

Making the Invisible Visible: School Counselors Empowering Students With
Disabilities Through Self-Advocacy Training
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Abstract

Professional School Counselors (PSCs) are trained to be leaders in school reform, collaborators with other educators, and advocates for all students. While PSCs provide academic, career, and personal/social interventions for the student body as part of a comprehensive school counseling program the needs of students with disabilities are often excluded. This article demonstrates replicable strategies for including students with special needs in a comprehensive school counseling program. The school counseling graduate participants focused on students with high-incidence disabilities in a diverse, urban high school in San Diego, California.

Making the Invisible Visible: School Counselors Empowering Students With Disabilities Through Self-Advocacy Training

Professional School Counselors (PSCs) are trained to be leaders in school reform, collaborators with other educators, and advocates for all students. While PSCs provide academic, career, and personal/social interventions for the student body as part of a comprehensive school counseling program, the needs of students with disabilities are often excluded. Self-advocacy training is a particularly valuable intervention school counselors can implement to ensure students with disabilities successfully transition between school grade levels and to postsecondary education and/or careers.

Despite the call for school counselors to provide advocacy programs and interventions for all students, the special education population remains on the periphery of school counseling programs and research (Milsom, 2002; Hitchings, Luzzo, Ristow, Horvath, Retish, & Tanners, 2001). Milsom (2002) found that only one third of the national PSCs surveyed, assisted students in high school with transition plans. School Counseling graduate programs are encouraged to provide training to address the needs of students with disabilities (Nichter & Edmonson, 2005; Milsom, 2002; Baumberger & Harper, 1999).

This article demonstrates replicable strategies for including students with special needs in a comprehensive school counseling program. The strategies included the implementation of a self-advocacy program, a *WhyTry*® curriculum, narrative counseling techniques, John Gottman's relational model, and presentations on advancing parental advocacy. The school counseling graduate students worked with students with high-incidence disabilities in a diverse, urban high school in San Diego,

California. A high-incidence disability typically refers to individuals identified with a learning disability, a mild intellectual disability or an emotionally behavioral disability. A School Counseling and Disabilities (SC&D) grant provided by the Office of Special Educational Programs funded 48 PSC trainees to provide counseling services to over 200 9th grade students with a high-incidence disability between 2004 and 2008. The partial focus of the grant was to support students with high-incidence disabilities to become strong self-advocates in proactively satisfying their educational needs through the course of their high school experience, and in preparation for life after high school.

Importance of Working with High-Incidence Disability Students

The many roles and functions of the Professional School Counselor are imbedded in the themes of leadership, collaboration, advocacy, and systemic change (ASCA, 2005; House, R. M., & Sears, S. J. (2002). The American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) *National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (2005) charges school counselors with providing academic, career, and personal/social interventions as part of a comprehensive school counseling program to meet the needs of *all* students. Further, the ASCA position statement on the school counselor's role in serving students with special needs identifies PSCs as advocates to help "all students realize their potential and make adequate yearly progress despite challenges that may result from identified disabilities and other special needs" (ASCA, Adopted 1999; revised 2004, p. 39). PSCs should work to identify and eradicate barriers, as well as actively promote learning environments for students with special needs' success, although this often is not demonstrated in practice (Scarborough & Gillbride, 2006).

A distinct area of need for advocacy in working with students with special needs is in the area of transition planning (Milsom, 2007). Studies over the past twenty years reveal that while there is an increase in students with disabilities graduating from high school with a diploma, there remains a considerable gap between students with and without disabilities when it comes to postsecondary education (National Council on Disability, 2003). Only 27% of students with disabilities enroll in postsecondary education compared to 68% of students without disabilities. Of those students with disabilities who do proceed toward postsecondary education, more are likely to enroll in two-year colleges or vocational schools than to complete a degree program when compared to their peers without disabilities (National Council on Disability, 2003). These statistics identify a need for PSCs to collaborate with special education staff to increase access to postsecondary educational and career options for students with disabilities. Furthermore, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA; P.L. 101-476; IDEA, 1990) mandates K-12 public schools provide accommodations and services to guarantee a free and equitable education for students with disabilities. Upon graduation from the public school system, students are no longer protected by IDEA and must request services in order to receive the accommodations that may be crucial to their postsecondary success as outlined by the American with Disabilities Act (Milsom, 2007; P.L. 101-336, 1990). Unfortunately, students with disabilities have little understanding of their civil rights or their accommodations when they enroll in postsecondary education (Carroll & Johnson-Bown, 1996). Unless students learn assertiveness skills, they will not receive the accommodations they need (Roessler, Brown, & Rumrill, 1998). Research suggests that enhancing self-advocacy skills can serve as an excellent

“antidote” against conditions that cause many students with disabilities to drop out of school (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003).

Advocacy Training

Research has shown that students equipped with the ability to self-advocate have the tools necessary to successfully transition to adult life (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003). Self-advocacy skills serve a particularly crucial role for students in special education, as it relates to the need for students to recognize when they are not receiving appropriate accommodations and ask for them when necessary. Norton (1997) found students apprehensive to ask for accommodations in the classroom and that most did not clearly explain their disability to their instructors.

Preparing students for post secondary self-advocacy requires teaching them the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need while still in high school. Van Reusen & Bos (1994) found that high school students with disabilities were more active participants in their Individualized Education Plans (IEP) when they received knowledge of their individual disability, learning strengths and weaknesses, as well as taught specific strategies such as how to ask and respond to questions and use listening skills.

Needs Assessment

Data-driven decision making is an effective way to identify and address student needs to insure all are receiving equitable access to an education that best prepares them to achieve their post-secondary goals (Dimmit, Carey & Hatch, 2007). Graduate students working on the SC&D project used data to determine how best to meet the needs of students with high-incidence learning disabilities with special education services. First, qualitative data was collected through observations and interviews of key

personnel involved in special education at the school site. The grant team then developed a 28-question survey on students' attitude, knowledge, and skills in areas related to the special education services they received at the school. The survey was initially administered in the spring of 2005 to 138 students in grades 9-12 with an active IEP, over the course of two consecutive days.

Survey results revealed multiple targeted needs in students' attitude, knowledge, and skills in the area of college readiness and self-advocacy. For example, of the 138 high school students surveyed, 78% reported they planned to go to college, yet only 58% of students reported that they *believed* they could succeed in college. Only 13% of students surveyed *knew* if disability services were available to them in college. With regard to the *skill* of self-advocacy, only 46% of students reported that they attended their IEP meetings, and of those, only 35% gave input. Summarily, it was evident that students required interventions that would teach them the skill of self-advocacy—the knowledge of what they need to advocate for and the attitude and belief in their ability to positively impact their future.

Advocacy Interventions

The grant team, consisting of 8-12 SDSU graduate students and professors as advisors, began the project by focusing on several areas of advocacy intervention. Graduate student grant members were assigned a caseload of 9th grade students with high-incidence disabilities. Students on each caseload were met with both individually and in small groups on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to address the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to be successful in high school and beyond. The graduate team sought to address the gap in knowledge of college and postsecondary options by

providing a variety of activities for students, teachers, and families. Summaries of these advocacy interventions are outlined below.

Individual and Group Counseling

Self-Advocacy Training

The most common type of advocacy students in special education can apply in the school and career settings is “request advocacy.” Request advocacy occurs when students take initiative in asking for the appropriate accommodations they require. Grant members taught students self-advocacy skills on a one-on-one and in small group context. Grant members modeled and students role-played scenarios designed to help students gain the skills to advocate for themselves in the classroom, in their IEP meeting, and in their everyday lives. Students were taught the differences between aggressive, assertive, and passive behaviors to increase their understanding of appropriate and effective ways of communication.

Why Try Curriculum

Small group interventions utilized the *WhyTry® Curriculum* (Moore, 2008), which employed narrative and solution/focused counseling techniques to address the way students view themselves as successful learners. This curriculum was specifically designed for students with learning difficulties. A range of activities in the Why Try curriculum were established primarily to confront students to take charge of their lives and feel responsible for creating positive changes in their lives.

One particularly powerful lesson is called “Tearing off Your Label,” in which students identify all of the different ways they might be labeled or stereotyped in school, at home, and in the community. Students were empowered to tear their label off and

separate themselves from their stereotypes (Moore, 2008). The goals of critical thinking and empowerment through the *WhyTry*® intervention laid the groundwork for introducing self-advocacy and the self-confidence necessary for students to be active participants in their own education and transition plans for postsecondary life.

Narrative Counseling Techniques

A unique technique was used during individual counseling sessions to begin to change the way students view themselves as learners. Adapted from Nancy Paulsen's work, students were encouraged to externalize their disability and internalize their strengths as a learner (Monk & Winslade, 2007). The first step in the process was to gather material highlighting academic successes and positive feedback drawn from the student's cumulative record, such as passing grades, teacher comments on report cards, IEP meeting notes, and attendance and behavior records. The material was assembled into a dynamic narrative based upon positive achievements the student had demonstrated in the past. During the session, grant members introduced the lesson by asking the student about their perception and qualities they thought made for a successful student. Next, a story was presented to the student (their story but with altered names). Reactions to the story were discussed as well as assumptions the student made about what type of person this characterized student must be. Students often respond with positive stereotype reactions to the "storied" student ("they live in a fancy home," "they wear glasses," "they are pretty," and "they are smart"). The story is then retold to the student using real names, with the character's true identity revealed to the student in a biographical narrative about them. Discussion then included inquiring if the student was interested in continuing with the development of their "success" story.

With the subsequent declared interest by the student in continuing to develop the success story, the conversation led to exploring small ways in which the student is (or could be) perpetuating the trajectory of this success story. Small but important steps are taken by identifying micro-level behaviors (such as the ability to approach a teacher when confused about an assignment) that could be indicative of current and future success. These ideas were constructed into an ongoing, emergent narrative of determination, persistence and hope that is revisited on occasion.

Gottman's Relationship Model

The Search Institute® researched and compiled a list of 40 Developmental Assets® that help lead to the growth of thoughtful and responsible, young adults by protecting from risky behaviors and promoting positive and healthy behaviors (Search Institute®, 2008). An important facet of the 40 Developmental Assets® is how caring relationships and a caring school climate help improve student's life chances, achievement, and educational attainment (Search Institute®, 2008). In an attempt to build assets in students with disabilities, grant members created an intervention based on infusing concepts from John Gottman's (1999) relationship model on friendship and conflict management skills into the individual and group counseling sessions. Gottman, a marriage and family therapist, described several simple, yet powerful tools for making relationships work which can be infused with any type of intervention at any grade level. The friendship skills consist of creating what Gottman calls "love maps," which encompasses how much one knows about the other persons' inner psychological world – their worries, stresses, dreams, and joys (1999). Love maps were generated by asking open-ended questions about the client's (or in this case the student's) history,

concerns, preferred relationships, and their current perspectives and plans for themselves.

The second part of developing friendship skills was the articulation of a fondness and admiration system which focused on the amount of affection and respect students have in their relationships with others. Grant members focused on acknowledging the positive aspects of the students personality and by noticing and commenting on the positive things they saw students (or faculty) doing, in an effort to create positive perspectives toward and between each other.

The third part of the friendship skills is what Gottman calls the “turning towards,” which refers to how to respond to a person’s “bid” for attention, affection, humor, or support (1999). Students may “bid” by initiating a conversation, expressing a need, or giving an unexpected smile. If a student were to “bid” by calling out the counselors’ name for instance, the counselor would have the choice to “turn towards,” “turn away,” or “turn against.” In turning towards, he or she might answer “yes?” In turning away there might be no response, and in turning against the response might be “what do you need this time?”

Grant members recognized that each day they encountered dozens of moments which became opportunities to turn towards, away, or against students. Every time they turned towards, they made what Gottman (1999) calls a deposit into the emotional bank account of the student. These positive moments add up – like saving money. To build strong emotional bank accounts with students, particularly students who may have less than full accounts, grant members made an extra effort to turn towards all bids made by students. Similarly, students learned how important it is to build up their emotional bank

account with teachers, peers, and family members so that when there were difficult times, there was enough emotional strength in the bank to maintain their positive attitude towards others.

Bidding works well with teachers, administrators, and other staff; filling a frustrated teacher's emotional bank account helps improve their patience with challenging students. While Gottman's relationship model (1999) may seem like just another way of conceptualizing things counselors already do, it actually provides a solid research-based relationship model framework from which school counselors can adapt and explain the importance of building a positive culture of appreciation and respect not only with students, but with the entire school. The goal of working with students on friendship skills was to help create a sense of school connectedness, thus contributing to building developmental assets. In turn, the admiration system and culture of appreciation on a school-wide level, may help lead to a positive school culture.

College Readiness

Classroom Guidance Presentations

The initial student survey identified the need to assist students in gaining the knowledge necessary to self-advocate and to increase their awareness of postsecondary options. To address these needs, grant team members conducted classroom guidance lessons focused on high school graduation and college entrance requirements, exit exam requirements, postsecondary options, as well as promoting the College/Career Night held each year. A two-pronged approach was utilized. First, classroom guidance presentations targeted all ninth grade students through their English classes and were delivered in collaboration with the school counselors. Grant

members then also conducted the presentation a second time for the special education students in their small groups to ensure comprehension of this important information. Presentations were measured with a pre-post test, which indicated substantial improvements in students' knowledge.

Supporting Parental Advocacy

To support parental advocacy with and for their students, two important parent activities were held each year. Each spring, grant members hosted a *College/Career Night* for students and their families. All students in grades 9-12 with an active IEP were invited to attend with their families to gain exposure to a variety of postsecondary options. Presentations (much like those in classrooms mentioned above) were tailored for the students and parents and translated when language assistance was necessary. Grant team members researched and invited local colleges to present information on admission processes and services available to special education students.

Students' parents and families were also invited to the second advocacy activity, a *Family Information Night and Award Ceremony*. In collaboration with the on-site parent center and the special education department, families were invited to the school to learn about the often confusing special education process and services in their native language. The hope was for parents to feel more comfortable advocating with and for their students' appropriate course placement or intervention. Grant members presented their students with awards based on notable progress they made during that semester. For many of these students, this was their first award ever received and served to strengthen their parents' and their own positive perception of themselves as successful learners.

Early Indicators of Success

The interventions outlined in this perspectives article were part of a four-year federal grant that will be formally evaluated at the end for effectiveness. The most encouraging preliminary results to date come from student survey data. Two cohorts were compared: a 2006 cohort of 11th grade students (n=25) who *did not* receive the grant services and the 2007 cohort of 11th graders (n=17) who *did* receive the grant services as 9th graders. Students reported attending more IEP meetings: 52% in 2006 and 88% in 2007; giving more input at their IEP's: 44% in 2006 and 76% in 2007; feeling more comfortable asking questions at their IEP meetings: 52% in 2006 and 65% in 2007; and knowing the results of their IEP: 16% in 2006 and 53% in 2007. While the sample size is very small, these preliminary results are encouraging.

Summary and Implications

School counselors often overlook the needs of students in special education because they do not have the necessary training and experience to work with this unique population (Nichter & Edmonson, 2005; Milsom, 2002; Baumberger & Harper, 1999). While more research is needed in measuring the impact on all cohorts in the grant, this article was written to bring attention to different techniques and the potential benefits of school-based interventions for a significant, contemporary issue impacting school counselors. These strategies can be used with any student who would benefit from additional support, but were specifically targeted for students with disabilities. Of course not every school has access to these resources; however the ideas may serve as a springboard for conversation among counseling teams or as suggestions for future grant writing to provide additional support for special needs students. Through

increased collaboration with the special education departments, school counselors can meet the needs of students with disabilities as they transition into and out of high school. Specifically teaching students the knowledge of high school graduation and college entrance requirements, as well as other postsecondary options, the skills to advocate for their learning needs to achieve their goals, increasing developmental assets and confidence through teaching and modeling friendship skills, and supporting a positive attitude as a successful learner will help school counselors include the needs of special education students in their comprehensive guidance program.

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