

Article 53

School Counselors' and Teachers' Perceptions of Elementary School Counselor Roles Related to Personal/Social, Academic, and Career Counseling

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School counselors and counseling programs have always been closely associated with teachers. The first vocational guidance counselors were teachers (Gysbers, 2001; Myrick, 2003), and until recently, many states still required school counselors to hold teaching certificates. Although teachers' influence on school counseling programs is often overlooked (Clark & Amatea, 2004; Reiner, Colbert, & Pérusse, 2009), teachers are major stakeholders in ensuring quality programming (Beesley, 2004; Clark & Amatea, 2004; Ginter & Scalise, 1990; Myrick, 2003; Ponec & Brock, 2000; Vaught, 1995). According to Clark and Amatea (2004), who interviewed 23 teachers across all grade levels regarding their perceptions and expectations of school counselors and counseling programs, "teachers' expectations of counselors and their knowledge of counselor performance can have great impact on students, parents, and administrators and therefore on counseling programs" (p. 132). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2005) model for school counseling programs promoted collaborating with teachers through consultation, coordination, and program evaluation and development. Beesley (2004) suggested that teachers were in a "unique position to provide insight and meaningful feedback to school counselors as how to maximize counseling service provision" (p. 260). Teachers are an integral unit in helping counselors provide services which are both available and effective, and "comprehensive developmental guidance programs cannot survive without the continued support and commitment of teachers" (Beesley, 2004, p. 269). As a teacher interviewee of Clark and Amatea stated, "A counselor cannot successfully help students without the help of teachers" (p. 136).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this article is to examine the value school counselors and teachers place on elementary school counselors' roles, specifically roles which align with the content areas identified by the American School Counselor Association. *Sharing the Vision: The National Standards for School Counseling Programs* (Campbell & Dahir,

1997) was “designed to connect school counseling to the current school reform agenda” (Dahir, 2001, p. 324). The Standards propose that counseling programs offer a proactive focus in three content areas: (1) academic development, (2) career development, and (3) personal/social development.

This discussion is part of a larger study that was conducted which also examined counselor educators’ and principals’ perceptions and included the domain areas of the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI) from the Education Trust (2009).

Very few studies have examined teachers’ perceptions of school counseling programs and the areas they believe to be important. Most of the research to be found has focused on the school counselor-principal relationship. While the school counselor-principal relationship is of vital importance, the school counselor-teacher relationship cannot be underemphasized. Teachers are key stakeholders in school counseling programs. Therefore, it is important to compare school counselors’ and teachers’ values and to focus solely on the perceptions of these two groups of professionals.

Two research questions are discussed in this article: (1) What value do school counselors and teachers place on elementary school counselors’ roles? and (2) Do their perceptions differ on the values placed on elementary school counselor roles?

Method

A researcher-developed, online questionnaire was created to measure perceptions of the value of elementary school counselors’ roles. The same survey instrument was completed by both school counselors and teachers. The researcher chose to develop an instrument that would intertwine two constructs – the five domains of the TSCI and the three areas of the ASCA National Standards. The three areas of the National Standards are: (1) Academic Development, (2) Career Development, and (3) Personal/Social Development. For the purposes of this article, only results pertaining to the ASCA National Standards will be discussed.

Of the 40 items, 37 related to the importance of school counselor roles; three items requested the following demographic data: (1) stakeholder position, (2) sex, and (3) primary descent group. A five-point semantic differential response scale was used to rate the importance of each of the counseling roles. Response choices for role-related questions ranged from *Not Important At All* to *Extremely Important*.

Participants

Elementary School Counselors. Of the participants, 124 indicated they were elementary school counselors. School counselors had the highest female to male ratio, with 90% (111) of the sample comprised of females and 10% (13) of males. Most of the elementary school counselor participants were Anglo-American (82%). The second largest primary descent group represented was African American with slightly less than 10% (10), and the third largest was Native Americans with 3% (4). Each of the other primary descent groups had less than 2%.

Elementary School Teachers. Of the 353 participants, 65 indicated they were elementary school teachers. Like elementary school counselors, over 80% (55) of the elementary teachers were female. Only 15% (10) of the elementary teachers were male. Most of the participants were Anglo-American (83%). The second largest primary

descent group represented was African-American with a little over 10% (8). The third largest was Native Americans with a little over 1%.

Discussion of the Findings

Participants completed the *School Counselor Role Survey* which assessed their perceptions of the importance of school counselor roles, specifically those related to the content areas advocated by ASCA. Two primary research questions were addressed: (1) “What value do stakeholders place on elementary school counselor roles?”, and (2) “Do stakeholders’ perceptions differ on the values placed on elementary school counselor roles?” Scores on the *School Counselor Role Survey* could range from 1, Not Important At All, to 5, Extremely Important.

Content Areas

Personal/Social. The Personal/Social content area overwhelmingly had the highest overall mean ($M=4.41$, $SD=.53$) of the three content areas and the highest mean for both groups. This suggests that both counselors and teachers view school counselors primarily as mental health specialists. It appears that both groups support a mental health emphasis for school counselors, even with No Child Left Behind legislation and educational reform practices. Although significant differences existed between the means of school counselors and teachers, the average rating for each of the groups was above 4.0. It seems obvious that school counselors would highly value this content area because most school counselor education programs emphasize a mental health orientation (Collison et al., 1998; Education Trust, 1997; Paisley & Hayes, 2003). Yet, it appears teachers also highly value the personal/social role and view it as the primary responsibility of the elementary school counselor.

Academic. The Academic content area received the second highest overall mean score ($M=3.58$, $SD=.78$) of the three areas. Also, it received the second highest mean score for both school counselors and teachers. No significant differences were found between the means groups for this content area. In comparison with the Personal/Social content area, it appears that stakeholders place less value on an academic role for school counselors. This finding suggests that school counselors have certainly distanced themselves from the “guidance counselors” of the past, whose primary focus was on academic and career counseling. Given that the role of the first school counselors (i.e. “guidance counselors”) was defined by the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 and required school counselors to identify and foster the development of students who showed promise in the subjects of math and science (Lambie & Williamson, 2004), the higher valuing of the personal/social component highlights the philosophical shift that has taken place over the past fifty years.

Career. Of the three content areas, Career received the lowest overall mean ($M=3.22$, $SD=1.08$). Relative to the score range interpretation, school counselors and teachers were *Neutral* concerning the value of career roles for elementary counselors. Overall, the results suggest that both groups do not believe career roles for elementary school counselors to be as important as personal/social and academic roles. Like the results for the Academic content area, this finding further emphasizes the difference between today’s school counselor and that defined by the NDEA.

Implications for School Counselors and Leaders

Of the three content areas advocated by the American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) National Standards, school counselors and teachers scored the Personal/Social content area as the highest ($M=4.41$). Academic was the second highest content area with a mean of 3.58. Lastly, the content area of Career received the lowest ratings ($M=3.22$). When compared to the score range interpretation for the instrument, the means for the content areas of Personal/Social and Academic indicate that these roles are *Somewhat Important* for elementary school counselors.

Although Personal/Social almost met the range interpretation criteria for *Extremely Important* (4.51-5.0), it fell short by approximately one-tenth of a point. Significant differences were found between school counselors and teachers on the content area of Personal/Social, but this area received the highest mean score for each group. This finding parallels similar results of Reiner et al. (2009). Echoing recommendations from Whiston (2002), work from Reiner et al. found that teachers valued school counselors working with individual students in a therapeutic manner (i.e., individual counseling) and believed this to be an important counselor role.

The mean for school counselors and teachers as a group indicated that they are *Neutral* concerning the importance of career roles for elementary school counselors. No significant differences were found between school counselors and teachers for the Academic and Career content areas.

Overall, these findings suggest that school counselors' and teachers' valuing of elementary school counselor roles as they relate to the content areas of Personal/Social, Academic, and Career are fairly consistent and compatible. In line with these findings, Reiner et al. (2009) posited "that the most important duties of a school counselor, according to teachers, would include assisting students with academic and career planning; assisting students with personal/social development;...and working with students in a therapeutic, clinical, individual counseling mode" (p. 329).

Conclusion

Although a significant difference within mean scores was only found within one content area, teachers consistently rated all of the content areas lower than did school counselors. While much work has been done to educate principals on the role and functions of school counselors, it appears that more work, especially with teachers, is necessary for complete buy-in to the National Model. Reiner et al. (2009) warn that stakeholders' perceptions of the roles and duties of a school counselor are important and advise school counselors to conduct needs assessment to identify priorities. Failure to meet the expectations of stakeholders, including the expectations of teachers, can negatively impact the success of the program (Gysbers, 2001; Reiner et al., 2009). Teachers are key stakeholders within schools and school counseling programs; their knowledge and expectations of the school counseling program informs the perceptions of others and their importance cannot be overlooked or undervalued.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm