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ABSTRACT

Recent movements within school counseling have sought to define the duties of school counselors. A study of regional Southern California schools, which have the highest student to counselor ratios in the nation, reveals that the predominate barrier to development of comprehensive, results-based counseling programs has been cognitive rather than circumstantial. This study offers insights into the need for a paradigm shift in order to achieve school counselors' goals of gaining status as indispensable to schools. (Contains 18 references.) (Author/SLD)

Factors Contributing to Difficulties Operationalizing Comprehensive School Counseling Programs: A Quantitative Study.

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Abstract

Recent movements within school counseling have sought to define the duties of school counselors. A study of regional Southern California schools, which have the highest student to counselor ratios in the nation, reveals that the predominant barrier to development of comprehensive, results-based counseling programs has been cognitive rather than circumstantial. This study offers insights into the need for a paradigm shift in order to achieve school counselors' goals of gaining status as indispensable to schools.

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The American School Counselor Association has stated the role of the school counselor:

> "Within a comprehensive school counseling program professional school counselors will focus their skills, time and energy on direct service to students, staff and families. ASCA recommends a realistic student-counselor ratio of 1:250. Professional school counselors will spend 70 percent of their time in direct service to students. Indirect services include counseling program planning, maintenance and evaluation; participation in school site planning and implementation; partnerships and alliances with post secondary institutions, businesses and community agencies; and other tasks enhancing the program's mission." (ASCA, 1997)

School counselors have become increasingly invisible and increasingly expendable as they were left out of the education reform movement. In response, the American School Counselor Association announced the establishment of the National Standards for school counseling programs to define school counseling within the parameters of education reform. The three areas of student development defined by the Standards are academic, career, and personal/social development.

After extensive research and review (Dahir, 2000), the American School Counselors Association (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) announced the establishment of the National Standards for School Counseling Programs. The three domains of student development defined by the Standards are academic, career, and personal/social development. "Academic development includes the acquiring skills, attitude and knowledge contributing to effective learning in school across the life span" (p. 18). "The program standards for career development ... provide the foundation for the acquisition of skills, attitude and knowledge that enable students to make a successful transition from school to the world of work" (p. 19). "Personal/social development includes the acquisition of skills, attitude and knowledge which help students understand and respect self and others, acquire effective interpersonal skills, understand and practice safety and survival skills and develop into contributing members of society" (p. 19).

The American School Counselor Association National Standards recommend creation, implementation, and evaluation of a comprehensive developmental school counseling program to support and attain National Standards of ASCA. A comprehensive school counseling program focuses on overall development of students, from kindergarten through grade 12.

The principal attributes of a comprehensive K-12 developmental guidance and counseling program are sharply different from those of a traditional service delivery approach (Sink, 1998). Comprehensive guidance programs are characterized by an overarching organizational

components with distinct elements, including structural and program components, collaboration with other resource personnel, and response to student needs (Gysbers & Henderson, 1994). Structural components may include a mission statement as well as defined, measurable goals for the counseling program. The program component includes student needs assessment and implementation of guidance curriculum. The individual planning component includes personalization of guidance programs to reach student goals. Responsive services include assistance with student's individual personal/social, career, and educational development. Finally, system support consists of two support mechanisms for comprehensive counseling, first, the necessary collaboration between the guidance, administrative, and instructional departments, and, second, ongoing professional counselor training (,Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Johnson & Johnson, 2000).

To achieve results across the ASCA domains, counselors must be prepared to deliver individual and small group counseling, large group guidance, consultation, case management, and coordination, management and evaluation of the school counseling program (ASCA, 1997a). The primary goal of this type of system is to help students learn more effectively and efficiently as well as help make school life more rewarding (Myrick, 1997). Hogan (1998) stated that a comprehensive school-counseling program is developmental, systematic, sequential, clearly defined, accountability driven, proactive, preventive, and aimed at helping students acquire and apply life-long learning skills.

Several factors have been empirically found to affect the development of comprehensive counseling programs in K-12 settings. Watkins' (2001) analyzed several international settings and reported that comprehensive school counseling programs existed in numerous countries to further national curricula, influenced by culture and political structure. Herr's (2001) analysis of the evolution of school counseling programs in the United States discovered that national policies such as the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (NDEA), funding, the economy, and emerging theory and research influenced counseling program development.

Herr concluded that the only model to adequately respond to such effects is that of a comprehensive school guidance and counseling program. A subsequent study by Lapan, Gysbers and Sun (1997) explored the statewide implementation of comprehensive guidance programs in Missouri. The study revealed that the more fully developed the comprehensive counseling program the more likely students earned higher grades, were better for prepared for

their future, and had more college information availability. Students from schools with comprehensive counseling programs reported a positive school climate as well as feelings of belonging and safety in their schools. Counselors in these programs spent more time with students and enhanced academic progress.

Godbout, Grant, Sestero and Sutherin (1999) examined one San Diego elementary school district's progress in developing a comprehensive counseling program, using the evaluation instrument for measurement of development of comprehensive school guidance programs developed by Gysbers (1998). They discovered that, although several steps were taken to implement a comprehensive counseling program, counselors resisted gathering baseline data to measure and guide counseling program development and to measure student accomplishment. Surveys of students identified deficiencies in competencies from the personal/social development, while surveys of teachers revealed inconsistencies between teacher and student evaluations of classroom behavior. Data gathered from multiple sources highlighted the importance of collecting baseline data from more than one source. Furthermore, the high counselor to student ratio found limited counselor interaction with high-risk students. Another study of San Diego schools (Colandrea, Rojo, Seiple, Sharp, Vaughan, and Velez, 2000) reported that counselors were satisfied with their site-specific counseling programs but dissatisfied with school district support, including adequate funding, resources and information. Counselors believed their roles as school counselors were not properly defined and reported what they believed to be inappropriate job assignments such as supervision. A third study of San Diego schools discovered that goals for counselors were set without accountability, responsibility for the National Standards, or program management (Shirley, Prise, Lee, Mulligan & Langer, 1999).

Replicating the Shirley and associates study, Mitchell, Udow, Downs, McMaster, DeWitt, Parres-Sampson, and Stevenson (2002) studied the extent to which the American School Counseling Association National Standards were implemented in three counties in Southern California. The findings revealed a scarcity of comprehensive counseling programs across a significant region of Southern California. The study also discovered that regional counselors idealized the potential results of National Standards implementation. Areas noted included credibility to the school counseling profession, increased funding for counseling, reduction of student to counselor ratios, a corrected definition of the job description, increased accountability

for results; and the overall impact of implementation of the Standards. However they were discouraged by the comparison of existing programs in the region with the Standards.

Previous research has revealed existing problems in the development and implementation of the National Standards to a comprehensive developmental school guidance and counseling program. However, an explanation for these inadequacies and discrepancies is absent from the literature. Except for the historical data reported by Herr (2001) the barriers to implementation are unknown. In order to remedy existing deficiencies, these barriers need to be discovered. The present study was undertaken to discover the barriers.

Methodology

Participants

A convenience sample of forty-four schools was chosen from three counties in Southern California. Administrators, forty principals and four vice-principals, and a counselor from each school agreed to participate in the study. Thirty-eight institutions returned questionnaires (response rate=88 %).

Thirty-one of the counseling office personnel returned questionnaires. Of the counseling staff that responded, twenty-six were Pupil Personnel Services credentialed counselors (State certified school counseling professionals holding Masters degrees in school counseling), one school psychologist, a school social worker holding a Master of Social Work degree, a teacher who had been assigned to perform the counseling duties at the school, a contracted, uncertified counselor, and a career technician with a Bachelors degree in an educational field. The total number of study respondents was 69, covering 38 schools.

Apparatus

Gysbers and Henderson (2000) developed an inventory to measure the extent of individual comprehensive school counseling program components. The inventory was adapted for a study of San Diego schools (Shirley, et al., 1999) with a Likert scale and additional demographic questions added. The questionnaire assumed five components necessary for a fully functioning comprehensive guidance program in a school: structural, program, individual planning, responsive services, and systems support (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000, pp. 213-222).

The questionnaire contained twenty-four items, divided into six categories. Five of the categories dealt with the components necessary for a fully functioning comprehensive guidance program. The section on structural components sought to measure the existence of a mission for

the guidance program and whether a school had defined, measurable goals for the counseling program. The section regarding program components of the questionnaire gathered data dealing with the assessment of student needs and relevant guidance curriculum. The individual planning portion of the questionnaire measured the planning by guidance programs to carry out its goals and related activities. The responsive services section gauged how well guidance programs responded to individual student personal/social, career, and educational development by offering systematic responsive services to its students. The final section dealt with systems support and concentrated on communication between the guidance, administrative, and instructional departments. It also asked a question about the availability of growth opportunities for counselors. The sixth section of the questionnaire contained two questions dealing with school demographics. Respondents were asked to rate each of the components from one (not implemented) to five (fully implemented) on a Likert type scale. If the respondents believed that a component did not apply, respondents were to circle N/A.

Procedure

At each participating school site questionnaires were distributed, personally or by mail, to the administrator who agreed to participate and to either the head school counselor or the administrator's designee.

All analyses were performed on SPSS 10. To increase statistical power (Siegel, 1956, 9-12) a mean of the responses for each component was determined and analyzed. A multiple analysis of variance was performed on each variable in relation to the demographic factors. Variables that showed significance were analyzed with Student's t-tests to reveal where differences existed.

Results

Respondents were asked to rate several specific areas of each of the five components of a comprehensive guidance program system, individual planning, program, responsive services, structural, and system support from zero to five, ranging from not applicable to fully implemented. The ratings of these areas were then analyzed, using a Chronbach's alpha procedure to discover the internal consistency of each component scale. Table 1 describes the relationships between the ratings for each component.

- Insert Table 1Here-

Because internal consistency was high, the assumption was made that the items within each component were consistently measuring the same factor. Individual ratings were combined and the mean combined values were analyzed for relationship to demographic variables.

The comprehensive guidance component that was most emphasized in the regional sample schools were responsive services and system support. The mean implementation of these two components were moderate to strongly implemented, m=3.80, sd=.92, and m=3.71, sd=1.27, respectively. The independent planning component was moderately implemented, m=3.12, sd=1.34. Structural and program components were weakly to moderately implemented, m=2.81, sd=1.29, and m=2.73, sd=1.20, respectively. Once the relationships between differences in the implementation of comprehensive guidance components and demographic variables was determined, resultant differences were analyzed using t-tests.

The structural component was the first to be analyzed. T-tests described where those differences existed. There was convincing evidence of a difference between elementary schools and high schools on the structural component, t(47)=-3.65, p=.001, and for a difference between middle schools and high schools, t(32.29)=-1.92, p=.049. The mean of elementary schools in the region was 2.10, sd=1.54 (weakly implemented), the middle school mean was 2.7, sd=1.18 (weak to moderate implemented), and the high school mean was 3.36, sd=.84 (moderate to strong implementation). No significant difference was found between elementary and middle schools.

Analysis of the programmatic component indicated convincing evidence of differences between elementary schools and middles schools, t(37.07)=-2.36, p=.02), and between elementary schools and high schools, t(34.28)=-3.17, p=.003. The mean rating for elementary schools in the region was 2.02, sd=1.36 (weakly implemented), the middle school mean was 2.91, sd=1.03 (moderately implemented), and the high school mean was 3.13, sd=.97 (moderately implemented).No significant difference appeared between middle and high schools.

An analysis of the individual planning component revealed differences between elementary schools and middle schools, t(38.82)=-2.51, p=.017, between elementary schools and high schools, t(47)=-7.17, p<.000, and between regional middle schools and high schools, t(46)=-4.08, p<.000. A mean of 2.0, sd=1.31 (weakly implemented) existed for regional

elementary schools, 2.98, sd=1.16 (moderately implemented) for middle schools, and 4.06, sd=.66 (strongly implemented) for regional high schools.

Analysis of the support component identified several relationships between differences in the systems support component and demographic variables. The first significant relationship again existed between system support by grade level. There existed a difference between elementary schools and middle schools, t(39)=-2.59, p=.013, between grade school and high school, t(47)=-3.51, p=.003, but no significant difference between middle and high schools in the region sample schools.

The next significant relationship occurred between counselor to student ratio and systems support. Those differences were discovered to be between ratios of one counselor to less than 500 students and one counselor to 1,000 students, t(54)=-3.42, p=.001, and again between one to 1,000 students and one counselor to 3,000 students, t(36)=2.14, p=.04. The mean implementation of system support components for regional schools with ratios of one counselor to 500 students was 2.95, sd=1.77 (moderately implemented), for schools with ratios of one counselor to 1,000 students was 4.14, sd=.85 (strongly implemented), and, for schools with ratios of one counselor to 3,000 students was 2.3, sd=0 (weakly implemented).

There were no differences in the responsive services component by any demographic variables.

Discussion

The results of this study revealed that augmentation of four of the components of a comprehensive counseling program were related to grade levels. This discovery was congruent with the earlier study by the same investigators, that counselors and administrators believe that their functions at different grade levels are predetermined (Mitchell, et al., 2002). It appears that the general understanding of responsibilities of the counselor as duty-specific by grade level rather than comprehensive continued to hinder counselors from developing comprehensive counseling programs. Until counselors understand the importance of implementation and measurement of interventions across ASCA National Standard domains they can neither reform their programs nor inform administration and the public of their effectiveness toward student achievement.

Comprehensive counseling systems were strikingly less developed at the elementary level than at the middle or high school level. Further, counseling programs were not much different

than they were prior to the development of the ASCA National Standards and comprehensive guidance systems.

Structural elements, including a mission, philosophy, goals and measurable competencies were the weakest at the elementary level and strongest at the high school level. High school structural elements, though restrictive, were better defined than elementary or middle schools.

Program components were moderately implemented in both middle and high schools. Elementary appeared very weak in comparison to middle and high school. Responsive services continued to be the most emphasized. School counselors continued to act in a crisis/reaction mode of rather than proactive or preventative. The continued lack of planned and measured interventions presents a significant problem in light of fundamental principles of education reform. Without targeted student competencies and measured outcomes, counselors cannot substantiate the need for their existence (House, 2001).

The individual planning component was found to be moderately well developed in high school counseling programs. Middle school individual planning was less developed than at the high school level, and elementary was virtually nil. Elementary school counseling programs defined their positions in terms of crisis response without planning for individual student needs.

The system support component was also dependent on grade level. Although there appeared to be more collaboration and communication at all levels than other components of a comprehensive counseling system, there was a deficiency in both elementary counselor collaboration and training. Differences in system support were also related to student to counselor ratios. Only schools with midlevel ratios had well developed support systems. Perhaps, when ratios are high, counselors are too overwhelmed to collaborate and less likely to be allowed to attend trainings, while low ratio schools see less need to collaborate to keep up with the demands on the counselor. Still, this system support component was not related to development of comprehensive counseling programs.

One sidelight of the discovery that the system support component was grade dependent was the lack of equal and adequate training opportunities for middle and elementary counselors. Until schools invest in training, and then in collaborative efforts for development of comprehensive counseling systems, school counselor positions remain vulnerable.

Although student to counselor ratios were high and sometimes dramatically so (ranging from 329:1 to 1850:1, mean=1015:1, sd=1293:1), this study did not find ratios to be related to

differences in implementation of comprehensive counseling programs, except in relation to the system support component. Considering the position of ASCA on optimum student to counselor ratio, the study provided no evidence to support the contention that student to counselor ratio is critical, other than to development of system support. Since education reform rewards accountability, empirical evidence that ratio reduction augments student achievement would become a strong argument for those ratio reductions.

The discovery in this study of a consistent pattern of differences between grade levels and the institution of elements of comprehensive counseling programs becomes increasingly important if this sample were indicative of school counseling programs outside this study sample population. No other demographic, school size, student to counselor ratio, number of counselors present on site, professional position of respondent, nor school site, was significantly related to differences in implementation of any component of a comprehensive counseling program.

Finally, replication of this study is needed to discover if one of the other demographic variables is then a hindrance to development of comprehensive, results-based counseling programs.

Conclusion

Because a convenience sample was used for this study, results cannot be generalized to educational counseling programs for the nation as a whole. Nor can they be generalized to the Southern California region. Replication of the study with randomized sampling across larger regions, statewide or nationwide would increase reliability.

Also, inclusion of district administrators would give insight as to whether their knowledge and understanding of the ASCA National Standards was a barrier to the support and encouragement of the Standards implementation at school sites. A question of what determines counseling policy for districts and school sites also remains. Future studies could address the importance of counseling programs in a district and how comprehensive counseling implementation is affected by budgetary planning.

Comparison of this study to previous studies reveals commonalties. High student to counselor ratios and the inconsistency of implementing comprehensive and developmental guidance lessons and programming across K-12 are among those common discoveries. It appears that until school counseling philosophy reflects ASCA National Standards at all levels,

counseling programs cannot rely on increased support and students will be dependent on instructional staff to attain many competencies stated in the ASCA Standards. In the past decade, school shootings and violence have made headlines. Taking a closer look and making changes in counseling programs are imperative to assure our children and community a safe place to receive an education as well as the highest possible achievement of life goals.

Several approaches have been instituted to increase the speed at which school counseling programs develop comprehensive systems (American School Counseling Association, 2001; House, 2001; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 2000; Myrick, 1997; Tyra, 2001; ERIC/CASS, 2001). Each has documented successes both in development of comprehensive programs and in contributions to student development. However, schools must be willing to consider the necessity of paradigm shift and must invest financially in training. The more likely impact would come from counselor educators universally and consistently integrating the latest in school counseling theory and practice into curricula. Since this is seldom the case, it may require intervention on the part of CACREP to set the standard. Once university faculty consistently prepare school counselors for comprehensive counseling programs, the expectations of both counselors and of school districts are likely to follow.

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TABLE 1. Internal Reliability of Subscales for Subscales of Comprehensive Guidance Program Components

Component	respondent n	n of items	r
Structural	54	5	.88
Individual Planning	59	3	.86
Responsive Services	62	7	.85
Program	54	4	.84
System Support	59	3	.77

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