The School Counselor: Theory vs. Practice

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Abstract

School counselors enter the profession with a theoretical perspective of their roles as a school counselor, however this perspective does not always align with actual practice. This issue was examined in our current study. Four high school counselors were interviewed regarding their present roles within their profession. The authors found the following three salient themes in these interviews: caseload, lack of time spent on counseling duties as defined by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2009), and role ambiguity. The salient themes found in the school counselors’ interviews in this study were consistent with themes found in the literature.

The School Counselor: Theory vs. Practice

As graduate students transition into school counselors, many believe that their future careers will be within the bounds of the definition provided by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) for what constitutes a school counselor. According to ASCA, the role of a school counselor is defined as one who addresses “all students academic, personal/social, and career development needs by designing, implementing, evaluating, and enhancing a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes and enhances student success” (ASCA, 2009). Many school counselors are disappointed when their job duties do not align with their expectations as ASCA defines them.

According to research, a school counselor’s caseload can range up to almost 1,000 students in certain states (Moyer, 2001). Although the previously mentioned counselor to student ratio is on the extreme end, the national average number of 457 students to a school counselor is still overwhelmingly large (Moyer, 2001). This number is still well above the ASCA recommended ratio of 250 students to 1 counselor (ASCA, 2009). Researcher Michael Moyer (2001) suggests, “Although the ideal and recommended ratios may not be met, the ratios simply must be reduced in order for school counselors to be effective in their role”. With so many students assigned to a single counselor, it is difficult for the counselor to implement a successful school-counseling program let alone serve each student individually. A large caseload forces the counselor to replace their intentions of wanting to meet every students needs with the reality of having to limit their services to certain students and scenarios due to time constraints and necessity (McCarthy, Van Horn Kerne, Calfa, Lambert, & Guzman, 2010).

Role ambiguity is another common theme seen among school counselors when reviewing school counselor’s role expectations versus actual practice. Role ambiguity is “the degree to which clear information is lacking regarding the expectation associated with a role” (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Despite ASCA’s clear definition of what a school counselor should provide, counselors often find themselves doing tasks outside their job description as a result of administrative, student, and parental misperceptions of what school counselors ought to do. Clerical and administrative duties, curriculum development, testing, disciplinary functions, and even providing health education are common tasks that counselors find themselves completing that go well beyond counselor expectations according to ASCA (Lockhart & Keys, 1998). Role ambiguity hinders school counselors from performing ASCA’s guidelines and working within the scope they were trained in.

Large caseloads and role ambiguity combined often leave counselors feeling overwhelmed and challenged. According to research, school counselors are often too busy with other tasks to focus on their expected job description (Moyer, 2011). Moyer (2011) found that over 50% of school counselors specify they spend 10 or more hours per week on duties unrelated to their professional training. Spending this much time on activities outside of counseling in addition to monitoring large caseloads can easily make a counselor feel pressured and stressed. Many school counselors report that “even though they are trying to implement a Comprehensive School Counseling Program (CSCP), the ratio of students to counselors is so overwhelming that they do not have time to implement some of the components” which leaves students at a disadvantage (Rayle & Adams, 2007).

In this study, the researchers further examined three common themes outlined throughout the literature regarding school counselors’ expected roles versus applied practice. The three themes analyzed in the following study were caseload, lack of time spent on ASCA counseling duties, and role ambiguity.

Method

Participants

The researchers interviewed four high school counselors who were selected based on the researchers’ knowledge of the counselors. Three of the counselors worked in the county of San Bernardino, California, and one counselor worked in the county of San Diego, California. Three of the counselors were females and one was a male. The counselors’ ages ranged from 27 to 48 years. Two of the counselors were Hispanic and two were Caucasian. Their working environment varied significantly with respect to the socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds of students. It is of importance to comment that the years being a counselor ranged from one to six years.

Procedure and Data

The researchers created an interview guide with seven open-ended questions (see Appendix) and asked the counselors via email, phone, or in person if they would like to participate. All four counselors agreed, giving the researchers a 100 percent response rate. All four counselors were asked the same seven open-ended questions for validity of the survey and responded to the questions in the same order. Once the data was collected, the researchers reviewed the responses and found three salient themes. The three themes were: (a) case load, (b) lack of time spent on ASCA counseling duties, and (c) role ambiguity. The interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes. The counselors were not given any compensation for their participation.

Results

The results are presented in accordance to the three main themes that were identified in the analysis of the counselors’ interview content. Three main themes were identified as affecting the counselors’ ability to complete work tasks: workload, lack of time spent on ASCA counseling duties, and role ambiguity. These themes, identified in the literature review as impacting counselor’s ability to perform their primary counseling functions, are illustrated with direct quotes from the interview transcripts below.

Theme 1: School counselors have a high caseload which contributes to stress and role ambiguity.

All of the counselors in this study (n=4) indicated that they had a high caseload, which included factors such as a large number of different responsibilities and high workloads. The counselors’ interviews revealed a demanding caseload with responsibility for a variety of duties such as planning student schedules, tracking for graduation, developing interventions for struggling students, completing paperwork, and providing social support while handling high caseloads. Counselor 1 stated, “I have approximately 500 students on my caseload…. Building relationships with students is difficult when there are so many. The focus tends to be on those with behavior/academic problems, with little time available for other students.” She also stated, “I experience no down-time throughout my day and often feel overwhelmed by my workload.” Counselor 3 reported that she had a workload of more than 400 and Counselor 4 had a workload of over 650 students, which he noted was “stressful.” It is clear that the counselors’ large caseloads made it difficult to juggle all of the different tasks assigned. One counselor indicated, there are “so many students in caseloads and it’s hard to handle, to meet other kinds of needs” and another remarked, “The load is heavy so I don’t know a lot of my students.”

Theme 2: School counselors ’lack of time spent on ASCA counseling duties as part of their regular duties, which also contribute to stress and role conflict.

The majority of counselors (n=3) discussed their scope of duties and indicated responsibility for non-counseling ASCA activities such as clerical tracking/ monitoring progress, high volume of paperwork, attending meetings, and writing e-mails to parents. Counselor 2 stated, “There is a lot of paperwork involved in my workload.” She also indicated, “I did not realize there would be so much paperwork involved coming in as a counselor.” Counselor 4 reported, “I thought I was going to be counseling/meeting with each of my students one on one. In reality I am writing e-mails to parents, 504s, worrying about their academics, letters of rec., teacher meetings, interventions.”

Theme 3: Counselors discussed their role ambiguity and how it impacted their ability to be effective.

All of the counselors (n=4), discussed the theme of role ambiguity. They discussed their experience with having to multitask between different counseling roles and having little time available to meet the needs of the students. Counselor 1 discussed shortage of time in relation to which students she must focus on, “I spend more time with those students who are struggling…There is a clear mandate …to provide as many interventions for non-performing students as possible in an effort to get and keep them on track. The high-fliers are next in line, but mostly because they are self-advocating and trying to learn as much as possible about the college process. Students who are not failing, not getting in trouble, or have set their sights on college, tend to get less attention. Not because of a hierarchy, but because there is a shortage of time.” She also stated that, “It just seems to get a tougher each year to keep up with increasing numbers of students and the challenges they face to be successful in school.” Counselor 2 stated, “I feel that paperwork takes away from student interaction at times. I wish I had more time to spend with the students after completing paperwork…. Also, I thought I would have more one-on-one time with students than I actually have.” Counselor 3 remarked, “I would say multi-tasking, being able to finish paperwork while still being there for the students” is an important factor in being an effective counselor.

Discussion

The present study was conducted in accordance with salient themes in the literature regarding school counselor’s expected theoretical roles versus applied practice the literature. Therefore, aggregating to the literature that calls for a better understanding of the present role of the school counselor in todays’ schools. Four Southern California high school counselors were interviewed to share their experiences about job related roles. From the counselors’ accounts we were able to identify the three reoccurring themes: large caseload, lack of time spent on ASCA counseling duties.

The first theme that was uncovered in our findings was large caseload results when the student-to-counselor-ratio is too high. In graduate school, counselors are typically informed that, according to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), the recommended counselor-to-student ratio is 1:250 (ASCA, 2009). This leads school counselors to go into the profession with a preconceived idea of caseload size. The school counselor to student ratio that prospective school counselors are made aware of in graduate school falls into the theoretical aspect of a school counselor’s role while the actual stated larger ratio by counselors in our interviews and in the literature becomes the actual practical practice of a school counselor’s role.

The second theme that was revealed was lack of time spent on ASCA counseling duties. The high school counselors that were interviewed went into the profession believing that they would be doing more counselor-student counseling sessions than what they actually were. According to the four counselors the non-counseling duties took up most of their time and little, to no time, was left to do actual counseling with the students.

The last identified theme was role ambiguity. Role ambiguity occurred when there was not a defined job description and responsibilities list. According to the ASCA the role of a professional counselors is to ensure the “academic, career and personal/social development of all students,” (ASCA, 209). The counselors that were interviewed expressed feeling overwhelmed when they found themselves writing emails to parents, organizing teacher meetings, and other clerical duties that were not related to the ASCA Role of a Professional Counselor.

Overall, our findings were consistent with reoccurring themes in the literature of counselors’ expected theoretical roles versus actual practicality in the profession. The three prominent themes found in the interviews conducted for the purpose of our study, large caseload, lack of time spent on ASCA counseling duties, and role ambiguity, can also be found in the literature.

Some of the limitations in this research were; question type, gathering of data, convenient sample, and lack of diversity in the sample. The questions that were asked in this research study could have been formulated to gain a more in depth understanding of school counselors’ roles. Also, there was no consistency in the way the data was collected by the authors. It is also important to note that the counselors that were interviewed had a relationship with the authors and therefore it was a convenient sample. Subsequently the sample lacked diversity since out of the four participants two were Latinos and the other two were Caucasians.

Future research would improve our comprehension in this topic by utilizing triangulation research. The usage of triangulation research when analyzing counselors’ theoretical roles versus their practical roles would provide a more comprehensive understanding of this topic by means of analyzing data using more than one method.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. What do you think your roles are as a school guidance counselor?

2. What is your workload condition? How do you feel about it?

3. How often do you meet with your students? / Do you meet with all of them?

4. Does your relationship with your students depend on their grades?

5. How do you feel about the current shift of getting rid of guidance counselors?

6. What did you think you would be doing as a counselor vs. what would you are doing?

7. What makes a guidance counselor effective?