

Parental Perceptions of Elementary School Counselors in a Suburban Atlanta School

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ABSTRACT

This action research study revealed common parental perceptions regarding the role of elementary school counselors. The paper discusses their perceptions and ways in which counselors can better communicate their role to parents. The research was conducted in an elementary school of approximately 1,136 students. The school opened in 2003, and is located in a middle to upper class suburban community northwest of Atlanta. Most parents are well-educated and actively participate in school activities with their children.

PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN A SUBURBAN ATLANTA SCHOOL

Elementary school counselors spend a significant amount of time working with parents in day-to-day consultations, student support team meetings, phone conferences, and assisting with crisis situations. However, it is the observation of the author that many parents do not

fully understand the role of the elementary school counselor

The purpose of this action research study (ARS) was to collect data that would provide a better understanding of how parents view the counselors at School A. Because it seems that the school counselor's role is misunderstood by many respondents, an important task for school counselors is to clarify the job description and communicate this information to parents.

Review of Related Literature

The literature identifies and discusses three common themes pertaining to:

- 1) defining the role of the elementary school counselor,
- 2) parent/counselor relationships, and
- 3) making parents aware of the counseling programs.

Defining the Role of the Elementary School Counselor

The role of counselors is often confused and lacks clarity for many people (Lieberman, 2004). Anderson (2002) emphasized the importance of counselors realizing their primary role in

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schools is to “implement a program and apply the distinct skills and knowledge that only they possess” (p. 7). This is sometimes forgotten by school counselors because often they are assigned numerous duties and responsibilities not addressed in the expected role of the school counselor. Parents often are not aware of the educational requirements and responsibilities of school counselors. One of the most common reasons that parents seek the assistance of an elementary school counselor is to develop strategies to change children’s behavior. Littrell & Peterson (2001) find consultation to be a common role of school counselors who are effective at offering suggestions for parents to use at home and helping teachers with ideas to use in the classroom.

According to Lieberman (2004), “All parties have a stake in, and an opportunity, to heighten the probability of promoting excellence for all schools and all children once roles and functions are clearly defined and universally applied” (p. 555). This statement reiterates the need for school counselors to clarify continually their job description with parents, because school counselors need to help parents understand that counselors are available to assist their children in the areas of academic achievement, personal/social growth, and career preparedness (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2004, 2005).

Building Collaborative Relationships with Parents

The importance of building a strong partnership between parents and school personnel, particularly counselors, is emphasized in the school counselor

literature. Giles (2005) discusses the correlation between a solid parent-school relationship and student achievement, including social and emotional development. White and Mullis (1998) support this relationship as they describe the interactions between school personnel and family members as having a “powerful effect on student success” (p. 243). In this era of emphasis on academic performance, positive parent-school relationships are a key component of and reason for building rapport with parents.

Amatea, Daniels, Bringman, and Vandiver (2004) discuss a partnership model between families and educators as a way to assist in problem solving and meeting students’ needs. This model appears to aid the Student Support Team process and the importance of creating a sense of equality among team members, including the parents, in making decisions to help the child.

Making Parents Aware of Counseling Programs

Improving communication between counselors and parents is an important aspect of making parents aware of the components of a school counseling program. Sabella and Booker (2003) suggest utilizing technology to communicate the role of the counselor to parents. They recommend using media, such as Power Point presentations to explain and promote the school guidance program.

Lenhardt & Young (2001) explain the importance of marketing school guidance programs. They suggest the use of brochures to promote the school counseling program and make parents aware of the counselor’s role. Parent newsletters, published on a regular basis

by the guidance department, are another means of providing information to parents (McFadden, 2003).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions were developed to gain insight into the respondents' understanding of the role of the elementary school counselors at School A.

1. Are parents aware of the educational requirements of an elementary school counselor?
2. What do parents think are the primary job responsibilities of an elementary school counselor?
3. Do parents consider counselors to be a vital resource in the elementary school?
4. What are some ways in which counselors can better communicate their role to parents?
5. Approximately how many parents at School A communicated with an elementary school counselor, and what were some of the most common reasons?

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

In this action research study, quantitative methods, in the form of frequency counts, and qualitative methods were used to collect information from parents at School A. In addition, the other two counselors on the school's guidance team contributed parent information in the form of archival data.

Data Sources

- Surveys – 1,136 parent surveys were sent home to include all kindergarten through fifth grade students at School A (see Appendix A).
- Interviews - All parents who completed the survey were invited to participate in a follow-up interview. Thirty-three volunteers were randomly selected for an interview by telephone or in person.
- Archived Data – The counseling team at School A compiled a list of the number of parent contacts for the 2005-2006 school year by grade level, and sorted them by themes to indicate the most common reasons for parent/counselor consultations.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed according to frequency counts. Summary tables indicate common themes from interview responses (see Appendix B and Table 1) and organize information gathered from the archived data (see Appendix C, Appendix D, and Table 2).

RESULTS OF DATA COLLECTION

A total of 1,136 parent surveys were sent home with students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Two hundred eighty-seven or 25% of the surveys were completed and returned to the principal investigator. When respondents were asked about the degree requirements for a school counselor, 41% responded correctly that a Master's Degree in Counseling was required, 29% thought that school counselors only needed a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology, and

16% answered that a Bachelor's Degree in Education was sufficient for school counselors.

When respondents were asked to identify the main job responsibilities of elementary school counselors, only 30% could name all three correctly. The correct responses were: 1) meeting with individual students on a short-term basis, 2) teaching lessons in the classrooms, and 3) facilitating student support groups.

Fifty percent of the respondents at School A strongly agreed that elementary school counselors were valuable resources, while 39% agreed with that statement. Only 2% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Thirty-three parent interviews were conducted. Although some parents were interviewed in person, the majority were questioned by telephone. As a result of the parent interviews, many suggestions were identified as possible ways to increase awareness of the counseling program at School A. A brochure or pamphlet distributed to all students at the beginning of the school year seemed to be a resource that was well-liked and most commonly mentioned by the parents (see Table 1). It was interesting to note that many respondents indicated that they would prefer to receive information in the form of a pamphlet or brochure rather than a website or blog. During the interviews, most of the parents said that they would rather read something that came home in writing, as opposed to reading it on the computer.

There are two full-time counselors and one part-time counselor at School A. After a review of records from August 2005-February 2006 for the most common reasons for parent contacts, the

common themes that emerged included: grief/loss, friendship, divorce, anger management, and school adjustment (see Table 2). Copies of the blank forms used to record parent contacts are included in Appendix C and Appendix D.

DISCUSSION

The results of this ARS indicated that although many parents are aware of the school counselor's role, there also are many parents who do not realize the scope of the job description, qualifications, and that counselors are available for all students. It may be helpful to communicate this information to parents at the beginning of each school year, possibly through the school newsletter or guidance department brochure. A brochure should be helpful in promoting the guidance program and making parents more aware of the role of elementary school counselors. Brochures could be distributed to all parents at Fall Open House and available in the main office as new parents register children throughout the school year. Brochures also might be placed in the lobby of counseling offices. School counselors may want to consider introducing themselves and explaining their program to parents through the use of a Power Point presentation during a Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) meeting.

In many of the interviews, parents expressed that their children did discuss classroom guidance lessons. This is a positive result for School A, because so much of the counselors' time is spent in classrooms.

It appears some parents may have difficulty admitting that they have

consulted with an elementary school counselor. On the parent surveys, the majority of respondents indicated that they had not contacted a counselor. Based on numbers of parent contacts, and the surveys identified by name, there were many respondents who chose not to admit having talked to a counselor. It is unclear if parents had some concerns about confidentiality, or if there were other reasons for this response. Parents also seemed reluctant to talk about specific counseling issues during the interview.

Limitations/Implications

One of the challenges with the ARS was getting the parent surveys returned. Surveys were sent home with all students, and parents were given two weeks to complete them. Brightly colored paper was used, in hopes of gaining parents' attention. Several e-mails were sent to the teachers reminding them to collect the surveys from the students.

The return rate might have been higher if incentives for both the parents and the students had been offered for participating in the surveys. Ideas include a drawing for a gift certificate for parents and an ice cream party for the class with the highest number of returned forms. Also, if there was funding available through a grant or PTSA donation, it might have been helpful to send reminder letters to the parents, a second copy of the survey, or even mail the surveys.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to consider ways in which counselors at School A could better communicate their

role to parents. Based on the information collected from the respondents, parents would like to be more informed about our role through the distribution of a brochure at the beginning of the school year.

Overall, the results of the study seemed to indicate that parent participants had a positive attitude towards the counselors and considered them a valuable resource.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

It might be interesting to complete this study at other elementary schools within the same system, especially to find out if the results would differ at schools with less parental involvement and varying socio-economic levels. Counselors may benefit by discovering ways to increase communication with parents, creating a stronger awareness of their role, and, therefore, contributing to the academic achievement of students.

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**APPENDIX A
PARENTAL SURVEY**

Grade Level(s) of Child/ren: _____ Teacher's Name(s) _____

1. What is the name of the counselor assigned to your child or children's grade level(s) this year?
(Circle all that apply.)

- (a) Counselor A (b) Counselor B (c) Counselor C

2. What degree is required of an elementary school counselor? (Circle one.)

- (a) Bachelor's Degree in Psychology
(b) Bachelor's Degree in Education
(c) Any Bachelor's Degree
(d) Master's Degree in Counseling
(e) Any Master's Degree

3. Which of the following is a part of an elementary school counselor's job?
(Circle any and all that apply.)

- (a) Meet with individual students on a short-term basis
(b) Diagnose children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
(c) Teach lessons to students in classrooms (i.e. Study Skills, Career Awareness, Friendship/Social Skills)
(d) Facilitate student support groups (i.e. Divorce, Grief/Loss)
(e) Administer psychological tests
(f) Individual counseling on a long-term basis

4. Which, if any, of the following activities with a counselor has your child discussed with you? (Circle any and all that apply.)

- (a) A lesson taught by the counselor in the classroom
(b) A student support group meeting
(c) An individual conversation with the counselor
(d) My child has not discussed any counselor interactions with me.
(e) Other _____

5. Have you ever contacted an elementary school counselor about your child to discuss: (Circle any and all that apply.)

- (a) Academics (b) Behavior (c) Social Skills/Friendship
(d) Grief/Loss (e) Separation/Divorce (f) Anger Management Strategies
(g) I have not contacted an elementary school counselor.
(h) Other _____

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6. Having an elementary school counselor at my child's school is a valuable resource.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Additional comments:

*If you would be willing to answer a few follow-up questions by phone or in person, please provide your name and telephone number below.

Name of parent completing survey (Optional)

Phone number (Optional)

APPENDIX B
PARENTAL INTERVIEW

Grade Level of Child/ren: _____

1. Tell me about your communication with a counselor(s) at our school.

2. In what ways has a counselor at our school helped you or your child?

3. What do you think are the main job responsibilities of a counselor at our school?

4. What suggestions do you have for making parents more aware of the role of the counselors at our school?

TABLE 1

Parent Suggestions for Increasing Awareness of Counseling Program

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brochure/pamphlet describing the guidance program sent home with all students at the beginning of the school year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselors should give a brief presentation describing their program at the Fall PTSA Open House.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide grade level appropriate newsletters with helpful information for parents regarding common childhood behaviors to expect at certain ages. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselors should frequently update their website/blog.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselors should have teachers distribute brochures/pamphlets at Fall PTSA Open House/Sneak-a-Peek, and briefly talk to parents about the role of the counselor. Counselors should also be available in a designated area that evening to meet with parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue submitting monthly articles for parents in the PTSA newsletter under "Counselor's Corner."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Counselors should include an introductory brochure/pamphlet in the new student registration packets that are distributed throughout the school year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit introductory letter about counselors to be printed in the student handbook that will be distributed to all parents in the Fall.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brief introductory letter from each counselor with individual pictures, so parents can identify their child's counselor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselors should distribute a brief, one page flyer explaining their role to parents.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselors should identify their classroom guidance lessons/activities so that parents will know that they taught the lesson, and not the teacher. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselors should present a brief program at PTSA meetings when students are performing, thus reaching many parents.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselors should introduce their program to parents at Kindergarten Orientation.. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselors should include a note to parents that explain that they are available to all students and not just for crisis situations.

TABLE 2

Parent Contacts and Common Reasons for Consulting with Counselors

August 2005 – February 2006

Grade Level	#	Common Reasons
Kindergarten	25	School Adjustment, Behavior, Friendship, Grief/Loss, Economic Assistance
First	76	Divorce, School Adjustment, Grief/Loss, Moving
Second	89	Divorce, New students from hurricane areas, Friendship, Academics, Career Day, Student Support Team, Social/Emotional concerns, Anger Management, School Adjustment, Grief/Loss
Third	57	Divorce, Friendship, Academics, Anger Management, Grief/Loss, Economic Assistance, Terminal Illness, Teacher Conflicts, School Adjustment, Honesty
Fourth	65	Anger Management, Resources for private counseling, Divorce, Group Information, Grief/Loss
Fifth	71	Human Growth/Dev. Program, Friendship, Grief/Loss, Divorce, Social/Emotional concerns, Behavior, Anger Management, Motivation, Organization, Student Support Team
TOTAL Parent Contacts	383	Most Common Themes: Grief/Loss, Friendship, Divorce, Anger Management, School Adjustment

APPENDIX C

Fax:
E-mail:

Counselor: _____

School: _____ Month: _____

COUNSELING SERVICES	
Individual Counseling: Number of sessions with individual students	
Group Counseling: Number of sessions conducted with 3 to 15 students for personal/social support	
Classroom Guidance Sessions: Number of sessions conducted with a classroom of students for skill building.	
Group Guidance Sessions: Number of sessions conducted with 3 or more students for skill-building.	
Staff Consultations/Education: Number of consultations with staff concerning student/school needs. Include Student Support Team meetings and staff development.	
Parent Consultations/Education: Number of telephone or personal conferences with parents. Includes classes and presentations to parent groups.	
Community Agency Consultations/Referrals: Number of consultations with or referrals made to community agencies.	
COUNSELING CASES	
Academic Services Including Test Preparations/Interpretation: Number of student contacts in the area of test preparation, interpretation, and other testing services. Does not include test administration.	
Academic Service Including Dropouts: Number of student contacts because of attendance-related problems. This includes dropout prevention and recovery.	
Discipline Services: Number of student contacts because of school discipline problems.	
Post-Secondary Education/Career Planning Service: Number of student contacts for post-secondary educational planning and for career planning.	
Emotional/Family/Health/Personal/Homeless Services: Number of student contacts because of emotional, family, health-related, personal, or social problems.	
Special Education Related Services: Number of students contacts to discuss services required by the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP)	

APPENDIX D

DAILY COUNSELING RECORD

Date _____

7:30
7:45
8:00
8:15
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EVE.

Calls to Make:

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____

Consultations to Have:

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____

Students to See:

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____
- 5. _____
- 6. _____
- 7. _____

Tasks to Accomplish:

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____

Written Communication:

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____

Meetings to Attend:

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Count:

- | | |
|----------------|------------------------|
| Ind. Cl. _____ | Abuse _____ |
| Grp. C. _____ | Attendance _____ |
| Grp. C. _____ | Discipline _____ |
| Cl. G. _____ | Dropout _____ |
| Parent _____ | Ed/Career _____ |
| Staff _____ | Personal/Social _____ |
| Agency _____ | Substance Abuse _____ |
| | Suicide _____ |
| | TestPrep/Interp. _____ |