School Counselors and Teachers Collaborate to Implement Education Reform in an Urban High School

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School counselor success at meeting student developmental goals rests significantly upon their abilities to collaborate with teachers. However, teacher time is being increasingly restricted to matters pertaining to local education reform agendas. Therefore, unless school counselors can design strategies to participate with teachers in education reform, counselors will be limited in their ability to influence student learning and development. In this article we share the progress of an ongoing field-based research study in which school counselors are helping teachers improve their capacities to implement education reform.

The research is based on two conceptual areas: the school change feedback process (or SCFP; a framework for school counselors to provide leadership to teachers during education reform), and the concerns-based adoption model (CBAM) of education reform (which holds that three types of teacher concerns can emerge within the implementation of education reform initiatives, and that these concerns must be addressed for successful implementation of education reform).

The general research questions were (1) Can school counselor feedback to teachers and principals lead to strategies that improve teachers' ability to implement education reform? and (2) Can this concept become integrated into the school counseling program?

The research study is located in an urban high school in which the district is implementing smaller learning communities (SLCs). The school is divided into four SLCs, based upon the following themes: business and finance; health careers; law and public service; and art and technology. A team of teachers serves as the instruction unit for a cohort of students during all 4 years of high school. The research employs both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

First, we discuss of the two conceptual foundations of the research: school change feedback process, and the concerns-based adoption model of education reform. Next, we present a sequential account of our methods, our research to date.

Conceptual Foundation

The School Change Feedback Process

The SCFP is a strategy for school counselors to provide feedback about teacher concerns regarding the implementation of education reform (Colbert, Vernon-Jones, & Pransky, in press). This feedback is then used as a basis for teachers and principals to identify and implement strategies that address teachers' concerns. There are four steps in the SCFP process: (1) obtain teachers' perceptions of education reform implementation; (2) share teachers' perceptions of education reform implementation with the principal and teachers; (3) incorporate teachers' perceptions of education reform implementation into the ongoing education reform implementation process, with continuous feedback; and (4) obtain teachers' beliefs again, and, beginning at Step 2, repeat the cycle.

The SCFP was derived from the Colbert and Magouirk Colbert (2003) culture-centered education reform model. The primary objective of this model is to provide counselor educators with direction for preparing school counselors to play a key role in their schools' education reform. Specifically, the model informs counselor educators of factors (e.g., collective teacher efficacy, parental involvement) and processes (e.g., communication between central administration and individual school staff) that contribute to education reform implementation (van den Berg, Sleegers, Geijsel, & Vandenberghe, 2000; Wheatly, 2002). Applying this knowledge into a systematic process, school counselors play a key role in the implementation and ultimate success of education reform at the school level.

The conceptual basis for measuring the factors and processes that makes up counselors' feedback in the SCFP is CBAM.

Concerns-Based Adoption Model.

According to the CBAM, there are three types of concerns that can emerge within the implementation of education reform initiatives (van den Berg et al.,

2000). These are self-concerns, task concerns, and impact concerns.

Initially, individuals tend to reflect on exactly what the reform initiative means for them. This type of concern is referred to as *self*-concern. As self-concern decreases, people begin to consider what must be done regarding the daily operation of a task. This form of concern is called *task* concern. When teachers are more focused on their students and colleagues than themselves or the task, this is called *impact* concern. People who demonstrate impact concerns usually make an effort – often collectively, with their colleagues – to make a reform initiative as tangible as possible and thus ready for actual implementation (van den Berg et al., 2000).

Our primary hypothesis is that school counselors can use a systematic process (SCFP) for supporting teachers by identifying and providing direction for addressing teachers concerns specific to implementing education reform. This school counselor support (feedback) mechanism empowers teachers to move from self-concern and task concern toward impact concerns.

Research Methods

A case study method was used in this research with pretesting and posttesting. The experimental group featured two smaller learning communities (business and finance, and health careers). The comparison group consisted of the remaining two smaller learning communities (law and public service, and art and technology).

Participants

The school in which this research takes place is a high school in an urban setting with a student population of 1,251 students. The racial/ethnic makeup consists of 989 students who identify as African American, 116 as West Indian, 73 as Puerto Rican, 146 as Hispanic, 5 as White, and 1 as Alaskan/American Indian.

Twenty-five teacher participants in this study consisted of 14 in the experimental and 11 in the comparison group. Ten teachers in the experimental group had master's degrees; 10 were in their first year of implementing SLCs; and 6 had some training in SLCs. The comparison group had 10 teachers with master's degrees, 7 in their first years implementing SLCs, and 8 with some SLC training.

Instrumentation

Researchers used the concerns questionnaire (Hall, George, & Rutherford, 1979) to measure specific teacher concerns about implementing SLCs. The concerns questionnaire is used extensively in research and has good reliability and validity.

Procedure

Entering the school system. We began our research by meeting with administrators from the district's central office; the two co-directors of guidance, the head principal, and the coordinator of smaller learning communities. The purpose of these meetings was to secure administration approval of the research and to ensure that our work at the individual school level was consistent with the overall district's education reform initiative (Colbert & Magouirk Colbert, 2003). According to this model, the new role for school counselors depends on support at all levels of the district.

The support of guidance directors was important, given our objective of working to implement school counselors in their new role. Two years prior to this research, we had established a collaboration with the co-directors of guidance, wherein graduate students conduct their internships in the district; university faculty provide professional development to the counseling staff; and a field site for research is provided. Therefore, the current research was a natural outcome of the relationship with the guidance directors.

The head principal and coordinator of the SLC were the two central administrators most closely associated with the implementation of the SLCs in the schools. The head principal was a key contributor to the process because her approval helped ensure access, which was fostered by securing the approval of the school-level principal to conduct our research. Additionally, the head principal's participation assured us that, when we identified teacher reform implementation needs, there would be resources (financial) available to address teacher concerns. We proposed the research to the administrators and, after answering a few questions, received their support for the project. Our next task was to seek approval from the principal and school counselors.

Rapport with principal and school counselor. The head principal and one co-director of guidance called a meeting with the high school principal and the lead school counselor of the participating schools. Upon receiving a presentation of the proposed research, the principal along with his lead school counselor, immediately gave their approval of the research.

The principal invited us to meet with his staff to introduce the research. We presented a brief summary of the research to the entire staff at one of their regular

monthly meetings. Staff showed enthusiasm for the project and agreed to participate.

Preparing school counselors. Next, we met with the two school counselors to explain procedures, provide reading material outlining their role in the process, and set times for meetings throughout the school year. Our plan was for the researchers to take the primary lead in the school counselors' new role, allowing the counselors to assume a more active role over time. The training consisted of readings, meetings, ongoing instruction, and shadowing the researchers during the project.

Data Analysis

SCFP-Step 1. We administered the concerns questionnaire to teachers in the experimental and comparison groups. Counseling psychology students created measurement packets that included a cover letter explaining the measurement process, a consent form, and the concerns questionnaire. Teachers were instructed to return their completed questionnaire in a sealed envelope to the principal's secretary. Graduate students visited the school during a 2-month period to pick up completed questionnaires.

Upon return of the questionnaires, the principle researcher (author) and two counseling psychology students entered the data into SPSS for future analysis. However, in order to identify each teacher's concern across the stages of concerns, we followed the concerns questionnaire scoring protocol, which consisted of hand scoring each teacher's questionnaire, which led to the development of individual concerns' profiles.

SCFP – Step 2. We received 25 (14 experimental and 11 comparison group) completed questionnaires out of 96 administered. The low return rate was explained by the school counselors as "staff concerns that this project might just be another top-down dictate." The pretest scores for the 14 experimental group participants for the concerns questionnaire profiles resulted in seven self-concerns, two task concerns, and five impact concerns. The pretest of scores for the 11 comparison group participants revealed six self-concerns, two task concerns, and three impact concerns. The two groups were similar in their perceptions of concerns for implementing SLCs, as indicated by their pre-test scores on the concerns questionnaire.

Counselors first talked with teachers (experimental group) about their concerns' profiles. The primary objective was to allow teachers to express their opinions about the validity of results. The counselors stated, "This is what the results say about your SLC implementation needs," and then asked, "Does this seem accurate?" In all 14 cases, teachers agreed that the results were accurate. We then asked teachers to articulate their concerns in their own words. The following five themes emerged during talks with teachers about their concerns' profiles:

1. meeting and decision-making opportunities needed: *Staff are empowered to make decisions about literacy and student advocacy;*
2. more sustained contact with students: *Teachers meet weekly with their advisory student group;*
3. opportunities for SLC information: *Visit other sites where SLCs are implemented;*
4. discipline plan: *Staff can use district identified model or another model they choose;* and
5. opportunities for voices to be heard: *Hold debates and discussions with students.*

The preceding statements in italics are samples of what the principal stated he will do to address teachers' concerns about implementing SLCs. At this writing, we are beginning a new school year, during which time we will observe each of the strategies for addressing teachers' concerns. We will then talk with teachers to get an idea as to whether or not (and, if so, the degree to which) the new strategies are working toward addressing their concerns. This information recycles back into step 2 (SCFP), sharing teachers' concerns.

The observations of the different strategies will also allow us the opportunity to address our second research question: Can we integrate school counseling program goals and objectives into the ongoing feedback process? For example, when teachers meet with their advisory groups, teachers seek to understand their students better. Therefore, as students begin to self-disclose, we can look for connections between student needs and the American School Counselor Association (2003) national standards. This will be followed by the identification of school counseling program goals and the development of activities to meet student needs.

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