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Counselors are faced with an onslaught of unceasing demands and negativity from children, parents, community and staff.

Principals and Counselors: Creating Effective Elementary School Counseling Programs

Barbara L. Brock and Debra L. Ponec

{Schools} are the center of the community now... not the church, they gave that up... Social services... have pretty much broken down... dropped the ball... don't follow through. We have become the missionaries for all that society wants us to fix.

The words of an elementary school principal echo the wide-spread sentiments of teachers and principals struggling to serve the needs of their students. Many of the responsibilities and roles previously held by parents and family, are today assumed by the elementary school. In short, American schools appear to be becoming an alternative family (Petersen, 1997). However, elementary teachers and principals do not have the educational background or the time to effectively address the personal problems of students and their families. Teachers and principals are turning to counselors for assistance.

Schools mirror society. Our elementary school children are confronted with accelerating crime rates, drug abuse, declining family support systems, neglect, divorce, and increasing single parent households with incomes below the poverty level. In addition, some minority students find themselves alienated from the mainstream of society, facing limited opportunities for education and employment (Neukrug, Barr, Hoffman, Kaplan, 1993). These factors, combined with the shift of parental responsibilities from home to school, alert us to the need for a new model of elementary education, one in which elementary guidance and counseling programs are integral components (Peterson, 1997; Neukrug, Barr, Hoffman, Kaplan, 1993).

Elementary school counseling programs evolved from the vocational counseling model that predominated at the high school level. However, at the elementary school level, a developmental model that embraces a total life guidance approach is preferred. Counselors using a developmental model work to promote social and emotional, as well as academic and vocational development; the major responsibilities of the counselor being: counseling, consulting, coordination, and curriculum (Hardesty & Dillard, 1994).

Since counselors and counseling programs are relatively new to elementary schools (Hardesty & Dillard, 1994), they present an unfamiliar experience for many principals. A unique challenge emerges, that of preparing principals for the role of supervising counselor and monitoring the success of counseling programs. Responsibilities of principals regarding counselors and programs vary according to school district. However, it is safe to assume that the principal will be

responsible for some portion of the following: selecting and supervising the counselor, establishing and monitoring the counseling program, and evaluating the performance of the counselor and the counseling program.

Elementary school principals need to understand the elements of a developmental guidance and counseling program and what constitutes an appropriate role for the counselor. The relationship between administrator and counselor is an important factor in determining the counselor's role and subsequent effectiveness of the counseling program. In addition, a teamwork approach to developmental guidance and counseling is strongly advocated in that the network of support enhances preventative practices and the delivery of services to students (Paisley & Peace, (1995).

Given the importance of the relationship between principal and counselor, the researchers initiated a study to explore relationships among principals, school counselors and teachers in order to provide insights regarding effective delivery of guidance and counseling programs to students. Qualitative research methodology and interview techniques allowed participants to express their personal experiences, perceptions, and beliefs. This paper reports the results of the study with a focus on a profile of the components of exemplary principal-counselor relationships. The intent of the authors is to promote increased awareness of the role of the principal and the necessity for teamwork between the principal and counselor in creating effective counseling programs.

Method

Participants

Four elementary schools in a metropolitan school district were selected based on their reputation for having exemplary counseling programs. The administrative and counseling personnel of each school were participants in the study. Four principals, two assistant principals, and five counselors were observed in their natural settings and participated in personal taped interviews.

Field observations in each of the schools revealed that the schools were dissimilar in terms of school populations and school personnel. Although the four schools belonged to the same school district, their school populations were different in terms of number of students, racial composition of students, and socio-economic status of families. The principals and counselors also presented diversity in ages, experience, and race/ethnicity. Although the principals represented both genders, all of the counselors were female. The personalities and leadership styles of the principals were noticeably different in each of the schools. The eagerness of the principals to participate in the survey varied considerably, from one who was enthusiastic about the process to another who was noticeably concerned about the presence of the tape recorder and needed repeated reassurance regarding confidentiality.

The one similarity in demographic factors was the prior experiences that the six administrators had with counselors and counseling programs. Three of the principals reported having courses in counseling, four of them reported having considerable experiences working with counselors in previous settings or being instrumental in the district's efforts to develop counseling programs for elementary schools. Two of the principals reported involvement in committees that looked at identifying the role, purpose and service that counselors could provide for schools and addressing community forums to express the need for elementary counselors.

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Interviewers/Researchers

The two interviewers/researchers who conducted the study possess experience in the fields of elementary school administration and elementary school counseling. One researcher is a former principal of elementary schools and currently assistant professor of educational administration. The other researcher is a former elementary school counselor and currently assistant professor of counselor education. Both researchers view the principal/counselor relationship as key to the establishment of a successful counseling program.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with the principals, assistant principals and school counselors. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by the following questions:

1. Describe the role of your school counselor.
2. Describe activities where the counselor and teachers work together.
3. Describe activities where the counselor and administrator work together.
4. Describe your communication with the school counselor. What types of information, opinions, or beliefs are exchanged?
5. What makes your guidance and counseling program work?

Procedures

Each semi-structured interview was tape recorded, transcribed, and offered to the participant for review. Each participant was encouraged to make additions, corrections, or clarifications to the transcribed interview. After verification of accuracy by participants, transcriptions were coded for content and analyzed for themes. Utilization of the qualitative methodology of member checks, multiple sources of information, and coding and reviewing data for verification enhanced the validity and reliability of data (Frankel & Wallen, 1996; Creswell, 1994).

Results

The following themes emerged from the data: the multiple roles of the school counselor, the role of the principal in the counseling program, the importance of mutual trust and communication between counselor and principal, and problems and factors related to the success of the programs. Each of the themes will be further explored and discussed.

The Role of the Counselor

Principals and counselors agreed that the most important role of the counselor was working with students and their families. Descriptions of the principals regarding the counselor's role included: "wearing many hats," "[doing] what has to be done to help save kids from situations that might hinder their educational success," and providing the "bridge work between classroom, administration, parent, and community." The principals agreed that the function of the counselor was "more proactive than reactive," that the key role of the counselor was personally interacting with students and families, and all of them agreed that the counselor played a very important role in the school. A counselor said, "to me the school counselor is there for everyone- the school cook, custodian, children, parents, and teachers." A principal summarized, "[the counselor is] the glue that holds us all together."

The daily tasks of counselors were described as: providing classes on social skills, working with students who have been referred by teachers, working with students' families, meeting with small groups

of students with similar issues, referring students to resources for further assistance, addressing child abuse issues, and making home visits. Principals reported that the counselors participated on a number of building and district teams, such as student assistance teams, drug-free teams and building and district management teams. A couple of the principals and counselors reported that the counselors were encouraged to be involved in supervisory activities on the playground, lunch room and breakfast room. One principal commented that "the counselor is encouraged to get involved in some supervisory activities... because [this enables her] to see how the youngsters are in a different setting other than a classroom." One of the counselors reported not liking the lunchroom because of the noise and chaos but enjoyed the playground because it was "fun to interact with kids and watch the work in a cooperative effort."

Counselors Working with Teachers

The counselors also provided support to teachers. Principals described their counselors as, "there for everyone," providing information for teachers with meetings, speakers, bringing treats, decorating the faculty lounge, and being available to discuss personal concerns. Principals noticed counselors seeking out and offering assistance to staff members with personal problems. One administrator reported that the counselor works "with staff to help them with some of the stresses that apply to working with kids at risk. "A continual stream of people frequent the counselor's office daily...there's a trust level there." Another administrator enumerated the counselor's assistance with several tragic events in teachers' families, saying, "I could go on and on... they're pretty valuable."

Counselors Working with Administrators

Principals reported four areas in which counselors provided direct assistance to them: alerting them to important student problems, addressing students' family issues, providing the link between outside agencies, the school, and families, and facilitating the principals interactions with faculty.

Principals and counselors reported that they worked closely and communicated frequently because "we eventually see many of the same children." Most of the principals and counselors reported "touching base daily," and keeping each other "up-to-date on situations". "If there's something that I have not been in the loop on... she'll fill me in... and if it's something that might [result in] an irate parent the next day... then she'll let me know." "She works with me, helps me keep abreast of things... we have an open line of communication." "I can't imagine operating without her... I do need her [the counselor] that much."

The counselors assisted the principals by providing information about family situations, assisting with upset parents, and providing information about parenting resources. Principals said it was not uncommon for parents to make the initial call to the counselor who then established the meeting with the principal. One administrator spoke of fielding information through the counselor before returning calls to a parents. "I'll go to the counselor and say, fill me in before I call... what's the story here?"

Principals appreciated the counselor's assistance in dealing with outside agencies. One principal said, "The counselor has the time and skill to make the connections, that as an administrator, I don't have the time to do. She is the liaison between outside agencies, the classroom teachers, and myself."

Some of the principals reported that their counselors helped them

understand the needs and feelings of the faculty, as well as predict faculty response to possible changes. Other principals fielded advice from the counselor regarding how to approach an individual teacher or group of teachers, and how to present issues so they will be positively received. One administrator said, "The counselor is so perceptive. [After meetings] she tells me what she noticed regarding staff responses and offers suggestions on how to proceed, such as going slower, etc. I really do value her opinions... she is a good sounding board." Other principals reported that they did not have discussions with the counselor about administrative or personal issues.

Communication with the Counselor

Communication was cited by both principals and counselors as key to the success of their counseling programs. Principals and counselors reported frequent and daily communications about students. One principal remarked that the counselor had "an open home and I know staff call her anytime of day or night. I do too."

Two forms of communication were apparent: frequent informal contacts and exchange of information; the other the formal process of student referrals. Although both principals and counselors commented on the importance of face-to-face dialogue, they also emphasized the need for paper documentation to inform both parties of occurrences. A referral system, outlined by the school district, was reportedly followed in all of the schools in the study. One administrator reported, "We use the counselor referral so that we all have records of exactly what the need is and how that need has been addressed. When a parent comes in, I can pull up that file and say that the counselor worked with your child on this particular day and this is what they have been working on."

What Makes the Program Work

Trust was reported as an essential component of the counseling program. The principals consistently spoke of counselors establishing trusting relationships with students and families, as follows.

Because [the counselor] has worked with many of the families year after year and because they've had siblings that have come through she knows the families, visits the families and the families trust her.

[Our counselor has] established a rapport in the community with many of the families, touched base, helped them so they have a certain confidence in her and feel comfortable when there is a concern to make a contact...

...it's just a good air that [the counselor] creates with all the people that she touches.

People trust our counselor explicitly.

The trust basis created by the counselors provided the principals with leverage to work with families.

The personality and dedication of the counselor was mentioned by the principals as a key factor in the success of the counseling program. The following sentiments were shared by the principals, "What makes [our program] work is having counselors that actually care about the students and care about the staff members." Other attributes used to describe the counselors included:

- dedicated to what they are doing.
- an advocate for kids.
- a unique style.

- confidence in the skills and capability of the person.
- a relationship with students that's one of "I care, I understand, you can talk to me."
- low key, talks very softly, kind of soothing until the student can be spoken with and communicate, comprehend, and understand.
- very visible.
- pro-active, which is why things operate so smoothly.
- brings a lot of knowledge to the school.

Problems to Resolve

Principals reported three counseling issues that needed to be resolved: 1) classroom teachers' understanding and accepting the counselor's role; 2) counselors being assigned administrative roles; and 3) a lack of counselors in elementary schools. One principal pointed out that some teachers willingly accept the counselor as a resource, while others are reluctant to have another adult in their classroom. Other principals noted that the process "takes time." "Once teachers find out that the counselor can provide assistance, a nice team develops. We're at a point now where they know we're all [working] together for the betterment of the kids." "Another principal said that initially some teachers became upset when they lost their scheduled life-skills training classes due to a crisis that demanded the immediate attention of the counselor. Once they fully understood the counselor's role, they became more flexible in their response to the interruptions.

Principals were united in their sentiment that assigning counselors to administrative roles negates their effectiveness. One principal commented disparaging about schools in which the counselor was the unofficial assistant for overworked, frustrated principals, citing a building in which a counselor participated in teacher observations. The principals interpreted inappropriate roles for counselors as scheduling, discipline, and handling angry parents.

"The counselor isn't supposed to be in the role of handling volatile parents. She might help out when teachers are having conferences and a parent is angry or upset, but should always be viewed by students and parents as more of a support. If anyone's going to be the police, that's the role the principal will take. Due process and discipline are not the counselor's role".

"I do not wish to have my counselors ever placed in an administrator role. It waters down their effectiveness if they are looked upon by students [as having a role other than] to assist and help them. I know in other buildings counselors do have administrative functions. But not here."

One principal blamed university graduate preparation programs for principals' lack of counseling knowledge. "I don't see anyone teaching principals to work with counselors. That's why you probably see a wide variance of how a counselor is treated at the elementary level of counselors". This principal also noted that the counselor is directly accountable to the building administrator. Thus the role of the counselor is ultimately determined by the building administrator, sometimes regardless of district guidelines.

Principals were equally adamant about the critical need for a counselor in every elementary school. However, as one principal pointed out, "We fought for years and years to get counselors, and we can lose them as fast as we got them." The following comments echo the need for more counselors coupled with a fear of budget cuts that

threaten current programs. "We have been blessed with an outstanding counselor and hope that financial constraints... will not diminish from this program. The needs our children bring to us are ever increasing. Every school needs a counselor [regardless of what] your reduced lunch rate is."

Discussion

The building principal is responsible for everything that occurs within the school. Thus, supervision of the counselor and the ultimate success of the counseling program are the principal's responsibility. However, many elementary principals do not have sufficient familiarity with counselors and counseling programs to adequately supervise them.

The fact that all of the principals and assistant principals in this study had experienced counseling classes or had previously worked with a counselor was not surprising. These principals understood the role of the counselor, the value of counseling programs, and were committed to providing quality programs. Not coincidentally, the counseling programs in their schools were known for their excellence.

If elementary school principals are expected to administer counseling programs housed within their buildings, they need to be educated in the issues of elementary school counseling. School districts that plan to develop elementary school counseling programs need to provide adequate training for all levels of district administrators. Universities offering programs in elementary school administration need to include a course that addresses administrative issues in elementary school counseling.

The distinction between the principal's role and the counselor's role lies at the heart of a successful counseling program. The roles of the counselor and the administrator are distinctly unique. By nature of the counseling role, the counselor is in a more advantageous position than the principal to bridge the gap between school administration and community. An effective school counselor becomes the "heart" of the school, providing the human touch that links people together, enabling the administrator to focus on administrative tasks. Allowed to perform an appropriate role the counselor can complement and enhance the administrators' role.

The administrator's support of the counselor's role is a critical component in the success of any counseling program. All of the principals in this study of successful counseling programs were scrupulous in their adherence to and support of the counselor's role. They viewed their role as providing guidance and empowerment to the counselor; they welcomed the assistance of their talents in achieving school goals.

In some schools overworked principals have counselors perform administrative tasks to an extent that the counselor becomes the unofficial assistant principal. This negates the role of the counselor and the purpose of the counseling program. The principals in this study were disappointed with the many instances in which they saw this happening. Their displeasure with counselors who perform non-counseling school activities is consistent with previous research by Vacc, Thyne-Winker, and Poidevant, (1993).

Principals have a responsibility to convey and define the parameters of the counselor's role to parents, students, and teachers. One principal noted that a parents' common perception of needing a counselor is "there's something wrong with me or my child." Students sometimes have the same misconception. Principals can facilitate acceptance and trust of the counseling program by providing accurate information that outlines the program and the role of the

counselor. This trust base is then solidified by the counselor through high visibility and frequent contacts with students and families.

Equally important is communicating the counselor's role and the purpose of the counseling program to teachers. In schools where teachers are wary about counseling, principals need to encourage interaction between teachers and counselors. In other settings, teachers view the counselor's office as a convenient dumping ground for problems. In this study the acceptance and utilization of the counselors was so pronounced that some of the principals reported a need to define some limits. In either case, the solution to the problem lies with the principal's articulation of and adherence to the role of the counselor and the counseling program.

Counselors are faced with an onslaught of unceasing demands and negativity from children, parents, community, and staff. Unless the school district has a support system and staff-development program for counselors, these tasks falls within the parameters of the administrator's responsibilities to provide on-going support and professional development for school personnel. This need is consistent with the findings of Paisley & Benshoff, (1996), who encourage systematic induction programs and professional support and Vacc, Rhyne-Winker, and Poidevant, (1993), who reported that two thirds of the counselors they interviewed stated that they had no direct observation or supervision of their counseling by others.

The possibility of budget cuts thwarting existing or potential counseling programs is a concern. Principals know that regardless of the quality of instructional programs and teaching, "if a student walks in the door with baggage, thinking about everything else, he's not going to learn." However, counseling isn't as visible as test scores, athletics, and the arts. Schools don't publicize the number of children and families who were helped by the counselor. Ironically, the confidentiality that creates the trust necessary for a good counseling program also puts it on the endangered list.

Elementary school counselors need to actively demonstrate how their work contributes to the overall school environment and the development of the students. The public may not yet view counseling as the school's function, which underscores a need for more documentation of the effectiveness of elementary school counseling in the literature (Hardesty & Dillard, 1994). If guidance and counseling programs are to survive, counselors and principals need to engage in effective public relations, informing the public about the valuable contributions made through these programs. (Hardesty & Dillard, 1994; Hughey, Gysbers & Starr, 1993).

The following recommendations are suggested for individuals intending to create new or strengthen existing elementary counseling programs:

Principals

- Know the role of the elementary school counselor
- Inform students, teachers, and parents of the purpose of elementary school counseling and the role of the counselor
- Define and maintain the counselor's role within appropriate parameters

Principals and Counselors

- Establish frequent communications
- Create mutual trust

Counselors

- Maintain high visibility
- Keep publics informed about your work and your successes

Several factors limited the findings of this study. First, a relatively small sample of principals, assistant principals, and counselors was interviewed. Additional participants would be needed to saturate the data and develop additional support for the themes identified. Second, the data gathered were based on the objectivity and reliability of the interviewers. Typical of interview data gathering, informant integrity becomes an issue of rigor. Finally, the interviews were confined to a midwestern metropolitan area, limiting the generalizations of results. Despite these limitations, the results of the study reveal the significance of the role of the principal and the characteristics of counselor/principal relationships found in effective counseling programs. The paucity of research on counselor/principal relationships and the increasingly important role that counselors play in elementary schools suggest a need for additional research on this topic.

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