Counselors’ Perceptions of Their Leadership Roles in Schools

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Leadership

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Today, the role of the school counselor has changed from providing peripheral student support to leading a comprehensive counseling program that promotes student success. Counselors in today’s schools are expected to fulfill many important tasks. They must align their counseling program with the school reform standards and are expected to share the responsibility for student accountability (Dahir, 2004). These counselors have the primary responsibility to design, implement, and evaluate a comprehensive school counseling program that effects systemic school change and supports the mission of their school. In order to do this effectively, the school counselor must collaborate with administrators, teachers, students, parents, and additional support personnel to improve student achievement (Baker, 2001; DeVoss & Andrews, 2006; House, Martin & Ward, 2002).

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has also identified leadership as an essential element of the thirteen school counselor performance standards which are included in the accountability section of the ASCA National Model. Strong leadership is needed in order for the counselor to put into practice these standards at the campus level. These standards include developing, performing, and evaluating the school counselor program (ASCA, 2003).

The Education Trust (2003) has identified school counselors as an essential part of school reform in order for all students to reach high academic goals. In order to provide for the success of every student, school counselors should be active leaders who have high standards and provide support for both teachers and students. They should be committed to excellence in education and use their skills to collaborate with students,
teachers, parents and administrators in order to bring about change that provides for the success of all students.

The mission of the school impacts the development and implementation of the counseling program at each school (Fitch & Marshall, 2004; Green & Keys, 2001). The school counseling program should be based on the mission of the school and the needs of the students. The program should be integrated with the activities of the school and responsive to student needs, which are based on clear, decisive data. School counselors must be a member of the school leadership team in order to make policy decisions at the campus level (Paisley & McMahon, 2001).

School counselors can greatly influence the school climate (Fitch & Marshall, 2004.) They help students gain access to rigorous courses and promote equity for all students. In doing so, they tie school counseling to the mission of the school which in turn creates a school climate of expectations for academic success utilizing a rigorous curriculum (Gysbers, 2001; House & Hayes, 2002). Counselors also help to identify threats to a positive school climate. They identify and communicate teacher concerns to administrators (Colbert, Pérusse, Bouknight & Ballard, 2006). They also provide teachers with solution-oriented consultation in order to help them function better under stress and improve their attitudes toward the school and the students (Fitch & Marshall, 2004).

Collaboration is a key component in the leadership role of school counselors. Counselors should accept leadership responsibilities in their buildings in order to create methods and means which support collaborative counselor relationships with all school stakeholders. They must network with teachers, families, and community members in
order to provide resources and services for students (Green & Keys, 2001). They must collaborate with all members of the school community in order to facilitate systemic school change that will improve the academic achievement of all students (DeVoss & Andrews, 2006; Paisley & McMahon, 2001).

The principal and the counselor should have a unique partnership that provides for student success and positively affects the school’s mission and climate (Stone & Clark, 2001). While the principal is the ultimate leader of the school, the counselor fulfills many leadership responsibilities (Henderson, 1999). The school principal and counselor must be involved in a partnership that leads the school to improve teaching and learning and advocates for equal opportunity and access to a quality education for all students (Jackson, Snow, & Boes, 2002; Stone & Clark, 2001). School principals should support their counselors and value their roles and responsibilities. Principals and counselors should collaborate in order to provide a positive impact on the academic achievement of all students (Zalaquett, 2005).

A comprehensive counseling program can offer significant assistance for the academic success of all students. To implement school reform that improves student achievement school counselors must define and expand their role in order to be proactive leaders who are student advocates. They must be included as a member of the school leadership team. They must collaboratively work with the school faculty and the community in order to build consensus in decisions that influence system-wide changes (House & Hayes, 2002).
Statement of the Problem

Despite the fact that educational leadership has been in the forefront of school counselor standards and expectations, Gale and Austin (2003) asserted that the professional counselor’s identity was not clearly defined. In addition, school counselor leadership has not been emphasized in counselor preparation programs and practice. Students in counselor education programs have not been provided with the knowledge of leadership skills which involve social and systems change, political climates and power structures of schools (House & Sears, 2002). Some school counselors do not perceive they are prepared to fulfill the role of school leader (DeVoss & Andrews, 2006). Colbert, Vernon-Jones and Pransky (2006) believed that some counselors have a great deal of knowledge and expertise in the traditional school counselor role and very little knowledge and experience with the current counselor standards. Many school counselors do not view themselves as leaders in their schools (Stone & Clark, 2001). Additionally, school counselors are not currently working as leaders in their school (House, 2005). This is a result of the school administrators not knowing or understanding the counseling goals and the appropriate roles and tasks of the school counselor. Some do not include the counselor as part of an administrative team working together for school reform (Baker, 2001; Paisley & McMahon, 2001).

Although school counselors are expected to be educational leaders who are skilled in effectively leading counseling program development and maintenance, there is little research in the literature that addresses school counselors’ perceptions concerning the leadership roles they assume within schools. Kaplan and Evans (1999) found that effective counselors do view themselves as school leaders who collaborate with all
stakeholders to ensure equity and academic success for all students. This study was conducted to further investigate school counselors’ perceptions of themselves as leaders, their perceived level of comfort in assuming leadership roles, and how prepared they perceived themselves to be to assume these leadership roles.

**Methodology**

For our study, we developed four questions concerning counselors’ perceptions of themselves as leaders in their schools to determine their level of comfort with their leadership roles and their level of preparedness to assume these leadership roles. These questions were part of a larger survey which was mailed with a cover letter to the directors of guidance in two large suburban school districts in Texas. The directors then emailed these items to all of their school counselors. The counselors completed the surveys and emailed them to our student worker who printed the surveys and deleted the emails in order to protect confidentiality. The survey responses were entered into the SPSS software program for analysis, and frequencies were computed.

**Results**

One hundred and twenty-nine surveys were returned representing 40% of the target population \((N = 317, n = 129)\). Exactly 69.8% of the surveys were completed by counselors employed in secondary school settings; specifically, 42.6% were from high school counselors and 27.1% were from middle/junior high school counselors. Exactly 24.8% were from elementary school counselors and 2.3% were from intermediate school counselors. The level was unable to be determined on four (3.1%) of the returned surveys. No other demographic data were solicited from the responders. Table 1 illustrates the exact school levels represented.
Table 1
School counselors by school level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle/junior high</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to determine</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first question addressed by this survey was “How prepared do you feel to fulfill your leadership roles on your campus?” On this item, counselors were asked to indicate their level of preparedness on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 with 1 indicating “Not at all prepared” and 5 indicating “Extremely prepared.” The second question addressed was “To what extent do you view yourself as an educational leader at your school?” On this item, counselors were asked to indicate their view of themselves as leaders on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating “Very unlike you” and 5 indicating “Very like you.” The third question addressed by this study was “How comfortable do you feel in your role as an educational leader?” On this question, counselors indicated their level of comfort on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 with 1 indicating “Very uncomfortable” and 5 indicating “Very comfortable.” The fourth and final question addressed by this study was “To what extent do you view yourself as part of the leadership team at your school?” On this question, counselors indicated their views on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 with 1 indicating “Not at all part of the team” and 5 indicating “Very much part of the team.”

One hundred and twenty-seven counselors (98%) responded to the first question concerning level of perceived preparedness to fulfill leadership roles on their campus.
Forty counselors (31%) rated their preparedness as 5 on the Likert scale, 67 counselors (52%) indicated 4, 16 counselors (12%) indicated 3, four counselors (3%) indicated 2, and no counselors indicated 1. On the second question concerning the extent to which counselors viewed themselves as educational leaders, 126 counselors (98%) responded to the Likert item. Of these, 42 counselors (33%) indicated 5, 59 counselors (46%) indicated 4, 20 counselors (16%) indicated 3, three counselors (2%) indicated 2, and two counselors (2%) indicated 1. On the question concerning counselors’ comfort level with their roles as educational leaders, 126 (98%) counselors responded. On this Likert scale, 48 counselors (37%) indicated 5, 62 counselors (48%) indicated 4, 12 counselors (9%) indicated 3, three counselors (2%) indicated 2, and one counselor (1%) indicated 1. On the fourth question concerning perception of themselves as part of the leadership team, 128 counselors (99%) responded to the Likert item. Of these, 50 counselors (39%) indicated 5, 46 counselors (36%) indicated 4, 16 counselors (12%) indicated 3, seven counselors (5%) indicated 2, and nine counselors (7%) indicated 1.

Table 2 illustrates the results of counselors’ responses.

Table 2
*Summary of counselors’ perceptions of themselves as leaders*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Likert Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fr.    % Fr.    % Fr.    % Fr.    % Fr.    %</td>
<td>Fr.    % Fr.    % Fr.    % Fr.    % Fr.    %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness for leader role</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View self as leader</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort with leadership role</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View self on leadership team</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion and Implications

The results of our study are unique. While the literature surveyed suggested that the majority of the counselors felt uncomfortable with leadership roles, our study appears to support the work of Kaplan and Evans (1999) who indicated that school counselors did indeed view themselves as leaders in today’s schools. This study also emphasizes the changes that appear to be taking place among some counselors in today’s schools. The vast majority of the counselors in the two large suburban districts we surveyed reported an unexpected level of comfort with their roles as leaders and an equally unexpected perceived level of preparedness for their roles as leaders. While counselors have traditionally viewed their role as one of support, our study suggests that counselors do, in fact, view themselves as leaders of their schools and as part of the school leadership team.

When considering the number of counselors who rated their perceptions as 4 or 5, the overwhelming majority of responders appear to be comfortable in their leadership roles, and feel prepared for those leadership roles. Specifically, 83% of the counselors surveyed rated their level of preparedness as a 4 or 5 on the Likert scale which indicates a high level of perceived preparedness. On the question concerning the extent to which counselors viewed themselves as educational leaders, 79% indicated their view of themselves as a leader with a 4 or 5 on the Likert item. On the question concerning their comfort level in their leadership role, 85% indicated their comfort level with a 4 or 5 on the Likert item. Finally, on the question concerning whether counselors viewed themselves as part of the leadership team, 75% indicated their view of themselves as part of the leadership team with a 4 or 5.
Our survey results may reflect the changes that have begun to take place in counselor training programs. With the start of the Transforming School Counseling Initiative, more universities may be including leadership components in their counselor training programs. Our survey did not require counselors to indicate their number of years of experience or the time that has transpired since receiving their counseling training. It is possible that counselors who have fewer years of experience, or those counselors who have acquired their training more recently, may feel more comfortable with leadership roles as a result of recent counselor training that addresses leadership responsibilities.

Another explanation for counselors reporting higher comfort levels and preparedness for leadership may be the increased professional development opportunities available that address these leadership responsibilities. It is possible that these counselors have received additional training through involvement in their national, state, and local professional organizations.

One further explanation for the results of our study may be indicated by the levels of school settings of the various school counselors who responded. The responders to our study consist of approximately 70% secondary school counselors that include high school and junior high counselors. Only approximately 27% of the responders reported working in settings of elementary or intermediate level schools. It may be possible that the involvement of school counselors at the secondary level in processes and tasks involving high profile responsibilities related to testing, transcripts, and recordkeeping may incline some secondary counselors to view themselves in leadership roles more than elementary counselors who may be perceived as working less with recordkeeping and more directly
with students. However, this is uncertain, as it appears that specific tasks assigned to counselors at all levels may vary from district to district and even from school to school within districts.

*Limitations*

An important limitation of this study is that it was conducted on a specific population. Our responders were school counselors from two large suburban school districts from the same state. School counselors from rural school districts or from other states may report perceptions of themselves as leaders and comfort level with leadership roles differently from this sample. Additionally, specific leadership duties were not defined. This section of our study does not address specific leadership tasks, only the school counselors’ perceptions of their leadership roles and of themselves as leaders. Furthermore, approximately 70% of our responders were secondary school counselors. A larger representation from elementary level counselors is needed to give a more balanced report of school counselors’ perceptions across all levels.

*Recommendations and Conclusions*

Additional research is indicated to clarify the specific reasons for the unexpected high levels of comfort with leadership roles that our responders indicated. Inquiring about responders’ number of years of experience and time lapsed since obtaining their counselor training might give increased insight into the reasons for the changing perceptions of today’s counselors in contrast to those suggested by the previous literature. Additionally, school counselors were not asked about the specific training they received in their graduate counseling programs. Some of the school counselors who responded to our study may have received increased training in internship coursework or may have
been required to do increased internship hours. Whether counselors were trained in CACREP accredited programs and in programs requiring greater numbers of courses may be an influencing factor in comfort levels with leadership responsibilities. A future study might address the specific courses and program requirements that prompted counselors to report feeling more prepared for leadership roles.

While school counselors are increasingly being expected to fill leadership roles in schools, our study indicates that some school counselors already view themselves as leaders to a great extent. The counselors responding to our survey appear to indicate that their perceptions of themselves as providers of peripheral support services have already adjusted to viewing themselves as educational leaders as well. Our study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the changing perceptions of some school counselors concerning their leadership roles.
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References


