

New School Counselor Perceptions of Their Mentoring and Induction Program

Carol P. Loveless

Carol P. Loveless, Ed.D., NCSC is the Lead Counselor at Grace Snell Middle School, Gwinnett County Public Schools. This manuscript is based on data presented within a doctoral dissertation at Walden University, *Perceptions Held by New School Counselors of their Induction Training Programs*. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Carol Loveless, Grace Snell Middle School, 3800 Brushy Fork Rd., Loganville, GA 30052 or by e-mail at carol_loveless@gwinnett.k12.ga.us.

Abstract

Abstract

School counselors in their first year of practice within the profession or within a new school district can experience challenges in assuming the professional responsibilities associated with their role. Mentoring programs are one form of professional assistance that has been recommended in the literature for new educators, including school counselors.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of new elementary school counselors regarding their mentoring/induction program in a large suburban school district in the southeastern United States. A qualitative case study was conducted and data were collected from multiple sources, including individual interviews, observations, and documents. Findings highlighted both positive perceptions held by program participants regarding training, resources, support, impact, and effectiveness, as well as specific needs not addressed.

New School Counselor Perceptions of Their Mentoring and Induction Program

For most new school counselors, the first year on the job is filled with daily challenges to meet competing demands of students, parents, and faculty. Student crises, classroom presentations, group guidance, staff meetings, program planning, accountability studies, and paperwork must all fit into overbooked schedules. New school counselors may feel stressed in their attempts to meet such varied demands (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Butler & Constantine, 2005; Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005; Rayle, 2006). Furthermore, peer support can be limited when school counselors work alone or in small departments within much larger faculties (Mor-

rissette, 2000; Thomas, 2005).

Mentoring and induction programs provide one time-honored method of support for new educators. Although mentoring programs for new counselors have been encouraged in recent years (Jackson et al., 2002; Lazovsky & Shimoni, 2007; Walker, 2006), the development of such programs has lagged behind that of mentoring for other educators. When Black, Suarez, and Medina (2004) reviewed the various counseling flagship journals, they discovered that less than 1% of all articles published in the last three decades pertained to mentoring. Although mentoring of new counselors is promoted in the available literature, the concept of organized, structured induction programs has received little attention in current publications for professional school counselors.

In theory, a mentoring/induction program for new school counselors should benefit both the participating counselors and their students. Effective school counseling programs can improve school climate (Fitch & Marshall, 2004), as well as student achievement (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Steen & Kaffenberger, 2007). Strong support of new school counselors can assist these counselors in offering impactful programs and services to their students.

Novice school counselors fresh from graduate training may enter the field well-versed in helping skills, but may be potentially lacking in their knowledge of school culture and their particular role within that culture. Teachers may perceive new counselors who do not have teaching backgrounds as less competent than those with classroom experience (Quarto, 1999). Conversely, first year school counselors with teaching backgrounds may be quite familiar with school culture, but their shifting roles within the work setting can prove stressful. Learning to relate to students and faculty from a counselor's perspective and adapting to a less structured work environment may pres-

New School Counselor Perceptions of Their Mentoring and Induction Program

ent challenges for these former teachers (Peterson, Goodman, Keller, & McCauley, 2004). Furthermore, many new counselors perceive that their faculties expect them to be highly functioning professionals from their initial days of employment (Matthes, 1992; McMahon & Patton, 2001). Peer supervision from more experienced colleagues or clinical supervision from a district counseling coordinator may ameliorate some of the stress new counselors experience, if they are fortunate enough to have such support. Those new counselors who are veterans of the profession but are new to a particular school district may benefit from training in the culture of the local district, that is, what the expectations are regarding counselors and their role. Through appropriate training and support in a first year mentoring/induction program, these gaps in knowledge can be filled and role expectations clarified.

In Brott and Myers's (1999) grounded theory of school counselor identity development, which provided the conceptual framework for this study, the authors argued that the development of a professional identity is crucial to school counselors. Such an identity "serves as a frame of reference for carrying out work roles, making significant decisions, and developing as a profession" (Introduction section, ¶ 4). Brott and Myers reported that a "blending of influences" occurs over time as new school counselors progress through various training experiences and participate in professional interactions with constituents. In the mentoring/induction program that was studied, new counselors had a unique opportunity to add to this blend of influences through the training and support provided by the program mentors.

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of a structured mentoring/induction program for new school counselors at the elementary school level through the perceptions of program participants. In the program that was selected for study, three experienced counselors served as mentors to a group of 11 newly hired elementary school counselors; seven of the new counselors were novices and four were veteran counselors who were new to the school district. Program design included a series of structured monthly meetings for the mentees, led by mentor counselors throughout the first school year. Each mentor also provided individual support to mentees as needed. The mentor counselors created both program curriculum and activities for each meeting. Sessions included numerous topics of value to new counselors, including use of computer technology, mandated reporter training, small group lessons, classroom guidance, teacher support, district and community resources, organizational

techniques, maintenance of counseling records, accountability studies, and consultation. By closely examining the impact of this program through the perceptions of its participants, this study explored how effectively the program was meeting the needs of these counselors and how the program might be improved to better address unmet needs.

Method

Research Questions

Of central interest in this case study was the research question: How do new counselors perceive the structured mentoring/induction program? The researcher also sought to explore participant perceptions of training and peer support received within the program; individual impact, if any, of the mentoring/induction program; necessary components of a highly effective mentoring/induction program; and how future mentoring/induction programs might be adapted to better meet the needs of participants.

Sample and Participant Selection

Merriam (1998) argued that two levels of sampling are usually necessary in a qualitative case study: first, the case itself must be selected, and then sampling within that case must be determined. In this study, the case selected was a mentoring/induction program for new elementary school counselors within a large public school district in the southeastern United States. This program was selected for study because of its structured approach to new counselor mentoring, including a planned calendar of meetings, set agendas for each session, and a group mentoring format.

Purposeful sampling was also used to select the sample within the case, just as it was used to select the case itself. At the second level of sampling, six elementary counselors were selected from 11 potential participants, representing 10 different elementary schools. Although demographic data were not collected regarding participant age and ethnicity, all of the 11 potential participants were female. Of the potential participants, seven were novice elementary school counselors and four were elementary school counselors new to the district, but with previous counseling experience. Input was sought from the primary program leader in determining which participants to select and establishing a prioritized list of those who were invited to participate. By including participants with prior experience, a sample was provided that was representative of the district's program, which included all counselors new to

New School Counselor Perceptions of Their Mentoring and Induction Program

the district, regardless of prior experience. Potential participants were solicited for the study through e-mail invitation. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned a pseudonym and references in the manuscript utilize these pseudonyms.

Data Collection and Analysis

Methodology for this case study of a new counselor mentoring and induction program included multiple sources of evidence: (a) individual interviews with program participants, (b) observations of new counselors in the work setting, and (c) investigation of program documents. The researcher designed all data collection tools, including an oral questionnaire and an observation protocol. The researcher collected data in the individual interviews using a semi-structured format that allowed flexibility in questioning. Field notes, researcher reflections, and audio-taped recordings provided the means of data collection. Four observations of new counselor activities were conducted. Two counselors were observed teaching classroom guidance lessons. Two additional participants were observed in systems support activities, specifically in program planning consultation with fellow counselors. The researcher took notes in the observations using a data collection form that included field notes and reflections organized around six guideposts. The documents studied included program calendars, handouts, and a new counselor handbook.

Data were analyzed at two levels. The researcher first utilized the constant comparative method recommended by Merriam (1998) to conduct category construction. At the second level of analysis, a search for broader themes, patterns, and relationships among the identified concepts was conducted.

To ensure data quality within the study, the researcher used multiple sources of evidence as recommended by Yin (2009), including individual interviews, observations in the field, and document review. Additionally, a chain of events was established through the use of a case study protocol guiding the collection and analysis of data. The researcher also used member-checking to allow participants to review transcripts and provide feedback on initial findings (Merriam, 1998).

Findings

Participant Perceptions of Training and Peer Support

McMahon and Patton (2001) believed that new counselors would need additional training and support in their first year on the job, especially with the practical aspects of their jobs, and more specifically, in adjusting to the school culture. The authors also noted that new counselors would benefit from the guidance of more experienced counselors during their first year. The findings of the current study of the mentoring/induction program for new elementary counselors mirrored the findings of McMahon and Patton. Overwhelmingly, the mentees revealed positive perceptions of the program, the mentors, and the resources provided. By far, the majority of impressions that were shared by the participants were positive. Out of 34 impressions shared by the participants interviewed, 25 were clearly positive and could most often be categorized as *helpful*. The mentees described numerous ways in which they perceived that the program helped them: through sharing of resources, demonstrations, consultation, exploration of materials, and mentor support. Beatrice found the new counselor handbook to be especially valuable:

Probably the nicest thing about summer orientation was getting the binder, the tool kit that they made for us which was something that I could refer to all year long. Being able to leave with that, you know having that in my hands was really important.

Beatrice also expressed appreciation for the mentoring meetings as “a really safe place, a safe environment. It really just took kind of a ‘come as you are’ and talk about whatever it was you were experiencing.” Danielle valued the “support of resources, being able to consult with someone, bouncing ideas off of someone, getting ideas from someone. I mean the program was very consistent and just extremely helpful.” Allyson found that the mentors “really did a good job of overall covering everything that would be helpful, you know, ‘Here’s how you do your monthly report.’ They gave extra help in doing the ASCA model as well.” Fiona also valued the leadership of the program mentors:

Both ladies leading the program were incredibly knowledgeable. Listening to them talking was like listening to my favorite professor at school. They were role models for me and I had a feeling like “I want to be like one of these ladies” when I get experience in my field.

Participant responses to specific interview questions regarding peer support were mixed. Mentee comments regarding mentor support were uniformly positive. However, when queried about support from fellow new coun-

New School Counselor Perceptions of Their Mentoring and Induction Program

sels within the program, responses varied; some felt that the commiseration between mentees was quite valuable, and others expressed the opposite viewpoint. Beatrice, a novice counselor, found it helpful to hear from other new counselors “how some of their challenges and issues were similar and how some were very, very different.” As an experienced counselor, Allyson stated that she did not find the peer consultation component as valuable as the novice counselors in the group appeared to find it.

Participant Perceptions of Individual Impact

Counselor mentors can play a vital role in teaching their protégés the skills they need for success in the workplace (Lazovsky & Shimoni, 2007). Program participants interviewed in this study stated that the mentoring/induction program had enhanced their feelings of professional efficacy as newly hired counselors. Mentees gave numerous examples of skills they had developed while in the program, as well as valued resources, such as the new counselor handbook that had been created by mentors. Program participants also discussed the value of mentor support in making decisions and gathering resources, a finding supported in studies that cite the importance of new counselor mentoring in easing adjustment to the school culture (Desmond et al., 2007; Peterson et al., 2004).

Program participants also cited numerous examples of resources their mentors gave them for classroom guidance, group lessons, office organization, classroom management techniques, and attendance programs. For example, three different participants described a puppet named “PAL” that was introduced to them as part of a classroom guidance lesson on listening skills that the mentors had shared. All three counselors had used or were planning to use PAL in their own classroom guidance. Mentors also presented a lesson on transition to middle school; subsequently two of the mentees used this lesson plan with their own fifth graders. Two participants discussed the helpfulness of the small group topics and lesson plans shared by mentors. Several participants mentioned the usefulness of a meeting held on site at two of the mentors’ school, wherein mentees had an opportunity to view the set-up of the mentors’ offices and organizational systems.

Danielle described the process that led program mentors to share valuable information on attendance programs:

[The mentors] would e-mail us and say, “Our meetings coming up. Do you all have anything you want to add?” So I e-mailed about I’ve been having some

attendance issues.... So like that next meeting, they brought, ... an attendance packet, so it had like an attendance contract, a letter for parents, ... when to keep your kid at home, so just those types of resources. And they also did attendance days, where the people the previous year who had multiple absences, they’d have a day where they would be with the counselor, the social worker. They’d be meeting, inviting those people in, just kind of an attendance informational type of meeting.

Not only did Danielle perceive the attendance interventions as useful, she clearly found the process wherein the mentors sought input prior to meetings to be helpful as well.

All counselors interviewed stated that participation in the mentoring program had impacted the quality of their own classroom guidance. Elizabeth said that she “got different perspectives on how to tackle problems” in classroom management from the mentors. Over the course of the school year, she purposely made her lessons more “intriguing” and “interesting” and subsequently found that she had fewer off-task behaviors with her students. Other mentees described classroom guidance ideas that they learned in the mentoring program, ranging from kindergarten friendship activities to end-of-year fifth grade lessons. Fiona added that she reduced the time she spent designing her classroom guidance lessons by repeatedly teaching the same lesson in grade levels where students were close in age, a tip she learned from the program mentors.

Through the mentoring program, participants learned strategies for organizing resources. Danielle commented that “you can have great ideas but another part is keeping those ideas, keeping these resources, organizing them, so they’re able for you to use and then pass on to others.” Carrie was interviewed during the summer following program participation. She described how she was working on plans to align her school’s counseling program with standards of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2005), which she had learned about in the mentoring/induction program. Carrie was also making use of her free time to organize lessons:

What I’ve been doing this summer that I did not actually have an opportunity to do for last school year is to actually go through and look at my standards and competencies for the grade levels that I’m over and kind of get my lessons together.

Participants discussed numerous ideas for improving

New School Counselor Perceptions of Their Mentoring and Induction Program

staff relations during the following school year by using a variety of ideas they had learned during meetings of the mentoring/induction program. Mentees described faculty morale boosters, methods for improving staff climate, and techniques for improving relationships with teachers that were shared by mentors. Allyson recognized the need for regular collaboration with her administrators while participating in the program. She wanted to discuss both guidance plans for the upcoming year and a counselor/principal management agreement with her administrators because she saw “a disconnect between counselors and the administration” and a need for better counselor collaboration with them.

New counselors made numerous references to support received while in the program, such as networking opportunities with other new counselors, advice from mentors, case consultation, peer support, and motivation. Elizabeth described the motivational impact of the meetings:

Every time I would leave the mentoring meetings, it just made me want to improve our program even more. I always wanted to make improvements and think of ideas for our program so it kind of lit a fire under me. It - they motivated me.

Mentees also viewed the individual support given by program mentors as positive. There were times when “what you need to do isn’t listed in [school district] protocol,” but the new counselors could turn to one of the three mentors for advice. The program mentors were seen as “definitely available - - e-mail or phone call - - really quick. Always there to be helpful if you did have a question and you needed an answer.” Not one of the new counselors interviewed in this study expressed the sense of isolation that had been described in the literature on the first-year counseling experience (Culbreth et al., 2005; Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Jackson et al., 2002; Nelson & Johnson, 1999).

Participant Perceptions of a Highly Effective Mentoring/Induction Program

According to ASCA, veteran school counselors should provide “support and mentoring to novice professionals” and should contribute “to the development of the profession through the sharing of skills, ideas, and expertise with colleagues” (ASCA, 2010, Section F.2). The participants interviewed expanded on ASCA’s concept of mentoring and specifically described their ideal mentoring/induction program. Danielle’s vision of the ideal program was that it should be “a structured one, which we had, (*laughs*) where we kind of knew what to expect for

everyone.” Overall, responses fell into three categories: *structure*, *resources*, and *support*. Mentees proposed that a mentoring program should ideally be structured through such means as planned agendas with pertinent topics, consistent meetings of appropriate length and frequency, and opportunities to address individual concerns when needed.

Mentees discussed the value of learning about guidance resources, not only as part of an ideal mentoring/induction program, but as part of the program in which they had participated. Numerous highly valued resources were available to program participants and included a handbook for new counselors, as well as a lesson plan database and electronic handbook that were available to all counselors in the district. Mentees also expressed that new counselor mentoring should ideally provide a means to review topics relevant to the school year calendar in a timely fashion. For example, school adjustment issues could be discussed at the beginning of the school year, when student issues are most likely to arise.

Program participants believed that ideally, support in a mentoring/induction program should come from both mentors and peers. Allyson stated that the mentors in her program “were definitely available -- e-mail or phone call - - really quick. Always there to be helpful if you did have a question and you needed an answer.” Beatrice described the value of peer support:

I loved the fact that our mentors gave us a little bit of leeway time at the beginning of each meeting and they encouraged us to find a buddy, meet up with each other and to have lunch first, go have lunch and then come and talk.

Overall, Beatrice’s response regarding components of an ideal mentoring/induction program was typical of the new counselors. Such a program, she stated, “would look a lot like what we got.”

Participant Perceptions of How Their Mentoring/Induction Program Might Be Improved

Interview responses from all six mentees indicated that there was little that the new counselors would change about their mentoring/induction program. Elizabeth commented that “I don’t think anything was lacking.” Danielle stated that “Obviously there’s room for improvement for things, but I really don’t know any negatives to the program.” Nevertheless, participants had several suggestions for program improvement, including more one-on-one mentoring, mentoring novices and those with prior counseling experience in two separate groups,

New School Counselor Perceptions of Their Mentoring and Induction Program

running the program over two years instead of one, and providing more information on community resources for needy families. Some participants indicated that including more mentors in the program might increase the amount of personal attention available to mentees. As Elizabeth remarked, "I think about those who didn't have a co-counselor that had years of experience," that is, an on-site veteran who could assist on a daily basis. Another suggestion for program improvement was to make available a master list of veteran counselors who could be called upon for consultation, as Carrie suggested: "OK, call these veteran people; you know all of them are on the same page." Allyson, who had prior counseling experience in another school system, participated in the program because she was new to the district. She suggested that having two separate mentoring groups would be ideal - that is, "having new counselors together and then having [those] new to the system together." Fiona was interviewed at the beginning of her second year as a school counselor and wanted the mentoring/induction program to continue:

An ideal program for me would last two years. As a second year counselor, I still feel... new in this field and with all the challenges that this job presents, it would be great to continue having that support this year.

Beatrice was also reluctant to see the mentoring program end after only one year:

It was very nurturing. Just the amount of resources and information that we were given was incredible. [The mentors] put so much time and energy into preparing for us. That was evident. I think that we were all so appreciative. You know, we would joke along the way, "We're not sure how we're going to do when we don't have this next year." And it was true. It was sort of a joke, but there was a feeling that we weren't ready to be weaned, so to speak, (*laughs*) from this experience because it was so nurturing.

Discussion

The mentoring/induction program in this study provides other school systems with an efficient model for inducting new counselors into the profession while providing the quality of training and support that is essential for guiding new hires through their first year of employment. Highly skilled mentors provided the necessary expertise; program structure provided the appropriate setting. The combination of these two factors produced the experience so highly valued by mentees. By selecting skilled

mentors and by providing the opportunity for extended meetings with protégés, the sponsoring school district anticipated and fulfilled new counselor needs. As a general recommendation, other school districts should consider implementing a similar model for the induction of their new school counseling hires. Use of such a model should result in faster adaptation to the school counseling role, higher productivity in the new counselor's first year on the job, and ultimately, improved services for students. Both of the counselor participants who had prior experience in other school districts said there was no similar program in their previous system, a situation which created a void for them in their novice year. As Allyson stated, "In the other system, it was, you're just thrown in. You're a new counselor, here's your school, go!"

The research findings extend the conceptual framework that guided the study, Brott and Myers's (1999) grounded theory regarding professional identity formation in school counselors. Brott and Myers theorized that professional identity is formed through a blending of influences from both training and professional interactions; a structured mentoring program can provide extensive opportunities for new counselors to receive such training and support in their professional interactions. Mentee perceptions of program effectiveness and impact were overwhelmingly positive. Each counselor interviewed described at least two positive impressions of the program and identified a minimum of three areas of professional impact. Participants valued program structure, with set meetings and agendas, as well as purposeful training and support activities. Each counselor also identified at least one aspect of the job that she might approach differently in the future as a result of program participation. Observations and document review reinforced data collected in individual interviews. New counselors were observed in both classroom guidance and systems support activities, that is, roles for which they had been trained in the mentoring program. Document review and analysis revealed that purposeful training and support had also been provided through a new counselor handbook and program handouts.

Limitations of the study included the small sample size and the possibility that those new school counselors who agreed to participate in the study may have been a more motivated group than those who declined. If this is true, then the study's findings may have been skewed in a more positive direction than if a more representative sample had been used. A final limitation of the study was that the researcher has served as a mentor to new school coun-

New School Counselor Perceptions of Their Mentoring and Induction Program

sors at the middle school level for many years, and as such may have a positive bias toward the concept of new counselor mentoring.

The central research question that guided this study was: How do new counselors perceive the structured mentoring/induction program? The data collected and analyzed in this study indicated that participants had overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the program as a whole, and that such a program was an effective means of inducting new counselors into the school system. Thus, new counselor mentoring can clearly play a role in the formation of professional identity for novice counselors.

The findings of this qualitative case study provide support for the mentoring and induction of new school counselors, particularly through structured programming. Because related research on this topic is currently lacking, there is ample opportunity for continued investigation. Areas for possible future exploration might include a comparison of group mentoring to traditional one-on-one mentoring, a study of new counselor mentoring at the middle or high school level, or a quantitative study of new counselor mentoring. Regardless of the direction of future research, finding effective ways to support those new to school counseling can only serve to strengthen the profession as a whole.

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New School Counselor Perceptions of Their Mentoring and Induction Program

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