroni method. In addition, because the assumption of sphericity was not met, separate error terms were calculated for each pairwise comparison (Girden, 1992). SPSS 10.0 version automatically produced the separate error terms. No significant

interaction effects were found for any of the split-plot ANOVAs.

For the purpose of answering research question four, responses on the sub-items used to answer research questions two and three were summed to provide total measures of counselors' perceptions about their current level of involvement in partnership roles and counselors' perceptions about the importance of their pre-service training for partnership roles. A Pearson's correlation was performed on the summed scales to determine if there was a significant correlation between counselors' perceptions about their current level of involvement in partnership roles and counselors' perceptions about the importance of their pre-service training for partnerships.

## Results

*Research Question 1: School counselors' perceptions regarding the importance of school counselor involvement in school-family-community partnerships.* Overall, the participants rated school counselor involvement in school-family-community partnerships as very important,  $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = .75$ ,  $N = 72$ . A one-way ANOVA revealed that school counselors did not vary by school level in their perceived importance of school counselor involvement in partnerships,  $F = 3.07$ ,  $p = .054$ . Results are presented in Table 2.

*Research Question 2: Current school counselor involvement in school-family-community partnership roles by school level.* The split-plot ANOVA revealed a significant between-subjects effect for school level in involvement in the eight SFC partnership roles,  $F(2, 62) = 6.27$ ,  $p = .003$ . Elementary school counselors had a higher level of involvement in these partnership roles than high school counselors. The means and standard deviations for school level are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Analysis of Variance of Between-Subjects Effect for School Level on Four Dependent Measures*

Measure		Total (N = 65)	Elementary (n = 27)	Middle (n = 19)	High (n = 19)	ANOVA F (2, 62) <sup>a</sup>
Perceived importance of school counselor involvement in school-family-community partnerships overall	M	4.27	4.49	4.26	3.95	3.07
	SD	0.75	0.50	0.73	0.95	
Perceived importance of counselor education program in preparing school counselors for partnership roles	M	3.26	3.55	3.24	3.01	2.305
	SE	0.11	0.16	0.20	0.20	
Current involvement in roles in school-family-community partnerships	M	3.25	3.65 <sub>a</sub>	3.30	2.78 <sub>a</sub>	6.270 <sup>**</sup>
	SE	0.10	0.16	0.19	0.19	

Note. Means in a row sharing subscripts are significantly different. For all measures, higher means indicate higher scores.

<sup>a</sup> This is the F statistic for the between-subject variable school level in the split-plot analysis of variance (SPANOVA) conducted for each measure. Results for the within-subject effects are presented in other tables.

<sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < .01$ .

Significant within-subject differences were also found in counselors' current level of involvement in these eight partnership roles,  $F(7, 399) = 24.304, p = .000$ . The alpha level for pairwise comparisons was  $.05/28 = .002$ . School counselors reported being very frequently involved in school-family-community partnership programs in their schools in the roles of advocate, team member, and consultant. They were significantly less involved in all other roles. Table 3 presents the mean level of involvement and standard deviations for each role and the results of the post hoc comparisons.

*Research Question 3: School counselors' perceptions regarding the importance of their pre-service training in preparing them for eight school-family-community partnership roles by school level.* No significant differences were found by school level in counselors' perceptions of their pre-service training (i.e., counselor education program) in preparing them for eight school-family-community partnership roles,  $F(2, 62) = 2.305, p = .108$ . Nevertheless, significant differences were found among the eight partnership roles,  $F(7, 375) = 17.060, p = .000$ . The alpha level for pairwise comparisons was  $.05/28 = .002$ . School counselors reported their pre-service training as very important in preparing them for the roles of advocate, consultant, and team member. They perceived their training as less significant in preparation for the other roles. Table 2 shows means and standard error for school level while Table 4 shows means, standard deviations, and multiple comparisons results for the within-subject variable.

*Research Question 4: Relationship between school counselors' perceptions about the importance of their pre-service programs in preparing them for partnerships roles and their current level of involvement in partnership roles.* The relationship between school counselors' perceptions of pre-service training in preparing them for

Table 3

*Split-plot ANOVA for Within-Subjects Effect of Perceived Current Level of Involvement in Eight Partnership Roles*

Role	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Post hoc Comparisons <sup>a</sup>
<i>SPANOVA F ( 7, 339) = 24.304***</i>			
Leader	3.28	1.13	1 < 2, 3, 5
Advocate	3.83	0.98	2 > 1, 5, 6, 7, 8
Team member	3.83	1.08	3 > 1, 5, 6, 7, 8
Consultant	3.57	1.09	4 > 5, 7
School-home liaison/home visitor	2.66	1.29	5 < 1, 2, 3, 4
Coordinator	3.26	1.06	6 < 2, 3, 7
Trainer	2.69	1.18	7 < 2, 3, 4, 6, 8
Facilitator	3.23	1.06	8 < 2, 3, 7

*Note.* A SPANOVA was conducted with school level as the between-subjects variable and role as the within-subjects variable. The results of the within-subject effect are presented here.

<sup>a</sup> Post hoc comparisons of means were done at the .002 level using the Bonferroni method to correct for Type I error.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 4

*Split-plot ANOVA for Within-Subjects Effect of Perceived Importance Ratings of Counselor Education Programs in Preparing Counselors for Eight Partnership Roles*

Role	M	SD	Post hoc Comparisons <sup>a</sup>
<i>SPANOVA F (7, 375) = 17.060***</i>			
Leader	3.17	1.14	1 < 2
Advocate	3.75	1.12	2 > 1, 5, 7
Team member	3.52	1.10	3 > 5, 7
Consultant	3.61	1.11	4 > 5, 7
School-home liaison/home visitor	2.71	1.25	5 < 2, 3, 4, 6, 8
Coordinator	3.34	1.15	6 > 5, 7
Trainer	2.77	1.01	7 < 2, 3, 4, 6, 8
Facilitator	3.51	1.02	8 > 5, 7

*Note.* A SPANOVA was conducted with school level as the between-subjects variable and role as the within-subjects variable. The results of the within-subject effect are presented here.

<sup>a</sup> Post hoc comparisons of means were done at the .002 level using the Bonferroni method to correct for Type I error.

\*\*\* p < .001

roles in school-family-community partnerships and current level of involvement in partnership roles was explored. The results indicated that there was a significant moderate positive correlation between these two variables,  $r(72) = .383, p < .01$ .

### Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that school counselors across all school levels perceive their involvement in school-family-community partnerships to be very important. This is encouraging considering the recent focus on collaboration and partnerships both by school counseling professional organizations (e.g., ASCA) and in the extant school counseling literature. In addition, school counselors reported that they are more frequently involved in the partnership roles of advocate, consultant, and team member as compared to roles of leader, school-home liaison/home visitor, coordinator, trainer, and facilitator.

More specifically, elementary school counselors had a significant higher level of involvement in partnership roles (i.e., advocate, consultant, and team member) than high school counselors. Prior research leads us to expect this pattern of differences between counselor involvement in school-family-community partnerships at the elementary and high school levels (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Pelco & Ries, 1999; Pelco, Ries, Jacobson, & Melka, 2000). It would be important to further investigate what these roles mean for school counselors and why they may be more involved in advocacy, consultant, and team member roles in school-family-community partnerships.

The results of this study imply that school counselors perceive their pre-service training programs as more important in preparing them for roles of advocate, consultant, and team member, in partnerships when compared to the roles of leader, school-home liaison/home visitor, and trainer. It is interesting that school counselors perceive their

pre-service training as significantly less important in preparing them for the role of leader in partnerships because the literature has suggested that school counselors should play leadership roles in education reform and in implementing school-family-community partnerships (ASCA, 2003; Bemak, 2000; Colbert, 1996; House & Hayes, 2002; Walsh, Howard, & Buckley, 1999). It is possible that current school counselors may not be trained in leadership skills or to perceive themselves as leaders and therefore, may not accept a leadership role in school-family-community partnerships and in education reform in general. This proposition needs to be investigated in future research to elaborate on school counselors' perspectives and preparation concerning leadership roles in school-family-community partnerships.

There was a significant positive correlation between the perceptions of the importance of pre-service training in preparing school counselors for roles in partnerships and actual involvement in these roles. This research lends support to findings by Hiatt-Michael (2001) and Pelco & Ries (1999) that school professionals' involvement in school-family-community partnerships is positively related to their pre-service training for partnerships. While this relationship between perceptions of training for and involvement in partnership roles does not imply causality, it is supported by prior research that indicated that training for partnerships significantly increased involvement in partnerships (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). This relationship needs to be investigated further.

#### *Implications for Counselor Education and Research*

The results of this study have implications for training and research in counselor education. While school counselors perceive their involvement in school-family-community partnerships to be important, preparation for such partnership roles will need new approaches to training (Holcomb-McCoy, 1998). Curricular experiences should

include training in the theory and practice of school-family-community collaboration, partnership-building, and their dynamics; placement in field experiences with site supervisors who are involved in school-family-community partnerships; training in community asset mapping and in locating and mobilizing local community resources; and the involvement of students in action research with families and communities. This curriculum should be embedded within an empowerment perspective and a multicultural competency framework conducive to facilitating collaboration with culturally and linguistically diverse families and communities. Such a course should include students from across various counseling, education, social work, and health-related disciplines in order to encourage the practice of interdisciplinary collaboration in the class.

As current counselor education initiatives move toward training school counselors for roles in school-family-community partnerships, it is essential that further examination of school counselor involvement in these partnerships take place. Certainly, the results of this study suggest that the effects of pre-service training on school counselor involvement in school-family-community partnership roles need to be further explored. Further research is needed to determine what the most appropriate partnership roles for school counselors are, whether school counselors are currently being trained for these roles, and what are the best strategies for preparing school counselors for such partnership roles. In addition, it will be necessary to establish what factors influence school counselor involvement in school-family-community partnerships in order to design curricula to intentionally encourage factors that result in successful partnership role enactment.

### *Limitations*

The authors acknowledge inherent limitations in this exploratory study. It is possible that the school counselors' perceptions in South Carolina may not be representative of all school counselors. Therefore, any attempt to generalize these results should be done with caution. The self-report nature of this study may be influenced by response bias caused by counselors wanting to appear competent and to be seen as engaging in professionally desirable behavior related to school-family-community partnerships. Response style and honesty of the respondents will affect the validity of the information received to some extent. Furthermore, it will be important in the future to repeat this study on a larger, nationally representative sample of school counselors to reduce any sampling error and to determine if these findings are consistent among the national population of school counselors. Despite the tentative and exploratory nature of these findings, this study is an important first attempt to examine school counselors' perspectives about their involvement in school-family-community partnership roles.

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