First-Year School Counselors: Examining the Benefits of

Informal Support and Mentoring

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Abstract

New professionals can benefit from support and mentoring as they transition into their jobs, and research suggests that school counselors often do not receive formal mentoring from other school counselors. In this qualitative study, seven first-year school counselors were asked to keep journals during their first year and to reflect on their experiences, challenges, and supports. Results suggested that school counselors experience support and mentoring in numerous ways even in the absence of formal mentoring programs. Recommendations for establishing informal support networks are provided.

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Mentoring has been defined as "a relationship in which a person of greater rank or expertise teaches, guides, and develops a novice in an organization or profession. The experience has an unusually beneficial effect on the protégé's personal and professional development" (Alleman, Cochran, Doverspike, & Newman, 1984). Furthermore, Rawlins and Rawlins (1983) stated that mentors can be helpful through teaching, advising, encouraging, and helping their protégés learn how to deal with organizational politics. Mentoring programs are common in schools, and many states provide funding to support the development of formal mentoring relationships for new teachers. Jackson et al. (2002) believed that mentoring also can help to facilitate the induction of new school counselors into the profession. In fact, formalized induction programs and support networks have been recommended as methods to help school counselors successfully make the transition (Matthes, 1992; Peace, 1995; Stickel & Trimmer, 1994). VanZandt and Perry (1992) identified a "significant need for all first-year counselors to have the support, resources, and professional nurturance to develop confidence and direction in their careers" (p. 159). Recently, Armstrong, Balkin, Long, and Caldwell (2006) reported increased self efficacy among first-year elementary school counselors who participated in a district-wide school counselor mentoring program. Interestingly, aside from these few articles, little has been written on mentoring for school counselors in the last 10 years.

In the oldest research that was found regarding school counseling mentoring, results suggested that mentors for new school counselors were rarely used (Matthes,

1992) or that school counselors were assigned teachers as mentors (Stickel & Trimmer, 1994). Writing about one school counselor's mentoring experience, Stickel and Trimmer stated that although she appreciated the usefulness of school information and procedural items from her reading specialist mentor, the school counselor expressed a need for support for counseling-related concerns. Recent research, although limited, still supports these concerns; Schmidt, Weaver, and Aldredge (2001) reported that the few school counselors in their study who were assigned a mentor had teachers as mentors. Many of their participants indicated they sought their own mentors and looked specifically for other counselors who would understand their roles and challenges.

Rationale for the Study

Although much literature exists with regard to the potential training and professional development needs of school counselors, very little has been written about their general mentoring needs. In fact, a 40-year review of literature via ERIC and EBSCO databases yielded only seven articles (Armstrong et al., 2006; Jackson et al., 2002; Matthes, 1992; Peace, 1995; Schmidt et al., 2001; Stickel & Trimmer, 1994; VanZandt & Perry, 1992) that specifically addressed school counselor mentoring. Additionally, little has been written about common concerns and issues experienced by school counselors once they begin their jobs. As yet, school counselors have not been given their own voice in sharing their noteworthy challenges and supports (Stickel & Trimmer, 1994). They also have not been asked to share what has been helpful for them. The purpose of this research study was to learn about the experiences of first-year school counselors, including significant experiences, challenges, and support

systems, in an attempt to identify ways in which school personnel can mentor and support them during their transition into school counseling.

<p style="text-align:center">Methods</p>

Participants

Participants included all members of a cohort of students who completed their master's degrees in school counseling from the same university and who found employment as first-time school counselors the year they graduated. The seven Caucasian, female participants ranged in age from 24 to 31, with an average age of 27. Three had no classroom teaching experience, two had worked as substitute teachers for less than two years, and two had full-time classroom teaching experience. Their graduate training program was accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs and required that students complete a minimum of 700 hours of field experiences with school counselors prior to graduation.

The participants worked in diverse settings. Five of the participants found employment in high schools, one in a middle school, and one in an elementary school. They worked alone or with up to four other school counselors. Their districts were rural ($n = 3$), suburban ($n = 2$), and urban ($n = 2$) and were located in the Midwest, South, and Northeast. The participants worked in schools that graduated between 75 and 350 students each year, with an average of 175 students per graduating class. The percentage of students who received free or reduced lunch in their buildings ranged from 10% to 90%, and the participants' individual caseloads averaged 307 and ranged from 80 to 525.

Procedures

A few weeks before they graduated, the participants were invited to become involved in the study. Stickel and Trimmer (1994) recommended a reflective journaling process as a useful method for helping school counselors during their transition into the profession. As such, the participants were informed of the potential benefits of keeping reflective journals and were provided with a template that they could use throughout their first year. The participants were asked to submit a weekly journal during their first year to the first author via email. They were provided with specific prompts including: Biggest challenge of the week; Most rewarding experience of the week; Most significant growth/learning experience; Who served as best support/mentor and how. Although prompts were provided, participants were instructed to reflect on whatever was important to them each week. The number of entries submitted by the participants ranged from 7 to 29 ($M = 19.28$, $SD = 9.0$). None of the participants submitted an entry every week, but their entries did span their first full year as school counselors.

Data Analysis

Initially the authors read all of the journal entries independently in order to get a sense of the overall experiences of the participants (Cohen, Zahn, & Steeves, 2000) and a few main themes emerged. Because we had asked a question specifically about mentoring, we were not surprised that topic emerged as a main theme; we found numerous references to mentoring throughout their entries (i.e., not only in response to the support/mentoring question). The remainder of this manuscript focuses on the mentoring theme; only the data related to mentoring were analyzed for this manuscript.

Once all entries that related to mentoring were identified and agreed upon by both authors, we began thematic analysis (Cohen et al., 2000) by identifying independently any subthemes related to mentoring. We then met to discuss these emerging subthemes, using consensus as the criteria for inclusion of the themes and associated passages. Finally, we identified direct quotations from participants that seemed to capture the essence of each subtheme (Cohen et al.).

Data analysis resulted in the identification of two subthemes in the mentoring data, *mentoring* and *support*. Although the benefits of mentoring and support often were similar for the participants, the main difference between these two subthemes was in relation to salience of expertise. Data that fit under the mentoring subtheme addressed relationships that were beneficial to the participants because they were able to learn from others who possessed more expertise or had higher rank, as suggested by Alleman et al. (1984). Data in the support subtheme involved situations described by the participants where the salience of their interaction was not based on differences in rank or expertise. This is not to say that support was not provided by individuals who possessed greater expertise than the participants; however, their expertise was not what appeared to make the interaction salient for the participants at that time. Additionally, data that fit under mentoring subtheme addressed procedural or job performance and decision-making issues where they gained knowledge and where expert opinions would be needed. Data that fit the support subtheme referenced interactions with colleagues that led to feelings of self worth, collegiality, and a sense of belonging.

Mentoring. The participants perceived many of their colleagues, including other school counselors, administrators, and teachers, as mentors to them in various ways. The actions or behaviors of these school personnel provided the school counselors with information and guidance on how to do their job and feedback on their job performance and skills. These informal mentoring relationships (i.e., the individuals were not formally assigned as mentors) appeared to increase the school counselors' knowledge and repertoire of skills, as well as their confidence and sense of worth in the school.

The participants benefited from information they obtained from others regarding school policies and procedures, as well as student issues. In particular, the information provided by experienced school personnel helped the participants know what to do in particular situations and gave them ideas of how to handle future situations in the school setting. Participants indicated that they appreciated when a colleague with more experience: "…continues to answer lots of questions, provide insight about the system" and "…lets me know the protocol." Participants indicated that they felt a sense of security when they were provided answers: "…I have always known how important it is to ask questions and ask for help in this job. I always go to my principal or (name of the other school counselor) with questions and concerns about student issues." Another participant wrote: "…My principal was the best mentor this week. She's always there to answer each one of my questions and get me through it."

The participants also found individuals in their schools who had more expertise to be helpful when they needed advice on how to approach various situations. Specifically, when participants needed to make important decisions, they consulted with individuals in their schools who could serve as experts. They appeared to gain some clarity about

what course of action to take after talking with colleagues: "…I decided not to report it after meeting with the other school counselor." Another participant wrote: "…It was difficult to know how to handle it – but I talked with our school social worker." Participants appreciated suggestions from others who had dealt with similar situations. Other times their interactions with colleagues generated useful ideas: "…My principal…helped me figure out what to do."

The participants appreciated having experienced colleagues with whom they could consult: "I've had to do more consulting with colleagues this week…this makes me so grateful to have others around for additional ideas." Another participant stated, "[name of other school counselor] was the best mentor. She was really helpful when I had to bounce ideas off her and run my thoughts and courses of action by her." One other participant simply indicated that "it was nice to bounce ideas and situations off them." Additionally, consulting relationships helped the participants perform their job duties: "…the school social worker is a tremendous help. She has been here for many years and is Spanish speaking. She takes your consultations seriously and will find ways to help you in student issues."

Interactions with experienced colleagues helped the school counselors to feel good about their work and confident in their abilities; it left them with a *you can do it* message. In particular, such interactions helped the participants to confirm the appropriateness or accuracy of their choices and decisions and increased their confidence to work independently. For example, participants indicated that they felt confident when experienced colleagues let them: "…handle things and not jump in right away" or when they are "…respectful when I have said I have everything under control."

Positive feedback from experienced colleagues also helped to increase their confidence: "my principal…gave me a lot of compliments on how I was handling the situation." Another participant wrote: "One of the other counselors I work with…has been very helpful giving me feedback about various situations." Also, conversations with others provided validation of ideas generated by the participants: "…my thought was to contact our school social worker and she (principal) agreed." Furthermore, participants gained confidence when their choices or initiatives were validated by experienced school personnel: "[counselor's name] has always respected my opinions and suggestions. I just feel more confident now in offering those." Another participant stated: "…one other counselor…was able to assure me that my decisions were okay."

Support. The participants felt supported by many of their colleagues, including other school counselors, administrators, and teachers. The actions or behaviors of these school personnel appeared either to assist the school counselor in doing her job or in increasing her confidence and sense of worth in the school. What distinguished acts of support from mentoring was participants not commenting on the salience of their experiences as being tied to others' level of expertise.

The participants felt encouraged when their colleagues supported their efforts, which seemed to lead to the participants feeling appreciated and valued. Sometimes this encouragement came in the form of appreciative comments: "I have had a couple of staff members tell me what a good job I have been doing and how organized everything has been. I have not felt it has been as organized as I would have liked it to be at times, but I definitely appreciate their compliments." Another participant wrote: "my principal-he has been very supportive of all the hours we have been working and the amount of time

we've spent in getting school started. He continually stops by and says thank you for everything we've done." Other times encouragement was evident in their colleagues' actions: "[The other school counselor I work with]…has also been very open to all of my new ideas."

Many of the participants' comments reflected the importance of collegiality. They wrote specifically about feeling connected and supported: "knowing we work as a team feels good." The participants particularly valued opportunities to collaborate with others to generate solutions to student-related concerns: "She sat [counselor] with me for 30 minutes trying to figure out the best solution to a very unrealistic situation…I really appreciated the time she took out of her after-school hours to chat with me." Another participant shared that her counselor colleague and she have "…been working together to try to find solutions…We also went on a home visit this week to his house, and visited with dad about some of our concerns, and to brainstorm with dad about how to make things better for his son." Teachers were also supportive in generating solutions, as one participant discussed: "working with a special education teacher and some regular education teachers to make sure one of our students with a visual impairment is receiving the accommodations and help she needs to be successful in our school."

Collegial support when personal issues affect work also was valued by the participants. One participant found relief in knowing that she could take some time to deal with a family crisis and also know that important tasks would be covered: "Another teacher and my principal were very supportive this week, in letting me take time for what I need regarding my family. The office staff has offered to cover and help with anything that I don't have time to do. It is registration and scholarship time, so things are really

hectic." Another was pleasantly surprised by the support offered by a teacher: "…I emailed the teachers and asked to make up the lessons. In one class the make-up days were going to be a mess. So the teacher offered to teach my lesson."

The participants also valued opportunities to talk about their work experiences, and many of their colleagues provided listening ears. Many found the other school counselors in their buildings to be great supports in this way: "…my fellow counselors. We also gave each other a chance to vent and just supported each other as much as possible." Another participant wrote of her counselor colleague: "She is also really willing to let me vent to her, which I need to do sometimes. It is so nice to have someone who understands the difficulties and the joys that are unique to this job." For others, colleagues who possess some understanding of their experiences were able to provide emotional support. One participant found a solid support network in a group of new teachers in her building: "The first year teachers I have become close to have been great as far as stress relief. It is so nice to have other first-year professionals to vent to." Another found that colleagues who had dealt with similar concerns in the past could provide perspective: "I'm talking with a couple of my colleagues about the stress of it all- they are a big help- they normalize all my feelings!"

<center>Discussion and Recommendations</center>

The results of this study suggested that school counselors can and do benefit from daily interactions with a variety of school personnel. Although none of the participants were assigned a formal mentor, they still learned from and were supported by others who had greater levels of expertise in different areas. They also felt support via collaboration and commiseration with others with whom they connected in different

ways. An environment where they felt safe to ask questions and where they found others to be collegial seemed valuable.

Before proceeding further, it seems important to acknowledge, given the qualitative nature of this study and the small sample size, that the results of this study cannot confidently be generalized to all school counselors. That is not the intent of qualitative research and was not the intent of this study, since each school counselor will have unique experiences and needs. Although their working conditions differ greatly, school counselors' experiences must be considered unique to their individual school contexts and personal characteristics. The results do, however, serve as a catalyst for exploring the various ways that school counselors can be supported and mentored in the absence of formal mentoring programs (i.e., where new school counselors are intentionally paired with experienced counselors).

Before jumping into ideas for establishing informal mentoring and support networks, it is important to note that school counselors should try to advocate for the inclusion of school counselors in formal mentoring programs that might already exist. They could work with administrators to emphasize the importance of including new school counselors in the same types of mentoring and induction programs that are often available to new teachers. Administrators might not think to include school counselors or other support personnel in those types of programs, so a request might be all it takes to make a difference. Ensuring that administrators assign school counselors rather than teachers as mentors, as suggested by Armstrong et al. (2006), also seems an important consideration. Nevertheless, formal mentoring programs might not be possible in all schools for financial or other logistical reasons, and identifying other ways to provide the

mentoring and support that new school counselors need seems warranted. Even as formal programs are being developed, informal methods could be employed.

The participants described their colleagues (principals, teachers, and other school counselors) as teachers, advisors, team members, and encouragers during their first year. It appears as if the participants' interactions with these individuals resulted in feelings of confidence, increased knowledge of school procedures, and feelings of worth, among other things. According to Alleman et al. (1984) and Rawlins and Rawlins (1983), these are the same results that someone would receive from mentoring. That is, the participants received personal (i.e., confidence and self worth) and professional (i.e., knowledge) benefits and learned how to deal with the politics of their organizations. Thus, even without the benefit of formal mentoring programs, it seems possible that some of the mentoring needs of neophyte school counselors could be met.

Perhaps the participants were fortunate in their experiences and in finding helpful and supportive colleagues. Even those participants who were the only school counselors in their buildings experienced support and mentoring from a variety of colleagues. Nevertheless, it is possible that many school counselors do not receive much mentoring or support during their transition into the profession. Because some school administrators may not either recognize or prioritize the needs of new school counselors, school counselors and directors of guidance/counseling can take the initiative to ensure the transition needs of first-year counselors are met by helping school personnel be intentional in their mentoring and support efforts, and by being involved themselves.

The participants appreciated the mentoring and support they received not only because it served to validate their choices but also because it helped them to feel like their efforts mattered. They also appreciated feeling part of a team. Perhaps school counselors can help administrators and other faculty members understand the potential benefits of sharing positive feedback with a colleague, thanking someone for their efforts, or offering to help someone. They could start by modeling this type of behavior themselves.

Next, similar to participants in other research studies (Armstrong et al, 2006; Schmidt et al., 2002; Stickel & Trimmer, 1994), the school counselors in this study indicated that it was important to have a support network of individuals to whom they felt some connection, usually based on having a set of shared experiences. For one participant this was a group of new teachers and for others it was other counselors. Rather than make assumptions about with whom their new colleagues might most connect, school counselors can help facilitate opportunities for their less experienced colleagues to meet and interact with a variety of school personnel, in the hopes that connections will naturally evolve over time. They also can encourage administrators to provide time for new staff members to meet as a group.

Third, when funding for formal mentors is not available, or in buildings where only one school counselor is employed, identifying individuals to whom new school counselors can turn for information or advice on a variety of issues becomes critical. The participants described a number of personnel who were helpful by providing different types of information. School counselors could help to establish a "Go To" list that would serve to identify the responsibilities and expertise of various individuals

within the school and the community. For example, a new school counselor might be instructed to approach the school nurse for advice regarding suspected substance use or the assistant principal for course registration procedures, including how to respond to students who want to change their schedules mid-semester. School counselors also might identify faculty members who could be helpful and encourage them to initiate interactions with new counselors. For example, a teacher who has spent many hours meeting with a particular parent whose son might not graduate could be asked to talk with the school counselor prior to and/or after he or she met with that parent. Additionally, school counselors might serve as important sources of information themselves, and are encouraged to anticipate the information needs of their new colleagues and, when possible, proactively help them prepare for various responsibilities. Partnerships also might be established with surrounding school districts so that school counselors could feel comfortable contacting each other regarding certain issues.

Finally, although it appears that the participants received different types of support and mentoring from numerous school personnel, they also valued the support and mentoring they received from other counselors. Historically limited numbers of school counselors have received formal mentoring from other counselors (Matthes, 1992; Stickel & Trimmer, 1994), and many have chosen to seek assistance from other counselors who they believed would most likely understand the unique challenges they faced (Schmidt et al., 2001). As such, school counselors could advocate for regular district-wide counselor meetings during which counselors could have a chance to brainstorm or vent, and more importantly, during which support and mentoring could be

provided. They also could make it a point to have regular "check-ins" with new counselors in their districts.

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

School counselors will likely continue to face unique challenges as they enter the profession, and they cannot necessarily rely on administrative or fiscal support to establish formal mentoring programs for their new colleagues. They also should not feel obligated to assume full responsibility for helping their junior colleagues to transition into the profession. The experiences of the participants give some credence to the idea that, even when resources are limited, through systemic efforts it seems possible that all school personnel can find ways to support and mentor new school counselors. In the same way they serve as leaders and advocates for students, in collaboration with their administrators school counselors can examine creative ways to provide support and mentoring to new school counselors as well as assess the outcomes of their efforts. Methods they utilize most likely could be beneficial for all new school personnel.

Nevertheless, the limited literature related to school counselor mentoring provides little empirical evidence supporting the benefits of mentoring. Qualitative data suggest that school counselors develop confidence and feelings of self worth, but more objective measures of these constructs are needed. As such, future researchers might consider using formal assessments in order to objectively examine the outcomes of mentoring on variables such as job satisfaction, mattering, and job performance. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, research can help to identify if relationships exist between mentoring and counseling effectiveness as it relates to student outcomes. Designing and implementing these types of studies might be challenging, but they

would meet the call for school counselors identifying how what they do and how they spend their time affects students.

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