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SCHOOL COUNSELORS' PERCEPTIONS OF COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL COUNSELING (CSC) ADHERENCE AND IMPLEMENTATION

Article by Nicholas Elam, Rachel Geesa, Renae Mayes, and Kat McConnell

Abstract

Many states are introducing or revamping evaluation systems for school counselors. The viability of such systems depends greatly on their ability to help school counselors implement and adhere to comprehensive school counseling programs. This study illuminates counselors' perceptions of the evaluation process regarding the four components (foundation, management, delivery, accountability) of the American School Counselors Association national model. Surveys of school counselors reveal they perceive the evaluation process to help very little in implementing and adhering to the foundation, management, and accountability components of comprehensive school counseling programs, and to be only somewhat helpful in implementing and adhering to the delivery component. This study indicates a need for renewed emphasis on preparing principals to effectively facilitate the evaluation process.

Introduction

The purpose of our study was to explore perspectives of school counselors related to school counselor evaluation processes and trends. The role of evaluating and supervising school counselors most often falls to the school principal (Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009). However, issues may arise when principals have limited knowledge of the role of professional school counselors and do not know how to appropriately evaluate their counselors. While appropriate evaluation based on school counselor roles and standards has the ability to enhance the counselor's role in the school, inappropriate evaluation may damage a counselor's effectiveness and may even impact their job security (Cobb, 2011; Janson, Militello, & Kosine, 2008).

Our rationale for the study was to gain more knowledge related to school counselors' perceptions of their evaluation process in relation to the implementation and adherence of comprehensive school counseling (CSC) programs within their schools. Previous

studies have expressed a need for principals to offer better evaluation and supervision procedures which are based off of existing school counseling theories and models, and which are able to effectively assess the unique duties and roles of the counselor within the school setting (Chata & Loesch, 2007; Somody, Henderson, Cook, & Zambrano, 2008; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). Our study seeks to discover more about the school counselors' perceptions of current evaluation standards and the way they affect the counselors' abilities to implement and adhere to comprehensive school counseling programs.

Literature Review

School counselors and school principals are trained under different models in order to prepare them for two different but vital roles within the school. Despite their separate trainings and different focuses, both roles are expected to collaborate and work in a complementary fashion within the school setting. When counselors and principals combine their separate expertise, the school and students benefit from a more comprehensive system of support and leadership (McCarty, Wallin, & Boggan, 2014; Rock, Remley, & Range, 2017). However, when counselors and principals are not on the same page and do not understand one another's roles, the school may suffer from a lack of congruence and collaboration, and counselors especially are at risk of feeling ineffective, being assigned to inappropriate roles, and eventual burnout (Bardhoshi, Schweinle, & Duncan, 2014).

Previous research has consistently shown that principals are often lacking in an accurate understanding of the counselor's role according to the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) model of school counseling. Due to this lack of understanding, principals may assign counselors to incongruent tasks within the school (such as student discipline, lunch supervision, or other miscellaneous tasks) and place expectations on counselors which may detract from the counselor's intended purpose in the school, or even directly conflict with the counselor's ethical obligations (Bardhoshi & Duncan, 2009; Bore & Bore, 2009; Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, 2009; Wingfield et al., 2010; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012).

This lack of understanding between counselors and principals becomes an issue of particular importance and concern when it comes to school counselor evaluation. Due to the power dynamic within the school, it often falls to the principal to evaluate the job performance of the school counselor, despite the difference in expertise and the often existing gap in the principal's knowledge and understanding of the ASCA counseling model (Wingfield et al., 2010). For principals who are not familiar with the unique aspects of the school counseling role, they may default to using the same evaluation methods which they use to evaluate teachers or other staff members, resulting in dissatisfactory and inappropriate feedback (Cinotti, 2014). According to one survey, just over half of school counselors reported being evaluated using a counseling-specific evaluation method (Cleveland & Hartline, 2017). Considering that principals hold the power to hire and dismiss counselors based on evaluation and performance, this potential for inaccurate and inappropriate evaluation can place undue strain and stress

on counselors who feel that they must conform to the principal's expectations in order to maintain their position, even when the principal's expectations conflict with the counselor's intended duties according to the ASCA model (Janson et al., 2008; Wingfield et al., 2010).

This is not to say that principals should not be completing evaluations of and offering feedback to school counselors. Cisler and Bruce (2012) found that both practicing and in-training counselors considered evaluation of school personnel (including counselors) a vital and important role of the school principal, and Cleveland and Hartline (2017) reported that 61% of school counselors believe an administrator evaluation based upon the ASCA model would be useful for them. Additionally, Clemens and colleagues (2009) recommend that counselors specifically seek out regular feedback from their principals in order to improve their own performance and to gauge their principals' understanding of the counseling role within the school and thus open more collaborative discussions about the counseling program.

In order for principal evaluation of the counselor to be effective, principals should have a solid understanding of the counselor's role within the school and the ASCA model, and implement an evaluation/feedback method specific to the counselor role (Chata & Loesch, 2007; Cobb, 2011; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). In order to achieve this, some states, such as Tennessee, are pushing for a counseling model based evaluation system (Cobb, 2011). Other experts, such as Cleveland and Hartline (2017), have noted the lack of a counselor-specific evaluation measure and created their own. Aside from these efforts, implementing early education of principals on the counselor role in pre-service training programs may be an effective way to ensure principals entering the field understand and appreciate the unique role of the school counselor (Bringman, Mueller, & Lee, 2010; Chata & Loesch, 2007; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000) We examined the following research questions in this study:

1. To what extent do school counselors believe the evaluation process helps them to implement comprehensive school counseling programs?
2. To what extent do school counselors believe the evaluation process helps them to adhere to comprehensive school counseling programs?

Theoretical Framework

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) developed a national model that includes a framework for data-driven, comprehensive school counseling (CSC) programs in elementary and secondary education for increased student achievement (2012a; 2012b). The four components of The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs include: Foundation, Management, Delivery, and Accountability (2012a; 2012b). School counselors implement this model with CSC programs grounded in data and focused on academic, career, and social/emotional development of every student.

ASCA (2012b) identifies and defines the four components for the framework within The ASCA National Model. Within Foundation, school counselors are responsible for creating CSC programs “that focus on student outcomes, teach student competencies, and are delivered with identified professional competencies” (p. 2). Through Management, “school counselors incorporate organizational assessments and tools that are concrete, clearly delineated, and reflective of the school’s needs” (p. 2). ASCA defines tools and assessments that may be used, such as annual and weekly calendars, use of data, use of time assessment, annual agreements with administrators, advisory councils, action plans, and school counselor competency and school counseling program assessments.

In Delivery, “school counselors provide services to students, parents, school staff and the community” in direct services (e.g., school counseling core curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services) and indirect services (e.g., referrals for additional assistance, consultation, and collaboration) (ASCA, 2012b, pp. 3-4). The majority (80% or more) of school counselor activities should be focused on this component. Within Accountability, school counselors analyze school counseling programs and school data to identify the level of effectiveness of schools counseling programs that can be measured (ASCA, 2012b). School counselor’s performance is evaluated on “basic standards of practice expected of school counselors implementing a comprehensive school counseling program” (p. 4).

Methods

PARTICIPANTS

Participants in this study included 484 professionals in school counseling roles, including school counselors who also serve as directors of guidance, counseling grant coordinators, college and career counselors, and intervention specialists. Most participants identified as White (90.1%) and women (84.9%). The majority of participants 40.3% (195 participants) are in high school settings followed by 27.5% (133 participants) are in elementary school settings, 21.5% (104 participants) are in middle school/junior high settings, and 10.1% (49 participants) are in various P-12 educational settings (i.e. K-12, K-8, 5-6, 6-12, etc.). The majority of participants (59.9%, 290 participants) had over 7 years of experience as a professional school counselor. In terms of school settings, participants were fairly evenly represented: 38.6% in rural settings; 39.9% in suburban settings; and 21.5% in urban settings. Participants indicated that the evaluator for school counselors and school counseling practice was typically school principals (69.2%) followed by assistant school principals (19.8%), district level administrators (3.1%) and directors of guidance/school counseling (2.7%). The majority of participants (35.3%) served economically diverse student populations with 25-50% of students on free and reduced meals. Further, the majority of participants (60.5%) served in schools with student populations with less than 25% of students of color.

Measures

SCHOOL COUNSELOR EVALUATION SURVEY

The school counselor evaluation survey included 17 Likert-type questions related to experiences and perceptions of school counselors regarding the evaluation process. Survey questions were created based on literature regarding school counseling evaluation as well as school counselor/administrator collaboration in addition to the ASCA National Model (2012). The survey included eight questions that focused specifically on the adherence and implementation of the four components of the ASCA National Model (2012; Foundation, Management, Delivery, and Accountability). These questions asked participants to consider the extent to which the evaluation process helps school counselors implement and adhere to the respective components of the ASCA National Model (e.g. To what extent do you believe the evaluation process helps you implement the Delivery component of the ASCA National Model of comprehensive school counseling programs? To what extent do you believe the evaluation process helps you adhere to the Foundation component of the ASCA National Model of comprehensive school counseling programs?). Questions were on a 5-point Likert-type scale where ratings of 1 indicated “not at all” and ratings of 5 indicated “a great extent”. Six additional questions were included to understand perceptions around utility of evaluation system (e.g. To what extent do you believe the evaluation process can help your school counselor to develop professionally?) in addition to participants’ preparation to meet the highest expectations based on the evaluation system (e.g., How well-prepared do you feel to meet the highest expectations of the counselor evaluation system?).

Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire included 15 questions related to participant background, educational and professional experiences, and school context.

PROCEDURES

The present study is part of a larger investigation regarding perceptions on school counselor evaluation among school administrators and school counselors. The research design is an exploratory study on school counselor evaluation practices, policies, and trends. After IRB approval, researchers contacted state Departments of Education, national and state-level school counseling professional associations, and school districts to invite school counselors to participate in the study. Invitations included a Qualtrics survey link which brought potential participants to an informed consent page followed by the survey.

Data Analysis

Authors used descriptive statistics to answer the two research questions. For the first research question (To what extent do school counselors believe the evaluation process helps them to implement comprehensive school counseling programs?) authors computed means of four survey questions regarding perceptions around the evaluation process helping with the implementation of ASCA National Model school counseling program components (i.e. *Foundation, Management, Delivery, and Accountability*; To what extent do you believe the evaluation process helps you *implement* the Delivery component of the ASCA National Model of comprehensive school counseling programs?). Means for each ASCA National Model program component were reviewed in order to understand the extent to which the evaluation process supports school counselors implementing comprehensive counseling programs as a whole. For the second research question (To what extent do school counselors believe the evaluation process helps them to *adhere* to comprehensive school counseling programs?) authors calculated means of four survey questions regarding perceptions around the evaluation processing guiding adherence to ASCA National Model (2012) school counseling program components (i.e. To what extent do you believe the evaluation process helps you adhere to the Foundation component of the ASCA National Model of comprehensive school counseling programs?). Means for each of the ASCA National Model components were reviewed to understand the extent to which the evaluation process supports participants adhering to comprehensive school counseling programs.

Results

As previously mentioned, participants indicated that school counselor evaluations are primarily conducted by school principals and assistant principals (69.2% and 19.8% respectively). In regards to the four components of the ASCA National Model (*Foundation, Management, Delivery, and Accountability*), participants indicated that the evaluation process helped “very little” in the *implementation* of each component (See Table 1). The item with lowest level agreement among participants was the extent to which the evaluation process helps school counselors implement the management component of the ASCA National Model (M= 2.44). Participants reported similarly for foundation (M=2.51) and accountability (M= 2.63) components. However, the highest level of agreement among participants was the extent to which the evaluation process helps school counselors implement the delivery component of the ASCA National Model (M=2.80), which is approaching “somewhat” helpful. Essentially, participants believed that for each component of the ASCA National Model, the evaluation process only helped “very little” in regards to the implementation of foundation, management, and accountability components of comprehensive school counseling models, whereas participants believed the evaluation process was approaching somewhat helpful in the delivery component of comprehensive school counseling models.

Participants reported similar results regarding the evaluation process being helpful in the *adherence* components of comprehensive school counseling models (See Table 1). The lowest level of agreement for participants was the extent to which the evaluation process helped school counselors adhere to the management (M=2.47) component. Likewise, participants reported similarly for foundation (M = 2.53) and accountability (M=

2.66) components. Regarding adherence to the delivery component, participants reported the highest level of agreement ($M = 2.82$). As with implementation, participants rated the evaluation process as helping “very little” for all ASCA National Model components with the exception of the delivery component which approaches “somewhat” helpful.

Table 1. School Counselors' Perceptions on Comprehensive School Counseling (CSC) Adherence and Implementation

Likert Scale Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
To what extent do you as a school counselor believe the evaluation process helps you <u>implement</u> the Foundation component of the ASCA National Model of comprehensive school counseling programs?	482	2.51	1.05
To what extent do you as a school counselor believe the evaluation process helps you <u>adhere</u> to the Foundation component of the ASCA National Model of comprehensive school counseling programs?	483	2.53	1.05
To what extent do you as a school counselor believe the evaluation process helps you <u>implement</u> the Management component of the ASCA National Model of comprehensive school counseling programs?	482	2.44	0.978
To what extent do you as a school counselor believe the evaluation process helps you <u>adhere</u> to the Management component of the ASCA National Model of comprehensive school counseling programs?	483	2.47	0.986
To what extent do you as a school counselor believe the evaluation process helps you <u>implement</u> the Delivery component of the ASCA National Model of comprehensive school counseling programs?	483	2.80	1.10
To what extent do you as a school counselor believe the			

Discussion

This study builds on previous research that speaks to the importance of the proper implementation of and adherence to comprehensive school counseling programs, in part due to its ability to prevent counselor burnout and turnover (Bardhoshi, Schweinle, & Duncan, 2014; Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009). This study, through a survey directly related to the counselor evaluation process, indicates a need for renewed emphasis on principal preparation and training regarding the roles and responsibilities of school counselors, reaffirming a need indicated by previous research that used different methods and approaches, whether through a more direct examination of principals' perceptions of counselor roles and responsibilities (Aliyev, Erguner-Tekinalp, Ulker, & Shine-Edizer, 2012; Bringman, Mueller, & Lee, 2010; Bardhoshi & Duncan, 2009), through examination of counselor induction programs (Bickmore & Curry, 2013), etc.

While previous studies have focused on counselors' perceptions of their evaluators, this particular study focuses on counselors' perceptions of the evaluation process itself. Findings indicate a need to further improve the evaluation process itself, as counselor evaluation systems appear to have limited alignment to ASCA standards.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include the location of participants (surveys were sent to counselors in Ohio, Indiana, and Colorado). These states were chosen as they are at various stages of implementing counselor evaluation reform.

Conclusion

Further research is needed on counselor perceptions and administrator perceptions of the counselor evaluation process in other states, particularly from the many states that are rolling out or revamping their counselor evaluation process. Further research is also needed regarding the specific approaches and effectiveness of graduate-level principal preparation programs, state-level departments of education, and local-level school district/corporations (Graham, Desmond, & Zinsser, 2011; Fitch, Newby, Ballestero, & Marshall, 2001) in preparing and training school administrators to evaluate school counselors in a way that promotes the implementation of and adherence to comprehensive school counseling programs, specifically related to foundation, management, delivery, and accountability. As research indicates, promoting this end serves the interests of students, counselors, and schools as a whole.

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