Where Are We Now? An Updated Review of the School Counseling Literature for Trends and Themes

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Abstract

The present study is a follow-up to an earlier investigation of themes and trends in school counseling journals. The original study examined articles pre- and post-merger of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) journal(s) for content reflecting themes evolving from the Education Trust Initiative. This study evaluated literature reflected in the *Professional School Counseling* (PSC) journal articles since the adoption of the ASCA National Model to assess trends as well as to identify current values and issues in the profession. The results suggest content in professional journals is reflective the ASCA National Model and suggestions are offered regarding future publications.

Keywords: school counseling, professional values, literature trends

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The current issues, trends, and values of a profession are reflected in the publications associated with that profession (Flores, Rooney, Heppner, Browne, & Wei, 1999). Most professions have journals that inform best practices within that discipline and serve as a guideline for training and professional functioning in a manner reflecting those practices. Over the past fifteen years, there have been broad shifts in educational practices, as well as more focused shifts within the profession of school counseling.

One might expect changes in trends in the school counseling literature over this time period given these recommendations for change in school counseling practice.

Over the past twenty years, leaders and scholars in the field of school counseling have advocated for reform in the role that professional school counselors take in schools (e.g., Borders & Drury, 1992; Hayes, Dagley, & Horne, 1996). The Education Trust initiated the reform process in 1996 by conducting a series of focus groups with various school counseling stakeholders wherein they identified both problems and solutions for school counseling and school counseling training programs (Guerra, 1998ab). Following the publication of these findings, debate ensued regarding the appropriate role of school counselors in the direction of advocating for the academic success of all students as opposed to a model primarily focused on the mental health of students (House & Martin, 1998). A result was a "new vision" for school counseling known as the Education Trust National Initiative for Transforming School Counseling (House & Hayes, 2002). This initiative promoted the shift away from a primary mental health focus in the practice of school counselors toward an emphasis on promoting

academic achievement for all students. Following this initiative many leaders in the school counseling profession have encouraged school counselor training programs change their focus to skill sets supporting this *new vision* (e.g., Martin, 2002).

More specifically, the Education Trust recommended that school counselors return to a focus that promotes high academic achievement for all students across the developmental spectrum. The ultimate goal was to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people to lives on the margins of the American mainstream, especially students of color and students from low-income families. The Education Trust also partnered with the National Center for Transforming School Counseling (TSC), in order to provide school counseling professionals with a voice in the education-reform discussion. This partnership appeared to evolve from what Guerra (1998b) perceived as a schism between not only subsets of school counselors, but also counselors and other educational stakeholders. While some counselors, in accordance with the Education Trust's recommendations, were recommending return to a guidance model, other counselors were advocating for a counseling or mental health model. Issues of access and equity, coupled with a stronger emphasis on data-based accountability, would eventually further develop concepts and tasks for school stakeholders to include in their missions and objectives. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model was adopted in 2003 with the goal of providing a framework for school counseling practices. This model addressed the concerns of the Education Trust and aligned with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. This emphasis is reflected in TSC's description of school counseling (2011), which states: "By arming school counselors with the data and knowledge to help

schools raise achievement and close gaps, TSC takes school counselors from the margins to the mainstream of the mission of schools—preparing all students for access and success in a wide array of postsecondary options" (National Center for Transforming School Counseling, 2011).

The dialogue around implementation of the ASCA National Model, comprehensive school counseling reform, and the TSC initiative continues. Originally, the emphasis of the TSC was to critically examine the preparation of school counseling candidates. Today that emphasis also centers on the role school counselors play in increasing educational opportunities for all students (Dahir, Burnham, & Stone, 2009). Several studies have examined the development and utility of comprehensive school counseling reform, and the impact of both TSC and the ASCA National Model. For example, Martin, Carey, and DeCoster (2009), in a national study of the status of state school counseling models, found that an increasing number of states continue to implement comprehensive, developmental school counseling programs. In 2008, 44 states had written comprehensive school counseling models, up from 24 in 1998, suggesting that TSC and the ASCA National Model movements have positively impacted the work occurring at the state level. Further, Wilkerson, Perusse, and Hughes (2013) explored the efficacy of the ASCA National Model and found that ASCA designated Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) schools, had significantly positive outcomes on achievement, specifically math performance at the elementary level when compared to non-RAMP schools.

However, while more states have articulated comprehensive school counseling initiatives, the implementation by school counselors has been found to be more

inconsistent. For example, Dahir, Burnham and Stone (2009) found that middle school counselors were significantly more involved in personal/social development and academic development than elementary and high school counselors. Similar findings were reported in a study in Wisconsin high schools (Burkard, Gillen, Martinez, & Skytte, 2012). Responsive services, not academic support services, were the most fully implemented aspect of comprehensive school counseling programs. These authors concluded that high school counselors spent at least 30% of their time addressing the personal/social needs of students and provided inconsistent access to academic and career planning services.

Alexander, Kruczek, Ramirez-Chase, and Zagelbaum (2003) conducted a review of the school counseling literature from the first five volumes of *Professional School Counseling* (PSC) and the last three volumes of both *Elementary School Guidance and Counseling* and *The School Counselor*. Their review spanned the seven years preceding the Education Trust National Initiative for Transforming School Counseling (TSC). The purpose of the review was to determine whether the TSC's recommendations were reflected in school counseling journals. At the time, the primary debate was whether or not the school counseling profession should emphasize educational achievement versus mental health in students (Guerra, 1998ab). In 2002, House and Hayes (2002) outlined a *new vision* for school counselors in which the focus would shift from serving as mental health providers to fostering the educational achievement of all students. The authors of the 2003 review found that the majority of the articles emphasized mental health issues alone. A relatively even number of articles focused on educational achievement alone and both mental health and achievement,

however, the combination of these two categories accounted for less than the total number of mental health only articles. There appeared to be an emerging trend toward articles categorized as neither mental health nor educational achievement in PSC: a trend which the authors concluded might reflect the current trends in TSC.

Independent research by Falco, Bauman, Sumnicht, and Englestad (2011) was also conducted on the first ten volumes of PSC. They reviewed 571 articles and produced 20 content categories in their content analysis. Their main findings suggested the majority of articles were of content comprised of professional practice/conceptual knowledge (55%), followed by articles that were composed of empirical research (32.6%), and articles that could not be classified within these aforementioned categories (12.4%). Further delineations of article topics were also presented in their study, but these categories were not based on any pre-existing initiatives such as those recommended by the Education Trust and TSC. Instead, the authors drew only from the content of the articles they reviewed. Though the findings of Falco et al. produced interesting categories, it is suggested here that framing a content analysis in terms of House and Hayes' (2002) new vision for school counseling provides a relevant and perhaps even more complete view of the school counseling literature. This approach to analysis would evaluate the existing literature in terms of a consistent and significant mission that encapsulates the essence of the role and identity of school counselors (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). Education and related services have been greatly affected by these various initiatives and movements over the past few years. A review grounded in the previously stated mission of the Education Trust and TSC would thus seem warranted.

As the ASCA National Model has become more fully articulated and integrated and the RAMP Award for school counselors developed, one would anticipate a shift in the content of articles published in ASCA's journal, Professional School Counseling. Also, further debate and discussion over NCLB has continued to thrust education reform and data-driven initiatives into the school counseling field. Recent economic downturns have also placed significant strains and concerns into the professional and socioeconomic landscape of American society, and the need to further examine the school counseling literature seems relevant as school counselors try to crystallize a shared identity and identify their role in the educational reform process. The present review was a replication study that explored the seven years following the original Alexander, et al. (2003) study to determine if the articles would reveal a similar pattern in terms of emphasis, or if there have been changes in the content and focus of articles congruent with changes in the profession. It was clear that a new review of the school counseling literature could shed further light on the current missions and objectives of school counseling.

Method

Materials

Volumes 6 through 13(2) of *Professional School Counseling* were reviewed to categorize articles into one of the four relevant categories. As was the case in the Alexander, et al. (2003) review, only major contributions were included in this study. Introductory excerpts, editorial commentaries, book reviews, and theme-based forwards were excluded. A total of 413 articles were examined.

Procedure

To replicate the previous study, a three-phase review process was utilized. Initially each reviewer independently analyzed the content of each of the 413 articles to identify the core emphasis of the article. Each reviewer independently classified each article into one of four categories as described below. These categories were the same as those used in the original study and included: 1) mental health only, 2) educational achievement only, 3) both, and 4) neither. Definitions of the criteria for each classification were as follows.

Mental health only. Mental health was defined as addressing the psychosocial needs of the student with a primary focus on personal and social functioning (House & Hayes, 2002). Articles in this category, as was the case in the previous study, included content only related to student mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, self-concept/identity, sexual identity, emotional coping skills, suicidality, grief and loss, self-esteem, cognitive behavioral coping skills and interpersonal relationship issues.

There were also articles addressing applied techniques and applied theoretical approaches to mental health counseling included in this category. However, articles had to address specific interventions, therapeutic procedures, and dynamics of client (i.e., students, parents) counselor relationships; this meant that articles were specifically written about counseling interactions that had taken place among clients and school counseling professionals, behavioral/emotional issues that arise during counseling sessions, and various methods/procedures used to assess and intervene with students' personal/social development.

Educational achievement only. Educational achievement, as was the case in the previous study, was defined as the preparation of all students for academic success via directed, academically-focused guidance activities designed to define, nurture, and accomplish academic goals (House & Hayes, 2002). Articles in this category included material only related to student educational achievement. Topics within reviewed articles that fit this category addressed concerns with academic performance, school and classroom preparation, college/career preparation, athletic motivation/participation, time management, school compliance, mentoring, extracurricular activities, and minority/cultural academic success or achievement. There were also articles that emphasized how counselors interact with student-peer advisors; how parents and/or tutors can monitor school-based performance; how collaborative teaching strategies can be used to impact the school environment; how counseling services influence curriculum development; and how counselors can assess academic inclusion needs of diverse and exceptional children. Generally, these articles tended to address specific ways in which counselors work with students and school personnel to promote academic success, as well as specific procedures and interventions used to address academic success.

Both. Articles determined to be in this category, as was the case in the previous study, were identified as having content that reflected both student mental health and educational achievement issues. There were articles, for example, that addressed ways in which parents could become more involved with the school counselor, as well as their children's school experiences. However, the content of these articles would not only discuss students' learning and achievement-oriented outcomes and goals but also

emotional and behavioral experiences associated with this type of work. The focus of such articles also did not exclusively center on the particular interventions, psychological well-being of participants, the relationships between the counselor and various stakeholders, or on the issues related to the academic and professional development of students. Instead, these articles tended to significantly emphasize the integration of mental health and educational achievement perspectives; therefore, they were determined to be relevant to both concepts under the classification system used for this study.

Neither. Articles were classified in this category, as was the case in the previous study, if the content did not reflect either student mental health or educational achievement issues. Such articles included content related to the supervision of school counseling professionals, coordination of services with other school personnel, coping with work-related stressors, and discussion of administrative issues. Trend surveys, issues of professional development, and accountability articles were also included in this category. In other words, these topics were not directly related to counseling students or meeting their educational needs but rather were procedural, training-based, or policy-focused. One example included an article that spoke about job satisfaction of practicing school counselors in order to illuminate possible self-care options and tips for avoiding burnout (Butler & Constantine, 2005). Articles like this one did not contain information about how self-care could correlate with student needs and goals, professional development options that could enhance resources for school stakeholders associated with particular student populations, or materials available to create or

parallel interventions that enhance the work of school counselors when it comes to working with their clientele.

After the initial independent review and classifications were made, two review "teams" were formed and each team was composed of two faculty members who had experience in the area of school counseling. The teams met to compare each member's initial, independent classification of the article content. When initial classification differed the team discussed each member's rationale and basis for his/her classification. Each team then had to form a consensus rating for the article based on this discussion. After the consensus "team ratings" were finalized, the two team's ratings were compared. A team leader was identified for each team to participate in the third and final phase of the evaluative process. In the third phase of the evaluative process the two team lists were compared and discussed by the team leaders. When article classifications did not match between the two "teams" each team leader provided their team's rationale for why that classification was decided. Team leaders then developed a consensus rating that served as the final classification for each article. The consensus ratings formed the basis of the final summary classifications reported below. The two teams took five months to conclude the three phases of the review and classification process.

It is important to note this method varied slightly from that used in the original study. In the original study a third reviewer conducted an independent review to serve as a "tie-breaker" for ratings when the initial team rating did not reach agreement.

However, in the present study, the teams used a slightly different process as described herein. This method was chosen as three of the four raters were part of the original investigation and, as such, had a strong working knowledge of the rating categories.

This adjustment to the method also helped to limit possible biases from reviewers who had a strong working knowledge of the prior investigation.

In phase two, the percent agreement was calculated on the initial, independent reviews for each pair of raters (team one = 79%, team two = 83%). In the third phase which compared the two team ratings, 124 of the 413 articles were classified differently by the two teams, yielding an overall agreement score of 70% between team one and team two.

Results

Table 1 provides a summary of the final assignment into one of four categories: educational achievement only, mental health only, both, and neither. Sixty articles, or 15 %, were assigned to the educational achievement category after the final review. Ninety-eight articles, or 24%, were identified as reflecting predominantly a mental health focus. Eighty-eight articles, or 21%, were categorized as containing both mental health and educational achievement content. The final review yielded 167 articles, or 40%, were categorized as neither mental health nor educational achievement focused.

Table 1Number and Percentage of Articles Published in Professional School Counseling: Comparisons from 2003 Study and 2011 Study

Category	2003 study		2011 study	
	n	%	n	%
Educational Achievement	102	18.9	60	15
Mental Health	217	40.4	98	24
Both	82	15.2	88	21
Neither	135	25	167	40

Follow-Up Analysis

Given that just under half, or 40%, of the articles were categorized as having neither mental health nor educational achievement content, a follow-up analysis was conducted to ascertain the content reflected in these articles. This follow-up analysis of the neither category was not conducted in the original study; however, it seemed important to conduct given both the high number of articles contained in this category and the fact that the current professional trends in school counseling are diverging from the more traditional and limited mental health and educational achievement foci. The leader of team one conducted a preliminary content analysis of the 167 articles classified as neither and generated additional content categories for the subsequent rating. The leader of team two then conducted a separate review of these articles to determine points of agreement and disagreement for the content categories as well as assignment to the additional content categories. There were no points of disagreement between the two team leaders. These additional content categories included: administrative focus, accountability, coping with work-related stress, trend analysis/trend data, coordination of services, professional development, and supervision. Bases for the categories were as follows:

Administrative focus. These were articles that addressed topics such as administrators' perceptions about school counseling and counselor roles as well as and how school counselors can best interface and work with administrative stakeholders and understand their roles.

Accountability. These articles addressed the need for accountability, and resources for school counselors that could be used to assist with the measurement and application of this concept.

Coping with work-related stress. This category was fairly self-explanatory in that these articles addressed types of work-related stressors typically faced by school counselors and methods counselors can use to manage these stressors.

Trend analysis/Trend data. These articles addressed both short-term and long-term investigations of work-related patterns affecting the profession of school counseling as well as the role of the school counselor.

Coordination of services. This category referred to articles that addressed how school counselors can implement the ASCA Model's notion of system support and work collaboratively with other agencies as well as child service providers and community resources.

Professional development. These were articles that called attention to needs of school counselors in the form of professional development and/or formal education opportunities. These articles also provided resources about how school counselors can address such needs for continuing education and professional development.

Supervision. These articles differed from the professional development category in that they addressed issues that occur when school counselors either seek professional supervision or provide supervision and mentoring to counselors in training. This category also included studies of perceptions held by school counseling supervisors toward their supervisees.

The follow-up analysis revealed that approximately one-quarter of the articles in the neither category focused on accountability. Trend analysis/trend data (17%), coordination of services (18%), and professional development (17%) were the next most represented categories. Supervision (8%), administrative focus (7%), and coping with work-related stress (7%), were fairly evenly distributed at the lowest end of article representation. The distribution of these articles is summarized in Table 2.

 Table 2

 Distribution of Articles Classified as Neither Among Categories Used for Follow-Up Analysis

Category	Obtained Distribution (n=167)
Accountability	43 (26%)
Coordination of Services	30 (18%)
Trend Analysis/Trend Data	29 (17%)
Professional Development	29 (17%)
Supervision	14 (8%)
Administrative Focus	11 (7%)
Coping with Work Related Stress	11 (7%)
TOTAL	167 (100%)

Discussion

The present investigation was a replication of a study conducted in 2003, which assessed trends in the school counseling literature after the two school counseling journals were merged and became *Professional School Counseling* (PSC). In the intervening years, the ASCA National Model and TSC were implemented. This study conducted an evaluation of the content of the PSC journal to determine how these initiatives are being reflected in our primary professional publication.

When comparing the results of the two studies, there are clear differences in the content of manuscripts more recently being published in PSC as compared to those in its first three years of publication. In the original study, 40% of the articles emphasized mental health only, 30% reflected neither mental health nor educational achievement, 17% emphasized educational achievement only, and 12% reflected both themes. In the current investigation, the neither category is the highest content category at 40%, revealing a shift away from predominantly mental health-focused articles, which currently stands at 24%. Both themes are reflected in 21% of the articles and educational achievement only is reflected by 15% of the articles.

Similar trends are reflected when comparing the current findings to the 537 journal articles evaluated in the previous investigation. As with the PSC only comparison, 40% emphasized mental health only as compared to 24% in the current study, reflecting a clear decrease in mental health only focused articles. The other significant shift was a 15 percentage point increase in articles identified as reflecting neither mental health nor educational achievement, rising from an original rating of 25% to the present 40%. There was a shift in articles focusing on the both category and those focusing on educational achievement only. In the original study, 15% of the articles emphasized both content areas as compared to 21% in the present study, reflecting a slight increase in more broadly focused manuscripts. There was a decrease in articles highlighting educational achievement only with 19% in this category in the original study and 15% in the current study.

These changes in trends of PSC's published article content suggest that we are "putting our money where our mouth is," in terms of our professional literature. It would appear that the current issues, trends, and values of our profession are being reflected in ASCA's journal, and that these changes in content are consistent with the broad shifts in educational practices as well as more focused shifts within our profession (Flores, Rooney, Heppner, Browne, & Wei, 1999). Given the shift related to the percentage falling in the neither category to just under half the manuscripts rated in the present study, the authors believed that there was a need to further analyze those articles to try to ascertain the current, prevalent themes in the PSC journal.

This additional analysis revealed that just over one-fourth (26%) of those manuscripts falling in the neither category focused on accountability. Eighteen percent emphasized coordination of services, referring to how school counselors provide support within and across systems. Trend analyses of both the long and short terms trends in school counseling accounted for an additional 17% of the manuscripts.

Similarly, 17% focused on professional development in terms of the training needs of school counselors and resources for training and development. Three other content areas comprised the remaining neither category articles including: 8% that addressed supervision and related issues, 7%, that provided guidelines and recommendations about how school counselors can more effectively work with school administrators, and another 7% that focused on ways school counselors can avoid burnout and cope with the stress of working as a school counselor.

For the most part, the emphasis on accountability and coordination of services is consistent with the guidelines provided in the ASCA National Model (2005). Those manuscripts emphasizing professional development, supervision, and training seem consistent with the Education Trust's recommendations. These trend analyses likely

reflect our move toward data-driven practice and accountability. The guidelines for working with administrators may demonstrate increased awareness of our need as school counselors to inform policy by embracing our role as part of the leadership team. Finally, as professional counselors are asked to do more with fewer resources, stress management and coping will be increasingly important for effective and healthy functioning.

However, there also appears to be cause for concern about PSC articles being out of touch with the practical needs of working counselors. Falco et al. (2011) provided some rationale for this assertion by reporting that the majority of PSC articles contained first authors with a university affiliation. Articles that were collaboratively written with second or third authors not affiliated with universities only comprised 13.8% of their sample. Their critique is that not all university professors and students-in-training can speak to the current needs of professional school counselors in the same way that individuals who are practicing school counselors can. However, the daily duties of practicing school counselors may make it difficult for them to pursue professional publications, particularly empirical research articles. It is also possible that university affiliation does not preclude awareness of the needs of professional counselors. In these times of encouraging evidence based practice and accountability, collaboration between university-affiliated counselor educators and non-university affiliated authors seems ideal. The mission of these two groups seems complimentary, and collaborative study of "best practices" would benefit not only counselor educators, but also practicing school counselors. Further, conducting more needs assessments with practicing

counselors could result in more relevant professional publications, and also would encourage the greater collaboration that Falco et al. (2011) recommend.

In conclusion, there have been clear shifts in the school counseling literature that are current with our ASCA National Model and greater awareness of systemic influences on the role and function of school counselors.

Limitations

The replacement of one of the original team members may have shifted some of the elements of investigation considering that the new reviewer had no previous exposure to the original review process other than becoming familiar with the published 2003 article and consulting with the previous reviewers. Although some elements of the original review process were not exactly replicated in the methods of the current review, it is assumed that the process was likely similar enough to yield a valid comparison and equivalency. Replication studies often are equivalent as opposed to exact, and in this case, the minor modifications in procedure did not appear to significantly impact the obtained results.

Implications

The current analysis of recent PSC articles revealed that many articles were written primarily by academics from school counselor education programs. While there certainly is no disputing the fact these authors are providing important contributions to the school counseling field, we believe that more collaboration with counselors in the field would further enhance accomplishment of the TSC and ASCA National Model initiatives. Specifically, collaborative research projects would provide a stronger link between theory and practice and provide models that could inspire collaborative efforts

among other school stakeholders who wish foster the educational reform movement. Second, academicians might have greater access to funding and resources to support practicing school counselor's participation in such field research. Pragmatically, the amount of time that practicing school counselors have to contribute to peer-reviewed research and publication can be limited, but collaboration with academicians could enhance their ability to participate in this line of much needed applied research. Finally, with such a small proportion of the reviewed articles reflecting issues of burnout prevention and job stress, we believe that more projects and publications that provide suggestions and techniques to address these topics would be significantly beneficial given the current educational climate. The education reform movement has not been without its costs and many school professionals are struggling with what they experience as a negative work environment (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006). Empirical assessment of the efficacy of reform efforts as well as empirically validated methods of reducing job related stress in the educational environment is much needed.

Conclusions

The findings of this investigation provide evidence that the publication focus of PSC has moved steadily in the direction reflected in the ASCA National Model and somewhat in the direction recommended by the Education Trust. Specifically, the publications demonstrate a much greater focus on systemic change, accountability, coordination of services, analysis of trend data, supervision, administration, coping with work-related stress, and professional development. A number of these categories seem to reflect the four Education Trust-based themes of the ASCA National Model: leadership, systemic change, collaboration and teaming, and advocacy (Education

Trust, 2001). The percentage of articles focusing on these areas nearly doubled following the original publication of the ASCA National Model in 2003. This change in types of articles published in PSC likely results from a variety of causes, including shifts in the focus of journal editors and the development and distribution of the ASCA National Model. In particular, the emphasis on accountability and procedural operations that has developed over the last decade in response to the ASCA National Model and No Child Left Behind is clearly reflected in the more recent content of PSC articles.

It is interesting that the results of this study demonstrate a shift in the direction of content aligned with the ASCA National Model (2003, 2005) despite the fact that the procedures were originally designed to measure how well publications focused on issues stemming from the Education Trust's TSC initiative, although these two initiatives are not unrelated. It is important to note that the ASCA National Model includes an emphasis on academic development as well as the four themes directly taken from the Education Trust (2001). It is striking that our current review suggests that this portion of the model has not been emphasized significantly more than it was prior to the initial publication of the National Model. In order to best reflect all elements of the national model, there may need to be a greater emphasis on educational achievement in future volumes of PSC. Specifically, it would seem important to actively pursue articles to guide school counselors in how to best facilitate the academic achievement of *all* students.

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