

School Counselors' Systematic Perceptions of Change Agency Through Primal Leadership and Empowerment: Critical Provisions Towards K-12 Students' Achievement

Abstract

In this examination, 194 K-12 school counselors completed the Self-Perceptions of Effectiveness as Educational Change Agent (SPECAs) survey. Analyses uncovered that Primal Leadership and personal power or empowerment both play a significant role in counselors' potential effectiveness to effect change regardless of gender or building level. Personal power or empowerment proved to make the greatest contribution towards change agency effectiveness. Results showed that counselors perceive having high indicators of emotionally intelligent Primal Leadership and adequate levels of empowerment with some important limitations pertaining to involvement in program policy. The study revealed counselors' priorities pertaining to factors of unobtrusive leadership and empowerment. Scores further specified that female counselors tend to exhibit higher self-confidence than male counselors to undertake change. However, male scores yielded stronger correlations and coefficients of determination, signifying that males may merge ability and strategy more often than females do. Additionally, results corroborated that females may be inclined to build effectiveness to lead change on relationship management, while males may value self-management and personal power combined. Analyses of variance showed that, with minor exceptions, counselors' perceptions do not differ significantly by building level. The study concluded emphasizing training as a primary change medium. A Model of Competence for Change Agency Effectiveness was proposed, compatible with the National Model for School Guidance Counseling Programs, with implications for training and evaluation.

Professional school counselors face challenging societal trends and stringent legislation today. Due to these conditions, leading school counseling scholars and practitioners are prompting counselors to become leaders of their programs and agents of change accountable for the results of their work (Hatch & Bowers, 2002). The call has become even more compelling under the "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001. Concurrently, counselor education programs are under pressure to deliver training on leadership and program evaluation to help counselors design comprehensive developmental programs and implement accountability measures (Myrick, 2003a). Undertakings of such nature require commitment of personal effort, administrative support, and other resources (Hughes & James, 2001; Mullis & Otwell, 1997).

Although there are numerous studies about the school counseling profession and the challenges it faces, no significant body of research has balanced the work of school counselors as program leaders with their effectiveness as change agents. Using school counselors as the unit of analysis this study attempted to contribute to fulfill that gap. The research questions that guided this inquiry were: 1.–How and to what extent are school counselors' indicators of leadership aptitude related to their sense of personal power or empowerment in school? 2.–Is there a relationship between school counselors' indicators of leadership aptitude and their perceived effectiveness to impact specific change factors? 3.–Is there a relationship between school counselors' indicators of their personal power or empowerment in school and their effectiveness to impact specific change factors? 4.–Is there agreement in the perceptions of elementary, middle/junior high, high school, and multilevel counselors pertaining to primal leadership, personal power or empowerment in school, and their effectiveness to effect change? Two a-posteriori implicit research questions enhanced the understanding of results by factoring in gender and uncovering the impact of each independent variable on change agency effectiveness.

Conceptual Underpinnings

Critical Provisions Towards Students' Achievement

Critical provisions towards students' achievement include the vision, attitudes, interventions, and artifacts that are aimed at transforming existing cognitive connections and social relations in school, in the interest of greater achievement of all k-12 students.

Change

In light of ongoing reform, the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) endorses a call for school counselors to become agents of change, advocating for systemic change (Paisley & Borders, 1995) and for progressive implementation of the National Model for School Guidance Counseling Programs at all school levels with the psychosocial and academic development of students in mind (Hatch & Bowers, 2002). Hatch and Bowers maintain that by embracing the National Model school counselors could establish themselves as leaders of educational change. By focusing on student development and achievement, school counselors become vital educators in the school setting (Martin, 1997). To undertake the change process, school counselors need to implement counseling

programs that articulate educational goals differentiated at each level of schooling to match students' developmental needs (Lee, 2001).

Proactive educators can optimize their work by participating in the processes of policy-making and program vision implementation geared to promote educational change (Fullan, 2001). Other researchers noted that to enhance the practice of school counseling in schools, programmatic change should parallel school reform (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). Thus, school counselors should undertake immediate action in implementing educational reform through the National Model, and assess how their leadership toward service delivery, collaboration, and accountability reflect on students' outcomes (Sink & Yillik-Downer, 2001).

Primal Leadership

Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee's (2002) "Primal Leadership," is a psychosocial paradigm with foundation on emotional intelligence, brain-based, and change oriented. Emotions are a source of motivation, connection, and information in the form of potent feedback, personal power, influence, and innovation (Cooper & Sawaf, 1997). If thought and emotion are such potent drivers of performance, as Goleman et al. (2002) and others before them indicated, the leaders' primal task, school counselors in this case, is to promote emotional development at all levels of the institution.

Additionally, Goleman et al. (2002) noted that emotional intelligence is at the heart of Primal Leadership. Goleman (1998) identified four dynamically intertwined domains of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Goleman's research reiterated the idea, imperative for education and for the school counseling profession in particular, that emotional intelligence competencies are learned rather than genetic, and are never static (Goleman, 1998; Salopec, 1998). In examining the views of outstanding organizational leaders, Goleman (1998a) found that emotional intelligence proved to be twice as important as technical skills and IQ. "An emotionally intelligent leader can monitor his or her own moods through self-awareness, change them for the better through self-management, understand their impact through empathy, and act in ways that boost others' moods through relationship management" (Goleman et al., 2002, pp. 5, 103). To enhance performance, school counselors must adopt such self-leadership attitude before outward leadership happens.

Personal Power

Little of existing research has examined the extent and quality of school counselors' true influence in light of the school reform and accountability movements (Bunce, 1999). According to Burnham and Jackson (2000), school counselors' educational mission is unique to the profession and existing discrepancies between theoretical models and actual practice make the issues of personal power and program leadership merit distinctive relevance and treatment for these professionals. Bunce (1999) noted that principals and teachers see school counselors as an in-between among administrators and teachers. Role ambiguity results in school counselors being attributed varying degrees of personal power. Bunce also found that while advocating for students, school counselors often serve as a buffer between contrasting groups and individuals.

School counselors' perceived power, originated by delegation rather than by official entitlement, could be classified as 'personal,' falling in the category of 'empowerment' as conceptualized by Short & Greer (1997). Blasé and Anderson (1995) identified several benefits of empowerment over control and dominance, and singled empowerment as one of the constructivist outcomes of a genuinely influential leadership, with positive impact on educators' performance and student achievement. As an added benefit, empowered school counselors reap the kind of influential power that caters to a basic human need: control over one's own performance, essential to inspire students to achieve.

Method

Participants

Of 240 school districts from a Midwest state invited, 188 agreed to participate in this study. A school counseling population of 300 from these districts, stratified by location and level (elementary, middle school, high school, and multilevel) was contacted next, resulting in 194 survey participants.

Instrumentation

This investigation used a theory-based survey assembled by the researcher, the "*Self-Perceptions of Effectiveness as Educational Change Agent (SPECA)*." The SPECA survey consists of three parts. The first part comprises nineteen indicators of emotionally intelligent Primal Leadership aptitude based on Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee's (2002) Primal Leadership theory. The second part entails fifteen indicators of personal power or empowerment addressed in the academic literature. A six-level Likert scale measures these two parts. The third part pertains to demographics.

Theory-based research items provided the basic premise of face validity to the SPECA survey. Preliminary survey validity and reliability were determined by means of a pilot study including feedback from a statistics expert, review and critique by three school counselor educators, and test-retest involving a focus group of ten school counseling professionals. These experts' suggestions were incorporated to enhance validity.

Survey reliability was substantiated by means of the Cronbach's Alpha technique applied to each subscale, resulting in an internal consistency alpha coefficient of .918. Further predictive validity was conducted through item-total correlations plus correlation procedures between the pilot sampling and the research sample resulting in an overall Pearson coefficient $r = -.63$, $p = .038$; $r^2 = 40\%$ (Sig. $p < .05$, 2-tailed) between the two measures.

Data Analysis

Two independent variables were balanced against 'change,' the dependent variable: indicators of Primal Leadership aptitude and indicators of personal power or empowerment in school. Descriptive statistics served to profile the sample, and quantitative procedures examined the answers to research questions. The direction and strength of possible relationships pertaining to research questions one to three were determined by Pearson r correlations. Coefficients of determination (r^2) were calculated to establish the percentage of mutual predictability among significantly correlated variables.

Answers to the fourth research question were sought by means of one-way analyses of variance. Univariate ANOVA procedures helped ascertain significant

agreements and differences in participants' responses by educational level. The ANOVA was further explained by post-hoc comparisons complemented by Eta Squared (η^2) calculations expressed in percentages. Throughout the study, the significance level was set at $p \leq .05$, two tailed.

Findings and Discussion

Indicators of primal leadership and indicators of personal power or empowerment revealed strong positive Pearson r relationships between themselves and with the basic factors of change. Subscales in Parts I and II of the survey were positively correlated with a 99% level of confidence ($p < .01$), and yielded high coefficients of determination indicative of good mutual predictability. Even though the areas of process, and particularly program policy, appeared unattended to a degree, overall the dynamics included in the SPECA survey together emerged as effective tools to support school counselors in the quest for positive change in school.

Analyses of variance procedures compared the school counselors' responses by building level (i.e., elementary, middle, high school, and multilevel) indicating that no significant differences exist between scores by building level with the exception of elementary counselors giving more emphasis than middle/junior-high counselors to specific primal leadership and personal power or empowerment components. To further understand results, gender was factored-in; a t -test of independence confirmed higher female scores over male scores. However, correlational results indicated that male scores had stronger Pearson r s and r^2 s across variables. A posteriori research question assessing the contribution of each independent variable to the effectiveness to lead change was answered by a multiple linear regression analysis indicating that personal power or empowerment contributed a $\beta = .531$ while Primal Leadership contributed a $\beta = .301$, with a confidence level of .001.

The above results indicated that counselors perceive having high indicators of emotionally intelligent Primal Leadership and adequate levels of personal power or empowerment with some important limitations pertaining to involvement in program policy. Overall female scores resulted higher than overall male scores, indicating that female counselors may exhibit higher self-confidence to lead programmatic change than male counselors do. However, overall male scores yielded correlations and coefficients of determination stronger than female scores did, signifying that males may merge ability and strategy in a stronger fashion. T -test results revealed that females tend to build their effectiveness on relationship management, while males may favor self-management and explicit personal power combined, the traditional way.

Analyses of variance showed that with some minor exceptions, counselors' perceptions do not differ significantly by building level, supporting the unification of the school counseling profession. A-posteriori analyses revealed that personal power or empowerment contributes the most to counselors' perceived effectiveness regardless of gender or building level, but empowerment makes a significant contribution, as well. Conclusions emphasized training at all levels as the primary tool towards change.

Implications for Practice

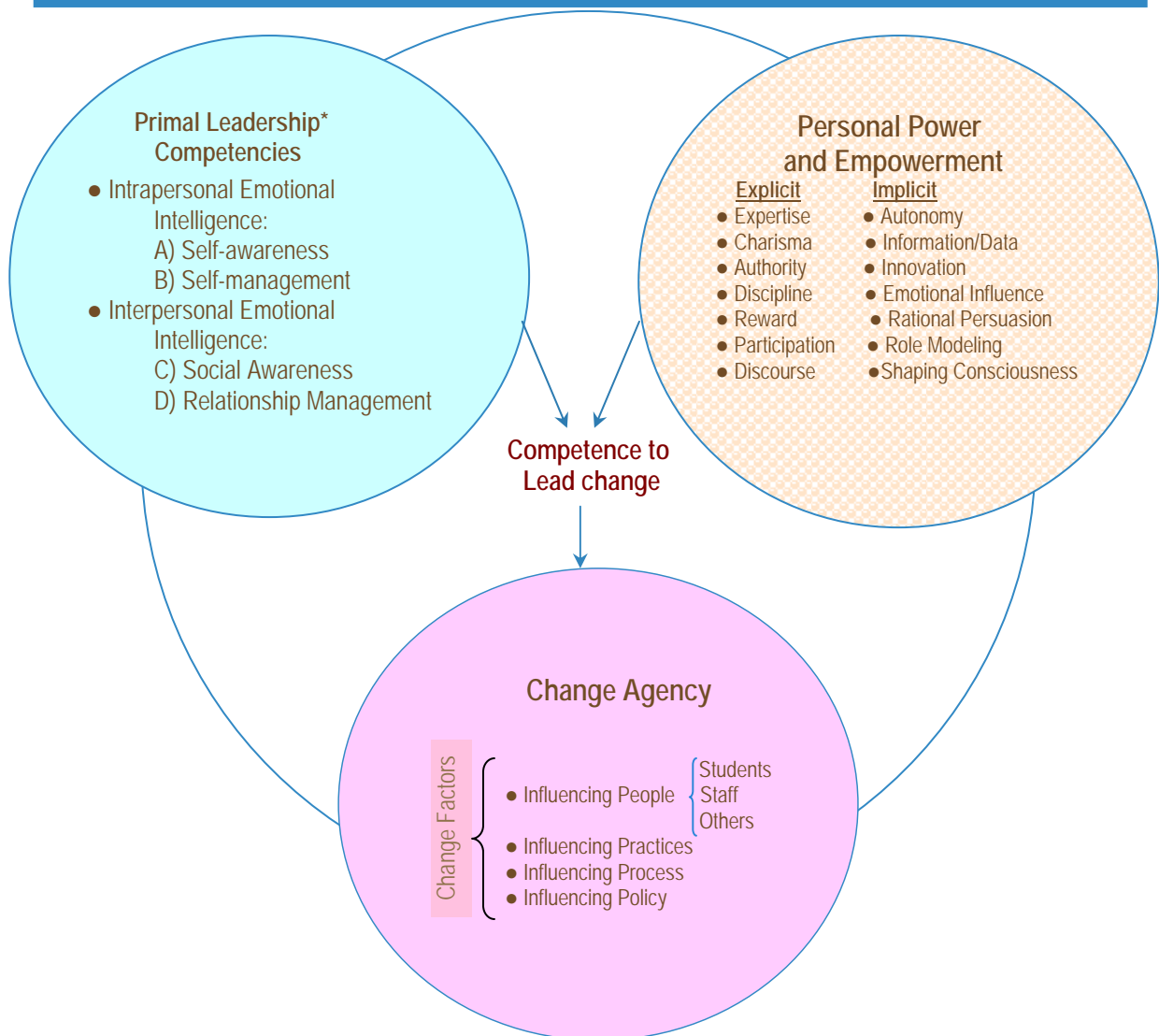
Results of this study suggest that emotionally intelligent primal leadership strategies are welcome elements of school counselors' repertoire in school. Change agents must, Goleman et al. (2002) advise, develop in self and others the emotional intelligence competencies of primal leadership, beginning at the intra-personal level through self-awareness and self-management growth, and spiraling to the interpersonal and institutional levels by means of social awareness and relationship management. In supporting these initiatives, counselor preparation and professional development programs are deemed instrumental.

Further study results showed that school counselors appeared less engaged with program policy factors. Seemingly, reorganizing their efforts could allow professional school counselors to participate in reform initiatives and seize opportunities for involvement in policy-making. Formulation and implementation of a District's Comprehensive Developmental Guidance Program appears to be a catalyst for involvement in policy-making.

Finally, school counselors advocate for the profession by articulating to their administrators and educational stakeholders their professional views pertaining to their educational mission, to their privileged position and competencies for effectiveness as change agents, to the empowerment required to implement programmatic change initiatives, to Primal Leadership strategies, and to other matters pertaining to the advancement of the profession. A *Model of Competence for Change Agency Effectiveness* involving 'Primal Leadership,' 'empowerment,' and 'change factors,' emerged from the study. This model of competence is compatible and supports the National Model for School Guidance Counseling Programs, with implications for training and evaluation.

Model of Competence for Effective Change Agency

Training, practice, and evaluation of school counselors as change agents in schools:



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