

School Counseling and School Educational Leader Preparation Programs: Partnerships in Training Skills in Open Communication

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The quality of communication and the working relationships between PreK-12 public school counselors and school principals has been ignored, yet questioned for years. Some graduates from school counseling and educational leadership preparation programs have voiced concerns that the communications between these two extremely important school positions have been ineffective in the past. The concern was that the skills taught in these programs did not provide the knowledge necessary to work as a collaborative team to solve school-related issues and possibly help to save students' lives.

Concerns about these nonexistent relationships have come to the attention of various interest groups in addition to graduates of school counseling and school leader preparation programs due to the recent increase in attempted and successful suicide rates and school violence among today's public schools. This proposal addresses the need to begin the implementation of a partnership aspect to a school counseling and school leadership preparation program at a four-year comprehensive state university that centers on the need for open communication and the high quality collaboration in two different skill areas. This program began to develop in the fall of 2008 at the University of Central Oklahoma with discussions held among the chair of Advanced Professional Services, the program coordinator for school counseling, and an assistant professor from the educational administration program.

Sherry Ward has been the program coordinator for the school guidance and counseling program at UCO the past three years; Cheryl Evans has been an assistant professor in the school administration program for two years. With the strong support and guidance from their department chair, Patsy Coutts, who has been at UCO for 17 years, these two junior faculty began a casual conversation about what they see out in the public schools today and how they could create and develop change for school counselors and principals for the future. This change could benefit not only school organizations, but students' lives and successes in education, as well. Mentored and encouraged by their department chair to pursue their vision and goals to create a working collaboration between students enrolled in the current internship programs of school counseling and leadership. The preparation programs at UCO were ideal due to the far-reaching enrollment from across the state.

Founded in 1890, UCO is Oklahoma's oldest institution of higher learning, and with close to 16,000 students, it is the state's third largest university. It is located on a 210-acre campus in Edmond, Oklahoma, a northern suburb in the Oklahoma City metropolitan area. The location offers the campus community the benefit of living in what's been ranked as one of the safest communities in the country with close proximity to the activities and opportunities of a rapidly growing city.

Led by President Roger Webb, UCO offers an ever-expanding list of academic majors (112 at last count), including several programs that you cannot find anywhere else in the state or region. Two graduate programs that are available include a Master of Education in Guidance and School Counseling and a Master of Education in Education Administration.

The Master of Education in Guidance and School Counseling leads to certification as a school counselor upon successfully passing the Oklahoma Subject Area Test (OSAT) in School Counseling. UCO is committed to taking a proactive approach to alleviate the shortage of school counselors in the

state of Oklahoma. The Master of Education in Education Administration offers a degree in school administration K-12. The degree program is based on requirements for the Elementary or Secondary School Principal Standard Certificate as set forth by the Oklahoma State Department of Education. The Education Administration degree program prepares school leaders who demonstrate the knowledge and skills required of future administrators. The curricula are designed in an integrated problem-based mode to promote an understanding of the relationships between the various knowledge and skill areas in education leadership. Clinical internship tasks and field experiences provide the necessary transition from the study of content areas toward a more realistic workplace experience. Even though both of these degrees require extensive work in the internship courses and in multiple subject areas, there are no courses available in the school counseling courses that emphasize effective communication with the school principal, and no courses in the principal preparation program that apply to school counseling or effective communication with school counselors.

Oklahoma utilizes a competency-based assessment system for teacher certification. Referred to as Oklahoma Subject Area Testing (OSAT), the tests are designed to assess subject-matter knowledge and skills. Certification as a school principal or school counselor requires successful completion of the respective OSAT.

The OSAT for school counselors includes 5 subareas. They are:

- I. Human Development and Learning
- II. Assessment and Evaluation
- III. Counseling and Group Guidance
- IV. Educational and Career Planning
- V. Guidance Programs and Professional Knowledge

A review of the literature reinforces our concern that principals' expectations of school counselors relate to subareas II. Assessment and Evaluation and IV. Educational and Career Planning. The intent of this collaborative initiative is to 1) refocus principals so that they may realign their expectations to include subareas III. Counseling and Group Guidance and V. Guidance Programs and Professional Knowledge and 2) enlighten future principals and counselors of the importance of purposeful communication and collaboration between the two positions, and 3) begin the process of productive and systemic change within these two roles that lead to change in the schools.

The OSAT for school principals (common core) includes three subareas. They are:

- I. School Vision and Leadership
- II. Instructional Leadership
- III. Organizational, Operational, and Resource Management

Another goal for our collaborative partnership is to prepare future principals to identify procedures that will promote collaborative decision making and creative problem solving in various schools situations that involve school counselors and will address subareas I., II. and III.

Our purpose for this work is to offer an example to conference session participants of a beginning partnership program that will benefit the working relationships of future school counselors and school leaders in an attempt to benefit and possibly save students' lives in the process.

Very little research has been conducted in the past on the relationships between school counselors and school principals. Many schools tend to develop their own culture and within that culture the counselors and principals struggle to decide upon the most conducive partnership that they can. The struggles are many due to the lack of understanding of each other's training, boundaries, beliefs, and perceptions. The small amount of research that has been completed in the past reflects a strong need for more communication between counselors and principals in order to form a partnership that benefits not only their relationship, but the entire school community and environment.

Principals are typically designated the leader of the school (Henderson, 1999), and according to the responses of principals in the field, effective leadership and systemic interactions can be key to building partnerships between counselors and principals in a way that helps counselors expand their roles and their programs. A school principal has the control in the majority of schools to initiate through promoting growth or stop change in relation to the direction and vision of the school counseling program (Amatea &

Clark, 2005). This control can mold or suppress the school counselor in many different ways especially new counselors in the profession. "Without the support of a colleague with similar preparation and perspective, principals became the primary referent group. In the context of this administrative referent group, it is easy to see why principals frequently assign school counselors non-counseling duties (such as discipline and keeping attendance records) that detract from a comprehensive program of counseling services in school settings" (Barret & Schnidt, 1986). In fact the American School Counselors Association (2004) cites such events as a "dual relationship" in their code of ethics. This makes it then a moral dilemma for counselors. A disconnect is evident in the relationships that counselors and principals have had in the past and the relationships that are present in the schools of today.

Professional school counselors hold pivotal importance in schools because of their availability to all academic records concerning students (Stone & Dahir, 2006). This vital stance allows for school counselors to have an extensive function in implementing and maintain modifications that assistance all students (House & Martin, 1998; Stone & Dahir, 2006). On the other hand, the benefit made by school counselors to influence student academic achievement is dependent on the capacity and motivation of school counselors to function as influential mentors in schools (DeVoss & Andrews, 2006). As a result, Stone and Dahir necessitate for school counselors to cultivate not only leadership skills, but also leadership "mindset[s]" (p. 93).

The importance of the job position of the school principal is sometimes a mute point to many, including counselors, due to the fact they are unsure as to how principals can benefit the successful implementation of an outstanding counseling program. "The roles of principals and school counselors are natural partners who should complement one another in the task of serving students and form a partnership based on knowledge, trust, and positive regard for what each professional does. It is not surprising that literature describing leadership strategies for school counselors calls for the involvement of principals" (Dollarhide, 2003; Meyers, 2005; Murray, 1995a, 1995b).

Kaplan (1995) has stated that counselors encourage positive classroom climate while principals work to establish a safe and orderly learning environment. Counselors look at the causes and issues that lead to negative behavior; principals look at the effects. Principals could view counselors' attempts to assist students as enabling, instead of teaching personal responsibility. Although many principals do seem to understand the role of the school counselor, there is still some evidence of dissonance in the literature (Beale, 1995; Beale & McCay, 2001).

Vaught (1995) has discovered in his research that principals who are supportive of their school counseling program had several characteristics that include understanding, respect, cooperation, openness, consideration, communication, and support. Ponc and Brock (2000) also found some characteristics that should be emulated by principals with successful school counseling programs that are mutual trust, clear communication, and the requirement of continual maintenance.

The roles of the counselor tend to take on different aspects at various school sites depending upon the principals' beliefs. Remley & Albright (1998) found in their study that principals appear to see counseling as an administrative position. Zalaquett (2005) found in his study of elementary principals that they believed counselors need to be in charge of and use their time in career advising, academic advising, classroom guidance, consulting, small group counseling, and crisis counseling, and coordinating community services. Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones (2004) conducted research that indicated principals' expectations come from differences in their beliefs of needs at different educational levels which 80% of those high school principals surveyed depicted registration, scheduling, and testing as acceptable.

An interesting finding from Amatea and Clark (2005) point to principals' expectations reflected the historical roles of counselors, leading us to believe the school counselor's role would copy the prevailing role when the principal was a teacher or educator. It is with this type of research that behooves us to make certain principals are exposed to and educated with the variety of training and knowledge their school counselors possess as they are hired into the school districts as counselors. This antiquated view of counselors often limits them in a secretarial position. In this changing time, where violence in the schools

is no longer an isolated incident, the role of the school counselor must shift to a view of a mental health resource for the public schools.

A challenge is present for school counselors and principals as they strive to find the most productive way to work together with successful outcomes for everyone involved in their schools. It is this challenge that our project will address by allowing our school principal and school counseling interns in their university preparation programs to work together to discover more about each other's professional roles before they are placed out in the field. Our hope is that by working together, the school administrators and school counselors of tomorrow will have the knowledge and expertise of each other's education and how these two very important positions can complement, benefit, and promote the success of all within the school.

Our partnership between these two programs will focus on a change that will benefit not only the preparation programs these students are enrolled in, but will also be very valuable to current research, theory development, and practice. This new knowledge will be the springboard to help reevaluate the relationships between school counselors and principals in the design of principal and counselor preparation programs. This project will assist current administrators, counselors, school boards, and others to understand this unique partnership. Understanding how school counselors and principals should work together as partners has the potential to bring about change and improvement in education and education programs.

Methodology

In response to the apparent need to build a more productive and cooperative relationship between principals and school counselors, a venue to address these needs was introduced and is currently being utilized at the University of Central Oklahoma. The principal and school counseling internships were incorporated into the process of building a positive working relationship between future school administrators and counselors. The journey began when a discussion developed between instructors about the existing problems for students in this domain. Cheryl Evans, Ed.D. Assistant Professor of the education administration program and Sherry Ward, NCC, NCSC, Program Coordinator and instructor of the guidance and school counseling program, Pat Coutts, Ed.D., Departmental Chair and instructor of Instructional Media Education, developed a premise that by having interns from both programs interact would begin to have a positive effect on future relationships.

The first event was the visitation of reciprocal classrooms by instructors to the future principal and school counselors' classrooms. Future principals were taught about the importance of school counselors as a mental health resource. The significance of fortifying a strong working relationship with school counselors was also explored. Suicide prevention education was stressed as the avenue for this initial contact. Students were involved in discussion of potential resources of their future school counselors and the importance of building strong relationships with this important asset. A question and answer session followed the presentation on suicide prevention education. These students shared recent suicide events in their own schools and their lack of knowledge in mental health field directions in how to appropriately deal with the event. Students shared their thoughts because of the presentation and new knowledge that in the previous event, they had placed students, parents and teachers in an at-risk position. Students gained insight into the necessity and strength of developing these essential tools in the academic setting.

Subsequently, future counselors welcomed Dr. Evans into their classroom to examine the leadership role of the school counselor in the schools of today. A quick survey of school students' perceptions of their supervisors, their internship, and the school counselors with the principal in the building revealed the significant lack of confidence, communication, trust, and positive working professional relationship within these roles. Counseling students believed that the school counseling position is seen by the principal as more a secretarial, test administrators and miscellaneous fill-in than mental health professionals. Due to the passage of No Child Left Behind, principals are under pressure to provide evidence of academic success, which in turn puts pressure back onto the counselor to become the test bureaucrat, neglecting other important mental health issues. It was stressed to the students the imperative need to build a relationship with the building principal. This constructive relationship will help enable principals to see the promise and benefit of utilizing the actual mental health skills of their counselor than

merely a body to organize test materials. Expectation and needs, in the current academic world were investigated. Students shared concerns on how to approach and address principals on crisis situations. The future counselors shared a potential violent episode in their school and how the lack of protocol interfered in the communication process. It became evident that more discussion between the groups needed to occur for a productive and meaningful learning experience. Due to the lack of time in the fall semester, plans to implement this are in the very near future.

Conclusion

The literature concentrates on principals reevaluating their perception of just what to expect from a school counselor. However, for collaboration to be effective, the school counselor needs to understand the mission for the school principal. According to Niebuhr & Niebuhr (1999), many schools, counselors and principals are working toward the same desired end state, but often do not realize how their respective roles might complement the actions of the other.

This plan was continued in the spring of 2009 with Cheryl Evans visiting the school counseling internship class and Sherry Ward working with the administration interns. The results of the previous semester were very similar. Students urged the professors to continue the work started with future classes. Plans are being made not only to continue the previous efforts but to expand the education where both internship classes will work together to create crisis plans for schools and present their efforts at the annual Principals, School Counselors and Library Media Safety Conference. Students will also learn positive interviewing techniques with their future students as well as formal interviews with prospective employees. A pre and post instrument is being developed through our interaction with internship students currently to measure the student perception of validity and need of the new training.

Beaches are built by one grain of sand at a time. A casual conversation launched an initiative to mesh the talents and shared knowledge of school principals and counselors that will ultimately lead to greater student achievement and success. While no formal assessment of this initiative was conducted, the excitement and sharing of experiences that occurred convinced this team that a few grains of sand have laid the foundation for a future beach.

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