

# AN EIGHT-STEP ACTION RESEARCH MODEL FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents an eight-step model for the school counselor implementing action research at the local school. The article reviews the current literature on the need for school counseling research at the practitioner level. Action research and outcome research practices are discussed as they pertain to the field of school counseling.



School counseling has struggled over the years to firmly establish a professional identity (Schmidt, 1999). Paisley and Borders (1995) described school counseling as an “evolving specialty” in which changes in the social, political, and educational climates often result in a shift in focus. School Counseling history demonstrates a change from individual and vocational guidance to a comprehensive and developmental model (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Paisley & Borders; The Education Trust, 2002). Some authors have noted a shift in school counseling from a service delivery model towards more of an emphasis on outcomes (Borders & Drury, 1992; Gysbers & Henderson).

This shift has been prompted by state and federal policies that have necessitated an increase in the accountability measures of school counseling practice. One such policy is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) Act, federal legislation focused on measured accountability for achievement. As a result, a new identity emphasizing leadership, collaboration, and the academic success of all students is being established (The Education

Trust, 2002; House & Hayes, 2002). Because of this new identity, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has called for an increase in the use of data to address programmatic improvement (American School Counselor Association, 2003). The importance of data collection has also been emphasized as a means to assess programmatic needs and effectiveness (Dahir & Stone, 2003; Myrick, 2003).

In the current climate of accountability, professional school counselors are challenged to demonstrate how counseling services impact achievement (Kaffenberger & Young, 2007). The importance of empirical research to the school counseling field has received considerable attention in the professional literature (Greising, 1967; Isaacs, 2003; Myrick, 1990; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Otwell and Mullis (1997) discussed counselor accountability and the importance of measuring academic results of counseling interventions. School counseling research has been stressed as a way to support assumptions (Cramer, Herr, Morris, & Franz, 1970), assess needs, and plan for future programs (Fall & VanZandt, 1997). Moreover, Paisley and McMahon asserted that counselors might be better able to justify and market their programs if they demonstrate that research has indicated their effectiveness. Despite such urgings, school counselors have generally been resistant to conducting research.

### *Counselor Resistance*

Research, according to Campbell (1986, p. 2), is the “backbone of guidance and counseling theory and practice.” Yet, school

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counselors generally have been hesitant to initiate research. The idea of conducting research often “evokes such emotional reactions of fear, anxiety, and even disdain” (Fall & VanZandt, 1997, p. 2). Many reasons have been cited for this apparent lack of interest or even contempt: little or no formal training in research design or strategies (Fairchild, 1993); lack of confidence about research methods and processes; and lack of counselors’ ability to utilize and apply data to their practices in a meaningful way (Astramovich, Coker, Hoskins, 2005). Other factors that may be preventing school counselors from conducting research and undertaking program evaluation include concerns that research is too cumbersome and time consuming (Lusky & Hayes, 2001).

School counselors are currently being charged to find the balance between practice and research (Bauman, 2004; Dahir & Stone, 2003; Otwell & Mullis, 1997; Paisley & McMahan, 2001). While most school counselors see the value of research to their practices (Bauman), most cite a lack of time as a significant barrier. Moreover, it has been suggested that multiple demands limit the research practicing school counselors can reasonably assume (Astramovich et al., 2005; Bauman et al., 2002). The multiple, and often times competing, demands placed on school counselors can be time and energy consuming. Therefore, counseling evaluation methods must be efficient and must generate meaningful data (Astramovich et al.).

### **Research that is “do-able”: Action Research**

School counselors might ask themselves, “Does this small group experience help decrease absenteeism?” or “Are there less incidents of bullying when students complete coping skills training?” These and other questions are related to outcome and action research. Outcome research is a focus within counseling research that attempts to document the impact of an intervention (Heppner, Kivlighan & Wampold, 1999). One of the latest trends within education and psychology is research oriented towards an applied focus, or action research (Hadley & Mitchell, 1995; Mertler & Charles, 2005). There are many ways school counselors can employ outcome or action research to demonstrate the

efficacy of their interventions. For example, counselors can make use of quantitative methods, as well as interviews following individual, group or classroom guidance activities.

Rowell (2005) contends that action research, focused on counseling outcomes, has significant implications for the future of school counseling as a profession. Action research has been described as a link between practice and research (Rowell; Whiston, 1996). Many school counselors have expressed a need to find practical assessment methods to provide documentation of their effectiveness with students (Astramovich et al., 2005). Therefore, in an attempt to address such a request a practical model for integrating basic research strategies into school counseling practices is presented. This model, developed by a practicing school counselor, delineates an eight-step approach for conducting outcome research in the schools.

### **An Eight Step Action Research Model**

Following is a “how-to” outline written by a practicing school counselor with the intention of giving other practitioners a concrete list of steps to follow and pitfalls to avoid. The outline is discussed in further detail.

#### *Step 1: Identify Data Sources.*

Practicing school counselors find that the most obvious place for data collection is the local school. Data is readily available and is the most meaningful to the counselor. A few examples of local school data include attendance and discipline records, test scores, report card grades, standardized testing reports, and graduation and retention rates. The mandates of No Child Left Behind (2001) indicate that data sources about achievement (i.e., test scores, report card grades, and graduation rates) are the most powerful data sources for securing the funding and ensuring the future of counselor positions. The Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI; The Education Trust, 2002) material specifically advises school counselors to examine “achievement gaps” between or within groups of learners. School counselors can access local or state websites for school data or consult the school improvement plan. Other data may be

available from administrators or school staff members. Side benefits of gathering this data include building relationships, and establishing credibility with others. Additionally, school counselors demonstrate to administration and faculty a desire to be part of the larger educational goals of the school.

#### *Step 2: Decide What To Study.*

Looking at the data, school counselors should consider three points: (a) *“What data peeks my curiosity?”* (b) *“What kind of study aligns with the school’s plan for improvement?”* (c) *“Which data fit well with an intervention that is already in place or that there are plans to implement?”* In examining the data, these questions will help the school counselor formulate a project that is interesting to him or her, relevant to the school, and practical to design and complete.

#### *Step 3: Formulate The Research Question.*

A research question is the sine qua non of action research. If a colleague, administrator or stakeholder asks the reason for a particular intervention, the practitioner should rephrase the research questions as a statement. For example, if someone inquires about the purpose of a guidance lesson on test taking strategies, the school counselor can respond by saying “I am investigating whether or not there is a difference in students’ classroom test scores after receiving information about test taking strategies.” With regard to research questions, the simpler, the better. A single variable can be enough given the busy nature of school counseling. Examples of research questions are as follows: *“Is there a relationship between my small group counseling intervention for absenteeism and the participants’ school attendance?”* or *“Is there a relationship between report card grades of students at risk of failure and large group guidance sessions on study skills?”*

#### *Step 4: Select Or Design Your Intervention.*

Based on the data selected and the research question(s) created, counselors can choose an intervention that is already in place, or plan a new intervention. Evaluating interventions that are already in place is a data driven practice itself that

can provide valuable information about the scope and effectiveness of a program.

When planning a new intervention, consider the following questions: (a) *How can the intervention be simple and focused?* Multiple components (i.e., individual counseling, group counseling, parent consultation) can make an intervention time-consuming to implement, difficult to track, and the resulting data difficult to analyze; (b) *What will be the unit of measurement?* (i.e., grades, test scores, demonstration of particular skills); (c) *How much time is needed to implement the intervention?* Projects may take longer than planned and it is wise practice to build in extra time in case there are obstacles. A solid intervention needs a planning stage, an implementation stage and an evaluation stage; (d) *What resources are needed?* (i.e., other staff, funding, materials). Collaborating with others to conduct action research is beneficial. Not only does working with others allow for dividing up the tasks but it also provides the leverage needed to advocate for other programs in the future; (e) *Who needs to know about, or who will support the intervention?* (i.e., administration, teachers, parents, community business partners); (f) *Are there research-based interventions that have already been done to address the research question?* School counselors can search the World Wide Web for relevant studies or ask colleagues about successful programs implemented at other schools.

#### *Step 5: Choose A Population Sample.*

School counselors assist all students. However, practitioners may choose to measure programs with selected students. When deciding to study the impact of an intervention that is already in place, such as a previously planned classroom guidance series, mentoring program or parenting course, the participants may already be selected; this is called a convenience sample. When starting a new intervention, choose participants with whom to expect some degree of success. Project manageability is critical. It is not necessary to measure every program, a whole grade level, team or a full caseload of students; a study with only 10 participants can provide valuable information about an intervention.

### *Step 6: Implement The Intervention And Collect Data.*

Follow the original research question(s) and intervention plan; refer to these often to ensure that what is being measured is consistent with the original goals. If it is necessary to make changes along the way, document them and reflect on how the changes alter the research question(s).

Programs such as Microsoft Excel are useful tools for tallying and sorting data. If the school counselor is unfamiliar with spreadsheets, there are likely other staff members in the school who are skilled enough to help input totals for the purposes of creating a basic table or graph. Action research provides ideal opportunities to hone or practice computer skills so that the end product is easy to read and share with others.

### *Step 7: Analyze The Data.*

It is critical to remember that results do not always mean causality. There are many factors that have bearing on participants, and it is sometimes impossible to isolate an intervention as the sole source of impact. Action research is about finding support for your intervention, not necessarily about proving causality or achieving statistical significance. Analyze the research question(s) and determine whether or not the outcome data support the intervention. For example, the data might indicate that 85% of the students who participated in a truancy group improved their attendance, or 60% of the students placed in advanced classes passed those classes. Whether or not the results support the intervention, something can be learned about how to implement the intervention the next time. A chart or table with a short paragraph can condense the findings down to the most important points.

### *Step 8: Share Your Data.*

Once the data is translated into a visual product, share the results through the school's website or newsletter, or at staff, PTA or school board meetings. Putting the results into a PowerPoint presentation is a meaningful way to share outcome with colleagues at local, state or national conferences. Sharing the findings is just as critical for advocating for the school counselor's position itself as it is for advocating for the students.

### *Implications*

The shortage of school counselor studies at a time of high stakes testing and accountability demonstrates that the value of school counseling is called into question. Due to the increase of accountability measures, shaping and solidifying the identity of our profession requires the intentional evaluation, analysis, and sharing of our work with stakeholders who support what we do and those who question the impact of our services.

More action research studies on school counseling are needed. By assessing need, developing research questions, and designing and evaluating interventions, school counselors will be well on their way to effectively demonstrating their contribution to achievement and overall student well-being. This article presented a practical eight-step model specifically designed for school counselors in hopes that it will demystify and illuminate the undertaking of action research.

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