# School counselors: a review of contemporary issues

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Abstract

This article seeks to review the topic of school counselors and the contemporary issues surrounding this profession. An introduction to the profession and overview of its history provides a comprehensive basis on which to understand today's school counseling profession. An examination of contemporary themes of school counseling will include job descriptions, preparation, mental health issues, families and communities, student success, leadership, and issues in technology. Counselor identity, functions, and ethics will seek to understand how a counselor comes to relate personally and professionally to the position, how the functions of a school counselor are ever-changing, and what impact ethics have upon the profession. The literature review will contain both empirical and summative resources from professional sources.

Keywords: school, counselor, school counselor, mental health, community, advocate
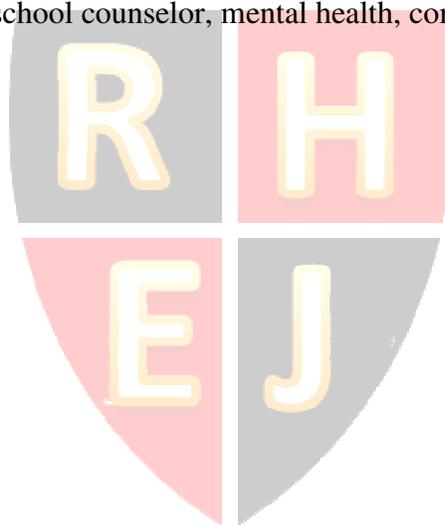
INTRODUCTION

Today's school counselor is faced with a changing environment in terms of roles, responsibilities, students, administrative issue, and opportunities. From school counseling's early days of focusing on vocational training, the school counseling profession looks nothing like it did from today's perspective. This paper will seek to review the history, issues, and challenges facing today's school counseling profession while at the same time seeking to provide some insights which might be helpful for those wanting to enter this field.

Historical Perspectives of School Counseling

School counseling can trace its roots to the early days of the 20th century. The entire world had changed from an agrarian and rural framework to that of an advancing American genre full of new opportunity and development. This development included a rapid increase in industrialization. As a result, jobs were being created at an ever-changing pace that would transform the very national fiber of the country. According to Gladding (2009), counseling as a profession was just getting started, having evolved from a mixture of psychoanalytical and social philosophies. In the early 1900s, Frank Parsons emerged as a major proponent of guidance counseling. Gladding (2009) declared: "Frank Parsons, often called the founder of guidance, focused his work on growth and prevention" (p. 9). A school superintendent in Grand Rapids, Michigan by the name of Jesse B. Davis became the first person to actually implement a regular review of guidance instruction for his students. As a result, many people began to understand the significant contribution of the school to vocational guidance and career instruction.

CONTEMPORARY THEMES IN SCHOOL COUNSELING

Job Descriptions

Today's school counselors are a different breed. According to the American School Counseling Association's ethical standards for school counselors (2010), the role of the professional school counselor has been widely defined for purposes of their members:

> The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is a professional
> organization whose members are school counselors certified/licensed in school
> counseling with unique qualifications and skills to address all students' academic,
> personal/social and career development needs (Preamble, paragraph 1).

Clearly, today's school counselor must answer to a much more complicated job description. With the constant changes in this contemporary society, adequately defining and encompassing the role of today's school counselor has become a moving target at best. Trolley (2011) contended that many school counselors operate with any official and clear job description. Perhaps this is due to the changing educational horizon, communities, administration, and federal influences of policies and procedures on schools and school districts.

Preparation

Finding a consistent and over-arching description of school counselors' duties creates a problem with the preparation for counselors in terms of programs. The needs of one school may not be the needs of another school. In comparison, the program of one university may not prepare school counselors just like the program of another university. Often, guidance strategies come down to cultural issues within the same school. Trolley (2011) asserted it has always been the challenge for counselors to "assist all students in their academic, career, and personal-social development" (p. 17). Solmonson, Roaten, and Sawyer (2011) found in their study "school districts and universities have a professional imperative to partner together to recruit individuals to the profession and appropriately train them to meet the developmental needs of all students (p. 48). Having fully equipped and prepared school counselors has been seen as essential for all involved. Epstein and Van Voorhis (2010) connect the success of the school counselor to the mission of the school (and, by implication, the district). In fact, Trolley (2011), found that "very little research exists that pertains to the adequacy of school counselor preparation, given the current demands of the job (p. 21).Hence, inadequate or ill-designed school counselor preparation may hinder the success of the student, counselor, and school.

Mental Health Issues

Contemporary issues related to mental health affect school counselors personally and professionally. Counselors often suffer personal psychological stress as well as professional stress as they seek to provide for the mental health needs of students. Ringeisen, Henderson, and Hoagwood (2003) declared that schools are a key factor in the delivery of mental health services to students. School counselors are at the forefront of working with students suffering from mental health issues. For many school counselors, the never-ending demands to be guidance counselor, school administrator, extra-curricular organizer, and mental health expert have produced an incredible amount of stress. McCarthy, Kerne, Calfa, Lambert, and Guzman (2010) conducted a survey of the demands on school counselors and the effect of those demands on stress perception. Although most of the counselors interviewed found the school counseling career very rewarding, many of their numbers had been impacted by emotional and physical exhaustion as well as burnout.

Most schools do not have adequate mental health services provided internally or externally. Hamlet, Gergar, and Schaefer (2011) concluded that the school counselor was often the one called upon to locate the available and local resources to assist students, families, and schools in crisis. Even in regards to finding support for children who suffered chronic illnesses they highlighted the role of the school counselor as a community leader: "As community leaders, school counselors initiate the support process through collaboration with the various professionals in the student's life and by providing responsive services to the student, the student's family, and the community" (Hamlet, et al., 2011, p. 202).

Families and Communities

Some of the most fragmented social entities involve schools, students, and families. For the school counselor, the daunting task of bringing these elements together is problematic at best. Epstein and Van Voorhis (2010) discovered student success could best be had when students,

parents, counselors, and administrators came together in a cohesive partnership. This partnership can also extend beyond those into community leaders, health and mental health agencies, community organizations, and faith based groups. Walker, Shenker, and Hoover-Dempsey (2010) maintained that school counselors cannot bring about student success by themselves. They must build upon a network of resources which of necessity involves families and communities. Building a network support for students is a delicate and deliberate aspect of the school counselor's role. Becoming familiar with the resources both in and out of school can often help build the bridge that will interconnect these various groups.

When working with families and communities, the issue of multicultural competence and awareness must be addressed. Ahmed, Wilson, and Henriksen (2010) reviewed the key elements to helping counselors in general become more sensitive to and capable in their cultural awareness and advocacy. These included providing support systems to encourage counselors to be strong advocates for social justice, participatory training which is more fundamental in nature, creation of support groups, and personal awareness through authentic communication. School counselors must develop their multicultural vigor through introspection and cutting edge training. Culturally sensitive school counselors are the key to community and family involvement in the area of student success.

Student Success

Student success means different things to different people. For students, it means graduation. For parents, student success means their child moving smoothly through the educational system in preparation for college or career. For the school, student success means continued state and federal funding. Student success then becomes an inter-connected issue that affects contemporary communities and society. The school counselor is the go-to person for student success. White and Kelly (2010) asseverated the role of the school counselor in the six key intervention strategies for student success: social support, monitoring and mentoring, personal and social skill development, parent involvement, academic instruction, and academic support.

With teachers focused on teaching to the achievement scoring, counselors are left with the responsibility of making sure the coordinated efforts of all related to the student come together. When the school counselor is called upon to be the administrator or disciplinarian of the school, he or she may be looked upon as just another Principal or Assistant Principal by the students. Making the mental transition from seeing the counselor as a friend and resource rather than a threat may create a disconnection which may complicate communication and stifle trust between the student and the counselor.

Leadership

Seeing the school counselor as a leader is somewhat different than seeing the school counselor in terms of leadership. Obviously, the school counselor is on the leadership team as it relates to administration. But school counselors must learn to lead out if they want to see effective change in their students and in the school they serve. Mason (2010) found that school counseling programs could be more effectively implemented if the school counselor manifested certain leadership skills. One of the key findings of this study had to do with reliability which is a key quality of an effective leader. According to Mason (2010), "School counselors who follow

through on commitments can be seen as reliable, and they are therefore more likely to be received well and sought out by students, parents, and staff" (pp. 282-283). Schools and school administrators who intentionally leave schools counselors off the administrative teams do their students, parents, school, and community a disservice. According to Ryan, Kaffenberger, and Carroll (2011), school counselors are, after all, educators who believe "early intervention is an important part of any counseling program (p. 218). School counselors who have leadership experience have been found to be prime leaders in terms of mentorship and consultation. School counselors would do well to include leadership development in any and all continuing education programs or classes.

Issues in Technology

Contemporary issues demand school counselors become familiar with technological advances and concepts. Today's student, though perhaps failing English and Composition, is highly skilled in computer, smart-phone, and audio-video technology. The use of emailing and texting has created a sub-culture within the culture. According to Burrow-Sanchez, Call, Zheng, and Drew (2011), many students who have trouble talking or writing about their feelings are typically able to express themselves electronically. School counselors find themselves in an advantageous position to help student who may be having difficulty because of technology. This also includes online victimization. Because one of the key problems with contemporary society involves a communication breakdown between parents and students, counselors are often in the position for real and substantive contact with students.

COUNSELOR IDENTITY, FUNCTIONS, AND ETHICS

Identity

Counselors must have an idea of their own identity, both personally and professionally. It is important for the counselor to be aware of their own life issues as they seek to help others. A high level of self -awareness will assure the therapeutic experience remains focused on the needs of the client instead of being shifted to the needs of the counselor. Corey, Corey, and Callanan (2011) suggest two particular areas to explore in order to maintain a high level of self-awareness: motivations for becoming a counselor and personal problems and conflicts. The counselor should always work towards the best interests of their clients, and should encourage autonomy at all times. Corey also suggests counselors engage themselves in personal therapy and offers many suggestions for therapeutic experiences which will increase availability to clients. It is suggested that therapists have an increased sense of self-awareness and self-understanding when engaged in their own therapy. Working through issues and biases also help avoid the practice of countertransference. Another concern among the counseling profession is the subject of stress and burn-out which are ongoing challenges among helping professionals. In order to sustain a competent and ethical practice, counselors must engage in self-care to maintain a healthy psychological and physical well-being.

Functions

The function of the school counselor has evolved over the years and no longer consists of just schedule changes, college applications, and dealing with troubled kids. According to the American School Counseling Association's website, school counselors involved in developing school guidance curriculum, student planning, individual and group counseling, consultations, referrals, psycho-education, intervention, and advocacy (ASCA, 2009). School counselors must be competent and willing to work with an extremely diverse group of individuals. The responsibilities of the school counselor include helping students in the areas of academic achievement, personal/social development and career development. School counselors are often the first ones to see a problem with a student. In their empirical bullying victimization, Cornell and Mehta (2011) concluded that counselors' ability to identify victims of bullying were positively correlated with the student self-reports of bullying. This confirms that counselors are often on the leading edge of knowing what is happening with and to their students.

Ethics

School counselors are guided by the same basic principles which guide all counselors. The American School Counselor's Association Code of Ethics provides a comprehensive review of the ethical guidelines for school counselors (ASCA Code of Ethics, 2010). These guidelines cover a wide range of issues including responsibility to students, confidentiality, counseling plans, dual relationships, referrals, technology, responsibilities to colleagues and professional organizations, and maintenance of standards. Following a strong ethical pathway involves being culturally competent in this contemporary age. Evans, Zambrano, Cook, Moyer, and Duffey (2011) maintained that this was one of the most challenging fields for new school counselors.

CONCLUSION

The school counseling profession of today's world is dynamically different than its historical beginnings. Contemporary issues, education, structure, challenges, and students provide a complex backdrop for this helping profession. At the core of this type of service will always be a unique and distinct calling to help students and promote their academic, physical, and emotional well-being. Today's school counselor is essential to the success of both the school and student body.

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