School Counselor Perceptions of a Comprehensive School Counseling Model and Implications for Practice

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Abstract

The study examined school counselor perceptions of the American School Counseling Association's Comprehensive School Counseling Program (CSCP) on academic outcomes (better-reported grades and better-standardized scores) of middle school students with a focus on recommendations for the tasks and responsibilities of school counselors. The study was qualitative and used a phenomenological approach through semi-structured face-to-face interviews to provide inquiry into school counselors' perceptions of an effective school counseling program.

Keywords: ASCA, School Counseling, Academic Progress, Counselor Perceptions

Whereas school counseling programs are not new to K-12 education, the concept of a comprehensive school counseling program (CSCP), structured to tap into every aspect of the student's social, academic, personal, and career / vocational concerns, is a relatively new initiative for schools throughout the United States (Sink & MacDonald, 1998). Although believed that the premise of the American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) counseling model will shape guidance and counseling programs for several years to come, the model has not become a part of every school counseling program. Comprehensive school counseling programs gained national notoriety in 2003 when the American School Counselor Association published The ASCA National Model: A Framework for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs (ASCA, 2003). ASCA's rationale for program implementation was to foster growth among the school counseling profession and to move toward full implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program (CSCP) that would align the goals with the mission of every school thereby increasing academic attainment among all students (ASCA, 2005).

ASCA (2005) asserts that due to educational reform efforts, there is a need to increase academic attainment at every level within school counseling programs. ASCA's position is that fully implemented and properly designed programs will increase student achievement. The goal of ASCA's National Model is to assist school counselors with helping students achieve the demands of the 21st century in the areas of

academic, career, and personal/social development (ASCA, 2003; 2005). In assisting school counselors with this endeavor, ASCA believes that a professional school counselor, functioning within the auspices of the ASCA National Model's guidelines, will provide teamwork, support, leadership and systematic change within a scaffold indicative of the program foundation, management system, and accountability delivery system (ASCA, 2005). Moreover, preliminary studies advocate that student participation in developmental school counseling programs increases counselor interface with those who have a vested interest in the program (parents, students, administration, community, counselors, etc.). Additionally, developmental school counseling programs increase the likelihood that students will achieve at higher rates and are better prepared for the future (Gysbers, 1997). Although some researchers suggest that school counselors can utilize specific interventions that are targeted to increase academic attainment, they argue that fully implemented CSCPs will produce the same result (Whiston, 2002; Sink & Stroh, 2003; Brown & Trusty, 2005). Thus, school counselor perceptions about the effectiveness of fully implemented CSCPs are an important factor for consideration.

Background

Meeting the demands of the 21st century is a primary concern for school counselors. Administrators, parents, and others challenge School counselors to assist students in the learning process and to define success through specific measures to increase student achievement (ASCA 2003; 2005). Based on the No Child Left Behind Act, school counselors are faced with this challenge more readily (Turner & Hyslop, 2006). The No Child Left Behind Act legislation was introduced as a means for mandating that schools become more accountable for higher student educational attainment, and provide an avenue for at-risk students so that these students are not "left behind." Therefore, school counselors are faced with challenges due to this legislation because schools have greater accountability in meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) standards, which is measured through a scrupulous testing schedule. Federal funding to schools is contingent upon schools meeting AYP toward proficiency standards that are determined by each state (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006). Based on these directives, schools were forced to change in an effort to meet these standards, and as schools changed, school counseling programs changed to address the newer standards (ASCA, 2005). This change meant that many school counselors would serve as building or district testing coordinators (Burnham & Jackson, 2000). As a result, most school counselors lose time in providing counseling services to students, have less access to students and less understanding from administrators concerning the role of school counselors, along with diminished relationships with teachers (Brown, Galassi & Akos, 2004).

Due to this demand, a look at effective school counseling programs is a primary concern. ASCA's Comprehensive School Counseling Program is a school counseling program designed to assist school counselors with helping students to increase academic attainment. In particular, specific components of ASCA's Comprehensive School Counseling Program (CSCP) have provided an avenue to assist school counselors in this endeavor (ASCA, 2005). Researchers have identified that there is linkage to student academic outcomes when school counselors utilize the components of a CSCP to assist with education reform efforts (Sink & McDonald, 1998). Hence, school counselors are the necessary springboard in determining the effectiveness of specific school counseling programs. While there have been several studies on the effectiveness of the CSCP (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; House & Hayes, 2002; Lapan, 2001; Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001; Lapan et al., 1997), such studies have relied solely on the utilization of self-report surveys to measure student and teacher perceptions concerning effectiveness in the area of guidance and counseling programs (Sink & Stroh, 2003), with little to no input from school counselors

(Sink & Yillik-Downer, 2001). Furthermore, during the time of the No Child Left Behind Act and educational reform initiatives (Turner & Hyslop, 2006) for higher academic attainment, school counselors' perceptions on the American School Counseling Association's School Counseling Program (CSCP) as defined by the association's National model concerning academic outcomes (better-reported grades and better-standardized scores) has not been studied.

The purpose of this study was to examine school counselors' perceptions of the American School Counseling Association's Comprehensive School Counseling Program (CSCP) on academic outcomes of middle school students. The study was qualitative in nature and utilized a phenomenological approach. Through a thematic analysis of transcribed interviews, the research endeavored to understand the lived experiences of school counselors concerning fully implemented and non-fully implemented CSCPs. Hence, the focus of this study was to discover and identify the possibility that through full implementation of a CSCP, middle school students could show gains in academic achievement.

Current perceptions in the education community about the role of school counselors show linkage to student academic outcomes when school counselors utilize the components of a CSCP to assist with education reform efforts (Sink & McDonald, 1998). School counselors indeed play a major role in educational reform efforts. Therefore, during the time of the No Child Left Behind Act and educational reform initiatives (Turner & Hyslop, 2006) for higher academic attainment, it is important to examine school counselors' perceptions of effective school counseling programs. The rationale of this study was to increase our understanding of school counselors' roles and to help school counselors become more effective in helping students academically. Another goal of the study was to enlighten other educators on the importance of school counselors' roles in the field of education. Additionally, it was a goal of this research to allow school counselors the opportunity to give voice on the importance of effective school counseling programs to the overall progress of the student. Through the interview process, other areas developed as the study progressed that were further explored (Mertens, 2005).

School Counseling Today

Fostering an environment of higher level learning has become increasingly important since the role shift of the school counselor changed as the original name "guidance counselor," which had more of a connotation toward vocational (career) counseling, shifted to "school counselor," which connotes a meaning of counseling the "total" child (Walsh & Galassi, 2002). Based on this role shift, ASCA (1997) introduced the Missouri Model, which became the counselor's springboard to use as an implementation model to affect change in the lives of their students. The program design of ASCA's CSCP generally follows the Missouri model, one of the first states to implement the ASCA framework with success. In the state of Missouri, school counselors employed specific components of the Comprehensive School Counseling Program to test its effectiveness on student attainment (Gysbers, 2004). The four essential components of the Missouri Model that serve as a model for other CSCP's include the following: Guidance Curriculum, Individual Planning, Responsive Services, and System Support. Of the four components, the guidance curriculum is said to be the most innovative and is the central focal point because it transforms school counseling programs into educational programs that are aligned with the mission of the school district (ASCA, 2003). Due to the level of success of the Missouri model, ASCA encouraged other schools to model this same effort (ASCA, 2005). Through program implementation of the guidance curriculum, the Missouri Model became the catalyst by which other states' school districts would model. The effectiveness of this model is largely due to the use of guidance classroom activities, and educational-focused classroom

presentations, which have been instrumental in its positive impact on student attainment (Rowley et al., 2005).

Due to the level of success of the Missouri model, ASCA encouraged other schools to model this same effort. Hence, schools desiring to improve school counseling efforts became imitators of the Missouri model for program implementation (Gysbers, 2004), and in the present, the ASCA National Model forms the foundation for the behaviors philosophy of school counselors in the present. A critical review of the current literature on CSCP efficacy rendered varied results. Previous studies show a linkage to the CSCP and higher student academic outcomes, while other studies indicate weaknesses to program implementation. Still other literature addresses perceptions about the CSCP without a clear indication of how it affects student academic outcomes. Hence, there is a continual need to synthesize the literature and provide school counselors with additional insight into the program. The social learning theory (SLT) supports modeling as an avenue to affect change and modification (Bandura, 1986). Hence, the aim of the current study was to explore whether modeling the CSCP is an avenue for program modification / implementation if other counselors or school districts have adopted the CSCP. It is the goal of the study to provide school counselors with additional insight by exploring their perceptions concerning the CSCP. Additionally, this study explored whether modeling program components affected student academic outcomes. Previous and current research studies on CSCPs have mainly utilized self-report surveys to measure student and teacher perceptions concerning effectiveness in the area of guidance and counseling programs (Sink & Stroh, 2003). However, little research exists concerning school counselors' perceptions of student academic outcomes and counseling effectiveness by using a fully implemented CSCP, the subject investigated here with a view toward advocating for CSCPs.

Seventeen years since the 2003 publication of the ASCA national model, many local school districts, individual schools, states, and to some extent the nation have formal school counseling models aimed at increasing student success in academic, career, and personal domains. Varying degrees of success demonstrate the useful nature of the CSCP as they are implemented in different ways across the country. In one of the largest school districts in North Carolina, for example, researchers realized that Recognized ASCA Model Programs (an ASCA-Model program with a focus on data-driven decision making and evaluation of outcomes) or RAMP continue to make positive contributions in the area of student engagement in attendance, but, the model in and of itself evades big differences in the total school population (Akos, Bastian, Domina, Muñoz de Luna, 2019), a sensible outcome as schools often make big differences in individual students' lives, but it remains difficult to quantify the outcomes in organizations the size of a school district. Studies of school counselor ratios, which vary across the United States from a low of 300:1 to over 1000:1, yield complex results owing to a variety of factors above and beyond school counselors individually that contribute to the success or lack of in the achievement of students at any particular school. Goodman-Scott, et al. (2018), noted that grade point average and Title I status are more significant predictors of student academic achievement than counselor activities such as personal development, career development, and other non-counseling activities. Moreover, because what contributes to student success are complex variables that very often operate in context with other factors that contribute to student success or absence of, the authors suggest viewing student success with respect to counselor involvement from an ecological framework, considering the multitude of variables above and beyond student-counselor ratio that contribute to student success (Goodman-Scott, Sink, Cholewa, and Burgess, 2018). The utility of a CSCP lies and its proactive way of codifying the duties of the school counselor. Most school counselors today are pulled in many directions on non-counseling related duties such as administrative tasks, organizing benchmark testing, lunch duty, call duty, and even in some cases

participating in the discipline-related function of what is or should be typically the job of a principal or assistant principal.

Today, there is a wider call for the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs, and, both ASCA and individual states have developed curricula to address the needs of their specific students and issues related to current events. In Arkansas for example, a bill was passed to increase to 90% the amount of direct-service time school counselors spend with students (ACT 190), motivated in part by the spate of school shootings since 2012. Other research by Wilkerson, Pèrusse, and Hughes (2018) investigated the relationship between Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) scores on the state of Indiana relative to their status as a RAMP. RAMPs have become the gold standard when it comes to comprehensively designed programs in support of the ASCA National Model. These programs focus on the elements of the ASCA national model and the way that the elements of the program affect outcomes for particular schools, districts, or states. The Wilkerson et al. study, found that the relationship was positive between AYP scores and implementation of the RAMP, but the authors did note because the findings were limited to the state of Indiana, broader research was necessary to determine whether these findings would generalize to a wider population of students with more diverse coverage across the United States.

Even after nearly 100 years of the United States offering school counseling in some form or another in its secondary schools, and, later, and elementary schools, there remains a wide range of flexible options when it comes to interventions that can be provided. Moreover, establishing the research base for the present and the future is still an important consideration given that the variety of studies published over the years do not point to any singular intervention that works with all populations across all situations. In a study of individual psychology, associated with Alfred Adler, Lemberger and Nash (2008), found that an ASCA members' study noted that counseling was their number one duty, followed by coordination, and then consultation, where participants were motivated in their career choices by social interest above and beyond any particular allegiance to a counseling theoretical orientation. Students themselves come to school with risk factors that are not necessarily able to be solved by schools, and, students similarly also will come to school with protective factors, the converse of risk factors. Somewhere in between risk and protective factors lies the interventions that school counselors do to make a difference, aiming for students to succeed using the support of counselors, the schools, what the students bring internally, and the benefits of a coordinated school counseling program. In a study of home, school, and community factors, Williams and Portman (2014) noted that among urban Black poor students, a group which has historically had among the lowest high school graduation and college graduation rates, community engagement, parental involvement, school counselors as change agents, and role flexibility among counselors are salient contributors to student success, all areas that counselors instinctively know about making a difference with particular groups of people. A challenge given the diversity of experiences around the country for school counselors is a relative lack of consistency about the role, function, responsibilities, and available interventions to counselors. The study sheds important light on what it takes to make a difference for students with the greatest barriers. The advantage of having a comprehensive school counseling program is that it ensures that what counselors spend their time doing is focused specifically on student success and outcomes.

Method

A field test of the present study was performed by a set of interview questions asked of other school counselors outside the research participants that were knowledgeable about the CSCP and its

program components. This set of school counselors represented a small percentage of the intended participants that would assist in developing questions and identify potential problems. The field test group captured feedback on questions that might have needed additional clarification prior to the actual interviews.

A qualitative phenomenological research design was based on van Manen's model, and the researcher's interest in an in-depth understanding of school counselors' lived experiences. The study's outcome contributes to the knowledge base of school counselors' perceptions of a fully and non-fully implemented Comprehensive School Counseling Programs. The phenomenological design asked the following questions of middle school counselors: (a) What are school counselors' perceptions about school districts that model the CSCP? (b) What are school counselors' perceptions about whether modeling the CSCP constitutes an effective school counseling program? (c) What are school counselors' perceptions of the impact of fully implemented CSCP's on academic outcomes (better-reported grades and better-standardized scores) in schools that have modeled this program? (d) What are school counselors' perceptions of the impact of not implementing CSCP's on academic outcomes (better-reported grades and better-standardized scores) in schools that have not modeled this program? Data gathered in the study consisted of semi-structured face-to-face interviews with participating school counselors. Capturing the information from the interviews transpired through audio taped sessions that were transcribed via audio media and given to participants to validate and review for accuracy and plausibility as a form of triangulation (Stake, 1994). As a form of triangulation, data were cited from the schools' pre and post implementation of the CSCP.

The participants of the study answered the following interview questions and other questions evolved through a thematic approach: (a) Discuss your understanding of the American School Counseling Association's Comprehensive School Counseling Program. (b) Discuss whether your school counseling program is effective or ineffective. (c) Discuss the factors involved that determine your belief about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of your current school counseling program. (d) Describe your feelings about what constitutes an effective program. (e) Describe your feelings about what inhibits a school counseling program from being effective. (f) Think about peers or schools that have modeled the Missouri model of program implementation. (Asked only of non-fully implemented schools) (g) Discuss the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of these schools as it concerns student academic outcomes after modeling. In reviewing the data that emerged from the research questions and interview questions, the first step of data analysis for this study consisted of merging the aspects of summarizing and memo writing (Neuman, 2003) into research themes. The next step included reviewing the information obtained from data sources (transcribed notes, follow-up notes, and interviewee observation notes), which were then manually coded with preliminary meaning created from the interview. To maintain participant confidentiality, the names were disguised by issuing pseudonyms. An analysis of the results from the interviews followed a thematic analysis approach as noted by Silverman (1993), which ultimately revealed a story line to assist readers in realizing the process, perceptions, and inspiration level of the participants. From the transcripts and taped sessions, identification of specific thought patterns / themes from the participants' responses transpired. Member checking served as a form of triangulation where participants reviewed the interviewer's transcriptions for accuracy and plausibility (Stake, 1994).

Participants

Four participants, Clara, Jane, Stephanie and Marsha (pseudonyms), shaped this study. All participants were middle school counselors in school districts in the southern United States. Three of the

four school counselors were Caucasian females, and one was an African American female. The participants' school counseling experience ranged from 5 to 15 years, and all had experience with the implementation of and counseling in a CSCP.

Themes

All participants identified performing non-counselor related tasks such as clerical duties, paperwork, and other duties that take the focus away from the student as characteristic of an ineffective school counseling program. In fact, ASCA's (2005) stance concerning school counselor accountability is that school counselors cannot be as effective in their critical counseling tasks and responsibilities if they are consistently taken away to perform non-counselor related activities. The definition of non-counselor related activities are those activities that are either the responsibility of the administration or teacher. These activities included the following: master scheduling, test coordination, detention room or classroom coverage, disciplinary measures, and clerical duties (ASCA, 2005). Each participant's perception was consistent with the ASCA framework. Despite that non-counseling duties can inhibit student success, some noted that the esprit de corps it fosters among counselors and administrators (being perceived as a 'team player' can be useful in other ways and contributes to a functional relationship), a theme noted by Clara:

> If you don't have their support, then you're not going to go very far because they won't want you in their classrooms, and administrators will assign you duties that you don't have time to do the things that you really need to be doing.

The participants noted the effectiveness resulting from a student-centered approach,

"Our school counseling program is effective because we use the framework of the ASCA model and its standards to meet the needs of our students and their families." She further indicated that "the CSCP's effectiveness is that the implementation of the program allows a department to tailor lessons and local school programs to the needs of the stakeholders at hand." Stakeholders are anyone with a vested interest in the program such as teachers, parents, community, administration, and students (Gysbers, 2004).

The next theme concerned ineffectiveness resulting from non-counselor related tasks. According to Marsha: "The plan is inhibited from being effective when counselors are often given duties that do not fall within the areas of focus (personal / social, career and academic). Because of the need for counselors to be involved in other aspects of the total school, there are times the ASCA model is not being followed due to this." Stephanie echoed similar sentiments: "A lot of times what I've noticed is that we get so bogged down with the paperwork, that I feel that our focus is being shifted away from the students and placed primarily on the paperwork aspect of it. This has been done and sometimes the students are the ones that have to be pushed to the side to be honest with you because it's a lot of paperwork and it's primarily in the middle and high schools."

The counselors uniformly supported the idea of a comprehensive school counseling program as illustrated in comments about the overarching theme of programmatic effectiveness in using a CSCP. The theme was articulated by participant Clara when she noted:

> I think following the model helps school counselors and the school to be more effective. It is similar to teachers who have their curriculum that they should follow, and if they don't then students aren't going to test as well because those are the things that are on the test. Yet, we

don't have a counseling test created and that kind of thing, but you see the results of the students and their successes. You can be as caring as you want, but if you don't have a plan and on how to counsel the students you won't be effective. So, I just think having the plan and following through on it is it. You can't do it without that. It's just like planning a budget, if you don't have enough and you don't plan, you're going to run out and that's what happens to us, we run out of time if we don't plan.

The participating counselors classified the factors defining an effective school counseling program as the linkage to better behavior, test scores, attendance, better preparation for the future, and overall increased academic outcomes. Based on the participants' perceptions of certain district and local findings, these factors were noted to have explicitly resulted from a fully implemented CSCP. The salient factors resulting in an effective school counseling program cannot be ascribed to one area in particular but instead as a combination of a student-centered approach, a shift away from non-counselor related tasks, and in modeling the CSCP.

Each participant noted some improvement (better behavior, test scores, attendance, better preparation for the future, and overall increased academics outcomes) that has been explicitly or directly impacted as a result of the CSCP. Three of the four participants acknowledged that improvements in behavior, test scores, attendance, preparation for the future, and overall increased academic outcomes were a direct correlation to an effective school counseling program, which they defined as the ASCA model. One of the participants agreed that there appeared to be a relative strength in schools that had a fully implemented CSCP regarding these factors, but did not want to give total credit to the CSCP being the attributing cause given that there are other factors such as maturation that can improve student progress.

Discussion

Many, if not most school counseling programs in school districts, individual schools within those districts, in addition to charter and private schools have a distinct focus on outcomes for their school counseling programs and even individual school counselors. One of the underlying themes that emerged through the current research study was the need to shift away from non-counselor related tasks. Each participant agreed that focusing on non-counselor related tasks in some ways prevents the school counseling program from capitalizing on its potential. Clerical tasks such as filing student records, creating master schedules and administering standardized tests are important functions of a school, but at best these tasks should not be exclusively the school counselors' responsibilities; rather they would be better served if counselors played only a consultative role. Over the past decade or more, as schools have becomes more administrative in nature, there has been a shift to make counselors quasi-administrators even at the same time as the CSCPs have become more comprehensive, better known, and relatively easier to implement because of their specificity. Because of national, state, and local accountability efforts, school districts expect better standardized test results from students, and school counselors are an integral part of this process. School counselors should be able to focus more on helping the students to be well rounded in their social/personal life so that their academic life and future plans remain intact. With this in mind, school administration academic training, in-services, and continuing education for active administrators need to include a focus on the understanding and awareness of the school counselors' role and the myriad ways school counselors can help to shape the total school culture with a focus on outcomes.

Another recommendation from this study is that school counselors should be change agents and continue to formulate additional ideas for creating a student-centered environment. One of the main themes that developed from this study was the fact that a student-centered approach aids in the implementation of an effective school counseling program. It is not surprising that this theme surfaced because it is ASCA's premise - to cater to the total student (ASCA, 2003; 2005). Placing more focus on specific aspects (individual student planning, crisis issues through responsive services and individual counseling, and career development plans) of each individual student will certainly assist in this endeavor. Additionally, ending a school year and entering into the next with a clearer understanding of the students' needs would make the student-centered approach easier to tackle. Although somewhat difficult to quantify, the factors that can make the biggest difference for students, particularly at risk students, are those that counselors are in a unique position to remedy. The differences that contribute to success such as peer social capital, teachers who care, family and community assets, and multiple streams of motivation corresponds to student progress and collectively leads to resilience, areas where counselors are in the best position to develop programs and partnerships to make a lasting impact. (Williams, Bryan, Morrison, & Scott, 2017). Research has indicated protective factors for student progress including motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction, and relationships contribute to student improvements (Harrington, Griffith, Gray, & Greenspan, 2017). From the participants in our study, the important take away is how outcomes are connected to the specific duties where school counselors participate. It takes an entire school village to support and promote the importance of the work that school counselors do, and, a comprehensive school counseling program aims to ensure that what counselors do is specific, targeted, measurable, and focused on outcomes.

Conclusion

The job description of professional school counselors has been evolving for some hundred years now, and because of the numbers, the diversity, the needs, and the complex realities of what today's students face and what school counselors do can best be codified in a comprehensive school counseling program. As illustrated by the interviews of the subjects in this study, along with best practices noted in the evolving body of literature related to school counseling outcomes, never more has advocacy on behalf of all constituents been more central to the role and function of school counselors. School counselors are essential to the progress, academic outcomes and success of their student population. School districts and individual schools that have comprehensive school counseling models are better able to meet the needs of students, and there is near universal agreement among school counselors that a well-defined curriculum focused on the central tenets of CSCPs provides opportunity for a school counseling program to live up to its promise. As school counselors are tasked with an increasing variety of duties, some counseling related and some not, advocacy efforts at the school, state, and federal level should focus on the need for counselors doing the very tasks for which they are prepared and which help each student live up to the promises the United States educational system guarantees. The challenges in the present and the future are great and the advocacy of all constituents and stakeholders is central to school counselors' place in making the positive outcomes for the future our nation deserves.

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