Family Matters: An Investigation of Family Coursework in

School Counseling Programs

J. Richelle Joe
University of Central Florida

Pamela N. Harris
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Abstract

School counselors are expected to form collaborative relationships with the families of students. Yet, school counselors have limited knowledge about families to form these partnerships, as a descriptive content analysis of the family coursework requirements in CACREP-accredited school counseling programs in the southern region revealed that most programs do not mandate family coursework. Implications for the preparation of students to engage in school-family collaboration are discussed.

Keywords: counselor preparation, family collaboration, school counseling

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As the field of professional school counseling has shifted from service to program delivery, collaboration has become an integral component of the work that professional school counselors do (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012; Gibbons, Diambra, & Buchanan, 2010). Both professional best practices (ASCA, 2012) and academic standards (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016) emphasize collaboration as a key aspect in the implementation of comprehensive, data-driven, developmental school counseling programs. As stated in the ASCA National Model (2012), collaboration between school counselors, parents, and other educators is a key feature of effective school counseling programs, which can facilitate improved academic and socio-emotional outcomes for students. Additionally, CACREP standards advocate for educational experiences that promote systemic thinking among all counseling students as they explore helping relationships (CACREP, 2016). Specific to school counselors, standards further emphasize the central role of school counselors as "systems change agents" (CACREP, 2016, 2.a) that engage in consultation and collaboration with multiple stakeholders.

Collaboration between school personnel and family members yields several benefits for students, including improved academic achievement (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; Sheldon, Epstein, & Galindo, 2010), a reduction in disciplinary issues (McElderry & Cheng, 2014), and an increased likelihood of receiving a postsecondary education (Hill, 2008). To support these benefits, two of the four components of the ASCA National Model (2012) purposely include elements that encourage parental and/or

familial involvement. The delivery quadrant features indirect student services, which may include collaboration with parents on behalf of students. Moreover, the management component addresses advisory councils, which may involve contributions from parents to build comprehensive school counseling programs. In addition to standards related to collaboration in general, the CACREP school counseling standards (2016) also assert the importance of preparing school counselors to partner with families through consultation and to examine connections between familial involvement and student achievement.

Pre-school, elementary, and secondary schools have acknowledged the advantages of school-family collaborative relationships, and have implemented programs to support these partnerships. For example, Harlem's Children Zone offers support services for children and families to promote academic achievement, and An Achievable Dream, a K-12 academy, encourages parental involvement through volunteerism (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Such school-family partnership programs are typically grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, or the idea that human development is formed by interactions between individuals and the environment. The most immediate system that individuals belong to is the microsystem, which consists of both school and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, a clearer understanding of family systems may be beneficial for school counselors to create these collaborative relationships (Eppler & Weir, 2009; Paylo, 2011). Conceptualizing students through a systems perspective promotes persistent positive changes within family structures (Nelson, 2006). Moreover, a family systems viewpoint has been found to be effective in creating interventions for specialized populations, such

as exceptional students (Thomas & Ray, 2006) and sexual minority adolescents (Troutman & Evans, 2014). Further, an understanding of the family life cycle may assist school counselors in identifying potential stressors that influence students' behaviors (Lewis, Scott, & Calfee, 2013; Mullis & Edwards, 2001).

The importance and benefits of integrating a family systems perspective to build school-family partnerships suggests that school counselors may need a solid foundation in this viewpoint. Yet, professional school counselors may be ill prepared by their graduate programs to work with parents and families to form these collaborative relationships (Perusse, Goodnough, & Noel, 2001; Perusse, Poynton, Parzych, & Goodnough, 2015). Research has indicated that school counselors believe creating collaborative partnerships is important (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2006); however, Perusse et al. (2001) found that less than half of national school counseling programs mandated that school counseling students take courses in couple and family counseling. Further, only 9.9% of the aforementioned programs required and designed couple and family courses specifically for school counseling students, and only 1.1% mandated courses in parent education. A similar survey completed a decade after Perusse et al.'s (2001) study found even more alarming results, in that only 36.5% of graduate programs required school counseling students to complete couple and family coursework, and no programs mandated parent education coursework (Perusse et al., 2015). Finally, Epstein and Sanders (2006) found that 85% of administrators of schools, colleges, and departments of education believed that competency in collaboration is important for both school principals and counselors, but only 27% of these administrators believed their school counseling graduates were

prepared to take on this role. That is, though collaboration is considered to be an integral duty of school counselors, the majority of graduate program leaders believe school counselors have limited training to form these relationships. Thus, whereas knowledge in family-related content may be vital for school counselors to form partnerships, recent research has not discussed how often school counselors may have access to this information.

Purpose of the Study

As previously mentioned, several studies have examined preparation of school counseling graduate students and programs. Akos and Scarborough (2004) studied clinical preparation of school counselors, yet their study assessed 59 internship syllabi rather than general coursework. Content analyses from this study illustrated that systemic intervention, which included both consultation and collaboration with school personnel and families, was only the third most frequent content area theme in the syllabi, falling behind counseling skills and ethical behavior. Perusse et al. (2001, 2015) examined preparation of school counselors through national surveys completed by chairpersons or coordinators of school counseling programs, and assessed credit hours and screening methods for admittance to graduate school counseling programs, faculty experiences in school settings, as well as mandated course content areas. Results from both studies indicated that the content areas school counseling students were most required to complete included theories in counseling, testing, assessment, and appraisal, lifespan development, group counseling, and research methods. Couple and family counseling course content was required by less than half of the programs. Perusse and Goodnough (2005) expanded upon this research by surveying 568

elementary and secondary school counselors about their perceptions of graduate coursework. Whereas both elementary and secondary school counselors ranked consultation with parents and teachers within the top three of important graduate-level course content, couple and family counseling did not rank within the top 20 for either group.

The results of these studies were based on self-report questionnaires; hence subjectivity may exist. Additionally, although the aforementioned studies evaluated school counseling students' preparation for working in the field, none focused specifically on family coursework. Thus, the purpose of this research study was to examine how, if at all, counselor education programs educate graduate school counseling students about concepts related to family systems and counseling. More specifically, the study was guided by the following research questions: (a) What, if any family-related coursework is required by CACREP-accredited school counseling programs in the southern region of the United States? (b) What content is included in the family-related courses required in these programs? Objective content analysis was employed to illustrate the nature of the preparation school counseling student received to facilitate their understanding of and collaboration with parents and families.

Method

Content analysis is a method of examining text, visual, and media data as well as other objects for manifest and latent meanings (Saldaña, 2011). This method of data analysis reveals both surface and subtextual information, and was employed in this study to examine the course requirements of a sample of school counseling programs. Content analysis has been used in both counseling and counselor education research

to analyze trends in a variety of professional activities, such as publications, presentations, and services to specific populations (Blancher, Buboltz, Jr., & Soper, 2010; Evans, 2013; Helwig & Schmidt, 2011; Smith, Ng, Brinson, & Mityagin, 2008). In terms of school counselor preparation, Akos and Scarborough (2004) used content analysis to explore the content of clinical training for school counseling students in a national study through the examination of internship course syllabi.

Data Sources

In this study, content analysis was used to examine the Internet sites of CACREP-accredited school counseling programs. Content analysis of such media data has been used in previous research as a method of understanding procedures and policies of counselor education programs (Brown, 2013). For the present study, data were gathered from university-supported Internet sites that provided course information via courses of study, student handbooks, and university catalogs.

School counseling programs were included in this content analysis if they had received CACREP accreditation at the beginning of the data collection period. Additionally, only programs in the southern region, as designated by CACREP, were analyzed (N = 102). Of the five regions of the United States, the southern region has the largest number of school counseling programs, which accounts for nearly half of the programs accredited at the beginning of this study. No restrictions were made based on full-time, part-time, or online offerings. A list of programs that met the requirements for this study was accessed via the program search tool on the CACREP Internet site.

Data Collection and Analysis

The university sponsored Internet site for each school counseling program was accessed electronically and analyzed by the authors between March 1, 2014 and June 1, 2014. The authors identified the programs to be included in the study, divided the list in half, and examined their assigned share independently. Independent analysis was followed by consultation between the two authors to determine that the data were categorized appropriately.

The authors examined program requirements, programs of study, course syllabi, program handbooks, and course catalogs to identify the family-related courses required for school counseling students. Information gathered on each program included: number of credit hours, date of accreditation, date of accreditation expiration, type of degree offered, family course(s) required, title of family-related course(s), and course descriptions, when available. Courses were identified as being family-related if they included the terms "family (or families)," "systems," or "collaboration" in their title. The term "systems" was included given that it reflects a central tenet of family processes and counseling, i.e., that individuals interact with and are connected to larger systems, such as families (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). The term "collaboration" was used based on the inclusion of school-family collaboration and consultation in the ASCA National Model (2012).

Courses that met the above criteria were then categorized according to the type of content included in the course. Using an inductive method that allowed themes to emerge from the data rather than placing data in preconceived categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), the authors read and re-read course titles, course descriptions, and

course syllabi to identify themes that represented the content included in each course. Four categories emerged from the data: consultation/collaboration, family systems, family lifespan development, and family counseling and therapy. These four categories have support in the literature as significant areas of focus for counselors working in schools and with families (Davis, 2001; Davis & Lambie, 2005; Eppler & Weir, 2009; Galassi & Akos, 2004; Green & Keys, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy & Bryan, 2010; Mullis & Edwards, 2001; Van Velsor & Cox, 2000). The data were quantitatively analyzed to determine the percentage of programs that included a family-related course as well as the percentage of courses in each content category. Finally, exemplars from the data were identified to provide a more in-depth understanding of each content category (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility is a key element of trustworthiness in qualitative research, and involves methods of establishing confidence that findings are true in the sense that they accurately reflect the data. The authors worked collaboratively to establish credibility throughout the data collection and analysis process. They jointly determined data sources, codes, and categories to reduce bias, and examined an initial data point to increase internal validity. The data were divided in half among the authors to be examined independently. The authors consulted throughout the data analysis to address questions or concerns regarding the data. Additionally, peer debriefing, the use of an outside peer to review the research, followed the analysis to ensure consistency in coding and to limit biases of the researchers (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

During the data collection and analysis period for the present study, 232 school counseling programs were listed as accredited by CACREP according to its online search tool. Data from the university websites of programs in the southern region (N = 102) were analyzed providing data from 44% of the accredited school counseling programs at the time of the study. The number of credits required for program completion ranged from 48 to 72 with 33 of the programs (32.4%) requiring 60 or more credits for graduation.

Required Family Coursework

The content analysis of data from the 102 programs included in this study yielded 62 programs (60.8%) that required no family coursework for school counseling students. Of these programs, 15 required 60 or more credits for graduation, and one program planned to increase to 60 credits in fall 2014. Forty of the 102 programs analyzed (39.2%) listed at least one family course as a program requirement. Of these programs, 13 required family coursework within a 48-credit program, the minimum number of credits allowed by CACREP standards at the time of the study (CACREP, 2009). Table 1 provides details regarding credit hours for the school counseling programs examined.

Table 1

Number of Credits Required for Graduation

	N	Number of Credits Required for Graduation			
		48	49-59	60 or more	Unspecified
Programs requiring at least one family course	40	13	7	19	1
Programs requiring no family coursework	62	37	9	15	1
Total	102	50	16	34	2

Content of Required Family Courses

The researchers further examined the content of the family-focused courses in the 40 programs that required such courses for graduation. Analyses of course titles and descriptions resulted in four broad categories into which each course was placed: consultation/collaboration, family systems, family lifespan and development, and family counseling and therapy. Details of each category are described below along with an exemplar from each category. Additionally, Table 2 provides the quantitative representation of each category among the school counseling programs that required family-related coursework.

Table 2

Content of Required Family Courses

	N	%
Consultation/Collaboration	5	12.5
Family Systems	5	12.5
Family Lifespan Development	4	10
Family Counseling and Therapy	26	65
Total	40	100

Consultation/collaboration. Among the forty programs that required a family course, five (12.5%) offered a course that focused on collaboration or consultation. Included in this category was a course titled "Family-School Intervention" which the researchers determined to be more similar to the other courses in this category than those in other categories. According to the course descriptions, content covered in the consultation/collaboration courses included theories and models of collaboration as well as skill development to enhance school counselors' abilities to engage various stakeholders, including family members. One description stated that the course was

"designed to develop essential communicative/interactive interpersonal skills, as well as collaborative problem-solving skills." Still another course seemed to have a more broad purpose given its description as a "culminating experience…providing the student with a comprehensive knowledge base in professional school counseling…A systemic perspective of schools and the counselor's role as a coordinator and change agent will be emphasized."

Family systems. Five school counseling programs out of the 40 requiring family-related coursework offered a course focusing on systems, four of which had "family" included in the title. The descriptions of these courses indicated that the content included concepts related to family dynamics, structures, and interactional patterns. The content of one course in this category included systems theory, but also seemed to explore concepts related to development: "Conceptualization of family dynamics is accomplished through integration of systems theory, family subsystems, the developmental stages of family life, and the interaction of the family in the larger community and social systems." Additionally, another course titled "Family and Support Systems" seemed to provide information about family systems and family counseling theory: "This course is designed to provide students with an overview of the processes and theories involved with counseling families and an application of course material to the school settings." Specifically, the focus is on preparing students to think systemically and to learn about family concepts, dynamics, theories, support systems and techniques. Topics for study in this course included the context of family therapy, the classic schools of family therapy, and recent developments in family therapy. Also the

topics included applications and issues in various settings such as a school setting and with diverse populations.

Family lifespan and development. Four programs out of the 40 requiring family-related coursework offered courses that focused on individual and family lifespan and development. The emphasis for these courses seemed to be on human development within contexts such as the family, community, or relevant culture. One course did mention family development across the lifespan, whereas the other course descriptions identified family as a context within which an individual developed or an issue faced by an individual.

Family counseling and therapy. The majority of family-related courses offered in school counseling programs included in this study focused on family counseling and therapy. Twenty six of the 40 programs (65%) that included family coursework offered a course in family counseling and/or therapy, with the breadth of concepts including family dynamics, development, theory and techniques, and history and ethics. Based on their course descriptions, three courses seemed to be specialized courses designed for school counseling students who will be working with children and adolescents. For instance, one course was titled "Family Counseling Applied to School Settings," while another course titled "Counseling Strategies for Family Relationships" focused on "systemic intervention with troubled families." Additionally, a course titled "Family Counseling with Children and Adolescents" was designed to "facilitate understanding of parent-child interaction patterns…and development of educational and therapeutic strategies to prevent and/or treat difficulties in the parent-child relationship."

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the majority of graduate school counseling programs in the southern region do not require students to complete any family-related coursework. Fewer than 40% of the programs examined required at least one course, and most often that course was a family counseling and therapy course. A downward trend seems to have occurred in terms of the inclusion of family-focused content for school counselors given Perusse et al.'s (2001) finding that 48% of 189 national school counseling programs required a couple and family counseling course. Yet, the findings of this study are reflective of Perusse et al.'s survey (2015) which found that 36.5% of 126 national school counseling programs mandated school counseling students to complete couple and family coursework. The school counselor competencies in the ASCA National Model clearly state that among other content areas, effective school counselors are able to demonstrate knowledge of family systems (ASCA, 2012). Moreover, ASCA (2012) emphasizes the importance of professional school counselors' collaboration and consultation with students' family members. Collaboration has proven to be successful in facilitating positive relationships with minority and underprivileged family members (Holcomb-McCoy & Bryan, 2010), and has served as a means for families to discover and apply strengths to assist students (Nelson, 2006). Conceivably, knowledge of family systems would facilitate the development of effective partnerships with parents and families. However, school counselors may not have received adequate preparation in their graduate programs if, as the present study indicates, they have not been required to complete coursework that explores the dynamics, organizational structures, and processes that occur within various family systems.

Implications for School Counseling Preparation

In consideration of relevant coursework for students, counselor educators would be wise to remain mindful that every child has a family that has a formative effect on experiences at home, in the community, and at school. Counselor educators might consider the value of exploring family lifespan development with students to ground their understanding of individual development within the context of the family system. Akos and Galassi (2004) suggested that school counselors break away from traditional school counseling models that primarily focus on individual development, and instead advocate for development that considers social-context factors. Green and Keys (2001) also advocated for school counselors to have an understanding of family lifespan development, and suggested using Bronfenbrenner's ecological paradigm to recognize how individual change can be influenced by outside factors. This idea provides awareness of contextual aspects worth considering when implementing individual and group counseling, as well as classroom guidance lessons.

An understanding of family systems may also be helpful given the time constraints that professional school counselors often face. It is not common for school counselors to provide counseling to the entire family. Nevertheless, school counselors can make use of systems assessment tools, such as genograms and timelines, to understand family functioning and, thus, provide more effective interventions when working with clients (Eppler and Weir, 2009). Additionally, an awareness of family systems enables school counselors to effectively collaborate with family counselors, as well as evaluate outside counseling services (Mullis & Edwards, 2001). Furthermore, designing and implementing models based on collaboration and/or consultation may aid

in creating effective school-wide interventions, and building community alliances (Bryan & Henry, 2012).

Despite the value of understanding family systems and development, the majority of programs in this study that required family coursework focused on actual family counseling content, rather than other relevant areas of family coursework. Hence, key questions that counselor educators might consider when examining their curriculum requirements are: (a) How much family counseling do school counselors complete in the field? and (b) Is family counseling more beneficial than other family content coursework in preparation for the school counseling field? With increasing responsibilities, large caseloads, and demands that extend beyond the scope of school counseling, (Bryant & Constantine, 2006; Moyer, 2011) it is unlikely that school counselors will have the time to commit to regular family counseling sessions with their clientele. Thus, while valuable, family counseling and therapy courses might be less relevant to school counselors than those that would enhance understanding of the systemic and developmental aspects of families. The family systems and family lifespan and development courses examined in this study and discussed above would likely be more relevant for school counselors in training.

Another interesting finding in the study is the family coursework requirement in 48-credit hour programs versus 60-credit hour programs. Nearly a quarter of the programs that *did not* include a family course as part of the school counseling curriculum required 60 or more credit hours for graduation. Yet, among those programs that *did* include family coursework, 13 were 48-credit hour programs during the time of the study. These programs with fewer credit hours were able to incorporate family-

centered coursework while also maintaining accreditation. An examination of such programs that are able to include family coursework within a 48-credit hour structure might provide guidance for counselor educators who recognize the value of the content, and seek to incorporate it into their programs. Moreover, as school counseling programs expand to 60 credit hours to align with the proposed 2016 CACREP standards (CACREP, 2016) research exploring the utility of various family courses can inform course selection such that more school counseling programs make room for family content in their curriculum.

Considerations for Future Research

The findings of this study illuminate a gap in school counselor preparation in the area of family-related coursework, which can inform case conceptualize and indirect service delivery, such as family collaboration. Further research in this area might include a qualitative investigation of current school counselors who have completed family coursework to examine the perceived benefits and applicability of the content to actual fieldwork. Additionally, interviews with graduate students and counselor educators may also be valuable in assessing the perceived needs of family coursework in school counseling programs. Moreover, as the 2020 deadline approaches when all CACREP-accredited school counseling programs must have 60 credits, future studies may re-examine school counselor preparation to see what, if any, changes occur that address the lack of family focused coursework in many school counseling programs.

Limitations

Although valuable to the field of counselor education for school counselors, the present study has certain limitations related to the sample and the use of Internet sites

for data collection. Data was gathered for CACREP-accredited counseling programs in the southern region of the United States. Thus, the findings may not be generalizable to counseling programs that were not accredited during the data collection period. Programs that have not sought or been granted CACREP accreditation likely have different requirements for graduation, which might include family coursework in the areas discussed above. A replication of this study with programs that are not accredited by CACREP might yield interesting findings in terms of the ways in which various school counseling programs prepare students to work with children and their families. Additionally, it is possible that the accredited school counseling programs in the southern region differ significantly from those in other regions of the country in terms of their family coursework requirements. Still, the outcome of this study provides meaningful insight into nearly half of the school counseling training programs in the United States, indicating what may be occurring in other regions of the country.

The researchers chose to employ content analysis rather than survey methodology to gather information about school counseling programs, which inherently presents certain limitations for the study. The results for this study were based on information provided by school counseling programs via their university-supported websites. Although it was assumed that the information provided on these websites was both correct and current, the researchers acknowledge that programmatic changes might have occurred during the data collection period, and these changes might not have been reflected on the websites. Despite this limitation, the methodology of this study allowed the researchers to analyze the curriculum of every school counseling

program in the southern region whereas the use of a survey might have been hampered by low response rates.

Conclusion

The multifaceted role of the professional school counselor requires knowledge and skills in counseling, collaboration, leadership, and advocacy (ASCA, 2012). Although students are their primary clients, school counselors interact with multiple stakeholders including family and community members. Preparation for establishing healthy, effective, and supportive family-school relationships is vital to school counseling students. However, according to the findings in this study, most students in school counseling programs have not been required to complete any family-focused coursework. Although expected to collaborate with families, school counselors entering the field may have a knowledge deficit in terms of varied family constellations and family functioning. They may also lack the skills to assess and intervene in ways that are ethical, effective, and respectful of the students and families they serve. Counselor educators preparing school counseling students for the complex work that they face in the schools might consider the value of broadening their curriculum to incorporate courses concerning family systems, development, collaboration, and counseling.

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Biographical Statement

Corresponding regarding this article should be sent to J. Richelle Joe, at P.O. Box 161250, College of Education and Human Performance, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL 32816-1250, jacqueline.joe@ucf.edu