Writing for the *GSCA Journal:* Capturing the School Counselor Experience

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Abstract

This article is designed to provide the reader with three different designs from which to choose when planning a possible publication for the *GSCA Journal*. The first focuses on writing up the best practices school counselors already utilize. The second suggests using a six-step accountability model to document the data of student outcomes. The third proposes using a qualitative approach to gather data which explores more in depth student's perceptions and experiences. Georgia School Counselor Association members are encouraged to consider the value in sharing their work in schools with other practitioners and contributing to the advancement of the school counseling profession.

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School counselors serve as the affective compass of schools. A varying degree of developmental and personal concerns eventually find their way to our offices. We are witnesses to the academic and personal peaks and valleys of administrators, staff, and students and their caregivers. How can it be, then, that we have nothing to write about? Clearly, there is more than enough to write; we just need to know that the pay off for investing in the writing process is worth the time and energy it will take. The process of writing about your experiences as school counselors is much the same as attending a professional conference. We attend so as to commiserate with colleagues and glean new ways of being as school counselors. In writing for a professional journal, the same need is realized: to be invigorated and validated by the sharing of your insights, ideas, and experiences that are grounded in the existing literature. Now is the time for you to take a turn to stimulate the profession by sharing some of the best practices and experiences which have shaped your way of being as a professional school counselor.

Writing About What You Do

Just last week, I was witness to a wonderful event. A school counselor was gathering the students of a grief and loss group for their final session. Together, in their group, they had found mutual support as each allowed the others to know of their sorrow. As the culminating group activity, they each carried the ceramic tile they had created and placed it at a fountain created as a memorial to their loved ones. There wasn't a lot of talking, just doing. They placed their tiles, made planters by which they could remember the event and their contribution. I walked away inspired by what we, as counselors, can do. I was inspired by the knowledge that while the counselor provided the opportunity, the participants provided the experience.

This particular school counselor could write about the process she undertook to initiate the group, screen the members, plan the activities, and support the member's emotional investment. She could have the students speak to the value of the group dynamic and how their participation impacted their desire to come to school or a renewed desire to get out of bed. She could share with us their improved attendance, rising grades, and improved test scores. From this accounting, we all could get a sense of how effective the work of one individual can be. We may be inspired to do the same.

This is the type of experience that inspires and needs to be shared with other school counselors. Whether it is grief, attendance, a certain science teacher, divorce, or peer relations, there are common experiences that unite students and their counselors. Decide to tell the story of how you came to know which need required the intervention. Explain the process from creation to fruition. Write a step by step accounting. Help us know

how we might do what you did. Your publication will be your current best practice.

Documenting Student Outcomes

Perhaps one of the elements of writing for publication which seems off-putting to many is the idea it must be research-based. An example is a paper describing some quantitative study, deductive in nature, designed to test some theory which results in numerical data too difficult to decipher. While data does need to drive the decision-making process in our programs, it does not always need to be in the form of anovas and chi-squares. Stone and Dahir (2007) created a concrete model by which we can document our work and demonstrate its effectiveness without having earned an "A" in Statistics.

The focus on student outcome data measured by a six-step accountability process provides the means to "play a proactive role in identifying and responding to the issues, policies, and practices that stratify and impede student opportunity" (Stone & Dahir, 2007, p. 113). Working to close the achievement gap takes many forms, all of which are measurable. You don't have to be a mathematician, just a reporter. By reporting the direct benefit of your interventions to students, we speak the language of those in a position of power. Direct benefit to students can take the form of a reduced number of discipline referrals, a higher percentage of minority students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses, or a lower percentage of non-completers. Data demonstrate how effective our programs are by revealing how our students are improved.

Giving Voice to the Experience

School counselors are witnesses to school improvement and student success. In fact, school counselors are already researchers and "are researching all of the time" (Farber, 2006, p. 367). School counselors instinctively look beyond the data to student perceptions and experiences to further explain how the circumstance occurred. It is incredibly meaningful to learn how students interpret and describe their experiences. As school counselors we are in an ideal position to provide the means by which students can speak to their own experience in schools. The data here are words, not numbers.

If you find yourself more intrigued with the "what" and "how" of student achievement then consider employing a more qualitative approach. By utilizing focus groups and other narrative data which provide a depth of rich information, we learn student's stories. The focus is not just how much or how many; perception data allows us to understand students' lived experiences. Farber provides an excellent breakdown of how you might conduct qualitative research in schools. In fact, the entire June 2006 issue of *Professional School Counseling* is dedicated to research methods in school counseling.

Concluding Remarks

This article was designed to provide three different avenues by which you can frame a publication: relating the details of a best practice, producing student outcome data using the Stone and Dahir (2007) accountability model, and giving students a voice by exploring their experience at a deeper level (Farber, 2006). Sharing your experience as a school counselor demonstrates the effectiveness of your work and provides incentive for colleagues. As the affective compass of schools, let it be part of our mission to work for the academic achievement and social justice that all our students deserve and then share these "best practices" with a larger public. Brigman (2006, p. 425) inspires with his words: "Showing that school counselors 'make a difference' in students and schools has never been more important".

References

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