

Making the Time: Relationships Among the School Specialists

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Abstract

This study examined the relationships among school specialists, specifically, special education teachers, Child Study Team members (school psychologists and school social workers), and school counselors, who provide support to students with specific learning needs and their families. By examining the relationship and level of collaboration among these professionals, this research provides further insight into the way schools are addressing the needs of a diverse student body. It was found that relationship barriers may be negatively impacting the work of these school specialists and ultimately affecting the students. Explored relationship barriers included time restrictions, scheduling conflicts, and role ambiguity. Recommendations for collaboration are discussed to support the development of these relationships.

Key Words: school counselors, special education teachers, collaboration, child study team, relationships, time, specialists, social workers, psychologists

Introduction and Literature Review

Collaboration among school specialists is becoming even more essential in today's PreK–12 schools because of changing student demographics. Schools are challenged in educating *all* students with diverse needs, including those with disabilities and those who are English language learners (ELLs). Collaboration needs to be created and encouraged among key school specialists—special education teachers, the Child Study Team (CST), and school counselors—to

ensure that schools are serving *all* students effectively. Research has shown the value of developing the relationship with these professionals to support student development (Barrow & Mamlin, 2016). However, there is also perceived belief that school counselors and the special education teams (special education teachers and CST) do not collaborate enough and do not share information regarding students, who often have diverse and constant needs (Beesley, 2004). Furthermore, it appears to be consistent in research that these collaborative relationships are essential but often have issues that exist within them (Hott et al., 2015), and these struggles may be felt by the rest of the school (i.e., parents, teachers, and/or school administrators). Essentially, collaboration among school specialists can support student development, but it is not being implemented to its fullest extent due to unclear relationships. Therefore, additional research needs to be conducted regarding the nature of the collaborative relationships among education specialists involved with IEPs and the factors that contribute to their successful and/or unsuccessful collaboration. In the current study, each of these factors is reviewed and the relationships among special education teachers, CST members, and school counselors in a large urban school district in New Jersey are examined in order to understand these collaborative efforts. Prior to exploring the barriers to forming effective collaborative relationships among special education teachers, the CST, and school counselors, it will be useful to discuss the defined roles of each group.

Overview of Roles

School Counselor

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2012) provides an outline of what school counselors should do following three domains (academic, career, social/emotional needs). The role of the school counselor varies depending on the levels in the building (elementary, middle, high schools). The ASCA (2012) suggests a balance of 80% direct service and 20% indirect service in regard to school counselors' responsibilities. The direct service includes:

- Delivery of the school counseling curriculum
- Crisis management
- Conducting individual and group counseling sessions
- Consultation with administrators, teachers, students, and parents
- Responsive services
- Collaboration with administrators, teachers, students, and parents
- Assessment (i.e., state testing requirements, district testing requirements)
- Academic development with students (i.e., scheduling)
- Career planning meetings with students

The indirect services include record keeping, creation of master schedules, curriculum writing and development, and other services when school counselors are not working with the student (ASCA, 2012).

Though ASCA (2012) recommends 80% of a school counselor's day be spent on direct services, this is not the reality in today's schools. Wines et al. (2007) reported that school counselors spend so much of their time on some of the indirect services (i.e., scheduling or assessment), that it takes away time from collaboration and relationship building with school community members. These findings are not in keeping with the recommendation from ASCA (2012) that suggest only 20% of the school day be spent on these indirect services. School counselors are often seen as leaders and change agents in schools (Kolbert et al., 2016) because they are often tasked with administrative responsibilities. However, being burdened with such responsibilities has become an increasing source of counselor burnout (Kim & Lambie, 2018). School counselors are still tasked with the academic, career, and social/emotional job responsibilities in addition to a variety of administrative testing, scheduling, and other data driven tasks (Dahir & Stone, 2015). The impact that this has had on the profession is often role confusion for the school system and also for the school counselor.

Special Educator

The role of the special education teacher has evolved over the last few decades due to changes in policy as well as research-based changes in practices in K–12 settings (Shepherd et al., 2016). These changes have increased the complexity and responsibilities of the special educator's job, which can lead to job overload (Garwood et al., 2018). According to Youngs et al. (2011), one of the primary roles of special educators is to design and implement specialized instruction in reading, writing, math, and other content areas. Though this role is essential in the success of students with disabilities, more recently a shift has occurred where the role of the special educator teacher is to primarily aid students with disabilities in mastering grade-level academic standards (Shepherd et al., 2016). Other responsibilities of special educators include:

- Making accommodations and modifications of curriculum for students with disabilities
- Writing Individual Education Programs (IEPs)
- Progress monitoring
- Case managing
- Collaborating and communicating with CST members, speech therapists, administrators, paraprofessionals, parents/guardians, school counselors, school psychologists, and general education teachers
- Selecting and implementing assistive technology

- Addressing functional behavior of students with disabilities
- Transition planning

The above list is not exhaustive, but it illustrates the breadth of the job responsibilities of special educators. The roles of the special educator may differ by setting and special education framework utilized in the school district. For instance, those school districts utilizing the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework may require a role shift in which the special educator is primarily seen as the interventionalist, someone who comes into the classroom and modifies instruction so that a student can participate (Simonsen et al., 2010). No matter the setting or framework used, special educators can fulfill the role of an advocate for students with disabilities and help maximize the time spent in the general education classroom (Youngs et al., 2011).

Child Study Team

In New Jersey, where this study was conducted, the multidisciplinary team that makes decisions about special education services is the CST. The CST members in New Jersey consist of a school psychologist, social worker, and a learning disabilities teacher consultant (LDT-C). In general, the CST is primarily responsible for the evaluation, placement, and programming of students with disabilities. In addition to these responsibilities, each member of the CST has specific roles that are relevant to the position held, which are elaborated below.

School Psychologist

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2017), the professional role of school psychologists is to assist children and youth to succeed academically, emotionally, socially, and behaviorally. Specifically, school psychologists provide direct support in the form of administering and interpreting assessments, supporting improved academic achievement through interventions, and providing consultation (Fagan & Wise, 2007). As assessment specialists, school psychologists conduct psychological, academic, and behavioral assessments and monitor student progress, with an ultimate goal of determining special education eligibility. Though assessment still is an important role of the school psychologist, a shifting role has expanded to include helping improve student academic and behavioral outcomes (Burns, 2013). This can occur through consultation and intervention. The consultation services provided by school psychologists have been deemed a prominent and important practice (Castro-Villarreal & Rodriguez, 2017), which is the foundation of school psychology practice (Ysseldyke et al., 2006). School psychologists consult with families, teachers, and other mental health professionals (i.e., school counselors, social workers). More recently, school psychologists

have a new burgeoning role of collaborating and consulting with other mental health professionals in the community and healthcare systems (Shahidullah, 2019). Consultation can take the form of mental health, behavior, crisis, or organization consultation. School psychologists are also considered experts in evidence-based academic and behavioral interventions (Burns, 2013). Through consultation, they can provide valuable support to teachers and families to help improve the outcomes of all students. Though both the literature and NASP (2017) define the roles of school psychologists, Fagan and Wise (2007) argue that ultimately the role of school psychologist is dependent on the presence or the absence of other school specialists.

School Social Worker

Traditionally, school social workers are viewed as the link between school, home, and community. In general, school social workers serve as counselors, mediators, and advocates (Sherman, 2016) and are expected to provide supports for at-risk students in public schools (Altshuler & Webb, 2009). Specifically, the school social worker focuses on coordinating the efforts of schools, families, and communities toward helping students improve their academic achievement and social, emotional, and behavioral capability by viewing the person in his or her environment (National Association of School Social Workers, 2012). More recently, a push has been made to encourage school social workers to take more of a leadership role in today's schools (Ayasse & Stone, 2015), which can be accomplished through collaboration with school administration (Sherman, 2016).

Learning Disabilities Teacher–Consultant

The Learning Disabilities Teacher–Consultant (LDT–C) is the third member of the child study team member in New Jersey. The term LDT–C is unique to New Jersey with other states sometimes using the term educational diagnostician. Roles of the educational diagnostician vary by state (Collier et al., 2020). However, in general, the LDT–C is a specialist who functions in the school environment as an educational diagnostician and instructional programmer. Specific services provided by the LDT–C include teacher/student consultation, preventative prereferral intervention, assessment, coordination of services, and program development (New Jersey Association of School Psychologists, 2002). Though LDT–Cs (educational diagnosticians) can serve in a wide array of roles, Rueter and Simpson (2012) assert that educational diagnosticians spend most of their time on assessing students, writing reports, and conducting IEP meetings rather than focusing on educational interventions.

Barriers to Effective Collaboration and Communication

Relationships often encounter barriers to effective communication and collaboration. Collaboration is simply bringing a group of individuals together for a common purpose (Jao & McDougall, 2016), recognizing each individual brings their own perspective and relationship style to that group. In order to have collaboration, time for interaction to occur is needed. For many of the school specialists, the structure of the school building or district prevents their ability to schedule collaborative meetings due to space and time constraints. Flexibility in scheduling is certainly an issue for which these educators might want to advocate. Other barriers to successful collaboration include role ambiguity, power struggle, scheduling conflicts, and areas of expertise.

Role Ambiguity

The roles of school counselors, special educators, and CST members may differ slightly by state, district, and school, and the duties of these positions are most likely dependent on the needs of the district and schools where they are employed. Specifically, role ambiguity occurs when the role expectations and the job description are not made clear (Brunsting et al., 2014). Not only do educators need to understand what is expected of them in a given role, they also need a clear understanding as to what is expected of professionals in different roles. Friction among different educators may occur because of mixed and/or unclear perceptions as to what that role should be (Idol & Baran, 1992). Role ambiguity can also lead to burnout in special education teachers (Brunsting et al., 2014), in school counselors (Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006), and social workers (Leyba, 2009). Not only can conflict occur, but also resources (time/expertise) are not used to the fullest potential.

Administrators can play a role in both the cause and remediation of role ambiguity. School administrators may not have clear knowledge about the different positions in the school, thus resulting in the assignment of tasks that do not fit in the parameters of the school specialists' training. This has specifically been documented as impacting the field of school counseling. Perera-Diltz and Mason (2008) found that school counselors are engaged in some duties that are not endorsed by ASCA (2012), possibly due to administrator's lack of knowledge. These school administrators may not have an accurate understanding of the school counselor's role (Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005) and at the same time are not familiar with the ASCA standards (ASCA, 2012; Zalaquett, 2005). Leuwerke et al. (2009) found that over half of the school administrator study participants (51.3%) did not have exposure to the ASCA model; therefore, the lack of education of school principals about the role of school counselors may lead to role ambiguity (Dahir et al., 2019).

A misunderstanding of roles also impacts school psychologists. School psychologists are often narrowly viewed as only an evaluators, but they offer a breadth of knowledge about the academic, social, and emotional needs of students that can be used to assist educators. Through using a consultation model, school psychologists are well positioned to provide support to teachers in best practices implementation (Castro-Villarreal & Rodriguez, 2017). However, teachers may not always seek out this consultation due to unfamiliarity with this role (Castro-Villarreal & Rodriguez, 2017) or due to teachers only being accustomed to working with the school psychologist in the role of evaluator (Hylander, 2012). School psychologists value this role of consultation. They often prefer it and want to spend more time in this valued practice, but approximately two-thirds of their time may be spent on special education eligibility assessments (Gonzalez et al., 2004).

Though not as frequently researched as in the fields of school psychology, school counseling, and school social work, special educators also face role ambiguity. This can be especially true for those special educators just beginning their teaching career. Novice special education teachers often rely on past experiences and knowledge, such as experiences gained through teacher education programs, to make sense of the ambiguous role expectations that are found in schools (Jones et al., 2013). Interactions with colleagues and mentors further play a part in shaping the understanding of their roles, but may be dependent on factors such as teaching assignment or location of the school (Youngs et al., 2011). Like in the case of the school counselor, the school principal can be key in addressing the role ambiguity of special educators. Once special educators begin teaching, the school principal can assist them in understanding their roles and what is expected of them (Youngs, 2007). Brunsting and Sreckovic (2014) suggest principals provide comprehensive special educator job descriptions and specifically address situations where several teacher job duties are in conflict to help reduce role ambiguity.

Power Struggle

Role ambiguity among educators may at times lead to a power struggle. School social workers, school psychologists, and school counselors often find themselves in competition for leadership responsibilities within the school because of overlapping role responsibilities, especially in the areas of mental health services. Altschuler and Webb (2009) refer to these conflicts as *turf battles*. These turf battles may impact school social workers more significantly than other professionals. A common perception held is that school social workers are not as rigorously trained as other CST members or school counselors and thus are not as knowledgeable (Sherman, 2016), which could lead to their

services not being sought after. Nevertheless, school social workers, school psychologists, and school counselors can all be important pieces in the puzzle when providing mental health support services to students in public schools. Each group has a unique skill set and knowledge base, and it is essential that they understand one another's roles (Dupper, 2003).

Time and Logistics

Time and scheduling to collaborate are not given to many professionals. Available time is one barrier to successful collaboration educators routinely and consistently report (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). Relationships need time to develop. Simultaneously, the complex problems being addressed by educators need adequate time to be resolved. In districts, especially for school counselors and special education team members, time is often short due to a myriad of responsibilities that need to be accomplished in a school day and often after school hours. Another barrier to the development of relationships is the practice of having school specialists rotate among several schools with the district which results in limited time in each building with students and staff. Cahill and Mitra (2007) found that the lack of time to collaborate among the school team members impacts the development of productive relationships. Based on the restriction of scheduling in some districts, it seems unlikely that effective collaboration can exist and does not appear to be encouraged or supported by administration (Alshuler, 2003). Therefore, administrators may need to consider altering schedules or floating planning periods (Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2015) to allow educators time to meet together and build cohesive relationships.

Differentiation of Functions

Student needs are changing in schools today, with students needing more support from school personnel trained in mental health—an area of expertise for the school counselor (Repie, 2015). As a whole, school staff need to identify students' needs and then consult with the position that has expertise in that area to best support the student's development. Special education team members have expertise in working with students' specific needs, using differentiation to help students, and understanding the challenges that special education students are facing (Cahill & Mitra, 2007). Recognizing the specific expertise of school counselors and special education team members does not take away from their power, but promotes stronger relationships among students and families as well (Geltner & Leibforth, 2008). Utilizing a school counselor's expertise and changing the IEP framework positively impacts the focus and outcome of the IEP meeting and, most importantly, the needs of the student (Geltner & Leibforth, 2008). Tackling tough and complicated issues demands that individuals no longer be seen as the expert but as carrying

expertise and knowledge into the larger group now working to address problems as a shared project (Bemak, 2000).

As reflected in the literature, each of the school specialists (CST members, school counselors, special education teachers) serves a specific purpose and has expertise in a variety of areas to help meet the diverse needs of students. Unfortunately, it appears that most school districts do not acknowledge that these independent areas of expertise, when engaged together, can be beneficial to the school, students, teachers, and parents. Little research exists on collaboration among these school specialists and the positive impact it may have on students. This study examined the relationships among school specialists to determine what gaps in collaboration may exist and how to close these in order to best support students and one another.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the collaborative relationships among mental health school specialists, specifically, special education teachers, CST members, and school counselors. A mixed methods case study approach was utilized. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the perceived job responsibilities of special education teachers, CST members, and school counselors, and how do these perceptions compare?
2. What are the barriers to collaboration among special education teachers, CST members, and school counselors?
3. What is the method and frequency of communication among special education teachers, CST members, and school counselors?

Methods

Participants

This study surveyed school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, and special education teachers in a large urban school district serving approximately 30,000 students in grades P–12. For the purpose of this study, the researchers did not include LDT–Cs because the focus was on mental health specialists in collaboration, instead of all members of the CST. Special education teachers work directly with all students and are often a link from the student to the mental health specialist. A survey was emailed to all school specialists meeting the participant requirements via the Chief Officer of the school district. A total of 705 specialists were contacted to participate in the study (school social workers $n = 144$, school psychologists $n = 22$, school counselors $n = 74$, special education teachers $n = 465$). After several attempts

to secure responses, the researchers then emailed the personnel directly from the schools' websites based on the identified role. As a result of the multiple attempts, 38 completed responses were recorded ($N = 38$). Of these respondents, 36 identified as female, and 2 identified as male. The race/ethnicity of the respondents varied: 16 identified as non-Hispanic White, 9 identified as Hispanic, 8 identified as African American, and 5 identified as Other. A total of 5 elementary level professionals (Grades P–5), 1 middle school level professionals (Grades 6–8), 17 high school level professionals (Grades 9–12), and 15 elementary and middle school level professionals (Grades P–8) responded to the survey. There were variations in the number of years' experience from 1 year to over 20, with most participants responding with 11 or more years of experience in the educational field (see Table 1). Many of the educational professionals held a variety of school certifications (see Table 2), but for the purpose of this study, respondents were selected if they currently held a position as a school counselor, school social worker, school psychologist, or special education teacher. There were no participants that identified as school psychologists in spite of multiple attempts to contact these professionals in the school district.

Table 1. Years of Experience in Education Field

Year Range	<i>N</i>
1–3 Years	1
4–7 Years	5
8–10 Years	2
11–15 Years	11
16–20 Years	5
Over 20 Years	14

Participants were asked to volunteer to further engage in an interview to deepen the understanding of their relationship with each school specialist and provide detailed discussion on collaboration and what would be helpful in their positions. Of the 38 participants, four agreed to continue with an interview to discuss their relationships further. Three of these participants were school counselors, and one participant was a special education teacher; all four were working in PreK–8 settings.

Table 2. New Jersey Department of Education Certifications

Certification	<i>N</i>
School Counselor	23
School Social Worker	8
Supervisor	2
Principal	4
Elementary School Teacher Grades K–6	8
Director of School Counseling Services	3
English	2
Mathematics	2
Spanish	1
English as a Second Language	2
Physical Education	1
Family and Consumer Sciences	1
Students with Disabilities	12
Preschool through Grade 3 Teacher	3
Student Assistance Coordinator	1
Student Assistance Coordinator with CEAS	1

Data Collection

Data were collected in two phases. The first phase consisted of the administration of an exploratory survey using the program Qualtrics. Survey links were distributed by email to school counselors, CST members, and special education teachers. Demographic type survey questions were asked to collect participant data concerning gender, age, race/ethnicity, years in the education field and the selected school district, the grade-level(s) working in, education, certifications, and the position the participants currently held in the selected school district. Then participants answered questions differentiated by the position (i.e., school counselor, CST member, special education teacher) held in the selected school district. In this section of the survey, the researchers were interested in collecting data on the perceptions the participants held concerning the roles different positions fulfilled, how helpful each group was to the students in the school, frequency and methods of communication, and the barriers to collaboration with other school specialists (i.e., time restrictions, schedule conflicts, logistics, personality conflicts, role expectations, role ambiguity). Participants were given the opportunity to add any additional information through an open-ended question. The creation of the exploratory survey was informed by a thorough review of relevant literature.

The second phase of data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews. At the conclusion of the survey, participants were asked to volunteer to be interviewed via a separate Qualtrics survey link to protect the anonymity of the initial survey. These interviews were semi-structured with the purpose being to obtain more in-depth and rich information that the surveys could not capture. Participants were asked to describe their job responsibilities and how they divided their time on these responsibilities. They were then asked to describe examples when successful and unsuccessful collaboration occurred with different team members (i.e., special education teacher, school counselor, social worker, school psychologist). Finally, participants were asked to discuss how they envisioned the ideal collaborative relationship among themselves and other school specialists and what roles/activities they would like their team members to be involved in. Again, like the survey, questions were differentiated based on the role the participant held in the selected school district. Three interviews were conducted using Zoom video software, and one participant provided written response and feedback to the interview questions.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis (i.e., frequency counts, percentages, means) was utilized for the survey data. Thematic analysis was utilized to interpret the open-ended survey answers and interview data. After the survey and interview data were organized, each researcher independently read the interview transcripts and the open-ended survey responses to become familiar with the data. Each researcher then independently generated initial codes for the data sets. Next, each researcher independently coded the survey responses and interview transcripts utilizing open coding. Once the initial coding was complete, both researchers discussed the codes and developed themes. These themes were then refined and defined. The themes that emerged were time constraints, role expectations, and scheduling conflicts. Qualitative findings were then compared to quantitative findings.

Results

Based on the survey results, there were clear areas that emerged as perceptions of job responsibilities, job duties, and communication/collaboration structure. Most of the school specialists agreed to similar areas for time spent in different roles (see Table 4). Additionally, there was consistency among the roles in regard to communication frequency among the school specialists (see Table 3). As reported by each school specialist group, the most preferred method of communication was in-person, with the exception of school counselors who preferred to communicate with the school psychologist through email.

The frequency of communication varied by school specialist group. School counselors communicated with special education teachers and school psychologists on an as-needed basis and with school social workers weekly. School social workers communicated most often with special education teachers and school psychologists on a daily basis and with school counselors on a weekly basis. The special education teachers noted that they most often communicated with the school counselor and school social workers weekly, but never communicated with the school psychologists. Further, there was consistency among barriers to working together among the school specialists (see Table 5).

Table 3. Frequency and Preferred Method of Communication

	Frequency of Communication (Mode)	Preferred Communication Method (Mode)
As Reported by School Counselor		
Special Education Teacher	As needed ($n = 6$)	In-Person ($n = 13$)
School Psychologist	As needed ($n = 11$)	Email ($n = 9$)
School Social Worker	Weekly ($n = 9$)	In-Person ($n = 13$)
As Reported by the School Social Worker		
Special Education Teacher	Daily ($n = 3$)	In-Person ($n = 4$)
School Psychologist	Daily ($n = 4$)	In-Person ($n = 5$)
School Counselor	Weekly ($n = 3$)	In-Person ($n = 5$)
As Reported by the Special Education Teacher		
School Psychologist	Never ($n = 4$)	In-Person ($n = 6$)
School Social Worker	Weekly ($n = 3$)	In-Person ($n = 5$)
School Counselor	Weekly ($n = 3$)	In-Person ($n = 8$)

Table 4. Communication Among School Specialists

Role	Frequency	n	M	SD
As Reported by School Counselor				
Special Education Teacher			3.29	1.52
	Daily	3		
	Weekly	5		
	Monthly	4		
	Never	1		
	Other	6		
	As Needed	6		

Table 4 continued next page

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Table 4, continued

Preferred Communication Method: In-person		13	1.71	0.55
School Psychologist			4.14	1.17
	Daily	0		
	Weekly	3		
	Monthly	5		
	Never	1		
	Other	11		
	As Needed	11		
Preferred Communication Method: Email		9	1.90	1.15
School Social Worker			3.05	1.59
	Daily	4		
	Weekly	9		
	Monthly	1		
	Never	1		
	Other	2		
	As Needed	6		
Preferred Communication Method: In-person		13	1.71	0.55
As Reported by School Social Worker				
Special Education Teacher			2.50	1.80
	Daily	3		
	Weekly	1		
	Monthly	0		
	Never	0		
	Other	2		
	As Needed	2		
Preferred Communication Method: In-person		4	2.83	1.46
School Psychologist			1.33	0.47
	Daily	4		
	Weekly	2		
	Monthly	0		
	Never	0		
	Other	0		
Preferred Communication Method: In-person		5	2.17	0.37

Table 4 continued next page

SCHOOL SPECIALISTS' RELATIONSHIPS

Table 4, continued

School Counselor			2.83	1.57
	Daily	1		
	Weekly	3		
	Monthly	0		
	Never	0		
	Other	2		
	As Needed	2		
Preferred Communication Method: In-person		5	1.83	1.46
As Reported by Special Education Teacher			2.91	1.38
School Counselor				
	Daily	2		
	Weekly	3		
	Monthly	2		
	Never	2		
	Other	2		
	As Needed	2		
Preferred Communication Method: In-person		8	2.36	1.23
School Psychologist			3.73	1.14
	Daily	1		
	Weekly	0		
	Monthly	3		
	Never	4		
	Other	3		
	As Needed	3		
Preferred Communication Method: In-person		6	3.36	2.01
School Social Worker			2.91	1.38
	Daily	2		
	Weekly	3		
	Monthly	2		
	Never	2		
	Other	2		
	As Needed	1		
Preferred Communication Method: In-person		5	2.82	1.99

Table 5. Barriers Among School Specialists

Barrier	Response From School Counselors	Responses From School Social Workers	Responses From Special Education Teachers	Total by Barrier
Schedule Conflicts	12 (21.82%)	6 (54.55%)	7 (35%)	25
Time Constraints	15 (27.27%)	1 (9.09%)	7 (35%)	23
Role Expectations	13 (23.64%)	2 (18.18%)	3 (15%)	18
Role Ambiguity	8 (14.55%)	1 (9.09%)	3 (15%)	12
Logistics (i.e., meeting space, etc.)	5 (9.09%)	1 (9.09%)	1 (5%)	7
Personality Conflicts	2 (3.64%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2

After a deeper analysis of the collected data, there were universal responses to themes that emerged from the participants in terms of barriers for working together. Based on the quantitative and qualitative responses, the researchers identified three main themes: time constrictions, role expectations, and scheduling conflicts.

Time Constraints

In the survey, time constraints was identified by school counselors (27.27%) and special education teachers (35%) as the primary barrier to effectively collaborating with other school professionals. Time constraints was the third most frequently selected item by social workers when considering barriers (9.09%). The barrier of time constraints was also made evident during the interviews and in the open-ended items on the survey. Specifically mentioned were time constraints due to staffing issues, missing team members, and a large caseload.

Participants remarked about the large workload or student caseloads resulting in faculty holding these positions primarily spending time on paperwork rather than collaborating with other specialists. A special education teacher answering the survey stated, “I think the workload placed on these positions often restricts them from meeting the needs of their jobs. They are too busy doing paperwork, and they are unable to train or work proactively with teachers and other school professionals.” The special education teacher interviewed made a similar observation when approaching a social worker for assistance concerning a student. She articulated, “She (social worker) tells me she’s very busy, and I’m like, well, okay, me too.” These heavy caseloads could be related to staffing issues in the studied school district where there are missing team members or not enough team members for the number of students who need special education and/or mental health services.

Missing team members may also result in team members being shared between schools. For instance, one CST member noted that the school counselor is only at the school one out of six days. The school counselors were not the only school specialists shared among schools. The shortage of personnel further impacts the CST members. In the open-ended survey response, one social worker wrote,

There are simply NOT enough Child Study Team members to adequately provide the academic support needed in our school district. At the high school level, there are traveling school psychologists and LDT-Cs, so they come to the high school only occasionally to evaluate students and attend an occasional IEP meeting. They are not available day to day to address academic or behavioral concerns. In addition, there is an enormous shortage of special education teachers in district, so many students with IEPs are not receiving instructional support in their classes. LDT-Cs are not available to train general education teachers or substitutes with regard to academic accommodations/modifications.

This response from the social worker is telling. She clearly articulates that there are not enough team members to adequately support the needs of both the faculty and students. When there are not enough team members, this can negatively impact the amount of time available to collaborate.

The participants interviewed voiced that they were interested and open to collaborating with their colleagues. Participants understood that lack of interest was not the cause of the limited collaboration in the district, but rather there was not enough time in the school day to collaborate. Specifically, in an interview, a school counselor noted that she would like to see the CST members visit classrooms, but recognizes that “there’s just no time. It’s not that they don’t want to, we all would like to [collaborate].” Similarly, a CST member (school social worker) noted in an open-ended survey response that she does not collaborate due to limited time in the building but is open to collaboration with her colleagues.

Role Expectations and Ambiguity

A second theme that emerged was connected to the concept of role expectations and ambiguity. Role expectations were defined as when what is expected in a position exceeds what can be accomplished in a timely fashion, and role ambiguity was defined as when the job requirements or description are not made clear. In the survey, school counselors (23.64%), social workers (18.18%), and special education teachers (15%) all identified role expectations as the second barrier to working with other school professionals. Participants

also noted in the survey that unrealistic role expectations were interfering with faculty effectively accomplishing their jobs. One school counselor responding to the survey stated, "Special education teachers and speech therapists have caseloads that are impossible to accommodate." Similarly, a special education teacher stated, "I think the workload placed on these positions (CST) often restricts them from meeting the needs of their jobs." Another school counselor noted in the survey that the CST members may be overwhelmed due to high caseloads. It appears that workload or cases given to the school specialists in the school district exceeds what can possibly be completed and thus impacts the ability to complete other tasks.

Though not identified as the most frequent reason for a barrier to successful collaboration in the survey by participants (special education teachers 10%; school counselors 14.5%; social workers 9.09%), the concept of role ambiguity as a barrier to collaboration emerged in the qualitative data as well as a comparative analysis of the identified roles by each group in the survey. When analyzing the survey data, no clear consensus was found regarding the roles within groups, with no specific role identified by more than 30% of the participants. This could possibly be due to the participants being drawn from different school buildings and grade levels. Often the role of school faculty is driven by the needs of the specific schools where they work. During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to discuss the main roles they fulfilled in their current position. Participants were also asked in the survey to identify the roles other colleagues fulfilled in the school district. For instance, school counselors were asked to identify the roles of special education teachers, social workers, and school psychologists. The following table (Table 6) compares the main role identified in the interviews with the most frequent role identified in the survey. More common roles were identified for the special education teachers and the school psychologist in comparison to the school social worker and the school counselors. The identified roles for the special education teachers in the survey were also in line with the self-reported role of the special education teacher in the interview. On the other hand, the school counselors in the interviews identified Intervention and Referral Services responsibilities as the primary role, which did not coincide with the survey data. Role ambiguity was greatest for school counselors and school social workers when compared to special educators and school psychologists in the current study.

SCHOOL SPECIALISTS' RELATIONSHIPS

Table 6. Role Comparison: Self-Reported vs. Survey Response

Self-Reported	Other Support Staff	Survey Response	<i>n</i>	%
Role: Special Education Teacher				
Teaching students with disabilities and exposing students to the same curriculum as general education students	Counselors	Adapt the general education curriculum for students with disabilities	12	18.18
		Implement Individual Education Programs (IEPs)	8	12.12
		Assess students' skills to determine their needs	8	12.12
	Social Workers	Adapt the general education curriculum for students with disabilities	6	24
		Implement Individual Education Programs (IEPs)	5	20
		Assess students' skills to determine their needs	3	12
	School Psych.	No Responses Recorded		
Role: School Counselor				
I&RS responsibilities	Social Workers	Counsel with students regarding personal/family concerns, school behavior, crisis, relationships, academic issues, substance abuse	4	26.67
		Assist in identifying exceptional children (special education)	2	13.33
		Coordinate and maintain a comprehensive school counseling program	2	13.33
	Special Education Teachers	Counsel with students regarding personal/family concerns, school behavior, crisis, relationships, academic issues, substance abuse	4	9.52

Table 6 continued next page

Table 6, continued

		Coordinate with an advisory team to analyze and respond to school counseling program needs	3	7.14
		Consult with school staff concerning student behavior	3	7.14
	School Psych.	No Responses Recorded		
Role: School Social Worker				
No Responses Recorded	Counselor	Other: CST Responsibilities (SPED, IEP Testing)	13	24.07
		Interview the family to assess problems affecting the child's education	8	14.81
		Work with parents to facilitate support in their children's school adjustment	7	12.96
	Special Educ. Teacher	Work with parents to facilitate support in their children's school adjustment	4	15.38
		Providing crisis intervention	4	15.38
		Help conflict resolution and anger management	3	11.54
	School Psych.	No Responses Recorded		
Role: School Psychologist				
No Responses Recorded	Counselor	Consult with parents about learning problems, social problems and/or behavioral problems	10	17.86
		Serve as a member of interdisciplinary teams to address the needs of students with disabilities through the special education assessment, eligibility, and placement process	9	16.07
		Consult with teachers about learning problems, social problems, and/or behavioral problems	8	16.07
	Social Workers	Consult with teachers about learning problems, social problems, and/or behavioral problems	4	16.67

Table 6 continued next page

SCHOOL SPECIALISTS' RELATIONSHIPS

Table 6, continued

		Serve as a member of interdisciplinary teams to address the needs of students with disabilities through the special education assessment, eligibility, and placement process	4	16.67
		Consult with parents about learning problems, social problems and/or behavioral problems	3	12.50
	Special Educ. Teachers	Other:	6	28.57
		Present in building if needed	1	
		Does not complete any of these tasks	4	
		Testing students/Paperwork	1	
		Consult with teachers about learning problems, social problems and/or behavioral problems	3	14.29
		Consult with parents about learning problems, social problems and/or behavioral problems	3	14.29

Note. I&RS = Intervention & Referral Services

Role ambiguity further emerged in the qualitative data among the school specialists. The CST members seemed to perceive that the role of the school counselor primarily revolved around working with students without disabilities and helping identify students for evaluation through the Intervention and Referral Services process, while they perceived their own role as primarily working with students with disabilities with little interaction with the school counselors. These opposing roles appeared to cause conflict among some of the CST members and the school counselors. For instance, one school social worker (CST) in the survey noted, “In my opinion, when a student is eligible for Special Education and Related Services, non-child study team members (school counselors/guidance counselors, administrators, special education teachers, teacher coordinators) do not accept any responsibility for the Special Education student. They refer all concerns to the child study team case manager (social worker, LDT–C, or school psychologist).” This participant felt that once a student is identified for special services, the responsibility for the student is solely given to the CST, when in fact there should be a shared responsibility. This ambiguity could be due to the participant being unclear as to what roles the CST members and school counselors can fulfill.

School counselors on the other hand perceived one role of the CST was to assist with at-risk students. One school counselor noted frustration by stating in the survey response, “The CST team returns files because they state interventions aren’t acceptable, but the CST won’t provide a list of accepted interventions.” Again, in the survey, another school counselor noted, “The child study team sees the counselors as their enemy because we send them students for special education.”

It appears from the collected data that school counselors are expecting the CST to fulfill additional roles (i.e., intervention ideas prior to student classification) when the role expectation of the CST members seems primarily focused on case management of special education students and the writing of IEPs. One school counselor noted in the survey that testing and evaluation are the main focus of the CST. Similarly, another school counselor in the survey stated, “They (CST) all had no time, or made no time, for the social/emotional needs of the students. Their main role seems to be completing IEPs.” A special education teacher also noted in the survey that the involvement of the CST members is a “call me when you need me,” or student ____ has an IEP due, please “get it to me by this date relationship.”

Initial analysis reveals that the possible challenges are a result of role ambiguity with each group not understanding or having knowledge of the roles as well as not having a clear picture of what each group is personally responsible for. The demands put on the school specialists exceed what can be done in a timely fashion. Though each group may be aware of its responsibilities, they cannot accomplish them all due to other demands (i.e., high case load). The school counselors are open to having more collaboration with the CST members when addressing the needs of at-risk students in the Intervention and Referral Services process. Both the school counselors and special educators wish for the CST members to have more involvement with students with disabilities beyond just completing paperwork related to the students’ IEPs.

Scheduling Conflicts

A third theme that emerged was scheduling conflicts among the specialists (i.e., school counselors, CST members, and special education teachers). School counselors (21.82%), special education teachers (35%), and school social workers (54.55%) all identified scheduling conflicts as the first barrier to collaboration in the administered survey. Participants identified not having the time to meet and discuss students and cases because of scheduling conflicts. Often special education teachers are teaching classes and cannot be interrupted when CST members have more time to meet or speak about students. Additionally, when a crisis emerges, school counselors and/or CST members are not

available due to dealing with the most pressing issue at the time. This further deepens the divide among these professionals. The frequency of communication among the school specialists was mostly as needed (see Table 3), and therefore it may be that school specialists are only able to meet when crisis or emergent issues are present. Participants noted that administration does not consider planning time for these specialists when creating schedules and does not appear to support collaboration among these specialists. This is important as professionals are trying to support their students and colleagues, yet without the time to meet, discuss, interact, or consult, it makes it very difficult to determine the best plan of action for the students.

One of the CST members stated, "I am not able to collaborate due to the limited time in the buildings, but I am open to it, especially because I am seeing more children with emotional and behavioral issues, and collaboration with the school counselor on these issues would be warranted." It seems that as students' needs are changing, there is more of a need to collaborate and work together using the expertise of the different roles. Geltner and Leibforth (2008) supported school counselors participating in special education meetings to provide insight into the everyday happenings of the school, teacher, and class decisions.

In addition, some participants noted not even speaking with other specialists during the study year. They cited the time that the specialists are in the building and available, as well as those that do not seem interested in having a collaborative relationship, as contributing to the lack of communication. It was noted by some that they only met, spoke, or interacted if there was a specific student concern, and sometimes days or weeks went by before a response was received. The scheduling conflicts and lack of time appears to be a clear barrier to establishing deeper relationships among the professionals.

In the interview with the special education teacher, the educator stated, "I just think that the team right now is not as visible, and I don't think we really feel like we have the support that we did with the last one." The lack of scheduling that corresponds to each specialist role limits the time that collaboration, expertise sharing, or support is available. This can lead to frustrations among the team and lack of communication, which may result in more issues for students and/or the school building staff.

Discussion

The researchers were interested in examining and comparing the perceived job responsibilities of special education teachers, CST members, and school counselors (RQ 1). In summary, only special education teachers and school

counselors self-reported their perceived job responsibilities since no school psychologists participated in the study and the school social worker participants did not participate in the interviews. Special education teachers perceived their primary job responsibilities as teaching students with disabilities and ensuring that students with disabilities were exposed to the general education curriculum. School social workers' and school counselors' perceptions of the special education teachers' job responsibilities aligned with the special education teachers' self-reported responses with a focus on adapting the general education curriculum for students with disabilities and implementing the IEP. The special education teachers' self-reported job responsibilities and the perceptions of them by school counselors and school social workers align with the primary roles identified in the literature, which are implementing specialized instruction (Youngs et al., 2001) and helping students with disabilities master grade-level academic standards (Shepherd et al., 2016). The self-reported job responsibilities of the special education teacher were the only ones in the study to align with the other school specialists' perceptions, which may be attributed to the less ambiguous role of the special educator.

School counselors self-reported their primary perceived job responsibilities as indirect service duties related to the Intervention and Referral Services process. These findings contradict with ASCA (2012) who recommend that 80% of a school counselor's day be spent on direct services. The reality is that many school counselors spend a good portion of their day on indirect services rather than collaborating with colleagues and/or providing direct services to students (Wines et al., 2007). The focus on indirect services, specifically the Intervention and Referral Services process, may be attributed to the fact that the number of at-risk students being monitored through that process is too great in quantity and the counselors too few to allow them to focus on direct service responsibilities, or it may be attributed to administrators' lack of knowledge concerning the job responsibilities of the school counselor (Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2008). Typically, it is the school administrator assigning job responsibilities to the school staff in the building. Thus, administrators not clearly understanding the role of the school counselor may result in job assignments that do not consider or prioritize the school counselors' full spectrum of job capabilities.

Interestingly, the school counselors' self-reported primary job responsibilities differed from roles perceived by the majority of special education teachers and social workers who both noted the main job responsibilities of school counselors are to counsel with students regarding personal/family concerns, school behavior, crisis, relationships, academic issues, and substance abuse, which are all considered direct services. Though it is not exactly clear why there is no alignment among the school counselors' self-reported job responsibilities

and the perceptions of the other school specialists, possible reasons may be attributed to other school specialists not having knowledge as to what the school counselor does on a daily basis. However, a more likely explanation may be attributed to the design of the study. It may be more than likely that the school social workers and special education teachers surveyed did in fact observe school counselors participating in direct services, but these school counselors did not necessarily participate in the study. Those school counselors who did participate in the study mainly provided indirect services. These results further show evidence that school counselor job responsibilities may differ across schools within a school district.

In the study, school social workers did not participate in the interviews, so self-identified perceived job responsibilities were not collected. However, school counselors perceived school social workers primary job responsibilities as centered around CST responsibilities, such as testing and IEP development. On the other hand, special education teachers' perceptions focused on the social worker's role in working with families and managing crisis interventions. The special education teachers' perceptions about social workers' job responsibilities align with the NASW (2012) standards for school social workers, which focus on the role social workers play in fostering the relationship between schools, families, and communities. These conflicting perceptions support the possibility of the existence of role ambiguity for the school social worker. The school specialists surveyed may not have a clear understanding of the school social workers' role, which is a pervasive issue in today's schools (Forenza & Eckhardt, 2020). Therefore, a clear delimitation of job responsibilities is needed for the school social worker. On the other hand, the differences of perceptions among special education teachers and school counselors may be attributed to similar reasons as noted for school counselors, which include possible different role responsibilities by school building or grade level, as well as limitations in the design of the study.

No school psychologists participated in this research study, but the school social workers, school counselors, and special education teachers noted their perceptions regarding the primary job responsibilities of school psychologists. Social workers perceived school psychologists' primary job responsibility as serving as a consultant to teachers to help address the needs of students with disabilities. Instead of a consultant for teachers, school counselors perceived that school psychologists' primary role should be a consultant for families. Both school counselors and social workers also perceived that a second job responsibility is to serve as an important member of the interdisciplinary team during the IEP process. Based on these results, it appears that both school counselors and school social workers have a good understanding of the school

psychologists' job responsibilities. The identified role responsibilities include both the traditional assessment-based role of the school psychologist, but also the shifting role that focuses on helping improving student outcomes by consulting with families and teachers (Burns, 2013).

On the other hand, the perceived job responsibilities reported by the special education teachers concerning the school psychologist were unclear. The majority of special education teachers either noted "other" on the study survey or responded that the school psychologist did not complete any of the responsibilities listed. It is unclear as to why the special education teachers responded to the survey in this manner, but it may be possible that the special education teachers are not in frequent contact with the school psychologist to understand their job responsibilities. This conclusion can be supported by results of the survey question where communication frequency was asked, in which the majority of special education teachers noted that they are never in contact with the school psychologists. Though it was not specifically noted, there appeared to be conflict among the special education teachers and the school psychologists. Conflict among different educators may occur because of mixed or unclear perceptions as to what that role should be (Idol & Baran, 1992). However, because no school psychologists participated in the study, it is impossible to gain a full understanding about the collaboration or type of relationship among the special education teachers and school psychologists.

The researchers also explored the method and frequency of communication among special education teachers, CST members, and school counselors (RQ 2). Overall, it appears that each school specialist preferred in-person communication as compared to other methods (email, phone, or meetings). However, the frequency of these conversations appeared to be limited and predominantly on an as-needed basis. In-person and on-the-spot communication allows educators to solve immediate problems at hand (Spillane et al., 2017), making it not surprising that the school specialists preferred this type of communication. However, as noted, the frequency of the communication was limited, which may be due to the lack of proximity of the school professionals. Many of the school specialists were not located in the same school building, and if they were, their workspaces were not in close proximity to promote in-person communication. Kabo (2016) found that when individuals had workspaces close together, they were more likely to interact, collaborate, and encounter one another. Further, Spillane et al. (2017) found that physical proximity (i.e., walking distance) can predict school staff's work-related interactions about learning and teaching. The researchers found that as the distance between staff members increased, the likelihood of interaction decreased.

The researchers were further interested in identifying the barriers to collaboration among special education teachers, CST members, and school counselors (RQ 3). Similar trends emerged across school specialist groups as to the barriers for effective collaboration. Schedule conflicts, time constraints, and role expectations were most often noted as barriers across groups in the study survey. However, school counselors and social workers more frequently noted that role expectations were a barrier in comparison to the responses made by the special education teachers. The barrier of scheduling conflicts was discussed during the participant interviews and was noted most frequently in the study survey across school specialist groups. In the interviews, the participants discussed that administration does not consider planning time for the school specialists when creating schedules and does not appear to support collaboration among these specialists. Without specific attention to creating a schedule that can help encourage collaboration (i.e., common planning or meeting times), effective collaboration most likely will be hindered. School administrators are one group that can help promote collaboration by addressing organizational factors such as schedules (Spanneut, 2010).

Time constraints were also noted in the survey, but further insight was revealed in the interviews. The interviewed school specialists noted that time constraints were inhibiting collaboration, which is a common barrier for successful collaboration among educators (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). Time constraints for effective collaboration were attributed to staffing issues, missing CST members, and a large caseload of students. Though time was limited, the school specialists still noted that they wanted to collaborate with their colleagues.

Further, role expectations and role ambiguity were identified as barriers for collaboration. Participants noted that unrealistic role expectations were interfering with school specialists effectively accomplishing their jobs. These unrealistic role expectations were related to the extremely high caseloads assigned to the school specialists. In some instances, the quantity of students assigned to school specialists exceeded what could realistically be completed. In addition, role ambiguity was identified as a barrier for successful collaboration. When analyzing the survey data, there was no clear consensus regarding the roles within groups, with no specific role identified by more than 30% of the participants. As noted previously in the discussion, role ambiguity also emerged in the comparative analysis of the job responsibilities by each school specialist group.

After the analysis of the interview data, role ambiguity emerged among the school specialists especially concerning who was responsible for working with students with and without disabilities. This role ambiguity predominately occurred among the CST members and the school counselors, which resulted

in a conflicting relationship. Relationship conflict is common when role perceptions are not made clear (Idol & Baran, 1992). School counselors wanted assistance from the CST regarding at-risk students especially those students in the Intervention and Referral Services process. On the other hand, CST members wanted school counselors to take more responsibility for students with disabilities. However, school counselors identified their main responsibility as the Intervention and Referral Services process rather than working directly with students with disabilities. Again, even though numerous barriers existed, participants were willing and eager to collaborate with their colleagues.

Limitations

The most notable limitation of this study is the limited sample size. After several attempts to obtain responses from participants through multiple email methods (mass and direct emailing), the study was closed, and data was examined based on the existing sample. Additionally, only four participants agreed to complete interviews, which limited further discussion and understanding of the identified issues. After multiple attempts were made to obtain more participants over a three-month period, it was determined that the study would close, and the researchers would not pursue additional participants for survey and interviews.

Another limitation to obtaining a larger sample size is that the time requested to complete the surveys and/or interview may have been a burden on the participants. One participant who initially agreed to participate in the interview was forced to cancel due to additional responsibilities placed by administration on her workload that took precedence with her time. It was noted in other interviews that there is limited time, and work requirements are often presented last minute that require immediate attention which may have led to low participation.

Importantly, there were no responses from school psychologists, so it is unclear as to how they perceive the relationships and work with the other school specialists. It is also unclear as to why difficulty persisted in obtaining responses from school psychologists, even via the online survey. This prevents full understanding of the interactions among all of the school specialists in the school. Additionally, the limited sample size of the interviews limits information and the generalization of the results. The data collected were the opinions expressed by one district. Broadening the sample area could present additional thoughts and perceptions that would be useful in understanding the relationships among these school specialists in school districts. The data indicated that school specialists identified large caseloads, which may have impacted the ability for school specialists to participate in the study. The needs of so many

students take precedence over research studies and would impact the level of participation.

Finally, by not including the LDT-Cs in the study, it may have skewed the data as they are an integral member of the CST. After reviewing the data, the researchers hope to include these school specialists in future studies. It is also important to consider involving school administrators in future studies as many of the identified barriers are often imposed upon by these professionals. Since they were not included in this study, it limits some understanding of the data. In order to understand the philosophy and belief of a school district or building, surveying and interviewing the school administration could provide valuable insight.

Recommendations

It is recommended that this study be conducted again. There is value in the qualitative responses regarding the structure of the relationships and the administrative value of the relationships. In order to have a more robust study, it is recommended to obtain responses from all school specialists to provide a clearer view of the perceptions among school staff. The role of the administration appears to be crucial after reviewing many of the responses from the participants. Many of the concerns noted among the school specialists had a connection to areas that the administration can impact. Finally, needing administrative feedback and insight appeared to be a key component of the responses of the participants. We suggest assessing administrators' beliefs on and vision for school specialists' collaboration. The understanding of their expectations for their district or building is crucial to understanding how stronger relationships could be created and sustained. As the researchers reflected on this study and the responses from participants, it appeared that with administrative support in clear role descriptions, expectations, common scheduling time, and encouragement of collaborative relationships, dedicated opportunity could be created to build stronger and more valuable relationships.

It seems that when school counselors or CST members are not building-based but share buildings, it lessens the opportunities for relationship-building and the time that they may have to address student issues or consult on cases. As discussed previously, CST members sharing buildings impacts communication among the school professionals and, ultimately, affects the students. The travel time, managing higher caseloads, and completing the workload of two or more buildings does not allow for the organic development of relationships among school professionals. The recommendation is to have school counselors and CST members assigned to one building, which allows for complete focus on

that building for both students and all school staff. Assignment to one building would allow for a deeper understanding of the climate of the building, styles of the school staff, relationship-building with other staff, and relationship-building with students and families.

Additionally, the emergence of unclear roles and expectations was a prominent theme in this study. School districts should create clear job descriptions and delineate roles so all school personnel understand expectations and who does what, including knowing to whom they should reach out regarding different issues with students. Each school district may interpret roles differently and have different expectations of the roles. Often times these differences even extend to various buildings, meaning differences in roles and expectations may exist between schools in the same district. It is suggested that school buildings and/or school districts consider holding a meeting to present specialists with responsibilities, roles, student expectations, and district expectations. This would assist in clarity for all school personnel.

Another recommendation is to study each school system separately and to examine ways the specialists can collaborate within the building. It is important to evaluate the value in these school specialists having set time together each week, month, or school year based on the needs of the specialists and students. Schools and districts can consider various means to create the opportunity for collaboration and strengthening these relationships. Some ways to consider may be to implement set meeting times throughout the district for specific specialists, set meeting times that are building based depending on the structure of the CST and school specialists, or allow for set time on professional development days. Examining the outcomes for the different configurations can allow for greater applicability of collaboration among specialists.

As a result of the research conducted in this study, collaboration models may be useful to school districts to bridge the gap that does appear to exist. The use of collaboration models such as strength-based collaboration and/or professional learning communities (PLCs), based on the needs of the school district or building, may provide more opportunity to deepen relationships and identify experts that are within the school district. The strengths-based collaborative approach unites together groups of school counselors, special education staff, families, and community members to further support students (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Geltner & Leibforth, 2008), while the PLC approach allows school specialists to collaborate to help address student needs (Blanton & Perez, 2011).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study resulted in identifying clear barriers to the working relationships among school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, and special education teachers. It is unclear if there is a negative impact on the students in the district, but it may be possible that the lack of collaboration does not allow for adequate use of school specialists' expertise. This study began to examine the perceptions of the roles of each school specialist and determine the level of communication to understand the relationships better. Perceptions of job role responsibilities for special education teachers were less ambiguous in comparison to the other school specialists. Differences in perceived job responsibilities may be attributed to the variance of school specialists' jobs across schools. Most school specialists in the study preferred to communicate in person with the frequency varying by specialist group. The special educators were the only individuals who noted that they never communicated with the school psychologist. This lack of collaboration and communication may have led to the special educators not having an understanding of the school psychologists' job responsibilities. There were clear barriers identified—role expectations, scheduling conflicts, and time conflicts—that could be addressed through collaboration models that are matched for the district or school.

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