Post-Training Needs of Urban High School Counselors:

Implications for Counselor Training Programs

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Abstract

In this study, the post-training needs of urban high school counselors were explored. A total of 55 high school counselors completed a questionnaire. The counselors emphasized the necessity of supplemental training for properly conducting youth drop-out and violence prevention programs, effective services for underachieving students who consistently earn low-to-failing grades, and needs assessments analysis. Implications for counselor education training programs are discussed.

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In the 21st century, urban schools are facing a wide variety of problems, including poverty, violence, and poor academic achievement. According to Lee (2005), urban schools, largely reflecting their environment, are typically characterized by a high concentration of people of color, recent immigrants, and, more generally, cultural heterogeneity. Further, concerns and issues facing urban areas include diversity in property values, high rates of reported crimes, higher poverty rates per capita, complex transportation problems, and higher concentrations of airborne pollutants. Urban areas also are subjected to disparities in public services, particularly in the educational, legal, and health care systems. Within this context, urban schools have had to contend with pervasive academic failure (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Holcomb-McCoy (1998) provided six factors that have a detrimental effect on urban school counseling: high diversity among students, lack of resources, poverty, family issues, violence and high dropout rates. Hence, special consideration is warranted given that these urban school counselors must confront a much greater range of issues than those of counterparts in rural or suburban environments.

Urban schools are often forced to confront a number of significant issues that affect the psychosocial, emotional, and intellectual development of their students (Lee, 2005). According to the bioecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner, 2001), children are a product of the reciprocal interaction between their genetic inheritance, behavior, and their environment. Within this ecological framework, development is a joint function of the characteristics of the person, the environment, as well as events

over the course of time. Events or conditions within a child's social context, such as the family or neighborhood contexts can affect aspects of his or her social, emotional, and cognitive development (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). For example, children living in urban settings have fewer educational opportunities, diminished access to resources, and greater instability of financial funding than their suburban district counterparts (Gonzalez, 2005). This disparity is most evident to those working on behalf students, such as the urban school counselor (Holcomb-McCoy, 1998). According to Holcomb-McCoy, (1998) school counselors in urban school districts are affected by the diversity of students, lack of resources to serve the needs of the students, high family conflict, violence, and the high rate of school drop-out.

Holcomb-McCoy and Mitchell (2005) found in their study that urban school counselors perceived low family functioning, academic achievement, and poverty as the most prevalent issues facing students in urban schools. School counselor education programs must adequately prepare future practitioners to meet the unique needs of urban school children. In addition, the community and family must take an active stance in reforming urban education (Ascher, 1988).

According to the American School Counselor Association's [ASCA] National Model and Education Trust transforming School Counseling Initiative, school counselors are being asked to perform a wide variety of duties in support of students' academic development without sufficient training. They are even required do so with a student-to-counselor ratio as high as 1:500 (Greene & Greene 2004), while the the American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of no more than 1:250 (ASCA, 1999).

School counselors interested in working in urban school districts must be equipped to deal with the current and emerging issues that will affect urban school children (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). Furthermore, Forbes (2007) wrote that based on current societal trends, counselors in urban schools must begin to look beyond the classroom for support in providing services. Despite the stressors they face working in urban communities, counselors must be able to support the personal and social development of their students that takes place off school grounds (Paone, & Lepkowski, 2007). Recent literature has encouraged school counselors being trained as evidence-based practitioners (Chwalisz, 2003). The term "evidence-based" initially introduced in the medical field. Generally defined as "the integration of the best evidence with clinical expertise and patient values" (Sackett, Strauss, Richardson, Rosenberg & Haynes, 2000, p.1),evidence-based school counseling involves using proven research methodology to guide their work with students.

In addition, counselor education accreditation agencies such as the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) lists a number of core components of effective counselor training, including: theories of counseling, appraisal in counseling, counseling in schools, clinical instruction (practicum and internship in counseling), group work, career development, legal and ethical issues and foundations of counseling (Brott, 2006). However, the challenges faced in urban schools may exceed common developmental models and accreditation agencies training standards (Green & Keys, 2001), leaving practitioners unprepared.

Counselor educators must understand the challenges of training professional school counselors. More specifically, the training of school counselors' should be done

in a way that does not hinder their ability to offer the most effective services to <u>all</u> students (Brott, 2006) focusing on specialization at the expense of versatility. Specifically, for those counselor educators training students interested in working in urban school districts, they must assist students with understanding the unique and varied challenges that urban school counselors face.

ASCA (2005) has pushed for accountability in the school counseling profession. Accountability is often mentioned as the must in training school counselors (Brott, 2006). In addition to the American School Counselor Association, The Education Trust (2007) has put forth statements insisting that school counselors take active roles to ensure academic success for all students. In order to accomplish this goal, counselor educators must understand the training gaps in counselor education programs, the realities of working in an urban setting, as well as the post-training needs of school counselors. Given the extensive issues that urban school counselors may encounter, advocacy by the counselor is a must. Butler (2003) recommends that school counselors be trained to act as their own advocates during their masters programs. He insists that oftentimes, school counselors' training programs ignore social justice, school change and advocacy. This is done when training programs fail to teach their students about social justice and advocacy skills (Butler, 2003).

<center>Method</center>

Participants and Procedures

The district chosen for this study is located in one of the poorest metropolitan large cities in the U.S (U.S. Census, 2007). The graduation rate for this district is 25%. The district has an entire student population of 106,485, with enrollment declining

rapidly. Although the counselor-to-student ratio is approximately 1 to 351 in the state, the student to counselor ratio in this particular district is 1 to 500 or higher.

The primary investigator was interested in understanding the post-training needs of urban high school counselors in this particular district in order to assist in the improvement of the coursework utilized for their training. In addition, these findings could aid in offering professional development workshops for current school counselors. High school counselors from the aforementioned district were invited to participate in the study. A total of 60 surveys were administered to school counselors in the district.

After administrators from the district were contacted, the lead researcher was put in contact with the Director of Guidance for the district. The lead researcher was invited to a district-wide school counseling meeting. The lead researcher explained the purpose of the study and invited attendees to participate. Thereafter, the lead researcher was invited to a second meeting to further explain the purpose of the study. Questionnaires were distributed to high school counselors which included demographic questions. An open forum for these school counselors was held to answer any questions or concerns related to the purpose of the study. Participants completed the questionnaire that was included in the research packet on an individual basis (alone). All high school counselors that were present at the initial meeting agreed to participate. The participants completed a survey packet consisting of a brief demographic questionnaire and the Post-Training Needs of Urban School Counselors Survey, which was developed by Henderson (2004). The survey was a 75-item questionnaire that was developed through a review of literature on urban school counseling. This was designed to focus on the post-training needs of school counselors in the following three areas: (1) gaining

knowledge and skills α = .93 (34 items), (2) current training topics in counseling α = .91 (31 items), and (3) legal/ethical issues in school counseling, α= .94, (9 items). School counselors rated each item using a five-point Likert scale with responses ranging from very important to not at all important. In addition, the survey included open-ended questions that prompted participants to include post-training needs that were not addressed in the survey. The Post-Training Needs of Urban School Counselors Survey was piloted on 5 practicing school counselors and one school counselor intern. The pilots of the survey provided feedback and recommendations on the appropriateness of content and clarity of directions and questions. Once all of the feedback was gathered it was used to develop the final product (Henderson, 2004).

<div align="center">Results</div>

Demographic Characteristics of Urban School Counselors Survey Respondents

A total of sixty questionnaires were administered. Five questionnaires had missing information and were not included in this study, yielding a total sample size of 55 school counselors. (12 males; 43 females).Five counselors did not report gender (8.3%). Seventy-eight percent of the sample was female (n = 43), with an average age of 42 years, and mostly African-American (60%, n = 36). Less than 2% of the sample consisted of Asian (n =1) and Hispanic Americans (n = 1), and 20% were European American (n = 12). Ten counselors did not disclose their ethnic identity which resulted in missing data for 16.7% of the sample.

A majority of respondents held a master's degree in counseling (81%) whereas less 10% had an educational specialist's degree or a doctorate in counseling. Respondents reported an average of 6 years of school counseling experience with

many working in a high school setting (88.3%) and 6.7% working in vocational career-development setting. The average number of years school counselors reported working in the field was 14 years, (SD= 9.11), with a modal number of 18 years. Many of the school counselors had received their masters of counseling during the mid to late 1980's (31.7%), whereas 26% reported receiving their degree before 1980 and most matriculated between 1990 and 2005 (38%). Participants were also asked to indicate whether they had taken a formal multicultural course in their school counseling training programs. In terms of receiving training in multicultural counseling, 52.7% reported taking a formal course.

Survey Results: Perceptions of Post-Training Needs

Subscales reflecting the three categories of training needs revealed that school counselors rated each of these three areas consistently important (see Table 1).

Table 1

Post-Training Needs Subscales*

Subscale	M	SD
Gaining knowledge and skills in consulting, coordination	2.0	.51
Current post-training topics	1.9	.61
Legal and ethical issues	2.1	.87

*Items were scored from 1= very important to 5 = not at all important

The analysis also examined the top five training needs most frequently rated with a high level of importance. The responses were collapsed from five to three categories reflecting importance: 1 = very important or important, 2 = somewhat important, and 3 = not important or absolutely not important. Frequency tables were computed to examine distribution of responses and the percentage of responses falling within the highest level

of importance category (i.e., 1 = very important/important). Chi-square tests were performed to test whether the frequencies and percentages across these response distributions were significantly different from one another at the .05 alpha level. All items in the survey were significant; indicating that observed responses significantly deviated from the expected frequency distribution across the categorical response set. Following this preliminary significance test, each question was individually examined for the greatest proportion of respondents who rated each item within *the highest level of importance category.* Responses indicating the highest level of importance were obtained from all respondents, with 86% to 93% agreement across these items. Taken from the open-ended part of the questionnaire, the most commonly requested subjects of post-training education included (in order of most important): (1) Drop-out prevention-93.1%. The school counselors indicated this is the most important training needed by today's school counselors working in an urban high school setting. The remaining four needs were (2), violence prevention programs (89.7%); (3), effective strategies for counseling students who consistently earn low-to-failing grades, (89.5%); (4), workshops on how to conduct a needs assessment (86%).

   Analysis of open-ended responses. A total of 15 school counselors completed an open-ended section of the questionnaire. The remaining sample in the study opted not to answer any open-ended questions. This section prompted counselors to examine critical training needs not addressed in the survey as well as to provide key recommendations for possible training topics. An independent review of the open-ended responses by two investigators was conducted. Themes were derived by assigning codes to statements reflecting specific training topics. Each investigator conducted this

first review independently. After an initial set of codes were established, investigators

reviewed the codes, discussed discordant codes, and then established a single coding

system for the training topics. Finally investigators independently reviewed the training

statements and assigned a code from a single list to each statement. Level of level of

agreement between both investigators reached good agreement at k = .85. Table 2

includes a list of identified training needs provided by school counselors in the study.

Table 2

Identified Post-Training Needs by Urban School Counselors (n =15)

Theme	Definition and Example Statements
Counselor Education	Changes in counselor education that includes greater opportunities to work in challenging settings; issues in counselor certification: "*School counseling candidates need exposure to counseling in urban public schools <u>before</u> the degree is granted.*" "*Why is it that some school counselors are not licensed? Is that fair to the licensed school counselors? Why was teacher certification removed from school counselor licensure requirements? School counselors need to understand this trend, including its causes and its consequences.*"
Mental Health	Increase need of interagency collaboration, resources, and referral network for school counselors. Training needs centered on identifying mental health needs and working with mental health specialists. "*[We] need assistance with finding information on agencies that families can go to for free.*""*How to reenter high school after a trauma such as homelessness.*" "*Information for family counseling and assistance especially for students who have behavioral problems, failed several courses, or have broken the law.*"

Theme	Definition and Example Statements
School Behavioral Issues	Training needs to address in-school behavioral problems such as in-school truancy; poor social skills; teacher-student conflicts, peer to peer conflicts. "*Assistance with teaching adolescent-appropriate behavior around adults such as staff and parents as well as peers." "[Addressing] in-school truancy.*"
Family Involvement & Support	Training needs to support family involvement, identification of family resources, and support for positive parenting. *"Providing support for parents and addressing negative parenting examples, such as children raising children." "Workshops on how to get parents more involved and interested [in child's education]."*
Career Counseling	Training to redirect students in establishing tangible goals and career aspirations; information on non-traditional career opportunities; greater emphasis on career development. "*Properly discouraging unrealistic career choices." "Telling students they can be anything that they want to be may inspire the setting of unrealistic occupational goals.*" "*School counselors need support in assisting students with career development." "Understanding the military [as a resource] and how it can potentially better the lives of students.*"
Administrative Support & Certification	Training to work with school administrators and helping others to understand role of school counselor. "*Helping administrators (principals and assistant principals) understand the role of school counselors.*"

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the post-training needs of school counselors working in urban school settings. The results of the study indicate that school counselors rated attending workshops on post-training topics as most important. The gaining knowledge section of this study was rated as second, and finally, legal training was rated as least important.

The school counselors in this study ranked their top-five post-training needs as designing and executing on (1) drop-out prevention programs, (2) violence prevention programs, (3) effective counseling of unmotivated students who still consistently earn failing grades, (4) effective counseling for discouraged students who are doing their best but consistently achieve low-to failing grades, and (5) workshops on how to conduct a needs assessment.

The findings of the present study revealed that school counselors working in urban school setting need further support with locating external social service agencies to help both the students they serve and their parents. The school counselors overwhelmingly expressed the necessity of training and support in the development of parental education programs.

Implications for Counselor Education Training Programs

School counselor educators must be aware of the realities of working in an urban setting. In response, they may consider altering their training programs to account for some of the issues implicated by our findings.

First, the findings could assist counselor education training programs in how to best encourage students interested in working in urban school environments. The

findings might also assist with the promotion of workshops, conferences and

professional development opportunities that such students might consider attending in

preparation for working in an urban school environment.

More specifically, the findings of this study speak to two important preliminary

concerns in promoting the academic achievement of urban school students and

development of urban school counselors. School counselors must first be trained to

become advocates (Brown & Trusty, 2005). Next, training programs must also equip

students with the tools needed to form family-school partnerships in urban areas

(Mitchell & Bryan, 2007).

School Counselor Advocacy

The American School Counselor Association (2005) has made key statements

on the importance of advocacy in the field of school counseling. Advocacy as defined by

House & Martin (1998) is the ability to stand up to injustices and attempt to improve the

quality of life for individuals and groups. Bemak & Chung (2005) addressed the critical

role of advocacy in urban school settings. They offer strategies that school counselors

can employ to become advocates. The authors believe that ideally, students should be

trained to acknowledge injustices and begin to challenge them in their school counselor

training programs. This is cited as the first step in advocacy on behalf of school

counselors. However, counselor education programs may not always train school

counselors. If training does not occur in school counseling programs, administrators

(principals and school counseling directors) must offer onsite training for school

counselors. This training could aid school counselors in recognizing injustices and

advocating on behalf of their students. Finally, the third level of support in developing a

counselor's advocacy skills is supervision. Bemake & Chung (2005), make mention of the supervisor being a social justice advocate who has both the experience necessary to recognize relevant concerns in urban school settings as well as the capability of fostering that skill to others.

Family-school partnerships

Family-school partnerships are defined as collaborative relationships between families, schools and communities which assist in promoting the academic, career and social/personal development of students (Davies, 1996). These partnerships can take many forms including: hosting parent education programs, organizing joint tutoring efforts, and developing parent education centers (Christiansen, 1997). Research has documented that these partnerships are expanding the role and potential impact of school counselors (Bemak, 2000; Taylor & Adelman, 2000). Because of the high student-to-counselor ratio, school counselors are striving to enlist additional support in their efforts to promote the success and academic achievement of students (House & Hayes, 2002).

School counselor training programs must be certain that students are equipped with the skills needed to establish these partnerships (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). Upon completion of counselor education programs, students must have the willingness and ability to collaborate with other school counselors, take on leadership roles, act as liaisons, and, most importantly, advocate on behalf of the students they will service (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). Prospective school counselors must also be trained on how to become resource agents (Colbert, Kulilowich, & Jonna, 2006), ready with answers to the questions that are most often asked by students, teachers and parents.

Limitations

Caution should be used before generalizing these findings to all school counselors who work in urban areas. This study was based on self-reports, which tend to be extremely subjective. School counselors could have factored in a number of unknown variables while completing the questionnaire (e.g. caseload, stress level). Another limitation of the present study is that data was collected in only one state. We used a convenient sample. Perhaps results would have looked different if the data was gathered in different states. More studies of this nature are necessary before one can truly understand the realities of school counselors working in urban settings.

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