Collaborative Relationships Between Principals and School Counselors:

Facilitating a Model for Developing a Working Alliance

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Abstract

The working relationship between principals and school counselors have received some attention in the literature, however, little empirical research exists that examines specifically the components that facilitate a collaborative working relationship between the principal and school counselor. This qualitative case study examined the unique perspective for building a leader-member relationship between the principal and school counselor. Specifically, the case study examined the experiences of the working relationship of a principal and school counselor in a rural Midwestern elementary school. Data analysis revealed that the following three shared themes emerged: *student-centered focus, role differentiation,* and *trust.* From these themes and their descriptions a collaborative working relationship resulted. As a result, the principal school counselor model evolved. Implications for principals and school counselors as well as future research are presented.

Keywords: principal, school counselor, collaboration

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Successful schools today are predicated on student outcomes (Hattie, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Leadership in these schools that serves the growth of others is required to navigate the storms of social and cultural shifts, epidemics of addiction, poverty, human isolation and despair combined with the urgency of academic success for everyone (Greenleaf, 2002; Reeves, 2006). Relationship building among the many stakeholders in the school's community cannot be over appreciated. Henrik Ibsen, a nineteenth century dramatist, put it this way, "A community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm" (Forbes Leadership Library, 1995, p. 2). The principal cannot navigate alone.

One leadership partner often overlooked is the school counselor. The purpose of this research study is to examine the principal-counselor relationship and the impact a professional alliance can bring to a small rural school district. Academic achievement does not occur in a vacuum; many factors, both external and internal, compete for student attention (Dahir & Stone, 2003; Fitch & Marshall, 2004). Creating space at school where each student feels safe, valued, and competent present special challenges for those responsible. Commitment by leadership to manage this growing complexity requires a strong alliance between the principal and counselor (Hallinger, 2005). Together at the helm, they better serve the whole child and begin navigating a community focused on results one child at a time.

A case study design set in a real-world context was chosen because it allows a deeper appreciation for the subject (Yin, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The case is

bounded by a single rural elementary school. Such a setting offers a unique perspective for building a leader-member relationship between the principal and school counselor. Schools serving small communities find it difficult to recruit and retain quality staff (Stone, 1990; Monk, 2007; LaTurno Hines, 2002). As a result, principals must be observant and savvy in finding teachers who demonstrate the capacity to grow into a specialized role such as counseling. Developing and fostering rare talent among faculty promotes sustained continuity so important for rural schools (LaTurno Hines, 2002). This study considers three questions that guide the inquiry into establishing and sustaining a principal-counselor relationship: 1) How do the principal and counselor of a rural school develop trust and respect for each other in a professional relationship? 2) How do the principal and counselor communicate expectations, concerns and beliefs about their relationship? 3) How do the principal and counselor share decision-making?

Leader-membership theory sets the framework for this study. In the mid-70s researchers began to look critically at leader-follower relationships (Northouse, 2016; Seer & Chopin, 2012). These researchers were curious about the inconsistencies followers demonstrated when they rated a leader's leadership styles. Some followers, for instance, rated a leader's task oriented style higher while others rated the same behavior as low. What attributes to the inconsistency (Seer & Chopin, 2012)? The inconsistency researchers found was explained by the degree of relationship the leader and follower experienced. Followers were discovered as in-group personnel, while others were considered the out-group (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975).

Much of the current counseling literature advocates that the school counselor must take on a stronger leadership role. Grimes, Haskins and Paisley (2013) report

from their study that it is crucial for counselors to insert themselves as social justice advocates who support both school and community values among their students. “The experience of rural school counselor, social justice advocates is made meaningful by deep community connection with generational limitations, community investment amidst socio-economic loss, and both value and compromise personally and professionally” (Grimes, et al., p. 47). As social justice advocate and leader, counselors must sacrifice much of their professional and social capital. Dixon, Tucker and Clark (2010) continue the theme of socially just counseling and advocacy. As leaders in their school counselors are asked to advance the access to academic and social supports for both the advantaged and disadvantaged (College Board, 2009). As leader-advocates they are asked to secure resources for mediating rights and services that students may otherwise not receive (Steele, 2008).

Rural education compared to more populated regions face challenges unique to its community (LaTurno Hines, 2002; Sutton, 2002; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). Children attending rural schools are more likely to experience a narrow curriculum and limited social services. Rural communities; however, do have strong ties among its citizens (Elder & Conger as cited in Byun, et al., 2012); as a result they may be able offset family or financial problems. Counselors in small rural schools must be creative at finding resources available beyond the school. Because of the communal nature of a rural culture (LaTurno Hines, 2002), counselors are more likely to find partners within the religious and community networks than their counter parts in larger communities (Sutton, 2002).

A cycle of poverty in rural areas reduces student aspirations toward higher education or career opportunities (Gibbs, 2000; Iceland, 2013). Sutton's (2002). Research confirms the notion that counselors must become acclimated to not only the cycle of poverty, but the resistance to idea that social problems of homelessness, drugs, and domestic violence are "out there, but not here in our quiet town" (p. 207). A team of committed school stakeholders that include the principal, faculty, staff, and community members must confront the challenges of rural culture facing a school counselor (Cohen-Vogel, Goldring, & Smreker, 2010).

Because a counselor by today's standards is asked to take on the roles of social justice advocate and leader, the role of counselor may often come into conflict with that of the administrator's role as designated organizational head. Trusty and Brown (2005) cast the counselor advocate as school actor, autonomous in thinking and behavior. Such autonomy puts that person at odds with the principal. As an advocate the counselor must protect the rights of students against zero tolerance policies or demand resources for services and special programs over other budget priorities (Trusty & Brown). While much of the current literature may imply competing purposes between administrative leadership and that of a counselor advocating social justice issues, the theoretical counter weight for this research offers a an alternate narrative.

Dyadic relationships defined by the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory provide a key underpinning for this case study. Earlier it was discussed that rural school principals must maintain close professional ties with productive faculty. One critical relationship is between the principal and counselor. High quality exchanges that occur with the leader and member are predicated on trust and mutual dependence. These

exchanges become stronger and more deeply held over time (Yukl, G. 2002; Schriesheim, Castro, Zhou, & Yammarino, 2001; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

While literature around the development of leader-member exchanges grows, it remains unclear how sustained leader-member relationships grow (Sparrowe, & Liden, 1997; Bauer, Green, & Bauer, 1996; Janssen, & Van Yperen, 2004). The implication of leader-member relations is that trusted employees grow seamlessly in their connections with a supervisor. However, it is more likely that the dyadic relationships have ebb and flow as any close relationship has. Attitudes shift as both individuals mollify their independence with a desire to become closer (Fairhurst, 1993). How well shifts in attitudes are mediated over time so trust and support is not lost as relationships mature remains a question. As a result, more research on the issue of mediating sustained LMX relationships will bring fidelity to this question.

Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) expanded the earlier research on leader-member exchange (LMX). Their work revealed that the quality of leader and follower's relationship contributed to higher quality performance of workers and less turnover among staff. The quality of the relationship also contributed to greater work activity and a heightened sense of accomplishment for both leader and follower. Rural teachers and counselors are relatively younger and less experienced than their peers in larger communities (Monk, 2007). Retaining such a fragile workforce demands that their school leader builds a strong relationship with all of the members. We argue here that the relationship between a building principal and counselor is particularly important to maintain. It is the counselor who, according to LaTurno Hines (2002), "[facilitates] the change needed to remove the systemic barriers that keep all children from achieving

success" (p. 192). Through the qualitative interviews between a rural Midwestern principal and school counselor, the researchers hope to illuminate further the importance of the collaborative relationship and its impact on the overall school environment through this case study.

Method

A qualitative approach in this study was chosen in order to further the understanding of the principal-counselor relationship and gain both the individual and collective meaning from the selected participants. Utilizing a qualitative methodology for this study allowed for an open-ended format of exploration where a variety of possibilities emerged because the participants were not bound solely to closed questions. Specifically, in order to understand the phenomena of the principal-counselor relationship, it was important to attend to the experience of a principal and counselor who work closely together in the same school. This case was bounded by both time (six months) and place (a rural Midwestern elementary school). We also utilized multiple date points (LMX7, School Counselor Self-Advocacy Questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews) to determine the in-depth picture of the relationship between the principal and school counselor. This approach follows Lincoln and Guba's (1985) case study structure: statement of the problem, context, issues and "lessons to be learned." This single case study allowed the researchers to further determine the emergent relational themes consistent with the principal and counselor experience.

Data Collection

In the context of this study, the researchers sought to construct the experiences of the elementary principal and school counselor as well as examine the critical steps

for building a professional relationship between an elementary principal and school counselor in a small rural school. Through the principal and counselor interviews, observations and professional-role questionnaires, reliability and trustworthiness was assured. The project used multiple approaches to establish trustworthiness and an analytical generalization of the case presented.

Participants

Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed the concept of generalization as operating within a natural paradigm. In a natural paradigm, data are viewed as emerging from an interaction between the investigator and participants. Personal understandings may be reached in the form of “naturalistic generalizations” in a qualitative framework. The researchers concluded that selecting a small number of participants for the study would allow an integration of a thorough interview process as well as gain a deeper understanding of the context in this case.

Selection criteria. The name and e-mail address of the elementary school counselor was obtained from a Midwestern regional comprehensive university’s counseling program post-graduate email database that was provided by the alumnus prior to graduation. The recruitment process began by e-mailing a letter to the elementary school counselor and the elementary school principal stating the purpose of the research, amount and length of the interview rounds, expectations of participating, and information on how to contact the researchers. The participants were given instructions on how to volunteer or to request for further information. Once participants were given further information regarding the study, informed consent forms were also provided and they were given an opportunity to review, ask questions, and agreed to

participate in the study. Purposeful sampling was used to obtain the participants for the study. Both the principal and counselor interviewed for this study represent a rural district challenged by unemployment, increasing illicit drug use, and poverty.

Demographic data. The participants included two Caucasian women between the ages of 40-55. The two participants selected were from a rural Midwestern school district. One participant identified as the elementary school principal and the other participant identified as the elementary school counselor. For the study, the participants were given pseudonyms to safeguard their identity. From this point forward the elementary school principal will be referred to as Sandy and the elementary school counselor will be referred to as June. The participants were selected based on identifying as having an effective principal-counselor relationship which included the following components: mutual trust and respect; principal-counselor communication; shared vision and decision-making (College Board, 2009).

Data Sources

The researchers engaged the participants (elementary principal and school counselor) in a semi-structured interview, interview protocol (Appendix 1). In these semi-structured interviews, the researchers provided generalized questions that were then followed by supplemental questions for clarification. To enhance the understanding of the collaborative working relationship between Sandy and June, the researchers also administered a Leader-Member Exchange Seven (LMX7, Appendix 2) to measure the school counselor-principal relationship. June also responded to the School Counselor Self-Advocacy Questionnaire to measure the role as school advocate and partner. Both the LMX7 and School Counselor Self-Advocacy (Appendix 3) instruments have validity

and reliability measures supporting their accuracy (Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009; Clemens, Shipp & Kimbel, 2011). The rationale for choosing the LMX7 and School Counselor Self-Advocacy instruments were to enhance the understanding of the relationship of this particular case.

The different sources of data from the interviews, observations and questionnaires allowed the researchers to triangulate and build a coherent explanation of themes (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). Member checking provided further evidence of the authenticity of the qualitative findings (Creswell, 2014). A rich, thick description from observations and the discussion of the environment offered a shared experience with the researchers (Creswell, 2014). Finally a peer debriefing allowed the researchers to question and evaluate the validity of results (Lincoln and Guba, 1985 & Creswell, 2014).

Data Analysis

Both of the semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy to prepare for data analysis. A phenomenological approach was used in collecting and analyzing data. Specifically, Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutical approach to phenomenology was utilized. Hermeneutic phenomenology attends to the description of the phenomenon of study, but also to the interpretation of the experience. Van Manen proposes that using language to describe the phenomenon is an interpretive course of action. In the context of this study, phenomenological analysis sought to construct the components of the principal-counselor relationship.

In order to elicit the meaning and experiences of the relationship between the principal and counselor, which is the phenomenon of study, the researchers reviewed

the semi-structured transcripts for common themes, engaged in peer debriefing, and conducted a final member check to confirm the findings. Data gathered from both the semi-structured interviews and member check were coded for themes. Data from the LMX7, School Counselor Self-Advocacy instruments (see Tables 1 and 2), and School Counselor Self-Advocacy Questionnaire were illuminating.

Creswell (2014) indicated that qualitative researchers should utilize at least two strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. For the purpose of this study, two strategies were used to meet the criteria for trustworthiness: member checking and peer debriefing (Creswell). Member checks ensure that the essence of the participants' meanings are articulated and interpreted accurately by the researcher. A member check was conducted following the semi-structured interviews with Sandy and June to confirm the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing was utilized to provide accountability through recognizing the influence of the researcher on the interpretation of the results of the interviews. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), incorporating peer debriefing can strengthen credibility in a qualitative study. In order to maintain sensitivity to the emergent themes uncovered by the interviews and instruments, the researchers engaged in collaborative dialogue. This dialogue, peer debriefing, also included the researchers playing the role as devil's advocate to provide accountability and recognize "the influence of the researcher on the interpretation of the data" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p.151).

Results

Interview Process

Both the first and second author engaged Sandy and June in the semi-structured interview to further understand the roles of the principal and school counselor who self-identified as having a successful collaborative relationship which each other. Sandy and June engaged in the interviews which lasted approximately forty-five minutes each. In this interview, the following questions were asked:

1. How, as a principal (counselor) do you feel you develop trust and respect with the principal (counselor) in your professional relationship? Is there an example you might give?
2. How do you as the principal (counselor) communicate expectations, concerns, and beliefs about your relationship?
3. How do you as a principal (counselor) share decision-making with the principal?

The interview questions were then expanded with follow-up questions and statements to facilitate access to the meaning behind Sandy and June's responses. The second author engaged Sandy in her interview and the first author engaged June in her interview. The results of their experiences describing their collaborative relationship follow.

Both Sandy and June were asked to complete the LMX7 (Appendix 2), a seven item questionnaire, recognized as a valid instrument for gauging quality leader-member exchanges. The inclusion of the LMX7 as a data point for this case study allowed the researchers to determine the context of the relationship between the participants in a more detailed manner. The questionnaire measures three qualities of a leader-member relationship: respect, trust, and obligation. Figure 1 below reveals that all three

dimensions are perfectly correlated between Sandy and June, indicating a deep sense of reciprocal trust and sense of obligation to one another. The implication of deep sense of trust between Sandy and June and their obligation to each other is not only apparent from the questionnaire results, but it is also revealed through their interviews. The results of the LMX7 allowed the researchers to further understand the collaborative relationship between Sandy and June. The incorporation of this instrument was not intended to compare and contrast multiple data sets, rather the intentions were to confirm the strength of their relationship.

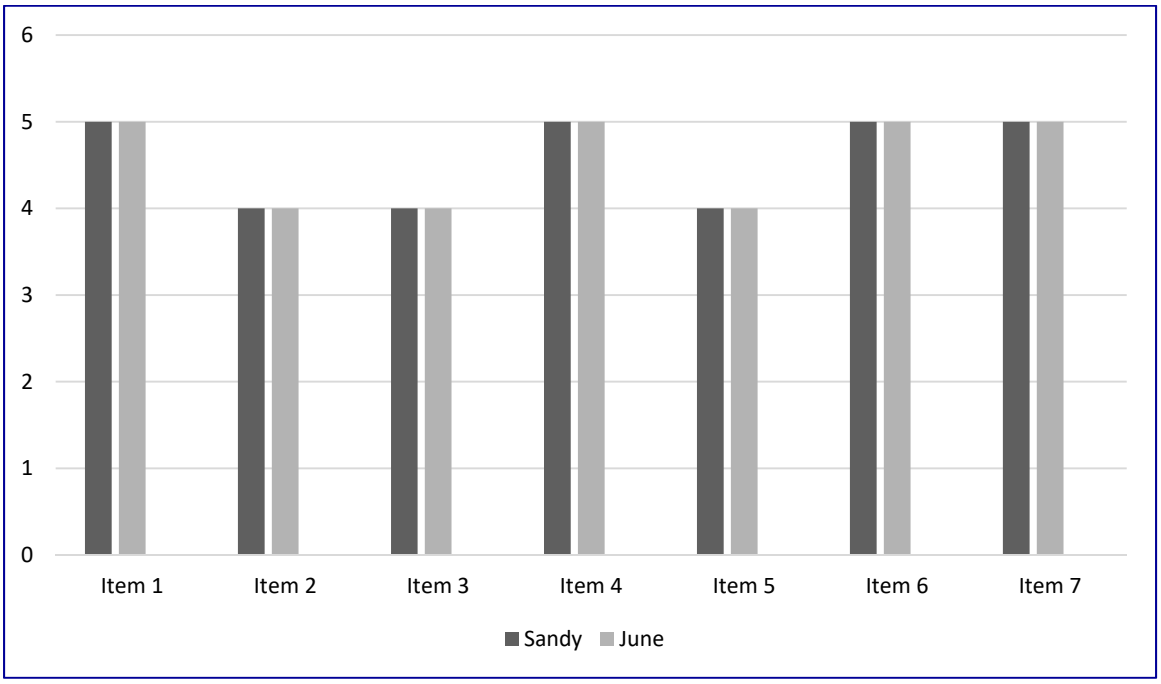

Figure 1. LMX7 Questionnaire Results

June was asked to complete the School Counselor Self-Advocacy Questionnaire (Crocker & Algina, 2008) in order to measure the use of June's self-advocacy skills when implementing them in her role as school counselor. The focus of this instrument is the interaction between the school counselor and principal. This measure can be helpful

when evaluating the impact of self-advocacy efforts and to also identify opportunities for school counselors to improve their self-advocacy skills (Clemens et al., 2011). This measure also assisted the researchers in understanding more fully the collaborative relationship between Sandy and June as it identifies more specifically June's perception and ability to advocate for herself and communicate her needs and role effectively with Sandy. June was prompted to indicate her agreement that she used a particular advocacy skill on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4), please see Appendix 3. Higher scores indicate the use of more self-advocacy skills than lower scores. June scored very high in terms of her perceptions of utilizing self-advocacy skills. For example, for items 1-6 she circled agree and items 7-9, she strongly agreed that she utilized skills to advocate for her role as counselor. Her detailed results are indicated in the Figure 2 below.

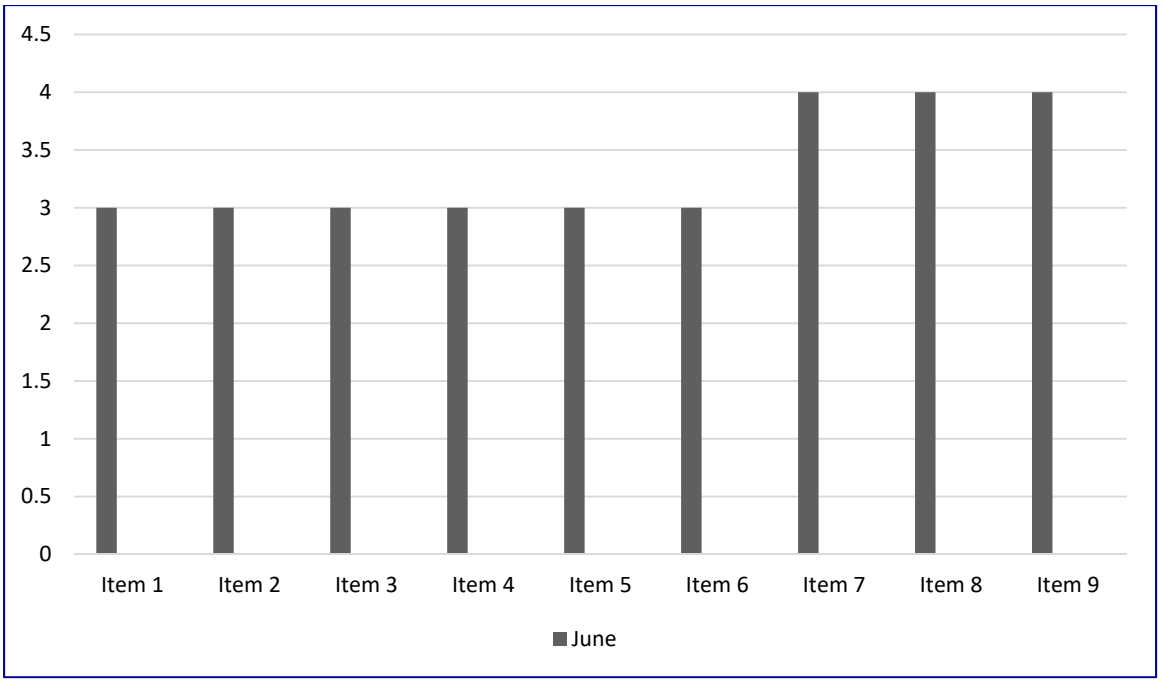

Figure 2. School Counselor Self-Advocacy Questionnaire

Sandy's Experience

Faced with limited resources and transient staff, rural principals must strategically identify needs and build relationships to maintain consistency in the school (Monk, 2007; Stone, 1990). Sandy recognizes her role as the leader of a rural elementary school who must capture the energy and imagination of those who work for her.

Defining Roles. Sandy defines herself as the disciplinarian for the school. "I am more the disciplinarian. I want students to behave." She found that the counselor she inherited when she took over was solid but overwhelmed with the many administrative roles rural counselors play in their district. The counselor was the process coordinator for the entire district and often called away to meetings at other district sites. She could not give her complete attention to the social and emotional development of children at Sandy's school. As a result, Sandy took on more nurturing responsibilities but found the two *roles*, counselor and principal, confusing for the students.

> We had so many special needs kids, and it was taking so much time. We were having so many kids coming in to school with such dysfunction starting out in school. They weren't potty trained; they couldn't communicate, because when you watch TV you don't have to talk to anyone. So I saw a tremendous need. I spent a lot of time training kids and counseling them, but I also had to be the disciplinarian. I had to be the hammer down. A little confusing to the kids.

As a result, she formed a vision of counseling that was less bureaucratic and more student oriented. Acting on that vision, however, took time. Carving out a piece of the budget for additional staffing and advocating a new faculty position took years to negotiate. Eventually, a bit of financial warming melted away resistance to a child's

needs beyond the academic. June, a veteran teacher and reading coach at the school, was installed as counselor. She became solely responsible for the emotional and academic needs of the elementary children.

Support through trust. Building effective relationships that influence member loyalty, trust, and work satisfaction is a priority for Sandy. Her continued professional relationship with June is particularly valuable to her. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1991) discovered through their research that high-quality relationships do not happen instantly, but develop over time. Three phases mark the progress of a leader-member relationship, according to Graen and Uhl-Bien. The first stage is one of a simple partnership that does not rise much above prescribed roles within the organization. As the relationship evolves through trials of conflict and resolution, it becomes a trusted and secure exchange from leader to member and member to leader. One where more responsibility is shared and access to resources is offered. By stage three the leader member relation matures to a high degree. Mutual trust and respect become evident between the leader and member (Northouse, 2016). Sandy and June's relationship shows that over time events and behavior have tested the trust each has with the other. For instance, Sandy was asked if she saw June as a leader, "She's [June] really lived up to that potential. . .you know she got the paper work in on time. I just had to move her to the process coordinator job because I know she could do it."

June was among the first faculty Sandy hired in her first year as principal. She talks about June's soft skills, revealing how June's students were treated with concern and hope for the future. Sandy describes her as "One of those empathetic personalities, wanting to help. And I watched that in her. A teacher leader." After several years in the

classroom, Sandy asked June to take on more leadership and become a reading specialist for the elementary. In this capacity June worked with students struggling to learn. She was also a reading coach and advocate for classroom teachers looking for strategies and resources to better serve their students. It was also during this time that June returned to school and worked on a counseling degree. Sandy found that June was never shy in coming to her when she believed that more could be done to help a student reach his or her full potential in the classroom and as a *trusted* member of the school community.

Resiliency in *No* and Opportunity for *Yes*

Sandy knows the answer *no* to June's ideas meant that with a bit more attention to need and more evidence; June will return and the word *no* could become the word, *yes*. "She's got to feel the freedom that she can come back to me with a better idea that just because I said no the first time . . .she is open to coming back to me again." Sandy tells the story of June's early guidance lessons. She wanted to see every class every week, a high expectation with the pressures of individual counseling needs combined with special education responsibilities. "I said, no, you can't do that and see everyone. But her heart is so big, you know." She pulled back on her goals a bit accepting Sandy's view. Sandy expresses confidence in her relationship with June, knowing that common bond is the welfare of students and the community.

As the relationship between Sandy and June matured, Sandy saw in her the nurturing qualities required to serve both the emotional and academic sides to children. Rural administrators many times must find the talent where they can and build loyalty through their relationships (Monk, 2007). Sandy revealed that her connection with June

solidified the person she would hire as elementary counselor. “You know, in small schools you have to, Sandy thought. You know, if you see a person who can do the job well you kinda have to take notice . . . Like the superintendent did with me.”

June is now firmly established as counselor, and Sandy and June’s trust and obligation toward each other has grown into the highest stage of leader-member exchange. They are able to share ideas openly (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1991). For instance, Sandy explains their professional work together as one of honest respect.

> “June can come in here and tell me exactly what she is thinking. And I can tell her, ‘June, what are you thinking! No. No.’ Or, ‘Hey, that is a great idea.’ I’m not intimidated because she has a great idea. You can’t be on an ego trip or be threatened by people who want to do things outside the parameters of their job description.”

June’s Experience

June begins to describe her experiences with Sandy as one where “she doesn’t hang you out to dry, she’s supportive” and shares further that if she had problems or concerns with students; they would work as a team to address it. As a result of reviewing the transcript, it was evident that several themes became apparent. The primary themes of support, a student-centered focus, and role differentiation emerged as a result of the interview with June. These themes will be further discussed as well as extrapolating the meaning that June attributed to each important aspect of the collaborative relationship she has with Sandy.

Support. June recognized that in order for her relationship with Sandy to flourish, it was critical that she experienced support by Sandy as she considered the welfare of

the students in the school. Support can be described as offering feedback that is both encouraging and also providing constructive observations in order to strengthen the trust in their collaborative working relationship. June described her experiences as trust being further enhanced by the *support* she experienced from Sandy. In particular June describes the program as needing further development, “I guess the program when I got it wasn’t very strong so I had all of these ideas…and, I present them as the outcome to the student you know what’s the benefit to the students. How can this help our school be better?” June further shares that when she has an idea that may “be a little out there” such as her reference to using a therapy dog in the school; she is also supportive to those ideas. The following excerpt captures the meaning of the support as it particularly relates to Sandy supporting June’s ideas:

> She buys into everything that is going to be better for our students. Nobody around here does it [therapy dog], but when I presented legitimate information videos, statistics, data. You know, maybe personally she may think that that’s a little bit of a risk to the district, but I think she sees far more benefit to the students than risk. I think that, you know, she buys into to my program. Like when I present something she really ever hardly shoots me down, unless say you’ve got to find the money. But, you know she’s supportive of my ideas and the things I bring to her.

June further describes that the experiences such as the one described above enhances the trust in the working relationship she has with Sandy. June also recalled a time early on in their working relationship that she “confided in her and watched to see if there were any repercussions,” soon following this test of their relationship it became clear to

June that she can continue to “confide in her with problems…I know that she has built that and earned that with me.”

In addition to the encouragement component of ***support*** that June received from Sandy, she also experienced Sandy as working with her towards solutions even if June had a part in the problem. For example, June shares of a time where she could have addressed a problem differently. The following excerpt further captures June’s experience of Sandy in their working relationship:

> She immediately worked with me for a solution, then, afterwards if there was something, if I had a part in the problem, then she would follow up with a conversation after the fact once we dealt with it together and worked as a team. And I feel like any time even if I had screwed up she supports. . . she supports me and works with me positively about it not just . . . she’s never going to throw you under the bus and just leave you to fend for yourself.

Based on the above statements by June, support can be described as offering feedback that is both encouraging and also providing constructive observations in order to strengthen the trust in their collaborative working relationship. Support was a primary theme that emerged as a result of examining the perspective of June’s working relationship with Sandy. Another theme that emerged was a student-centered focus which will be further discussed below.

A Student-Centered Focus. In order for the collaborative working relationship to be the most effective for the school, there was evidence that June experienced a shared student-centered focus with Sandy. June discussed that if there were work challenges, for example, with parents and/or teachers, the focus of any intervention would be

"what's best for the kid." A student-centered focus can be described as foci and interventions that have the most benefit for the student's overall emotional, social, and academic well-being. It is believed that if student benefit is of ultimate focus, then the environment of the school will be better. June shares of the following poignant statement to highlight the importance of this focus she and Sandy have when intervening on behalf of the students:

> We're very student centered. It's not about us. It's not about her; it's not about me, it's not about the teacher so much as it's about the students. We don't want to work against the teachers and make their lives more difficult, but ultimately I think together as a team we know the student is first.

June further states that she works with Sandy and not against her in order to be the most effective for students. She describes in particular that when she first got her program off the ground teachers weren't used to the counselor being in their room or having students pulled "because we didn't really have an active counseling and guidance program." She further states that it was met with a little resistance at first, but acknowledges that when she brought concerns to Sandy, they would work for solutions that were most beneficial to the students.

Additionally, when further discussing their working relationship, June shares that Sandy "doesn't present herself as the all-powerful Oz," rather represents herself as considering what is best for the students. In particular:

> She presents herself as someone who leads and wants what's best for our students. She'll do lunch duty every day. I constantly tell her that's a waste of two hours of your day. I mean that's ridiculous you've got so much you've got to be

> doing. She said, ‘But I don’t, that’s important to me. I want that connection with the kids, and I want the teachers to see that I’m not too important to do lunch duty.’

June further describes that because this is the perspective Sandy holds and operates from, it also empowers June to also maintain a service-orientation as she works with the students.

The experiences above highlight the importance of a student-centered focus June and Sandy hold when working collaboratively on behalf of students for the overall benefit of the school environment. June also discusses the importance of differing roles her and Sandy share which enhance their working relationship. Specifically, June shares of her leadership role with the “Care Team” at her school which focuses on particular concerns such as social, emotional, academic, and behavioral problems that interfere with student functioning in the school. Through the process of further uncovering what facilitates success in the collaborative relationship between June and Sandy, it was evident that the theme of role differentiation emerged.

Role Differentiation. It became apparent to June that in order for the school environment to operate the most effectively, there was a need for both her and Sandy to have different roles in their positions. In these roles, there is also a respect for each other and recognition that “egos can’t get in the way.” June summarizes by stating “we always play bad cop, good cop” and further illuminates this aspect of role differentiation through the following excerpt:

> I almost always get to be good cop, because we feel that’s what the counselor should be the good cop. The advocate the go-to person then the support system

> where the principal has to do the discipline and the more unpleasant things . . . I can see it wearing her down. She's always bad cop and I'm good cop, but, ultimately, we know that's kinda how it has to work to make it effective.

To further address the difference in roles June shares her experience of their collaborative working relationship by acknowledging that in their relationship they have a genuine respect for each other and the roles they each fill. She further discusses that when she was a teacher, prior to her current role as school counselor, that her role is different, "I'm an advocate." June recognizes that as she advocates for students, she can't always get her way:

> You win some you lose some. You're wrong sometimes you're right. And, she's got to be okay with you being right and her being wrong. But, you've got to be okay with her being right and you being wrong. And, you can't be afraid because I got shot down for an idea, and not take the next one to her. You know, you have to bring the next one to her. You're not always going to agree. I mean, sometimes I feel very strongly about something. If she doesn't see it my way, I can't hold that against her. I can't let that hang over the relationship. I have to let it go. And, whenever I'm aggravated with her, I have to tell her. If not I'll let it build and then I get testy and then she has to call me out. So, you know, if I'm mad at her, I tell her. You really hurt my feeling or I'm really frustrated because you did this, and it made me look this way and you made me feel this way. I just tell her.

The above excerpt establishes the importance of not letting their "egos get in the way" while they are both considering their *differing roles* in the school. In order for the school environment to operate the most effectively, June recognized the need for both her and

Sandy to have different roles in their positions. This aspect of role differentiation is an important theme that emerged as a result of their collaborative relationship.

The primary themes of support, a student-centered focus, and role differentiation emerged as a result of the interview with June. These themes were discussed further as well as the meaning that June attributed to each important aspect of this collaborative relationship she has with Sandy. As a result of the interviews with both Sandy and June, it is evident that there were joint themes or connections that they both shared. The themes will be further discussed in order to develop a collaborative model between principals and counselors in the schools.

Member Check

Member checks were conducted via email four months after participants were interviewed and the surveys were completed (LMX7 and School Counselor Self-Advocacy Questionnaire). Sandy and June were sent an email that included a summary of the emergent themes as determined by the authors and verified via peer debriefing. The participants were asked to review the themes that emerged as a result of their interviews with the authors and examine whether these themes confirmed their experiences in their respective roles (principal and counselor). They were also asked to consider any additions or subtractions of the narratives that depicted their experiences. As a result of the member check, Sandy and June confirmed that the findings captured their experiences in their respective roles. Specifically, Sandy stated the following, “I read over what you sent us in March and thought it was accurate.” June also confirmed the findings by stating, “Yes, I thought the themes were a perfect and accurate depiction of our working relationship as well as a great representation of our experiences in our

roles and how to relate to one another.” According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) member checks increase the trustworthiness of qualitative studies because it allows subjects to confirm that the findings of the study accurately portray the experience.

Discussion

Data analysis revealed that the following three shared themes emerged: a student-centered focus, role differentiation, and trust. From these themes and their descriptions a collaborative working relationship resulted. As a result of the themes that emerged and were confirmed from the interviews with Sandy and June, the authors considered a working model that became apparent when reviewing the results. The Principal School Counselor Model evolved and is one that encompasses the experiences of both Sandy and June as it relates to their collaborative relationship in the school setting. As seen in Figure 3 below, notice the center is focused on the student. It was important for both Sandy and June to consider the students and their benefit when implementing new programs, considering budget as well as working with faculty and staff, both Sandy and June had a student-centered focus. Additionally, it was important for them to consider the impact their relationship of trust had on the student. Without the element of trust as described above in their ability to be honest and communicate constructively with one another, there is potential for it to impact the overall school environment in a negative way. Thus, Sandy and June spoke about the importance of the trust in their relationship as key to a successful school environment. Lastly, they each also recognized that their roles within the school were different and yet both essential, role-differentiation.

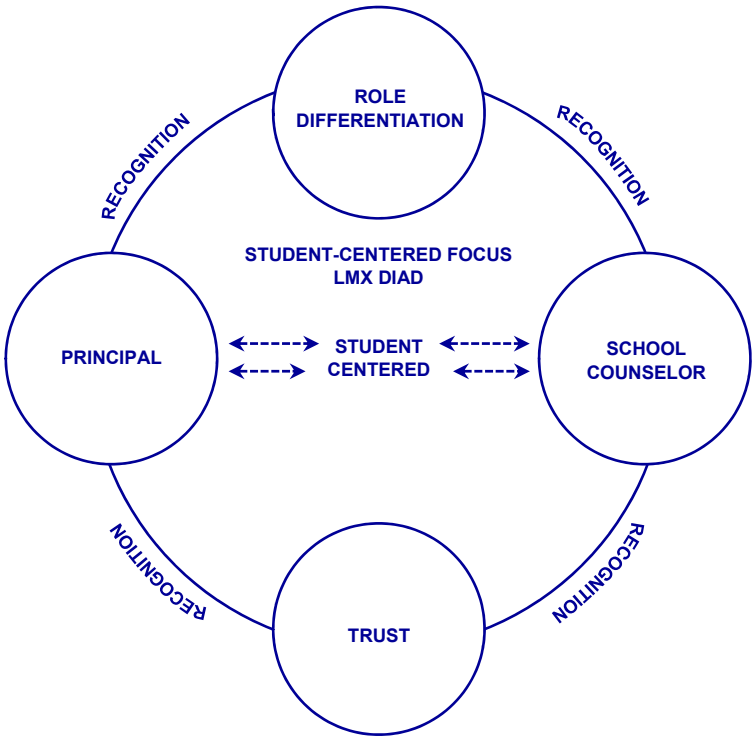

Figure 3. Principal/Counselor LMX Results Model

LMX theory offers a well-defined lens through which effective, sustained relationships can be viewed. This research intended to examine a healthy, high functioning principal/counselor partnership and find those elements contributing to success. Trust is one key factor, which adheres the values and beliefs of the counselor and principal. Both participants talked about confronting each other's assumptions. They understood that hearing no meant there had to be a better path to yes. But, ideas were never devalued or ignored. They communicated regularly and honestly with one another.

It was evident that roles within the organization were clearly defined. Each was aware what skills and expectations they brought to the school. Sandy was the disciplinarian, describing herself as "the hammer" and June defined more as the care-giver and advocate. Together they knew that at the center of their relationship were the

students. Authority was mediated as they respected the autonomy each brought to the realities of rural education. While Sandy defines herself as “the hammer” she also knows that kids are at different levels in their development, home support and academic growth. She recognizes that June brings a big heart that can find the scarce resources to overcome the ravages of poverty and loss of hope.

Implications for School Counselors

This model has tremendous implications for school counselors in that it provides a lens by which school counselors may conceptualize their role and relationship with their principal in the school. Particularly, in an increasingly data-driven environment, school counselors are tasked with providing evidence to multiple stakeholders including school principals. This model has the potential to highlight the focus (student-centered) and importance of the collaborative principal and counselor relationship as impacting the overall school environment to the principal. In theory, if the model is embraced by both the principal and school counselor and each ingredient: building trust, a recognition of differing roles (role-differentiation), and a student-centered focus; this has the potential to increase health in the overall school environment.

Limitations

A limitation of this current research is that it is a single case study design. Future studies would examine further principal and counselor interactions to determine whether the elements discovered in this collaborative relationship are consistent with other leader member relationships. In addition, the current study focused on a mature working relationship (14 years) between a principal and counselor, further study would be necessary to examine how early member relationships mature. Last, it would be

important to examine whether similar themes that came out of this study would be apparent in future studies that examine the collaborative working relationship between a principal and counselor.

Conclusion

Principals cannot lead alone schools are social organizations built on relationships and trust. School counselors must become a critical partner in a leadership team. Uhl-Bien, Maslyn, & Ospina (2012) provides a critical leadership framework that explains the growth of relationships from self-interest into a mature alliance, free from judgment and mistrust. This case study offered a unique opportunity to examine a relationship of trust and respect built over time. Both Sandy and June revealed that their honesty with each other and willingness to share their thinking shaping and reshaping ideas. Their insights helped bring greater understanding to how mature leader-member interdependence is sustained over time. While this study examined a mature principal-counselor exchange, further studies that examine early development of leader-member exchanges would be helpful in understanding how these grow into more meaningful partnerships over time. This leader-membership model was bounded by a rural context. An urban school context might offer even more insight to the questions addressed in this study.

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Appendix 1

Interview Protocol

The purpose of this interview is to help us understand roles of principal and school counselor in a successful collaborative relationship, impacting school improvement. The interview will take approximately 40 minutes. The research is sponsored by Southeast Missouri State University through an internal grant. There are minimal risks in participation. No actual names of individuals and organizations will be used, only pseudonyms. Your participation in the research is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time during the course of this research. The benefit from this research will result in a principal and school counselor collaborative leadership, best practices model. Results from the study will be disseminated through a scholarly article. If you have questions regarding your rights or any aspects of the research, please contact Dr. Paul Watkins at 573.651.2136 or by email, pwatkins@semo.edu or Dr. Melissa Odegard-Koester at 573-651-2420, or by email, modegard@semo.edu.

1. How, as a principal (counselor) feel you develop trust and respect the counselor (principal) in your professional relationship?
2. Is there an example you might give?
3. How do you as the principal (counselor) communicate expectations, concerns, and beliefs about your relationship?
4. How do you as a principal (counselor) share decision-making with the counselor (principal)?

Appendix 2

LMX7 QUESTIONAIRE

Instruction: This questionnaire contains items that ask you to describe your relationship with either your leader or one of your subordinates. For each of the items, indicate the degree to which you think the item is true for you by circling one of the responses that appear below the item.

1. Do you know where you stand with your leader (follower) . . .[and] do you usually know how satisfied your leader (follower) is with what you do?

Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Fairly often	Very often
1	2	3	4	5

2. How well does your leader (follower) understand your job problems and needs?

Not a bit	A little	A fair amount	Quite a bit	A great deal
1	2	3	4	5

3. How well does your leader (follower) recognize your potential?

Not at all	A little	Moderately	Mostly	Fully
1	2	3	4	5

4. Regardless of how much formal authority your leader (follower) has built into his or her position, what are the chances that your leader (follower) would use his or her power to help you solve problems in your work?

None	Small	Moderate	High	Very High
1	2	3	4	5

5. Again, regardless of the amount of formal authority your leader (follower) has, what are the chances that he or she would “bail you out” at this or her expense?

None	Small	Moderate	High	Very high
1	2	3	4	5

6. I have enough confidence in my leader (follower) that I would defend and justify his or her decision if he or she were not present to do so.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

7. How would you characterize your working relationship with your leader (follower)?

Extremely ineffective	Worse than average	Average	Better than average	Extremely effective
1	2	3	4	5

Appendix 3

School Counselor Self-Advocacy Questionnaire

Please indicate the extent to which you agree that you use these skills to advocate for your role as a counselor. Circle the response that best fits you.

1.	I maintain positive working relationships with professionals in the school.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
2.	I effectively communicate my perspective on my role to my principal.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
3.	I “choose my battles” when advocating for my role as a school counselor.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
4.	I listen to my principal’s perspective on my role as a school counselor.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
5.	I use problem-solving skills to find solutions to role challenges.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
6.	I present information clearly about my role as a school counselor to my principal.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
7.	I share data with my principal to support or to make changes to my role as a school Counselor.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
8.	I follow up appropriately with my principal about my role as a school counselor.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
9.	I cope effectively with challenges to my role as a school counselor.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

Biographical Statements

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