Fostering Collaboration between Preservice Educational Leadership and School Counseling Graduate Candidates

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Abstract

The purpose of this mixed-method study was to examine the perspectives of educational leadership and school counselor (SC) pre-service candidates on SC utilization in PreK-12 schools, barriers to implementing effective SC programs and professional SC identities, roles and responsibilities. Candidates (n = 105) participated in a collaborative class, where they engaged in group reflections and completed a survey. Emerging themes included time constraints, negative school culture, poor principal-counselor relationships, lack of communication and shared leadership.

Keywords

Author's Notes

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Recent policy changes in education, including the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (Greenstein, 2012), have led to greater demands for education professionals. While it is clear that higher academic performance, increased school accountability, and college and career readiness for all students lead to better outcomes, supporting this mission is challenging for school leaders (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Mangin, 2007; Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2003). Improvements in education are attained through collaborative efforts among all school professionals, using evidence-based practices (Reeves, 2011), and the role of school counselors (SCs) has never been as integral to the process of school improvement. Trained in the use of data-driven methods for addressing achievement and attainment gaps and promoting college and career readiness, school counselors are well suited to serve as members of the school leadership team (American School Counseling Association, 2012). The relationship between principals and school counselors can influence the implementation of school counseling programs, as well as influence the role of school counselors (Clemens, Milson & Cashwell, 2009). Through collaborative activities at the preservice level, candidates in educational leadership (EDL) and school counseling can begin to establish professional relationships and address misconceptions about school counselors' roles (Janson, Militello, & Kosine, 2008).

The Role of the School Counselor

One of the primary roles of SCs is to use evidence-based practices for improving student outcomes, by identifying gaps in achievement, opportunity, and attainment (ASCA, 2012). They also are responsible for developing and implementing data-driven comprehensive school counseling programs that are tailored to address students' academic performance, college and career readiness, and social emotional needs (Dahir, 2004; Johnson & Johnson, 2003).

Comprehensive school counseling programs contribute to higher levels of academic performance and student achievement (Legum & Hoare, 2004; Sink & Stroh, 2003).

However, despite the positive student outcomes associated with comprehensive school counseling programs, school counselors continue to report barriers to carrying out this mission, including having insufficient time to create and fully implement such programs (Dahir, Burnham, Stone, & Cobb, 2010). School counselors continue to be assigned tasks that ASCA (2012) has deemed inappropriate to their role, such as scheduling, disciplining students, and completing clerical work (Dahir, 2004; Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2008; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). Despite attempts by SCs to advocate for appropriate tasks associated with their professional role, many continue to accept inappropriate tasks assigned by principals, while looking for opportunities to promote their skills and capabilities (Dahir et al., 2010).

School Leaders' Perceptions of School Counselors

One major factor associated with the inappropriate utilization of school counselors is principals' beliefs about appropriate school counselor functions (Dahir et al., 2010). While principals hold school counselors in high regard and feel their contributions positively influence various aspects of the school climate (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012), few possess awareness on how to utilize counselors to address student achievement effectively (Mason & Perera-Diltz, 2010). Confusion among principals about school counselors' roles also persist as a result of embracing outdated beliefs about SC duties in direct conflict with SC roles established by ASCA (Amatea and Clark, 2005; Bodenhorn, 2006). For example, Bickmore and Curry (2013) examined how principals' perceptions of counselor roles influenced the induction of new school counselors. The authors found principals most often envisioned SCs being primarily responsible for administrative tasks such as managing student records, coordinating tests, and monitoring

504 plans (Bickmore & Curry, 2013). This is particularly concerning considering principals are responsible for assigning tasks to school personnel, which can influence how SCs develop their professional identity (Chata & Loesch, 2007; Clemens et al., 2009).

Perceptions at the Preservice Level

Preservice educational leadership (EDL; i.e., principal) candidates have been found to share practicing principals' misconceptions about the school counselors' roles and responsibilities (Chata & Loesch, 2007). In fact, Ross & Herrington, (2006), reported university faculty make minimal attempts to promote SCs as essential members of educational learning communities. Also, rarely do EDL graduate programs include training ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success (2014), formerly known as the ASCA National Standards for Students (2004) (Bringman, Mueller, & Lee, 2010; Shoffner & Briggs, 2001). Consequently, EDL candidates rely upon personal experiences with SCs from their schooling experiences when assigning professional tasks to school counselors (Coy, 1999; Mason & Perera-Diltz, 2010).

Learning is enhanced when information about counselor duties is provided to educational leadership candidates within their coursework (Bringman, et al., 2010). Instruction is also supplemented and deepened during internship experiences when EDL candidates interact with SC candidates. It provides an opportunity for educational leadership and school counselor candidates to share experiences that contribute to a more accurate understanding of school counselor roles (Mason & Perera-Diltz, 2010).

Carnes-Holt, Range, and Cisler (2012) describe a teaching module for educational leadership candidates about school counselor roles to develop informative relationships at the preservice level. They recommend uniting EDL and SC candidates through combined classroom experiences that provide opportunities to discuss points of contention that occur

within school buildings.   Such experiences also provide school counseling candidates opportunities to share best practices and clarify misconceptions about their roles (Carnes-Holt et al., 2012).   Candidates from both professions can learn from one another and engage in shared leadership, which also encourages counseling and educational leadership faculty to model collaboration by engaging in joint teaching activities (Janson et al., 2008).

The current research that addresses collaboration between EDL and SC faculty at the preservice level is informative because it illuminates how they can work together to eliminate barriers to SCs when trying to assume their professional roles (Carnes-Holt et al., 2012; Janson et al., 2008).   However, the literature examining such efforts at the preservice level between students is limited.   This study endeavored to contribute to the existing body of research by exploring EDL and SC candidate perspectives about the SC utilization at internship sites and by investigating the candidates' proposed solutions for addressing the perceived barriers to that utilization.

Methods

The reported research in this paper was designed as a pilot study that used a convenience sample to collect preliminary information on educational leadership and school counselor candidates' perceptions of each others' work and assess the feasibility of expanding data collection. The study had three primary purposes: (1) to explore educational leadership candidates' perceptions of school counselor utilization at their internship sites; (2) to examine school counseling candidates' perceptions of barriers hindering their ability to implement school counseling programs at their internship sites; and, (3) to determine educational leadership and school counseling candidates' perceptions of value regarding the collaborative

class experience. The investigators received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and procedures were compliant with both institutional and professional ethical standards.

Participants

Participants for the study were sampled from the investigators' school counseling and educational leadership capstone internship classes over a three-year period. The investigators developed a structured learning experience in which students from both programs would participate in one joint classroom session during internship to engage in dialogue prompted by reflective questions. A total of 105 students participated (n=105; 55 EDL/50 SC). No additional demographic information was collected beyond program enrollment (e.g., educational leadership or school counseling program).

Data Collection

The investigators used two data sources: candidate work samples generated through group discussions and a short survey candidates completed independently. During each joint class, students were assigned to work in groups of four or five. The investigators attempted to ensure that EDL and SC students were dispersed proportionately within the groups. Groups were given three open-ended questions upon which to reflect, discuss, and document responses on chart paper for approximately 30 minutes. Groups were then required to present responses to the entire class. A total of 15 groups (i.e., five groups per year over three years) participated.

Additionally, the investigators created a survey designed to assess student satisfaction with the joint class and to collect data students were possibly unwilling to share during group discussions. The survey contained Likert-scale and open-ended questions (Appendix A). The survey allowed students to evaluate the usefulness of the joint class; to indicate learning

outcomes and how they believed their perspectives had changed; and, to make suggestions for future classes.

Data Analysis

After all data were collected, group responses were transferred from the chart paper to a Word document and analyzed using open coding and comparative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). Responses were reviewed by both investigators independently, and examined for distinct concepts and categories to verify data. The *usefulness* survey question responses were tallied. The open-ended survey responses were compiled into a list and constant comparative methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), specifically open coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 2007), were used to analyze data. After the researchers coded the responses independently, they discussed their lists of categories. Although the wording for some categories slightly differed between the researchers' lists, there was consensus of the concepts behind the categories.

Results

The qualitative analysis of this mixed methods study resulted in three overarching themes, which encompassed multiple broad categories and subcategories. The three overarching themes were: Perceptions of educational leadership candidates on the utilization of school counselors; school counseling candidates' perceptions of barriers to performing appropriate school counseling activities; and educational leadership and school counseling candidates working together to eliminate barriers.

Qualitative Results

Perceptions of EDL candidates on the utilization of SCs. Open coding yielded 28 statements about specific activities educational leadership candidates observed school counselors

performing. Those activities were then categorized into what ASCA (2012) describes as appropriate school counseling activities or inappropriate school counseling activities. The second phase of data analysis further specified the kinds of appropriate or inappropriate activities in which school counselors engaged. The specific activities were labeled in one of the following seven subcategories: (1) Administrative/Clerical; (2) Monitor/Proctor; (3) Disciplinary; (4) Crisis Centered or Responsive; (5) Direct Services to Students; (6) Indirect Services to Students; and, (7) School Support. Eight of the statements were categorized as appropriate activities; twenty (20) were inappropriate. Examples of appropriate school counseling activities included individual and group counseling and student advisory activities, both forms of direct services. Examples of inappropriate activities included pushing paper, putting out fires, and lunchroom/hall attendance.

SC candidates' perceptions of barriers to performing appropriate school counseling activities. For this theme, open coding yielded 38 identified barriers, categorized in four groups: (1) Relationship Between School Counselors and Educational Leaders; (2) Lack of SC Identity; (3) Time; and (4) School Culture. The relationship between the school counselor and principal emerged as the most significant barrier, yielding 12 of the 38 statements. Contributors to the reported relationship barriers included lacking principal support, poor communication, and lack of collaboration. Time was the second most frequently cited barrier, yielding 10 statements. School counseling students reported being overloaded with non-counseling related tasks as impeding their time to engage in appropriate school counseling activities. Additional barriers cited were lack of school counselor identity, school culture, and misunderstanding of school counselor role by school staff. School counseling students also expressed difficulty demonstrating leadership skills and not feeling

empowered. These assertions suggest a lack of role advocacy by school counselors. In terms of school culture, negative attitudes about counseling, lack of vision, and fears of change were cited as barriers that interfered with school counseling program implementation.

EDL and SC candidates working together to eliminate barriers. After coding, four major categories were organized based on the data: (1) Advocating for School Counselor Identity; (2) Increasing Opportunities for School Counselor Participation; (3) Establishing Open Communication; and (4) Planning Use of Time. Within the first category, group participants indicated that school counselors "must know and assert their professional identity" and "clearly state the description and responsibilities of their position." Using a collaborative approach, principals and school counselors can negotiate to establish clear roles and expectations for counselors. Participant groups also indicated that once roles have been clarified, they must establish norms that foster respect for counseling and address role fidelity by establishing clear boundaries. Also within the first category was the importance of obtaining support from school personnel to increase their understanding of school counselors' work. One respondent reported, "All stakeholders need to understand and accept the role and value that counselors can bring to school" and have clarity in terms of the "responsibilities of school counselors, including understanding the issue of confidentiality." Participants recommended the use of professional development to "teach staff about the ASCA model" and "clear up misconceptions."

Increasing Opportunities for School Counselor Participation, encompassed creating opportunities for school counselors to function as leaders and collaborators. Participants recommended that school counselors lead professional development and be included in important "decision-making, technical systems and feedback." Participants highlighted that collaboration included involvement with all school stakeholders and participation on team

projects and with planning activities. Some suggestions included, but were not limited to: working with the assistant principal on creating a web site, curriculum planning; and program specific involvement.

Establishing Open Communication emerged as the third major category. Group participants indicated that it was important to find time for principals and school counselors to establish open and authentic communication. Responses indicated the importance of allotting time for consistent communication and planning regularly scheduled meetings.

Planning Use of Time, the fourth category, was recommended so that school counselors would have opportunities for strategizing, planning, managing caseloads, addressing student needs, and examining data. Further, it was recommended to allocate time for collaboration with stakeholders. Participants expressed the need to, "establish a common prep time for teachers and counselors" and "common prep time for school counselors and leadership so that they can look at data."

Survey Results

Results of the survey administered to educational leadership and school counseling candidate respondents are provided in the following two tables:

Table 1

Lessons Learned by EDL and SC Respondents

Variable	Number (%)[a]
-EDL respondents	
SC roles/capabilities	20 (46.5)
Shared leadership/collaboration	9 (20.9)
Defining roles	13 (30.2)
Challenges/barriers	5 (11.7)
-SC respondents	
SC roles/capabilities	0 (0%)
Shared leadership/collaboration	13 (38.2)
Defining roles	20 (58.8)
Challenges/barriers	1 (2.9)

[a]The number of respondents varied because of missing cases.

Table 2

Changed Perspectives Reported by EDL and SC Respondents

Variable	Number (%)[a]
-EDL respondents	
Value of SC and support	22 (62.8)
Collaboration in relationships	3 (8.57)
Change in perspective about own Professional role	3 (8.57)
No change	7 (20)
-SC respondents	
New perceptions of EDL	15 (60)
Collaboration in relationships	5 (20)
Change in perspective about own professional role	5 (20)
No change	0 (0)

ᵃThe number of respondents varied because of missing cases.

Discussion

Consistent with previous research, findings in this study affirm ongoing disparities between suggested best practices in school counseling and actual school counseling practices. This was apparent during analysis of EDL candidate reflections that highlighted their observations of SCs engaged in tasks deemed as inappropriate school counseling activities, as suggested by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2012). Rather than serving in leadership roles and addressing student and school needs, most were serving in support-type roles and expected to be crisis responders.

The school counselor/principal relationship was the most influential factor that interfered with school counseling program implementation. This finding seems plausible considering prior researcher has found that the principal/SC relationship influences the extent to which SCs are used to their greatest capacity (Clemens et al., 2009). The next most commonly reported barrier to program implementation was time, which also is consistent with previous research (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Zalaquett, 2005).

The findings from this study revealed that educational leadership and school counseling students welcome opportunities to collaborate and learn alongside each other. Data indicated that the majority of participants from both groups found the joint class to be extremely beneficial and learned something important from their peers. Further, most participants desired additional opportunities to collaborate and/or to create deeper learning experiences.

Both EDL and SC students reported a change in their perspectives to some degree. Prior to the session, most educational leadership students were confused and unsure of school counselors' roles and the most effective ways to use school counselors. Existing research has

shown that often prinicpals misunderstand the professional role of school counselors, are unclear of their specific responsibilities, and often underutilize them (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, 2009; Musheno & Talbert, 2002). The joint class helped EDL students realize that school counselors' skill sets are multifaceted and capable of contributing to student success by disaggregating data, closing student academic gaps, and leading advisory programs. On the other hand, school counseling students better understood principal roles and admitted to having more positive and optimistic perceptions of principals after having opportunities to engage in rich conversation.

Lastly, students from both programs communicated concepts such as shared vision, shared leadership, communication, and trust were critical to successful EDL/SC partnerships. These results mirror the findings of a national survey of principals and SCs that reported concepts such as communication, sharing information, shared vision, and mutual trust and respect to be predictive of effective collaborative relationships between principals and SCs (Finkelstein, College Board, ASCA, & National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2009).

Limitations of the Study

This pilot study extends our understanding of educational leadership and school counseling student perspectives about each group's roles and challenges in maximizing school counselors' knowledge and skills. However, the study has limitations. First, the sample was one of convenience only and was not representative of all EDL and SC students. Findings cannot be generalized and are meant to elicit reflection on and implementation of possible strategies for improving educational leadership and school counseling graduate programs through collaborative learning experiences. A second limitation was the study's survey. It was not tested

for validity or reliability because it served as a measure of course satisfaction and utility. A third limitation was student responses. The investigators acknowledge the possibility that students will respond to survey questions in ways that reflect what they believe their faculty want them to respond.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The pilot study was designed to be a springboard for additional research on EDL and SC student perspectives and how graduate programs can increase collaborative opportunities to deepen the understanding between both groups. This pilot study format can be expanded to include additional educational leadership and school counseling programs. Given both groups of students will be assuming positions in schools and be working together, it is critical these groups understand how each can contribute to helping facilitate student success. The school accountability era requires school principals to leverage the skills school counselors possess. Educational leadership and school counseling faculty have a role in bridging the gap between students by building strong relationships between them and affording opportunities for reflection, development, and learning in collaboration. Additional studies investigating how EDL and SC preparation programs can strengthen relationships between future principals and school counselors may prove to be beneficial. Studies that measure the influence collaborative efforts between EDL and SC students, actually have on the relationship between these two groups once they begin working together in schools would be worthwhile. Results from such an investigation could provide a rationale and evidence base for best practices in collaboration.

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Appendix A

EDL and SCE Joint Class Feedback

(Thank you for attending today's joint session and for your valuable feedback!)

1) I am studying to be

    _____ a counselor   _____an educational leader

2) How would you rate today's joint class?

____very useful   ____useful   ____somewhat useful   ____not useful

3) I learned the following:

4) I unlearned the following:

5) My perspective has changed in the following way(s):

6) Please share suggestions for future joint classes.