Identifying Role Diffusion in School Counseling

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Role ambiguity in professional school counseling is an ongoing concern despite recent advances with comprehensive school counseling models. The study outlined in this article examined role diffusion as a possible factor contributing to ongoing role ambiguity in school counseling. Participants included 109 graduate students enrolled in a CACREP-accredited counseling program at a large southwestern university. Findings suggest that providing direct counseling services is the most unique and least diffused role for today's school counselors. The authors also review implications for professional school counselors and recommendations for future research.

Keywords: **school counselors, role ambiguity, role diffusion, comprehensive school counseling, direct counseling services**

School counselor roles and functions have been examined by scholars for many decades (Astramovich, Hoskins, & Coker, 2013; Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Gysbers 2004; Herr, 2003; Lieberman, 2004; Myrick, 1987). As professional school counseling evolved, standards of practice were developed as a means for solidifying professional identity and to help guide the specific duties expected of school counselors (Dahir, Burnham, & Stone, 2009; Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012). School counseling as a distinct profession has proliferated in the 21st century, yet inconsistencies in school counselor roles and functions have continued to challenge the field (Astramovich, Hoskins, & Bartlett, 2010; Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005). This article defines and presents the results of a study of role diffusion among school counselors and calls for renewed emphasis on the professional counseling function of today's school counselors.

Historically, several school counseling models have been discussed in the literature, each emphasizing various school counselor roles. Myrick (1987) and Gysbers and Henderson (2006) created developmental guidance models for school counseling that emphasized individual and small-group counseling services, guidance lessons, individual planning, and system support duties. Schmidt (2003) promoted an essential services model of school counseling that focused on the individual and group counseling, appraisal, coordination, and consultation roles of the counselor. Campbell and Dahir (1997) presented a set of national standards for school counseling programs that emphasized school counselor duties in the academic, career and personal-social domains. Based on the work of Campbell and Dahir (1997), the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2003) published its initial National Model for school counseling programs. Later, Brown and Trusty (2005) suggested a strategic comprehensive school counseling model that emphasized the developmental and preventive roles of the school counselor along with a focus on supporting student academic achievement. Most recently, ASCA (2012) published an updated edition of its National Model that emphasized

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the school counselor's role in the implementation of a school counseling core curriculum, individual student planning, and responsive services, including individual, group, and crisis counseling. A common goal of these organizational frameworks for school counseling programs was to identify appropriate roles and duties for school counselors.

Models of school counseling were developed in part to strengthen and clarify the professional identity of school counselors, yet the specific roles of school counselors in educational systems have continued to be debated and refined (ASCA, 2012; Keys, Bemak, & Lockhart, 1998; Whiston, 2002, 2004). During the past decade, the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI; The Education Trust, 2009) and ASCA's (2012) National Model have been discussed extensively in the school counseling literature. In contrast to earlier school counseling models, both the ASCA National Model and TSCI placed an increased emphasis on the academic support and advocacy roles of professional school counselors, while minimizing the role of providing direct counseling services to students (Astramovich et al., 2010; Grimmett & Paisley, 2008). For example, the ASCA (2012) National Model indicated that individual counseling in a therapeutic mode is not considered an appropriate duty for school counselors. Accordingly, it has been suggested that the roles and functions of school counselors promoted by these recent models have become less clearly focused on counseling, potentially leading to a weakened professional identity for school counselors (Bringman, Mueller, & Lee, 2010; Whiston, 2004). In addition, a broader philosophical difference—whether school counselors are considered to be educators or professional counselors or both—also has fueled the ongoing debate over school counselor roles (Paisley, Ziomek-Daigle, Getch, & Bailey, 2007).

With the myriad duties suggested by different school counseling models, role research in school counseling has often attempted to clarify what duties are expected of school counselors and how these should be prioritized. Some researchers have focused on views of educational administrators about the appropriate duties of school counselors. Amatea and Clark (2005) found that elementary, middle and high school principals preferred school counselors to focus on leadership, consulting, and providing individual and small-group counseling, as well as classroom guidance to students. Similarly, Zalaquett (2005) and Zalaquett and Chatters (2012) found that principals prefer counselors to focus on providing direct counseling services to students as well as crisis intervention, coordination and consultation. Other researchers have examined the views of practicing school counselors about their roles and duties. Nelson, Robles-Pina, and Nichter (2008) found that high school counselors reported spending much of their time in non-counseling duties such as class scheduling, thus having less than preferred time to provide counseling, consultation and coordination services to students. In another study, Walsh, Barrett, and DePaul (2007) found that elementary school counselors spent only about one-third of their time in responsive counseling services, with the remainder of their time spent in guidance, individual planning, and system support activities. From another perspective, Astramovich and Loe (2006) compared pre-service teachers' views of the roles of school counselors and school psychologists and found that school counselors were considered more likely to help students with career development while school psychologists were viewed as more likely to help students with personal-social skills. Overall, findings from role research studies suggest that, despite advances in school counseling models, many school counselors continue to experience role ambiguity and role stress in their professional practice (Astramovich et al., 2010; Culbreth et al., 2005; Lieberman, 2004; Pyne, 2011).

Although role ambiguity has been identified as a significant concern of school counselors, the authors hypothesize that a preceding factor—termed as *role diffusion*—may be a major factor contributing to role ambiguity among professional school counselors. Role diffusion is defined by the authors as the process of assuming or being appointed to roles and duties that individuals from other fields or specialties are equally qualified to perform in the work environment. For example, role diffusion occurs when a school counselor is assigned by an administrator to be responsible for school-wide achievement testing—something that teachers,

teacher specialists, or even school registrars may be equally competent to organize. Although a school counselor is certainly capable of coordinating achievement testing, such a duty does not draw upon the unique graduate-level training the professional school counselor has to offer, and thus the unique role of the school counselor is diffused, potentially leading to role ambiguity. The authors therefore believe that role ambiguity among school counselors may be a consequence of role diffusion. Furthermore, role diffusion may be unintentionally reinforced by school counseling models that do not emphasize the unique counseling roles of the school counselor in educational settings.

Research Questions

Considering the continued discourse over school counselor professional identity, role clarity and our hypothesis about how role ambiguity may be perpetuated, the researchers decided to explore for potential role diffusion among typically suggested school counseling duties. The following primary research questions were developed for this study:
1. Of the typical duties suggested for school counselors, which duties are the most unique to the role of the counselor (i.e., least role diffused)?
2. Of the typical duties suggested for school counselors, which duties are the least unique to the role of the counselor (i.e., most role diffused)?
3. What other school personnel are identified as equally qualified to perform various duties suggested for professional school counselors?

Method

Participants
A sample of 109 master's-level graduate counseling students at a large southwestern university participated in the study. Students were enrolled in either the school counseling or clinical mental health counseling programs, both of which hold Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) accreditation. The sample was comprised of 97 (89%) females and 12 (11%) males with a mean age of 28.9 ($SD = 6.9$) years. Ethnicity of the participants included 81 (74%) Caucasian, 13 (12%) Latina/Latino, 4 (4%) Asian American, 3 (3%) African American, and 6 (5%) representing other or multiple ethnicities. Regarding area of specialization, 54 (49%) participants were school counseling majors and 55 (51%) were mental health counseling majors. In addition, the participants had completed a mean of 26.0 ($SD = 17.4$) graduate credit hours in counseling.

Instrument and Procedure
An instrument was developed by the researchers to explore the primary research questions, based partly on school counselor duties suggested in the ASCA (2012) National Model. The instrument identified potential school counselor duties grouped within five domains including Academic, Career, Personal-Social, Direct Counseling Services, and Support Functions. For each domain, five stem items were developed identifying specific duties commonly recommended of school counselors, resulting in a 25-item instrument with five domain scales.

For the Academic scale, the five stem items were drawn from the language in the ASCA (2012) National Model and included helping students to (1) identify attitudes and behaviors that lead to successful learning; (2) learn and apply critical thinking skills; (3) apply the study skills necessary for academic success; (4) become a self-directed and independent learner; and (5) apply knowledge of aptitudes and interests to goal setting.

For the Career scale, the five stem items were drawn from the language in the ASCA (2012) National Model and included helping students to (1) develop skills to locate, evaluate and interpret career information; (2) demonstrate knowledge about the changing workplace; (3) identify personal skills, interests, and abilities and relate them to career choices; (4) assess and modify educational plans to support career goals; and (5) describe the effect of work on lifestyle.

For the Personal-Social scale, the five stem items were drawn from the language in the ASCA (2012) National Model and included helping students to (1) identify and express feelings; (2) use effective communication skills; (3) learn how to make and keep friends; (4) learn how to cope with peer pressure; and (5) learn coping skills for managing life events.

The researchers developed five items for the Direct Counseling Services scale, including (1) providing individual counseling services; (2) providing small-group counseling services; (3) assessing student concerns for appropriate community referrals; (4) providing play therapy to elementary-aged children; and (5) providing activity-based counseling to older children and adolescents.

Finally, the researchers developed five items for the Support Functions scale, including (1) reviewing or changing students' class schedule; (2) coordinating and administering achievement tests, (3) participating in lunch duty/hall duty/bus duty; (4) substitute teaching classes for absent teachers; and (5) helping administrators with principal's office duties.

For each of the 25 items, participants were asked to indicate which of eight professionals typically working in school settings would be qualified to perform the specific duty. The eight professionals from which participants could select included school counselors, school psychologists, teachers, social workers, principals, paraprofessionals, registrars and administrative assistants. For each item, participants could select one or more of the eight professionals who would be qualified to perform the specific duty. The items were presented in a random order and not grouped by the five domains.

A Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for each of the five scales to evaluate the reliability of the instrument. Internal consistency reliability is an index of the consistency of participant responses on items purporting to measure the same construct. Greater consistency in responses signifies that there was less error in the measurement of the purported construct(s) of interest, which is desirable. High reliability also suggests that the scale is in fact measuring what it is intended to measure—that is, construct validity. Results indicated that the instrument had acceptable reliability on the Academic ($\alpha = .86$), Career ($\alpha = .86$), Personal-Social ($\alpha = .81$), Direct Counseling Services ($\alpha = .77$), and Support Functions ($\alpha = .80$) scales.

For each item, a total item score was created by summing the number of school professionals identified as competent to perform the duty (range 0–8). Table 1 lists the means for each of the 25 items, sorted from most to least role-diffused. Next, overall domain scores were calculated by summing the mean item scores for the five items in the particular domain, resulting in a possible domain score ranging from 0–40. Table 2 lists the means for each of the five domains, sorted by most to least role-diffused. Finally, Table 3 lists the Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation coefficients of the role diffusion ratings across the five domains. Prior to data analysis, the data were tested for requisite assumptions and screened for potential outliers. If not eliminated, outliers undermine the trustworthiness of the data because they unduly influence the group means and thus the normality of the data—that is, by affecting skewness and kurtosis. The data screening procedures yielded no outliers. Moreover, the data met all assumptions including normality (skewness and kurtosis values were within range), homogeneity of error variances and sphericity. Thus, data analysis proceeded without any adjustments.

Table 1

Individual Item Means from Most to Least Role Diffusion

Domain	Item	M	SD
Support	Participate in lunch duty/hall duty/bus duty	5.50	2.57
Personal-Social	Learn how to make and keep friends	4.76	1.98
Personal-Social	Use effective communication skills	4.61	1.95
Academic	Identify attitudes and behaviors that lead to successful learning	4.27	1.62
Personal-Social	Learn how to cope with peer pressure	4.27	1.74
Personal-Social	Identify and express feelings	4.25	1.65
Career	Develop skills to locate, evaluate and interpret career information	4.23	1.95
Support	Help administrators with principal's office duties	4.21	2.10
Career	Identify personal skills, interests and abilities, and relate them to career choices	3.94	1.75
Academic	Become a self-directed and independent learner	3.90	1.67
Career	Describe the effect of work on lifestyle	3.86	1.68
Support	Review or change students' class schedule	3.86	2.44
Support	Coordinate and administer achievement tests	3.79	2.22
Career	Demonstrate knowledge about the changing workplace	3.74	1.99
Academic	Apply the study skills necessary for academic success	3.72	1.71
Academic	Learn and apply critical thinking skills	3.70	1.67
Academic	Apply knowledge of aptitudes and interests to goal setting	3.69	1.71
Career	Assess and modify educational plans to support career goals	3.64	1.50
Direct Counseling	Assess student concerns for appropriate community referrals	3.53	1.50
Support	Substitute teaching classes for absent teachers	3.27	2.17
Personal-Social	Learn coping skills for managing life events	3.24	1.42
Direct Counseling	Provide activity-based counseling to older children and adolescents	2.82	0.80
Direct Counseling	Provide small-group counseling services	2.73	0.81
Direct Counseling	Provide individual counseling services	2.54	0.87
Direct Counseling	Provide play therapy to elementary-aged children	2.50	1.08

Table 2

Total Means for the Five Domains from Most to Least Role Diffusion

Domain	M	SD
Personal-Social	21.13	6.62
Support	20.63	8.77
Career	19.41	7.40
Academic	19.28	6.78
Direct Counseling*	14.12	3.82

Note. Direct counseling items were rated as significantly less role-diffused than the other domains. $* p < .05$.

Table 3

Zero-Order Correlation Matrix of the Role Diffusion Ratings Across the Five Domains

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Academic	—	.82**	.75**	.67**	.51**
2. Career		—	.71**	.62**	.45**
3. Personal-Social			—	.51**	.55**
4. Support				—	.37**
5. Direct Counseling					—

Note. $N = 109$; $** p < .01$.

Graduate counseling students enrolled in two sections of a course on Ethics and Legal Issues in Counseling and in two sections of a pre-practicum course at a large southwestern university were invited to participate in the study. After a review of informed consent, copies of the instrument were provided to participants and the researchers were available to answer questions as needed. A total of 120 students were eligible to participate, with a response rate of 109 (91%) completed instruments.

Results

Least and Most Role-Diffused School Counselor Duties

In order to address the first two research questions, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test for differences between the levels of role diffusion among the five domains. Ratings of role diffusion differed significantly across the five domains ($F (1, 107) = 7.81$, $p < .0005$, $\eta^2 = .63$) indicating a large strength of association between the variables under study. More specifically, the results suggest that the five domains account for approximately 63% of the variability in the ratings of role diffusion. Overall, results indicated that Direct Counseling was rated as significantly less role diffused (i.e., requiring more unique skills) than the other four domains (see Table 2 for means). Fisher's Protected *t*-test analyses with the Bonferroni adjustment to obviate the family-wise Type I error rate inflation were requested to more adequately ascertain differences across the five domains with respect to role diffusion ratings. Results demonstrated that the ratings between

Direct Counseling and the four other domains were statistically significantly different (all *p*-values < .05, effect size *r* ranging from –.42 to –.54, indicating moderate to large strengths of association between variables). No other comparison reached statistical significance (*p* < .05).

Other School Personnel Qualified to Perform Suggested School Counselor Duties

Addressing the third research question, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to test for differences between the eight school personnel and qualifications to perform duties in each of the five domains. There were statistically significant differences in the qualifications to perform duties in each of the five domains between the eight school personnel ($F (4,28) = 13.50$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .12$) indicating a moderate strength of association between the school personnel and qualifications. Thus, the eight school personnel roles account for 12% of the variability in qualifications to perform the duties of the five domains.

Results demonstrated that teachers, school psychologists, social workers and principals are equipped to perform school counselor duties within the Academic and Personal-Social domains, whereas administrative assistants, registrars and paraprofessionals are ill-equipped. Within the Career domain, teachers, school psychologists and social workers are equipped to fulfill school counselor duties and administrative assistants, registrars, paraprofessionals, principals and school psychologists were perceived as ill-equipped. All roles— that is, administrative assistants, school psychologists, paraprofessionals, principals, social workers, registrars and teachers—are equipped to perform school counselor duties in the Support domain. Finally, only school psychologists and social workers are rated as being equipped to perform school counselor duties in the Direct Counseling domain whereas all other roles are not.

Discussion

Findings from this study suggest that professional school counselors' least diffused and thus most unique role in the school setting is in the provision of direct counseling services to students. These results coincide with research on principals' views of the preferred roles for school counselors (e.g., Amatea & Clark, 2005; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012) and the preferred roles of professional school counselors (e.g. Nelson, Robles-Pina, & Nichter, 2008). Interestingly, these results are in direct contrast to the ASCA (2012) National Model, which suggests that individual counseling with students in a "therapeutic mode" is an inappropriate function of professional school counselors. Of the eight school personnel roles examined in this study, only school psychologists and school social workers were rated as equally competent as school counselors to provide counseling services to students. However, because school psychologists and school social workers are each employed at less than a third of the rate of school counselors nationally (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012), school counselors remain the most likely professionals to provide direct counseling services to students in educational settings.

School counselor roles in the Personal-Social, Academic, Career, and Support domains were found to be significantly diffused among the other seven school personnel identified in this study. School psychologists and school social workers were rated equally capable as school counselors to perform duties in these four domains as well, suggesting that the roles of school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers may have a significant degree of overlap and possible duplication. Another interesting finding was that teachers were rated as equally competent to perform duties suggested of school counselors in all domains except Direct Counseling. Because teachers are typically trained at the bachelor's level, it may be inferred that work in the Personal-Social, Academic, and Career domains may not necessarily require graduate-level training. Thus, role diffusion may be perpetuated by school counselors who focus primarily on duties that do not draw on their more advanced skills.

Recommendations for Professional School Counselors and Counselor Educators

Given the persistence of role ambiguity and role stress among school counselors, addressing role diffusion at the individual school, district, state and national levels may significantly strengthen the professional identity of school counselors. Thus, school counselors must regularly and systematically advocate for their professional identity by proactively informing key constituents about the counseling services the school counselor provides to students.

Furthermore, state and national professional school counseling organizations must find ways to promote the unique counseling skill set of their members and must help elevate the work of professional school counselors by emphasizing their graduate-level counseling training, rather than developing models and standards that lead school counselors to focus on duties that other school personnel are qualified to perform. Kaplan and Gladding (2011) stressed the need for all counseling specialties to converge around a common counseling identity as a means for helping the public to understand the appropriate roles of professional counselors. In light of the results of this study, their call seems especially significant for school counselors who have struggled for decades to establish a consistent professional identity.

Counselor education programs may need to critically assess the utility of training future school counselors in models, including the ASCA (2012) National Model, which do not support school counselors providing direct counseling services and which may consequently foster role diffusion and role ambiguity. The development of Comprehensive School Based Counseling Centers as suggested by Astramovich et al. (2010) may provide an alternative approach to existing models and could help promote the unique counseling expertise of professional school counselors. Therefore, the graduate-level training of school counselors should emphasize the development of individual and group counseling skills to help prepare future counselors to work effectively with a wide range of student concerns. In addition, counselor education programs must help new school counselors develop skills to advocate for the provision of direct counseling services in schools. Finally, counselor education programs must help new school counselors to foster a strong counseling-focused professional identity that is distinguishable in practice from other personnel in educational settings.

Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

Limitations of this study should be noted. First of all, the sample comprised graduate counseling students at one university, and therefore, caution must be taken in generalizing the findings to other populations, including working school counselors. Unlike practicing school counselors, school and mental health graduate counseling students may have differing perspectives about the roles of school counselors. In addition, the study focused on duties as suggested by the ASCA (2012) National Model domains, which may not reflect the actual day-to-day practice of professional school counselors at various school settings nationally.

Future role diffusion research could be strengthened by sampling currently practicing school counselors as well as school administrators who oversee and evaluate school counselor performance. In addition, examining role diffusion at the elementary, middle and high school levels may help identify unique challenges faced by school counselors in each school setting. Lastly, role studies that help clarify and distinguish the role of the school counselor from the roles of school social workers and school psychologists may help further strengthen the identity of professional school counselors.

Conclusion

Although role diffusion and role ambiguity may have negatively affected the profession of school counseling in the past, today's professional school counselors and school counseling organizations have opportunities to

clarify and advance the school counselor's role. Focusing on the unique counseling skills of school counselors may be a critical next step for the profession. Ultimately, by addressing the effects of role diffusion, school counselors can distinguish and strengthen their professional identity and therefore have a more significant impact on the children and adolescents they serve.

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