

School Administrators' Perceptions On Effectiveness Of School Counselor Evaluation: A National Study

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Abstract

School counselor-school administrator relationships have seen greater attention in the literature, especially as it relates to the development and implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs. These programs are well-suited to support the holistic development of children and adolescents in K-12 schools. As a part of this relationship, more attention is needed to understand evaluation measures which may support the school counselor-school administrator relationship in addition to school counseling practices. The purpose of this study is to explore school administrators' perspectives on school counselor evaluation. More specifically, this study focuses on administrators' perspectives around accuracy and helpfulness of school counselor evaluation as well as how administrators prepared for such evaluation processes. Results indicate that while administrators view the evaluation process as an accurate reflection of school counselor performance, they see little utility of its usefulness in facilitating professional development for school counselors. Further, administrators had little training specifically on school counselor evaluation.

Keywords: *School counselor evaluation; school principal role; ASCA*

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Introduction

Working toward a common goal of student success and achievement in schools, school counselors and school administrators serve different roles and have unique responsibilities throughout the school year. The guidelines for appropriate roles and responsibilities of a school counselor are laid out in the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) framework for comprehensive school counseling (CSC; ASCA, 2019). This framework is three-fold: it 1) outlines the role of the professional school counselor; 2) supports the development and the implementation of CSC programs; and 3) includes the evaluation of school counselors along with CSC programs. While most easily used by school counselors themselves, the framework also provides insight which can help school administrators, who often oversee and evaluate staff, understand more about the unique training and skills needed to be effective, comprehensive school counselors. However, studies show that administrators more often view evaluation of school counselors in the same terms that they view evaluation of teachers or other staff, sometimes even using the same criteria to evaluate both teachers and school counselors (Chata & Loesch, 2007; Cinotti, 2014; Cisler & Bruce, 2013).

While teachers' and school counselors' roles may overlap in some ways, these roles are largely different; thus, said evaluation may have little applicability and utility in its use with professional school counselors. The use of inappropriate evaluation measures with school counselors may be due to school administrator training. More specifically, this may be due to the lack of training and exposure administrators have regarding professional school counseling and the ASCA National Model (Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, 2009; Lowery et al., 2018; Geesa et al. 2020). As such, with limited formal training opportunities, many administrators may have to pursue such knowledge on their own.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of school administrators regarding their responsibilities for evaluation of counselors in their schools, the effectiveness of these evaluations, and their own competence to fairly carry out counselor evaluation. Considering that school administrators hold a certain power dynamic in their relationships with school counselors, including the ability to hire or dismiss counselors based on evaluation, it is imperative that administrators be aware of appropriate counselor evaluation guidelines and feel competent in carrying these evaluations out (Janson, Militello, & Kosine, 2008). According to one respondent from DeSimone and Robert's study (2016):

All stakeholders need to understand and accept the role and value that counselors can bring to schools and have clarity in terms of the "responsibilities of school counselors, including understanding the issue of confidentiality." (p. 10) This study relates directly to validating subaltern forms of leadership. Subaltern "refers to individuals who have been prevented from accessing social, political, or economic power within a particular society, group, or organization" (University Council for Educational Administration, 2019, p. 1). Whereas school counselors are often positioned to fulfill responsibilities (many of which are inappropriate to their role) delegated to them by a school administrator, improved forms of evaluation and collaboration will allow school counselors to lead and thrive in serving the best interests of all students.

Literature Review

The roles of the school principal and the school counselor are a symbiotic relationship; both benefit from the successful operation of the other within the school setting. However, when principals and counselors are not working in tandem, the relationship and the school itself may suffer (Lowery et. al, 2019; Mayes, Dollarhide, & Young 2018; McCarty, Wallin, & Boggan, 2014; Rock, Remley, & Range, 2017). Further, when administrators have limited understanding of the role of professional school counselors, the relationship itself can be strained and lead to school counselor burnout and job dissatisfaction (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Mayes et al., 2018), where school counselors were tasked with inappropriate duties, had limited supervision, and an overall lack of support (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Mayes et al., 2018).

Principal Evaluation of Counselors

One of the most measurable ways to quantify the principal-counselor relationship is through the principal's evaluation of school counselors' job performance. A principal's evaluation of the school counselor is important, as the evaluation often communicates to the counselor the principal's expectations of their role, and thus shapes the counselor's roles and responsibilities within the school (Janson et al., 2008).

When utilized properly, evaluation can be a powerful and useful tool for both principals and counselors. Clemens, Milsom, and Cashwell (2009) describe how the evaluation process can be an opportunity for counselors to ask for valuable feedback on their overall performance and their specific goals for the year and develop a growth plan with their specified goals and work on a growth plan with their principals. The evaluation process also allows for principals to initiate discussions with their school counselors about their role and responsibilities within the school (Clemens et al., 2009). When principals and counselors understand and respect each other's roles, the entire school community benefits from their collaborative relationship; appropriate evaluation may be one path towards establishing this collaborative relationship (McConnell, Geesa, Elam, & Mayes, 2020). Evaluation of counselors are not just a responsibility of principals, but also an opportunity for principals to enrich the school community by helping counselors build and improve upon their strengths, as well as an opportunity for counselors to advocate for themselves and make their voices heard (Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012).

However, when done incorrectly, the evaluation process can hurt principal-counselor relationships and negatively impact a counselor's role in the school. One such way in which evaluations can be misused is the tendency of principals to evaluate counselors in the same manner that they evaluate teachers or other school staff (Chata & Loesch, 2007; Cinotti, 2014; Cisler & Bruce, 2013). Counselors have inherently different roles and responsibilities from those of teachers, and thus when they are evaluated using the same criteria as those used for teachers, it can be expected that counselors will be held to unfair or unrealistic standards (Cinotti, 2014). When counselors know that they are being held to standards outside of their prescribed role, they may feel pressure "to conform to the ideas of the principal, even when the ideas are not optimal for students, teachers, or families" (Wingfield, Reese, & West-Olatunji, 2010, p. 124). It may mean that students, teachers,

and families have limited access to CSC programs which center holistic development and are preventative in nature (ASCA, 2019).

Two recent studies also demonstrate how perceptions on evaluation can differ between those who are evaluators and those being evaluated. More specifically, Elam and colleagues (2019) found that school counselors perceive the evaluation process to help “very little” in regard to their adherence to and implementation of the comprehensive school counseling programs as guided by the ASCA National Model. In a similar study regarding school administrators’ perceptions, Geesa et al. (2019) found that administrators believed the evaluation process to be “somewhat helpful” for school counselors’ adherence and implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs. These differing views demonstrate the challenges of the evaluation process, particularly as it relates to school counseling roles and practice. Further, if school counselors perceive the evaluation process to have little relation to their roles, then the evaluation itself may have limited utility towards comprehensive school counseling.

Conceptual Framework

The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs (2012a; 2012b) guided our work in this study of school counselor evaluation. Within the framework, the four components (i.e., Foundation, Management, Delivery, and Accountability) are designed to provide a comprehensive school counseling (CSC) program in schools for all students to enhance their academic, personal/social, and career development throughout their K-12 schooling. By school administrators having knowledge of the national model and supporting school counselors to design and implement a successful CSC program, school administrators have the understanding of the counselors’ role and responsibilities to evaluate school counselors for the work they do in schools.

In the national model (ASCA, 2012b), the Foundation is a school counselor’s aptitude to develop CSC programs by enhancing program focus, student competencies, and professional competencies. Management is viewed as the school counselor’s ability to bring together assessments and tools that are clear, specific, and focus on the needs of the school. School counselor competencies and school counseling program assessments, use of time assessment, annual agreements with administrators, use of data, and action plans are examples of assessments and tools school counselors may use in the Management component. Delivery focuses on the services that school counselors provide to school and community stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, teachers, staff, and community members). These services include: school counseling curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and indirect services such as referrals, consultation, and collaboration. Accountability refers to school counselors reviewing and analyzing school counseling programs and school-wide data to determine the effectiveness of the CSC program. School counselor performance is based on evaluation of “basic standards of practice expected of school counselors implementing a comprehensive school counseling program” (ASCA, 2012b, p. 4).

Research Questions

We investigated the following questions in our study:

1. To what extent do school administrators believe the evaluation ratings are an accurate reflection of school counselor's performance?
2. To what extent do school administrators believe the evaluation process improves the performance of school counselors?
3. To what extent do school administrators feel prepared to facilitate the evaluation process for school counselors?

Methods

Participants

Three hundred twenty-four school administrators (i.e., school assistant principals, school principals, and district-level administrators) participated in the study. The majority of participants identify as white (91.7%), regarding race and ethnicity. Gender identity included 50.2% identifying as men, 49.5% identifying as women, and .3% identifying as gender awesome. The 324 school administrators who participated in this study worked in all levels of K-12 schools: 35% elementary; 19% middle/junior high; 30% high school; and 16% across two or more developmental levels (i.e., K-8, K-12, 6-12 settings, etc.). The populations in the schools were moderately diverse. Less than half of the student populations were from low income backgrounds in the schools where the participants served. Regarding race and ethnicity, student populations with 25% or less students of color were present in 64% of participants' schools. All participants were over the age of 18. For more participant school setting information, see Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' School Information

School Variables	%
Current School Level	
Elementary	35
Middle School/Junior High	19
High School	30
Other (k-8, k-12, etc.)	16
Years of Experience in Current Role	
1 st Year	5
1-3 Years	14
4-6 Years	28
7-10 Years	21
10+ Years	33
Average Number of School Counselors in School	2
Average Number of Administrators in School	2
Student Population: Percent of Free & Reduced Meals	
Less than 25%	24
25-50%	32
50-75%	26
More than 75%	18

Table 1 (Continued)

Participants' School Information

Student Population: Percent of Students of Color	
Less than 25%	64
25-50%	16
50-75%	10
More than 75%	8
Urbanicity	
Rural	38
Suburban	33
Urban	28
School Size	
Less than 250	11
251-500	37
501-750	23
751-1000	12
1000+	16

Measures

School Counselor Evaluation Survey. The school counselor evaluation survey consisted of 17 Likert-type question focused on experiences and perceptions around the school counselor evaluation process. Survey questions were created based on literature around school counselor evaluation, the ASCA National Model, and school counselor school principal collaboration. Questions included perceptions around the adherence to and implementation of the ASCA National Model (2012a) as it relates to evaluation processes (e.g. To what extent do you believe the evaluation process helps school counselors implement the Foundation component of the ASCA National Model of comprehensive school counseling programs? To what extent do you believe the evaluation process helps school counselors adhere to the Management component of the ASCA National Model of comprehensive school counseling programs?). Additionally, questions were included to understand usefulness of the evaluation process (i.e., To what extent do you believe the evaluation process can help your school counselor to develop professionally? What is your overall perception of the counselor evaluation system?). Finally, three questions were added to understand how well-prepared participants were by their university training program, current employer, and state department of education to help their school counselors meet the highest expectations based on the counselor evaluation system.

Demographic Questionnaire. A demographic questionnaire consisting of 15 questions was included to understand participant identity and background, educational and professional experiences, as well as school context (i.e. rural, suburban, urban) and student composition (i.e. percentage of students of color, with disabilities, low socio-economic status backgrounds).

Procedures

This study is a part of a larger research project, which examined perceptions, attitudes, and experiences around school counselor evaluation among administrators and school counselors. The design for this research is a study of school counselor evaluation processes, policies, and trends. We contacted state Departments of Education, national and state-level school administrator associations, and school districts to distribute the survey to participants. Participants in this study were recruited by e-mail and completed one electronic survey administered via Qualtrics. The researchers collected the survey information via Qualtrics. The survey data were analyzed as aggregate data and anonymous.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in relation to the three research questions in this study. Descriptive statistics were used to understand school administrators' belief in the accuracy of the evaluation process. Further, descriptive statistics were used to also understand school administrators' beliefs in the evaluation process to improve performance of professional school counselors as well as their own preparedness to facilitate said evaluation processes. Finally, inferential statistics were used to understand if there were differences among the participants based on current school context and student demographics.

Findings

Descriptive statistics were used to answer the research questions. Results (see Table 2) indicate that school administrators find the school counselor evaluation process to have some utility in accurately assessing school counselors and supporting their professional development. For the first research question, participants reported the highest level of agreement ($M=3.69$; $SD = 1.00$) regarding the extent to which they believed that the school counselor evaluation ratings were an accurate reflection of school counselor performance. Regarding the second research question, participants indicated a lower level of agreement ($M=3.30$; $SD=0.968$) concerning the extent that school administrators believe the evaluation process improves the performance of school counselors.

The third research question incorporates responses of three distinct questions concerning preparation for school counselor evaluation. Results indicate that while participants are evaluating school counselors, they have limited preparation for such. More specifically, participants indicated that the highest agreement ($M= 3.01$; $SD=1.05$) on preparation for school counselor evaluation came from their employer. However, participants indicated lower levels of agreement ($M= 2.93$; $SD=1.13$ & $M=2.55$; $SD=1.14$) regarding their university administrator training and state departments of education respectively in preparing them for the school counselor evaluation process.

Table 2

Principals Perceptions of School Counselor Evaluation

Likert Scale Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
To what extent do you believe the evaluation ratings you have submitted are an accurate reflection of your school counselor's performance?	315	3.69	1.00
To what extent do you believe the evaluation process can help your school counselor to develop professionally?	315	3.30	0.968
How well-prepared (by your college/university training) do you feel to help your school counselor meet the highest expectations of the counselor evaluation system?	310	2.93	1.13
How well-prepared (by your current employer) do you feel to help your school counselor meet the highest expectations of the counselor evaluation system?	310	3.01	1.05
How well-prepared (by your state department of education) do you feel to help your school counselor meet the highest expectations of the counselor evaluation system?	310	2.55	1.14

Note: The five-point Likert scale ranged from 1 = Not at All to 5 = A Great Extent for questions 1 & 2. The scale for 3-6 ranged from 1 = Not well at all to 5 = Extremely well. There were 324 total responses. Some participants did not respond to all of the items, but we included their responses to the items they completed.

In addition to the descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations (see Table 3) were used to understand what differences might exist among respondents based on school context and student demographics. School context independent variables used include school size and urbanicity. Student demographic variables include percentages of students on free and reduced meals and of students of color. The school context and student demographic variables were not found to be significantly correlated ($P = 0.05$) to the dependent variables (evaluation accuracy, evaluation support of professional development, preparation for school counselor evaluation).

Table 3

Significance Levels of Pearson Correlations Between School Characteristics and Principals' Perceptions of School Counselor Evaluation

Likert Scale Items	% Students on FARMs	% Students of Color	School Size	Urbanicity
To what extent do you believe the evaluation ratings you have submitted are an accurate reflection of your school counselor's performance?	<i>P</i> = 0.75	<i>P</i> = 0.37	<i>P</i> = 0.17	<i>P</i> = 0.44
To what extent do you believe the evaluation process can help your school counselor to develop professionally?	<i>P</i> = 0.44	<i>P</i> = 0.71	<i>P</i> = 0.06	<i>P</i> = 0.92
How well-prepared (by your college/university training) do you feel to help your school counselor meet the highest expectations of the counselor evaluation system?	<i>P</i> = 0.73	<i>P</i> = 0.79	<i>P</i> = 0.65	<i>P</i> = 0.70
How well-prepared (by your current employer) do you feel to help your school counselor meet the highest expectations of the counselor evaluation system?	<i>P</i> = 0.54	<i>P</i> = 0.44	<i>P</i> = 0.13	<i>P</i> = 0.14
How well-prepared (by your state department of education) do you feel to help your school counselor meet the highest expectations of the counselor evaluation system?	<i>P</i> = 0.91	<i>P</i> = 0.71	<i>P</i> = 0.57	<i>P</i> = 0.43

Discussion

The counselor evaluation process can and should validate a subaltern form of leadership within schools – namely, school counselors. A fundamental element in the usefulness of an evaluation process is its ability to accurately reflect the performance of its subject, and this study yields relatively encouraging results regarding evaluation ratings' ability to accurately reflect the performance of a school counselor. This may speak to the accuracy and fairness of the school counselor evaluation system that is in place, but is also a reflection of what participants' emerging understanding of school counseling. Regardless, these results indicate an alignment between the school counselor evaluation system and perceptions of school administrators regarding school counseling.

However, it is not enough for an evaluation process to be fair – it should manifest in some way by helping the counselor to grow (Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009). This study indicates that even if evaluation systems are fair, school administrators do not believe them to be as strong in their ability to improve the performance of school counselors. This points to a missed opportunity to develop and facilitate evaluation systems as a formative means to improve future performance and foster meaningful discussion, collaboration, and growth, rather than simply as a summative means to evaluate past performance.

The results are more concerning still in school administrators' perceptions about their level of preparation to facilitate the evaluation process. Unfortunately, this study echoes the research of Leuwerke, Walker, and Shi (2009), indicating that school administrators are often left to learn about school counselor responsibilities and standards on their own or from the school counselors themselves. A school administrator's confidence is key in collaborating with and evaluating school counselors (Janson, Militello, & Kosine, 2008), and quality preparation can and should serve to promote this confidence.

In this study, school administrators indicated their preparation from their employer was better than from their principal preparation program or from their state Department of Education, but the responsibility of preparing school administrators in this way should not fall solely on the employer. Certainly, if state Departments of Education require schools and school administrators to facilitate certain evaluation systems for school counselors, then states should also provide relevant preparation and development opportunities for school administrators. Furthermore, universities should pursue and embrace the chance to incorporate material related to counselor collaboration and evaluation as part of their principal preparation programs, as a necessary means to thoroughly develop aspiring school leaders. Overall, providing greater preparation and support to school administrators can in turn help them provide greater support to school counselors, improving satisfaction and preventing burnout (Kim & Lambie, 2018), and ultimately serving the interests of the students in their care.

Implications for Practice

Results from this study seem to indicate that there is a mismatch in the utility of the evaluation process, particularly on the ability to garner useful feedback for professional school counselors. As this is a cornerstone of the evaluation process, there may be practices that school principals can incorporate to make it more meaningful. More specifically, principals who want to utilize evaluation for the betterment of the school counselor should first acknowledge the power dynamic between the roles of counselor and principal (Wingfield et al., 2010; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). The principal has a lot of power to do good in the school, but also has power to negatively impact or even end a counselor's position. Thus, principals should conduct evaluations in a way that allows counselors to advocate for their role without fear of being devalued or minimized by the principal (Wingfield et al., 2010; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). This may account for potential gaps between counselor performance and perceived accuracy in school counselor evaluation measures. This may also be accounted for by annual meetings between school counselors and administrators at the beginning of the school year to discuss role, expectations, and goals for the CSC program which can be documented in an annual agreement (ASCA, 2019). Annual agreements can be revisited on an ongoing basis for progress monitoring in addition to the school counselor evaluation process.

Secondly, training principals on the ASCA model and how to utilize the ASCA model in evaluation can benefit principal-counselor relations and evaluations (Chata & Loesch, 2007; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). The ASCA model acknowledges the importance of principal evaluation of counselors, stating within the purpose of their ethical standards that the guidelines are not only to guide counselors themselves, but to help principals and other school personnel understand and be able to properly evaluate the role of the counselor (ASCA, 2016; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). Local models, such as the Tennessee Model

for Comprehensive School Counseling (TMCS), also mandate that their models be used as a guide for counselor evaluation by administrators/principals (Cobb, 2011). Additionally, Boyland, et al. (2019) focused on the preparation of pre-service principals and aligned ASCA standards, mindsets, and behaviors with educational leadership course materials to better prepare pre-service principals to evaluate school counselors. Through pre-service preparation aligned with the ASCA model, principals will be more familiar with the roles and responsibilities of the school counselor.

Conclusion

School administrators play a critical role in the evaluation process, especially for school counselors. This evaluation process can provide deeper insight into roles and expectations for professional school counselors. Additionally, it creates an opportunity for valuable feedback to grow into skills and implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs in alignment with the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019; 2012a). As a result, effective evaluation processes ultimately support programming and services aimed at meeting the holistic needs of children and adolescents in their respective schools.

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