

Collaborative Preparation: Educational Leaders and School Counselors Building Bridges for Effective Schools

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Abstract

This research informed conceptual article explores traditional and current roles and expectations of school leaders and school counselors through the lens of collaboration toward expanding notions of school leadership. The work defines collaboration in the context of K-12 schools with a focus on the roles of school leaders and school counselors toward highlighting the necessity of teaching collaboration across the respective preparation programs. Further, showcasing practices that actively promote cooperation between school counselors and educational leaders it provides recommendations for the early advent of collaboration between school leaders and counselors across their training programs.

Keywords: Leadership, Collaboration, School Counseling, Preparation

The ever-changing student demographics and the advent of standardized testing and accountability have forced school leaders and school personnel to rethink how they function, including their conceptualization of the appropriate use of personnel (Glickman, Gordon & Ross-Gordon, 2018). At present, primary campus leadership teams in K-12 schools across the country consist of a principal and an assistant or associate principal. In many cases, especially in smaller elementary school settings, the leadership team consists solely of the campus principal. Unfortunately, these examples do not maximize the human resources (Seifert & Vornberg, 2002) available to facilitate meaningful opportunities for students, faculty, staff, and the surrounding community to experience success continually. Fortunately, redistributing staff with a more succinct understanding of the transformed role of school counselors to include role expectations around leadership, collaboration, and systemic change can aid in increasing student achievement (American School Counselor Association, 2012). Additionally, understanding the benefits of collaborative principal-counselor relationships on school culture and student success may serve to reinforce the rationale for the development of these relationships (Rock, Remley, & Range, 2017).

Many school principals still view school counselors through a traditional leadership lens relegating them to ancillary roles (e.g., testing, discipline, etc.). Leadership's lack of understanding of the training and capacity of school counselors in a building directly impacts the roles and functions to which they are assigned (Lowery, Quick, Boyland, Geesa, & Mayes, 2018; Wingfield Reese, West-Olatunji, 2010). Before the induction of the Transforming School Counseling Initiative and the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Model, school counselor functions were more reactive and less embedded into the mission of the school (ASCA, 2012, 2019). Although this transition occurred in 2003, leadership training programs have been slow to integrate the multiple roles of the school counselor, including leadership, into their curriculum. As a result, many principals are unaware of ways to utilize school counselors in a way that maximizes their potential (Bore & Bore, 2009; Desimone & Roberts, 2016) to actively support student success. Leadership training programs would benefit from the inclusion of curriculum around the training and increased capacity of school counselors to better prepare school leaders to utilize these resources in their buildings responsibly.

This research informed conceptual article follows a non-traditional format to explore traditional and current roles and expectations of campus leaders and school counselors through the lens of collaboration toward expanding notions of school leadership. Further, the authors work to define collaboration in the context of K-12 schools with a focus on the roles of school leaders and school counselors toward highlighting the necessity of teaching collaboration in leadership and school counselor preparation programs. Next they showcase practices of a regional research university to actively promote cooperation between school counselors and educational leaders while in training. Early results provide a glance into the findings and briefly summarize the process. Finally, recommendations and conclusions illuminate practical suggestions for other universities to promote collaboration between school leaders and school counselors throughout their training programs.

Rationale

Traditional Roles

The School Leader

The role of the campus leader is ever changing. Traditional leaders were expected to teach classes for a portion of the day and address administrative duties, manage discipline, transport students, and clean up the building during the other portions of the day. Many of these leaders were beholden to a time of authoritative leadership that demanded respect and obedience solely through positional power (Seifert & Vornberg, 2002) and a strong-willed disposition. School leaders of this type were then, and continue to be, more adept at managing the duties of the campus than they were at attending to the specific curricular needs of students and faculty. By contrast, the role of the ideal leader, a term synonymous with the instructional leader (Lashley & Stickl, 2016), depicts a person who negotiates power through a variety of methods depending on the situation and needs of those involved at each phase of the decision-making process. The instructional leader, unlike traditional leaders, is apt for managing the duties of the campus. Yet, the complexity of his/her abilities also prepares them to champion complex challenges arising from the selection of vertically aligned curriculum through the implementation of sound equity-centered instructional practices. Traditional and instructional leaders are not seen as equal in this context. The instructional leader (also educational leader) exemplifies the abilities of the traditional leader to *run* a school while at the same time directly impacting student achievement by engaging faculty in meaningful professional experiences that result in lasting changes in self-efficacy and collective efficacy (DeWitt, 2018; Hattie, 2009, 2012). Comparing the roles of the traditional leader and the instructional leader provides a foundation to explore the perceived impact that each set of roles has on student achievement. While there are stark differences between these two leader types, the characterizations provided are not absolute, and leaders often fall somewhere along a continuum between the two.

The School Counselor

School counseling, like school leadership, has had a long history of evolution as societal demands have driven the roles and functions that a school counselor performs (Wingfield et al., 2010). Emerging from the vocational movement of the early 20th century, the profession of school counseling developed out of an add-on responsibility of teachers to assist students in determining their future vocation. From the early 1920s into the 1940s, the advent of school counseling foci evolved to include mental health and the personal, social needs of students. As the mid part of the century unfolded the need arose for school counselors to lead the charge toward the identification of students with very specialized abilities to keep the workforce competitive with other countries (Stone & Dahir, 2016). From the 1960s through the 1990s, counselors became more involved with the school's mission, supporting dropout prevention and the development of comprehensive school counseling programs. These new roles and functions became additions to the responsibilities of school counselors. Although there was a movement to tie the role of school counselors to the mission of the school, school counseling through much of the twentieth century was still seen as an ancillary student support service, and school counselors functioned with no clear direction or purpose (Dahir, Burnham, & Stone, 2010).

Leadership Roles in Collaborative Schools

The School Leader

As state and federal school accountability measures have increased, so have the demands of the campus leader. The increasing focus on accountability appears to be one of the catalysts that necessitated the evolution of school leaders from traditional to more collaborative instructional leaders. The collaborative instructional leader sees leadership as an experience to be shared and therefore develops a leadership team that incorporates representation from a cross-section of the school's faculty, staff, and community. The diversity of the team provides a place for the leader to test ideas, pose questions, and monitor the climate of the campus (Love, Stiles, Mundry, & DiRanna, 2008). The members of the team are framed as leaders regardless of their level of certification or campus roles, thus providing opportunities for the team to engage in ongoing dialogues that include input from a larger sample of the school population.

Collaborative instructional leaders create an environment that encourages collaboration, risk-taking, and continued learning. The leader's approach to academic and curricular challenges involves input from the team, increasing the opportunity for others to feel included in the decision-making process and experience-increased feelings of ownership in the learning process. This type of leadership often lends itself to leadership styles such as transformational (Gunderson, Hellesøy, & Raeder, 2012; Quin, Deris, Bischoff, & Johnson, 2015), servant (Cerit, 2009), and blended (Collinson & Collinson, 2009, p. 376).

The School Counselor

The advent of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Model redefined the roles and functions of school counselors to better align with integral parts of the school's mission (Stone & Dahir, 2016). The ASCA National Model also espouses role expectations where school counselors serve as advocates, leaders, collaborators, and systemic change agents (2012, 2019). As a result of these changes, school counselors are expected to know: what they believe, the mission of the counseling program within the school's mission, a future vision of their program, students, and school, and a plan to reach these goals (Young, Millard, & Miller-Kneale, 2013). School counselors are expected to be data-driven practitioners who serve to connect the home and community with the school, teachers, school leaders, and the students (Lashley & Stickl, 2016). Additionally, serving in a leadership role within the school has become more imperative as school counselors are trained in multicultural issues, advocacy, collaboration, and in identifying achievement and opportunity gaps through the use of data analysis (Dahir et al., 2010). They provide distinct perspectives that directly impact student outcomes by engaging in advocacy efforts for students, and programs that are intentionally designed to address challenges that impede student success. Under the umbrella of these new roles as leaders, advocates, collaborators, and systemic change agents, school counselors are expected to address the academic, social-emotional, and college and career needs of all students. Serving in the capacity of these revised roles, school counselors build and implement comprehensive school counseling programs through the four components of the ASCA National Model: Define, Manage, Deliver, and Assess (ASCA, 2019).

Collaboration

Over the past decade, there has been a resurgence in publications examining collaborative leadership, and the importance of the principal-counselor relationship for student success (Anrig, 2015; Bore & Bore, 2009; Froeschle & Nix, 2009), school counseling program implementation (DeSimone & Roberts, 2016; Mason, 2011), school culture (Edwards, 2007; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Lowery et al., 2018) as well as the need for training programs to help facilitate these relationships (DeSimone & Roberts, 2016; Lowery et al., 2018). Finkelstein (2009) conducted a study on behalf of The College Board, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and ASCA examining principals' and counselors' perceptions of the importance of this relationship and identified the most valued components of the relationship: a shared vision or goal (Lashley & Stickl, 2016; Reavie, 2015), communication, collaboration, trust, and respect (Dahir et al., 2010; DeSimone & Roberts, 2016; Odegard-Koester & Watkins, 2016). Subsequently, a successful collaborative principal-counselor relationship has been found to have a positive effect on student success and school culture (Edwards, 2007; Hattie, 2009, 2012; Lowery et al., 2018).

Additionally, there have been several recommendations for developing productive and fruitful collaborations between the principal and school counselors. What emerged as the key is the creation of a culture of communication between the principal and counselor who meet to discuss student and school-wide needs through a strength-based lens continually identifying the leadership roles each can play (Dahir et al., 2010). School counselors are charged to take the lead on this, informing principals and stakeholders of their training, roles, professional best practices, and providing data-driven suggestions through accountability meetings (Froeschle & Nix, 2009).

The redesign of training programs is also a common theme in the literature (DeSimone & Roberts, 2016; Lowery et al., 2018; Wingfield et al., 2010) suggesting that school counseling and education leadership programs and faculty need to develop a curriculum that allows for cross-discipline training (Lowery et al., 2018). These pre-service collaborations can prepare both principals and school counselors to move into the profession with a clear understanding of what they can expect of one another, the strengths each role brings to the leadership team, and how to collaborate toward improving student outcomes (DeSimone & Roberts, 2016). Finally, Lashley and Stickl (2016) suggest that training programs also provide hands-on experiences in developing principal-counselor collaborations.

Methodology

Changes in the role of school counselors and school counseling programs through the ASCA National Model has created the need for a paradigm shift for the educational leader, teachers, and other stakeholders. Unfortunately, these stakeholders have not been exposed to the necessary training and practice to build capacity for understanding these newly created roles (Froeschle & Nix, 2009; Lowery et al., 2018). The literature suggests that educational leadership programs have not adjusted to address the transformed roles of school counselors, forcing administrators to rely on their experience and in many cases, traditional training models, to inform their decisions to hire and allocate the resources of school counselors (DeSimone & Roberts, 2016). This section builds on the suggestion to create pre-service collaborations between school counseling programs and educational leadership programs to assist students in deepening their understanding of the roles and training across both fields (Dahir et al., 2010; Lowery et al., 2018).

Following the guides of Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) and ASCA toward collaboration, professors from a Southern university have begun to intentionally design learning opportunities that model and encourage ongoing collaboration between future school leaders and school counselors. To this end, the researchers hosted a crossover class that included students from both programs and a representative from the state department of education. The class plan afforded students the opportunity to work together in groups toward the objective of foraging lasting collaborative relationships.

The class was structured to share information on the roles, professional standards, and training of both leaders and school counselors. Additionally, suggestions regarding supervisory relationships and collaboration opportunities were shared. Following the didactic portion of the class, the students were broken out into small groups pairing leadership students with school counseling students. Within these groups, ASCA Administrative conferences were conducted, prompting transformative discussions centered on the importance of collaboration between these roles. This classroom experience provided an opportunity to increase knowledge and to model collaboration between university faculty, the university and the state department of education, and finally educational leadership and school counseling students.

Early Results

Pre-class and post-class surveys were offered toward gaining an understanding of the knowledge and attitudes each group held about the other. Additionally, reflective forum posts were assigned after the class to assess student perceptions of the experience. Although this data was collected to inform pedagogy and not as research, it was apparent from pre-surveys that both sides had gaps in understanding the other's roles. The post-surveys indicated that there was an increase in each groups' knowledge as well as an increase in awareness that there is more to be learned. The post-tests and post-class reflections both reflected the students' desire to have more collaborative learning experiences like this throughout their programs.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Suggestions for Teaching Collaboration

School leaders must employ the entirety of styles and philosophies from which to access resources and illuminate ideas. These ideas are made richer and more inclusive when collaborative efforts are facilitated in environments and on teams that intentionally include diverse perspectives (Love et al., 2008). Collaboration between school leadership faculty and school counseling faculty in providing crossover experiences for their students is a necessity. These opportunities should include activities that allow students to learn from and about the other's roles and training, and engage in activities that will enable them to practice collaboration through role-play of real-life scenarios. Additionally, the modeling of collaboration by faculty provides pre-service leaders and school counselors a vision of how such partnerships might work.

Connecting crossover opportunities to the ASCA National Model and PSEL is key to justifying these collaborations. In school leadership, connections to PSEL standards one, two, and seven are almost seamless. Standard one identifies that effective leaders are expected to work in collaboration with members of the school community to plan a vision that promotes student success. Standard two outlines collaboration as a professional norm to be employed by leaders

alongside integrity, fairness, transparency, and trust. Standard seven addresses the professional community for teachers and staff. In this context, collaboration is an integral part of the professional culture of engagement that includes collaborative examinations of practice, feedback, and learning (PSEL, 2015). Similarly, key standards for school counselors address the leadership, advocacy, and collaboration training needed for school counselors to best serve the needs of their students (ASCA, 2018). These training standards reflect the transformed role that school counselors are expected to play in the school community. Combined, these standards point to specific strategies of how to build leadership teams from a strengths-based perspective.

Projections for Best Practices

As noted earlier, effective collaborations between school counselors and school leaders have direct positive impacts on student achievement. With such clear benefits, additional research must be conducted toward exploring the necessity and specific areas of added values these collaborations have. To begin, mixed methods studies are needed to inquire what is currently being done in these programs to introduce and foster collaborative environments and habits. Additionally, research and program evaluation studies can be undertaken to aid in the development of pedagogical best practices around the training of school leadership teams.

Conclusions

The literature supports the shift from a more traditional leadership model to a more collaborative model of school leadership that utilizes a team of leaders who bring their experiences and perspectives to the decision-making process. The school counselor, trained in data-driven decision making and comprehensive school counseling programs, has been identified as a valuable member of such a team. Currently, there appears to be a gap in understanding regarding the training and appropriate roles of school counselors. Pre-service experiences in collaboration may provide a foundation to bridge this gap, enhance future professional relationships, and impact student outcomes. This article, highlighting the creation of such experiences, illuminates the need for examining the status quo of identified best practices and suggests intentionally tethering collaborative practices throughout curricular experiences.

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