Mentoring Programs for First-Year Elementary School Counselors:

An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This exploratory study examined the importance of a mentoring program using a purposeful sample of 16 first-year elementary school counselors. A qualitative analysis revealed the importance of support that participants received from their mentors and mentoring cohort group. Participants also indicated an increase in self-efficacy as a result of the mentoring program. Implications for counselor induction and preparation are discussed.

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Being a first-year school counselor can be an overwhelming experience. Novice counselors may encounter special needs children, disgruntled parents, and administrators who expect counselors to assume duties outside of defined roles. In addition, most school counselors receive inadequate support and clinical supervision once they leave the academic environment (Boyd & Walter, 1975; Roberts & Borders, 1994). In elementary schools, the new school counselor may be the only counselor in the building. Peace (1995) noted that until recently, the counseling literature has not focused on the adjustment difficulties of new counselors. Matthes (1992) discussed the critical importance of the early stages of a school counselor's development and stated that the most common mode of school counselor induction has been a "sink or swim" approach. In large school districts, early development can be hindered by the complexities of numerous district policies and procedures that may inundate the novice counselor. Peace (1995) noted that, "negative consequences from minimal support could magnify counselor stress, contribute to attrition rates, and erode skill development acquired during counselor preparation" (p. 178).

According to Van Zandt and Perry (1992), the more assistance first-year counselors receive early in their development, the less likely that they will become victims of burnout. In addition to needing continued clinical supervision, new school counselors need additional support and guidance. Van Zandt and Perry and Peace (1995) proposed mentoring models designed to assist first-year counselors in their development and to assist experienced counselors in developing mentoring and

supervision skills. Neither Van Zandt and Perry nor Peace differentiated between mentoring and supervision. For the purposes of this article, mentoring is defined as “the process of one person supporting, teaching, leading, and serving as a model for another person” (Buell, 2004, p. 56). We further identified supervision as an integral component of mentoring. In this article, we will use the term supervision to refer to clinical supervision, which is a process that focuses on “enhancing one's clinical knowledge and skill working with students in individual or group counseling sessions” (Roberts & Borders, 1994, p. 150). Mentoring of new school counselors is for the purpose of successful induction into their full roles as school counselors. Supervision, more specifically, focuses on the growth and encouragement of new counselors’ counseling skills.

Although supervision of school counselors is critically important, there are other aspects of the counselor role, such as classroom guidance and working effectively with teachers, administrators and parents that are also difficult to assume for novice counselors. In the counseling literature, researchers have focused primarily on school counselor supervision rather than the broader mentoring relationship (Crutchfield & Borders, 1997; Henderson & Lampe, 1992; Page, Pietrzak, & Sutton, 2001; Roberts & Borders, 1994; Sutton & Page, 1994).

Van Zandt and Perry (1992) evaluated a statewide mentoring project that was designed to help first-year school counselors. The mentoring project yielded a positive evaluation, but was not part of a formal research study. Van Zandt and Perry noted that mentoring programs for school counselors are designed to address the many roles that counselors must assume. There have been numerous studies on mentoring in the

schools, but these studies focused on mentoring students or teachers (Cornell, 2003; Karchner, 2005; Lee & Cramond, 1999).

In a study examining the perceptions of mentor teachers, Cornell (2003) found that the more experienced the mentor teacher, the better mentor he or she would be. Mentor teachers in this study also indicated that they found the role of mentor satisfying. In a study of mentoring economically disadvantaged students, Lee and Crammond (1999), found that the length of time in mentoring was important. Only those students who were mentored for more than a year had improved aspirations.

The purpose of the current study was to explore the significance of mentoring for first-year elementary school counselors in a large urban school district. It was found that many of the counselors in the school district under study left after one year and went to smaller surrounding school districts. The participating school district thus created a mentoring program because of difficulty retaining school counselors. The district wanted to see if it additional support, training, and supervision for first-year counselors would result in a higher retention rate (Peace, 1995).

Using funds from a federal grant, four mentors were hired whose primary responsibility was to support first-year elementary school counselors. Due to the size of the school district's counseling program, the four mentors were responsible for mentoring 41 first-year elementary school counselors. The school district chose mentors who were experienced and effective school counselors (Supervision Interest Network of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, 1990). Mentors conducted weekly site visits and met individually with the mentees throughout the school year.

Mentors also modeled group counseling and classroom guidance skills in the mentees' schools.

Method

The mentoring program was implemented in a large urban school district with over 150,000 students in the southwest United States. The student population in the school district is predominantly Hispanic (62.5%) with African Americans comprising 31% and Whites less than 6%. Following the implementation of the mentoring program, the participating counselors were asked the following questions: How does having a mentor impact the development of a first-year school counselor, especially in supervisory experiences? What mentoring activities have the most impact on this counselor's development? How does the mentoring relationship impact issues of attrition and longevity? Ideally, the findings of the study will contribute to discussions about school counselor induction and preparation.

Data Collection

This research utilized grounded theory to identify themes and patterns based on systematic analysis of open, axial, and selective codes from observations, interviews and document collection (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First-year elementary school counselors were required to participate in a mentoring program offered by the school district. Each first-year school counselor was assigned to a cohort group and a mentor. Four mentors for the school district oversaw the program. All of the first-year counselors met monthly in a large group led by the four mentors and the supervisor of the mentors. In addition, the first-year counselors participated in small group activities at the monthly meeting. Observations consisted of two visits by the researchers to the

large and small group discussions. The focus of the observations was to gain information on the large and small group dynamics for the mentees. Observations were transcribed to facilitate coding.

Purposeful sampling was utilized to select 16 elementary school counselors from the four cohorts for participation in a standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 2002). Mentors referred four participants from their respective cohort to participate in the interview process. In order to reduce bias in selection, the mentors did not receive the interview questions. Mentors were asked to select participants who could provide rich information related to the mentoring program. Standardized open-ended interviews (see Appendix) of the 16 participants were conducted at the elementary school that employed the participant. Interviews were transcribed to facilitate coding.

Trustworthiness

Various forms of trustworthiness (Patton, 2002) were utilized to reduce researcher bias in the creation of the interview questions and the coding of the observations and interviews. Researcher triangulation was used with the researchers of this study to discuss the data collection and interpretations. The researchers of this study analyzed the data independently and then compared results. Additionally, peer debriefing was utilized with other researchers, which consisted of two doctoral students who assisted in data collection and were familiar with qualitative research. Persistent engagement played an important role in the analysis of data. Negative case analysis was essential in deriving an understanding of themes and patterns from the varying perspectives of the participants and the data collected via observations. An audit trail was maintained consisting of documents and hard copies of observations and

transcripts of interviews. Information was filed in a separate location and stored on disk when appropriate.

Results

Observations from the large and small group meetings and the standardized open-ended interviews of the participants were analyzed. Open, axial, and selective coding were used to identify patterns and themes in the data. Three selective codes emerged: (a) cohort support, (b) mentor support, and (c) increased self-efficacy.

Cohort Support

Cohort support addressed participants' identification of feeling supported in their new position of elementary school counselor by the large and small group interactions. In the large group meetings, which included all of the first-year counselors and their mentors, one of the mentors presented information related to a relevant topic. Then, the large group discussed the topic. Afterwards, the large group would break into smaller groups, each led by their respective mentor.

Data was collected through observations and interviews. Researcher triangulation was utilized to examine the data collected and identify recurring patterns from the large and small group interactions. Analysis of the interactions observed in the large and small group interactions elicited three axial codes: (a) cohesion, (b) collaboration, and (c) resources.

Group cohesion refers to "a sense of togetherness, or community, within a group" (Corey & Corey, 2005, p. 152). Yalom (1995) described cohesion as a sense of "we-ness", an esprit de corps, and a sense of solidarity in a group. Matthes (1992) explained that when teachers make the transition to becoming a school counselor, the collegiality

experienced as a teacher might not be readily available as a new school counselor. Thus, the sense of cohesiveness from the group experience appeared to be particularly important for new school counselors. “I would always get excited when we would have a meeting…some schools have one [school counselor] and as a teacher, well [there] is always a group of teachers” (Counselor 1, Cohesion). Other participants identified the feeling of camaraderie as a “need” or “like a family” (Counselor 2; Counselor 4; Counselor 10; Cohesion). Due to the independent nature of the position, school counselors appreciated the opportunity to be heard and relate common experiences. “You’re not out here by yourself. You knew that once a month, you’ll meet with [the group] and you looked forward to it” (Counselor 12, Cohesion).

Group collaboration refers to the sharing of ideas and working toward a common interest. Participants verbalized benefits from working together and sharing ideas. “We could see how other counseling programs were getting run and things that they were doing that maybe we could bring in and do…” (Counselor 9, Collaboration). Furthermore, the group experience allowed for the opportunity to work collaboratively with the other counselors, similar to the experience the counselors had as teachers. “We’re not unfamiliar with working cooperatively, we did as teachers, so that was just an extension in to the counseling profession…” (Counselor 11, Collaboration).

Group resources referred to the networking opportunities expressed by the participants. The group provided a learning opportunity for the counselors, “It gave us an opportunity to ask questions…and we needed to know resources we could implement in our schools” (Counselor 16, Resources). Outside of the group experience, counselors expressed an appreciation for the ongoing opportunity to network and get

information. “If I had a question, I had a list of numbers that I don’t hesitate to call. I didn’t have that as a teacher” (Counselor 14, Resources).

In summary, cohort support refers to a process where mentees developed a working relationship that facilitated networking and the sharing of ideas. The mentees expressed a genuine enthusiasm toward the large and small group interactions. These interactions contributed to a growing sense of professional development.

Mentor Support

Mentor support addressed participants' identification of feeling supported in their new position of elementary school counselor by their assigned mentor. Aside from the large group and small group experiences, each mentor conducted regular site visits and met individually with the mentee throughout the school year. Additionally, each mentee was encouraged to contact their mentor at any time when questions or problems arose. Analysis of participant responses and researcher observation indicated that mentor support included five axial codes: (a) accessibility, (b) modeling, (c) catharsis, (d) feedback, and (e) resourcefulness.

Accessibility refers to the availability of the mentor to the mentee. Mentees identified having their mentor's cell number, home number, and email. The mentors were available for contact, as well as personal visits. "[My mentor] came out all of the time, and she would also come out if we had a crisis" (Counselor 9, Accessibility). Participants consistently reported that in the event they called their mentor and the mentor was not available, they would get a return call very quickly. Mentees often expressed feeling supported by their mentor because of the individual attention they received. "It was wonderful…because I received one-to-one attention…and so it seemed more helpful" (Counselor 4, Accessibility).

Mentees reported that they often related to their mentors as teachers through the mentors' consistent use of modeling. Modeling refers to the willingness by the mentor to convey desired behaviors and attitudes to the mentees (Corey & Corey, 2005). Studer (2005) noted that modeling is an important supervision strategy for school counseling. In this study, modeling occurred in two primary methods. Mentors often conducted

personal visits, in which they assumed leadership roles in group guidance activities to demonstrate particular lessons or interventions and group counseling sessions to demonstrate skills. “Several times she came out and did a guidance lesson for me to show me…” (Counselor 12, Modeling). “I had to do a program that I had never done before, and she came out and actually… showed me what I needed to do and what I needed to ask” (Counselor 9, Modeling). Additionally, participants identified feeling overwhelmed by the paperwork and documentation consistent with system support. “I don’t know how anybody did this without a mentor because if I hadn’t had somebody to say ‘this is the paperwork, and this is what you do, this is how you document everything,’ I would have gone nuts” (Counselor 9, Modeling).

Mentees reported that they often related to their mentors as counselors with respect to the opportunity to express frustrations and obtain feedback. Mentees related cathartic experiences when discussing stressors and job responsibilities with their mentors. “She helped me as a counselor in overcoming some of my depression and feeling somewhat ineffective because it was just nonstop referrals, and I would start feeling like I wasn’t effective…” (Counselor 11, Catharsis). “We all have bad days…I just needed someone to talk to…” (Counselor 12, Catharsis). Mentees also reported an appreciation for feedback that was non-threatening and nonjudgmental. “I didn’t feel like I was being judged” (Counselor 4, Feedback). “I was very fortunate in that I had…somebody who could give safe feedback” (Counselor 13, Feedback).

Participants reported benefiting from the resources mentors were able to provide, making reference to the consultant role of mentoring. “He always provided resources…to the entire mentee group…I don’t care whether it was a website or a book

that someone had passed along to him" (Counselor 16, Resources). Mentees agreed upon the wealth of knowledge that mentors brought to the process. "She knows the sources, she's a plethora of resources" (Counselor 2, Resources). "Since she had been a counselor for so many years, she would have access or know about different resources that I could use depending on what I needed. She was one of the main people I would call" (Counselor 4, Resources).

In summary, the mentees valued the presence and availability of the mentors to model and facilitate interventions and programs. The mentoring relationship provided a mechanism for beginning counselors to receive constructive feedback in a safe environment. Additionally, the mentors provided resources to enhance counseling services in the schools.

Increased Self-efficacy

Increased self-efficacy refers to the enhanced self-confidence that participants revealed with respect to the tasks consistent with the position of elementary school counselor. Participants attributed their professional development to the mentorship program. Increased self-efficacy included three axial codes: (a) self-confidence, (b) longevity as a school counselor, and (c) program endorsement.

Self-confidence referred to participants' disclosures about improving their attitude or ability with respect to school counseling. Some school counselors addressed feeling overwhelmed with the documentation and overall job responsibilities. The mentoring program seemed to assist counselors in acclimating to the role of school counselor in terms of skills, the position, and self-concept. Through participation in the mentorship program, counselors identified feeling of success with respect to the various job

responsibilities, such as group guidance, responsive services, and system support. “I am definitely more confident in the classroom” (Counselor 9, self-confidence). “As time went on, I made a complete turn around, and I felt more comfortable” (Counselor 12, Self-confidence). Other counselors indicated a change in personal attitude, stating that the mentorship program “made me feel better about myself” (Counselor 4, Self-confidence).

Longevity as a school counselor refers to comments made by the participants in which they suggested that the mentorship program contributed to their intention of continuing work as a school counselor. Several school counselors indicated fear of burnout or quitting their job had they not had a mentor. Many counselors indicated feeling overwhelmed. Other counselors expressed that they could not imagine feeling successful as a school counselor if they had not been involved in a mentoring program. “I don’t see how counselors make it without the mentoring program” (Counselor 10, Longevity). Other counselors indicated greater job satisfaction as a result of the mentorship program—“I’m happier at the job…because I’m confident about what I’ve got to do” (Counselor 9, Longevity).

The participants were supportive of the continuation of the mentorship program. Many participants verbalized a desire to have contact with their mentor during their second year as an elementary school counselor. Participants verbalized concern about the program not being continued in subsequent years. “I can’t imagine not having it…I feel sorry for counselors in other districts I know don’t have it” (Counselor 4, Endorsement). Other counselors expressed fear of being lost in their profession without the ongoing guidance, “I think I would have felt…kind of lost…I don’t think I would have

had as easy of a year" (Counselor 16, Endorsement). Other counselors noted that school counselors who work as the only counselor in the school would have had an especially difficult time adjusting to their new field, "I could not imagine being a first-year counselor without this program, especially for those counselors who have to be on a campus by themselves" (Counselor 13, Endorsement).

In summary, as a result of the mentoring relationship, counselors felt better acclimated to their new role as a school counselor. An increased sense of success and confidence may be essential in preventing burnout and increasing longevity in the profession. The mentees endorsed the continuation of the mentoring program.

Discussion

These findings support Matthes' (1992) contention that the early development of school counselors is critically important. According to the participants, mentors helped mitigate the overwhelmed feelings that these novice school counselors experienced. These findings suggest that it may be helpful for counselor supervisors in schools and counselor educators to place more emphasis on issues related to school counselor induction. If supervisors and counselor educators focused more attention on early developmental challenges of school counselors, they may be better prepared for the multi-faceted role they are expected to assume.

As many of the participants in this study indicated, belonging to a cohort group was very important to them. The cohesive "family" feeling that many participants had appeared to help ameliorate the feelings of isolation that came from being the only counselor in the building. In addition to monthly meetings with the cohort, the network of other first-year counselors that the participants developed helped them to remain in contact with other first-year counselors and share resources with one another.

Given the importance of the support received from the cohort and the mentors, it may be helpful for school districts and counselor preparation programs to develop support programs in the field for first-year counselors (Van Zandt & Perry, 1992). As the participants of this study indicated, they did not know how they would have been able to survive their first year without the support and supervision that they received from their mentors and their cohort. Van Zandt and Perry (1992), and Henderson and Lampe (1992), used practicing school counselors as supervisors and mentors of school counselors. Due to a lack of funding, it appears that using experienced and skilled

school counselors who are already employed by the district as mentors/supervisors may be the most feasible option.

Another finding of this study that could be relevant for counselor preparation programs is the importance of modeling. Modeling of various skills was mentioned repeatedly by mentees as very helpful. As Studer (2005) noted, modeling appears to be an effective supervision strategy with school counselor supervisees. These first-year school counselors appeared to be very comfortable when their mentors assumed the teacher role and modeled interventions and strategies (Bernard, 1997). This need for modeling may be due to the difference between school counselor preparation and the realities of the school setting (Brott & Myers, 1999).

A limitation of this study is that all of the participants were from a large urban school district. The concerns and issues raised may be less relevant for rural or suburban school districts. Another limitation of this study is that the participants who were recommended by their mentors may have given more favorable responses than those who were not chosen.

Implications for Supervision

Supervisors of school counselors should be aware of the existence of mentoring programs, or lack thereof, for school counselor supervisees. Supervisees without a mentoring program may relate different stressors and issues during supervision than counselors who are able to benefit from a mentoring program. In this study, first-year counselors expressed the importance of the support they received through the cohort as well as the mentor-mentee relationship. Supervisors may need to monitor feelings of isolation that school counselors without mentoring programs may face.

Additionally, counselors who have access to mentoring programs also have access to modeling by their mentor. Hence, skill acquisition may occur more rapidly for mentored supervisees. For counselors who do not have the benefit of a mentoring program, supervisors may need to spend additional time modeling skills. Ultimately, the existence of a mentoring program that includes supervision may foster more rapid development of counseling skills. Thus, supervisors in counselor education programs may be able to adopt more of an egalitarian role that encourages supervisees “to think for themselves and generate ideas through brainstorming” (Nelson & Johnson, 1999, p. 96) rather than depending on supervisors for answers.

Conclusion

Many of the participants in the current study indicated that without their mentor and cohort group they would not have survived their first year as a school counselor. If counselor educators are to better prepare school counselors for the public school work environment, counselor educators may need to become more familiar with the early developmental difficulties of school counselors. School districts may need to provide more support for first-year counselors. Finally, counselor educators may need to become more familiar with the school counselor’s work environment in order to ease the transition from training to employment.

In conclusion, this study explored the importance of a mentoring experience for first-year school counselors. These findings suggest that further research might explore the importance of the cohort for first-year counselors. Similar studies could explore the significance of mentoring in rural and suburban school districts and include secondary

school counselors. Further research also might investigate the development and needs of school counselors beyond their first year.

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Appendix

Interview Questions for Mentees

1. Describe your relationship with your mentor.
2. Talk about your view of your mentor.
3. Describe your mentor as a teacher.
4. Describe how your mentor provided support for you.
5. Describe the extent to which you felt supported by your mentor.
6. Describe your willingness to participate in the mentoring program.
7. How was your mentor accessible to you?
8. What type of feedback do you have with regards to continuing the mentor program?
9. In what ways have you used your mentor as a consultant? Counselor?
10. Discuss any changes in your skills that may be related to the mentoring program.
11. Discuss any changes in your attitude that may be related to the mentoring program.
12. What effect has your mentor had on your professional development?
13. Talk about your reactions to participating in the large group mentoring meeting that is held once a month.
14. Talk about your reactions to participating in the small groups at the monthly mentoring meeting.
15. Talk about your evaluation of the mentoring program.

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