

The Varied Roles of School Counselors In Rural Settings

Dee Hann-Morrison, Ph.D., LPC
Capella University

Author Note

The author is a clinician, educator, and rural community resident who values the diversity that rural communities offer. Please direct inquiries about this article to Dr. Dee Hann-Morrison at dee.hannmorrison@capella.edu.

Abstract

In an effort to demonstrate the uniqueness of the school counselor's role in rural, as opposed to urban, communities, this contribution will speak to the societal norms that render rural communities cultural entities, in and of themselves. The discussion will start with a brief elucidation of the prescribed roles of the school counselor, before offering a broadened perspective of school counselors who practice in rural communities. This contribution will also consider characteristics of rural schools that may be either liabilities or assets in facilitating children's social and psychological growth.

Keywords: rural school counselors; rural school counseling; school counselor roles

Children's academic performance and opportunities for sound academic development hinge not only on abilities and aptitude, but also on psychological and social issues (Walsh, Howard, & Buckley, 1997). As a clinician, this writer remains profoundly aware of how psychological and social issues influence children's development; she has borne witness to the hurdles some children must cross to get an education. Some children require the attention of a counselor if they are to *resolve* interpersonal and psychological issues that hinder their educational process. These interpersonal issues may include, but are not necessarily limited to, such situations as domestic abuse, social isolation, substance abuse in the home, student and/or family members' mood disorders, or adjustment to a new school or community setting. Not surprisingly, school personnel will attend to these clinical services. Additionally,

the parents of these children often need clinical attention. While some parents will require assistance in dealing with an obstinate teenager, others will need intensive skill and knowledge in parenting and child management. Still others will require assistance to empower their children to aspire to greater academic heights.

Regardless of the school counselor feels skilled in clinical delivery, in rural America helping students cope with clinical conditions may fall squarely on his or her shoulders— even though providing ongoing therapy is beyond the scope of practice for professional school counselors. With a profound lack of resources, rural communities rely on the collaboration of every available institution to meet the needs of constituents. The community calls upon the church, the school, and even the municipal government to provide help as possible. By all accounts, this seems to be the ideology of rural functioning. It is a type of kinship care, so to speak, and it requires a commitment to the community, a commitment to the cultural ideals of the rural lifestyle, and great creativity.

The School Counselor---Deciphering Roles

With the presence of a vast array of professionals and para-professionals in the school setting, one may become confused, or at least, disillusioned about whose responsibility it is to perform which tasks. Even high ranking school personnel may be unclear about the school counselor's role. According to Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skeleton (2006) this may be the case even with the principal. This research team found that counselors and principals often had differing perceptions of the prescribed role of the school counselor, especially with regard to actual counseling duties. This role confusion is not new, as Aubrey (as cited in Monteiro-Leitner, et al., 2006) highlighted this issue more than 35 years ago. One of the factors that contribute to the problem of defining the school counselor's duties seems to be related to the flexibility with which the school counselor must operate and the alterations in this staff person's daily functioning. Local and regional resources, in conjunction with students' needs, govern these daily fluctuations in tasks (Monteiro-Leitner, et al., 2006).

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), (as cited in Helker, Schottelkorb, & Ray, 2007) school

counselors are “. . . certified or licensed professional(s) who address the needs of students comprehensively through the implementation of a comprehensive developmental school guidance program” (p. 32). According to Helker, Schottelkorb, & Ray (2007), consultation and coordination of services are among the four primary interventions in the school counselor’s duties. In either of these capacities, the school counselor engages in an array of activities (inside and/or outside of the school building) to help students succeed in the educational system. Helping students become successful in the educational system may translate into tasks as basic as identifying tutoring services for a child or assisting a child in improving his or her personal hygiene skills. Success in the educational setting, for some children, may be the product of resolving such interpersonal issues as anger management, shyness, or dealing with interpersonal victimization. Another child’s academic success may only come when she is not charged with covering for a drug addicted mom or an abusive father. Because of the breadth of the school counselor’s scope of responsibilities, the person acting in this role must not only be creative, but must also be skilled in resource management, community mobilization, and be able to multi-task (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007).

Mitchell & Bryan (2007) highlight the variety of activities taken on by school counselors in facilitating academic success in a particular immigrant population. In an effort to address barriers to the study population’s performance in school the research team concluded that the school counselors under observation developed and implemented interventions that were not necessarily academic in nature. Parent support groups, for example, strengthened the bond between parents and their children, while at the same time, helped parents to understand the local and national rules regarding child abuse. These support groups also encouraged parents to consider alternative discipline methods, while providing a forum for the parents to share and resolve the socio-cultural stressors faced by the parents and children (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). An integral part of this particular effort was a training component that assisted teachers in understanding the cultural ideologies of the study population (Mitchell & Bryan).

Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy (2007) assert that the school counselor may also serve in a clinical capacity, which is especially the case in rural settings. They suggest that the

school counselor may also serve as a guidance person, a vocational advisor, a parent educator, and as a clinician. While the school counselor may assist one student with a schedule or review options for career development, the next student may present with a situation of familial violence, an unplanned pregnancy, or depressive symptoms. Each of these issues requires the attention and expertise of a skilled and knowledgeable interventionist. In rural communities, stakeholders may expect the school counselor to respond to a host of social and emotional issues, and, realistically, these responses will occur under less than optimal conditions (Morrisette, 2000).

As one can plainly see, if the school counselor is to facilitate academic success for students, then s/he must be a problem-solving member of the school’s resource team. The school counselor must have skills to provide direct and indirect intervention, to plan, direct, and implement prevention programming, and serve as a student advocate. (Monteiro-Leitner, et al., 2006). Monteiro-Leitner, et al. further offer that planning, development, and implementation require the ability to mobilize and motivate all vested entities, whose energies and other resources the school counselor will ultimately find indispensable in the rural community.

The Rural School/The Rural Community

According to Walsh, Howard, & Buckley (1999) there is an inextricable link among the home, school and the socio-cultural environment. In order to understand and properly serve and promote the development of children in the social, educational, or psychological domain, one must first understand the child’s social environment, including his home and his community. Because of its cohesiveness and characteristics, the rural community is a distinct culture. This is not to suggest that those who choose to reside in rural communities are less than their urban counterparts, or that they necessarily suffer any emotional, mental, or cognitive defect. Rather, residency in a rural community often translates into significant differences in one’s manner of living. Edwards (2004) considers the rural lifestyle as a society uniquely defined by a framework that “. . . facilitates, constrains, and shapes the kinds of options that are available to individuals” (p. 3). Edwards clarifies further that the cultural ideology and environmental context of the rural community serves the foundational purpose

of setting norms that affect interpretations and govern individual as well as group interactions. Consequently, concerns regarding specific educational needs and access to mental health services arise and these seem directly related to rural lifestyle.

In considering service delivery in rural communities, the influence of poverty remains of utmost importance and fully considered. Research consistently finds a strong correlation between poverty and rural communities (Cross & Burney, 2005; Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006; & Bryan & Holcomb McCoy, 2007). In southern states, however, the picture seems especially grim. Moore, Probst, Tompkins, & Martin (2005) found that in small rural counties in one southern state, 77% of African American children and 77% of Hispanic children live in households at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. Moore, et al., (2005) contend, further, that the poverty level increases as the child's county of residence becomes more rural.

Most practitioners, educators, and other professional service providers are quick to recognize that rural communities lack resources that would facilitate any degree of ease in service provision. There is no lack of truth in these contentions---rural areas simply do not have the degree or even the breadth of resources one might expect in urban centers. While this lack of resources challenges service delivery, lack of resources also makes for challenges for residents' everyday existence, as well. Families in rural areas, then, face issues that are unique to them, and that are more often than not, a function of their environment. Mink, Moore, Johnson, Probst, & Martin (2005) found, for example, that while rural and urban teens are about equal in their likelihood of exposure to violence, rural teens tend to experience other risk factors that may render them more vulnerable for school failure. According to Mink, et al. (2005) rural teens are at significantly greater risk than their urban and suburban counterparts for using tobacco products, crack/cocaine, and steroids. Of even greater note is the high prevalence of the use of crystal meth among rural teens.

Additionally, Moore, et al. (2005) report that 80% of rural children with potential mental health problems live in counties that do not have community mental health centers. Interestingly, while these problems exist, and are of great

note, especially in rural communities, the services to combat these problems were notably absent or negligible in rural schools. Mink, et al., (2005) found in South Carolina, for example, that while rural and urban schools were equally as likely to have professional school counselors, psychologists, and social workers on staff, these personnel were available for significantly fewer hours in the rural settings. They found, additionally, that counselors in rural schools were significantly less likely to hold proper credentials or to have earned even a graduate degree. Of further interest is the finding that rural schools tended to use significantly less prevention initiatives or preventive policies than schools in urban settings, and relied heavily on more punitive policies when behavioral infractions occurred (Mink, et al., 2005).

Clearly, there is a lot amiss about the schools in rural settings, making them less than optimal for employment consideration for counselors. Despite the deficits noted in these settings, many unique assets of rural communities render them resilient in mediating issues in most, if not all, of their institutions. Moore, et al., (2005) found, for example, that parental stress levels tend to be lower in rural areas than in urban areas. On a scale of 3 – 12 (with 12 being the worst) rural parents averaged stress levels of 3.47, compared to nearly 5.0 for urban parents. The implications of such findings, according to Moore, et al. (2005) translated into the modeling of many types of positive behaviors by parents. The researchers link the lesser degree of parental stress to greater parental availability to participate actively in school-community functions, thereby facilitating greater academic performance by students. They also attribute lower incidences of violence among rural teens to lower levels of parental stress.

While rural schools, like their urban counterparts, seem to be grossly understaffed, the student populations are usually smaller. This, according to Cross & Burney (2005) is undoubtedly a positive for students at either end of the academic spectrum. Gifted students, they assert, benefit especially from the smaller class sizes that rural schools afford them. Rural teachers seem to consider rural gifted students holistically rather than simply through an academic achievement lens. Additionally, Cross & Dixon (1998, as cited in Cross & Burney, 2005) found that gifted students in small rural schools had more social latitude than gifted students attending larger urban schools. The research team noted, also, that important social and

psychological differences existed between rural and urban gifted students. The former, they say, viewed competition in the academic arena as positive, while urban gifted students' experience with competition for academic status was anxiety producing. They also noted that in rural schools, gifted students had greater opportunities for tailored academic instruction (Cross & Burney, 2005).

People in rural communities tend to demonstrate a stake in their communities and all its institutions. Rural fire departments, churches, police departments, municipal government, and schools all tend to enjoy an unyielding kind of support from their respective communities (Alisauskas & Jankauskiene, 2008; Edwards, 2004; Marquart-Pyatt & Petrzela; 2008;). Not unlike the findings of previously mentioned studies, Alisauskas & Jankauskiene show similar ideologies of rural culture in Eastern Europe and distinguish five key features of rural communities regarding members' willingness to invest energies. At least two of these seem applicable to this discussion. Conventional wisdom suggests that rural people characteristically prefer to solve their own social, economic, environmental, and other problems, and to engage in activities that preserve traditions. Collaboration is a crucial component of survival and is likely to include a broad range of professionals, including educators, farmers, and clergymen. Alisauskas & Jankauskiene aptly call this method of problem resolution the integral method, because issues in rural communities tend to be intensely interrelated.

Cross & Burney (2005) describe the rural community's support of its educational institutions as one that affords students considerable opportunities for participation in a broader range of activities that allow for leadership development. The connectedness between the school and the community is not necessarily a uniquely rural phenomenon, they say, however, the depth of that connection is a characteristic of the rural ideology. Despite the fact of high rates of poverty in rural communities, Cross & Dixon (1998, as cited in Cross & Burney, 2005) found that rural communities tend to express significant support for their schools and school activities. Support, for rural communities, they say, may range from donations of time, goods, monies, or expertise; participation in local and regional activities; or advocacy on behalf of the school.

The greatest challenge and paradoxically greatest help facing the rural community include pervasive stereotypes the practitioner may have. These disparaging beliefs are broad in scope and tend to include portrayal of rural residents as "...simple minded buffoons..." (Giardina, 1993, p.2). Other stereotypes include the belief that people who live in rural communities are backward, un-ambitious, and lazy. While this writer suspects that most readers of this contribution will be fully aware of how irrational these notions are, denying their existence would serve little more than to passively contribute to their proliferation. The new resident to rural America often finds the cultural mores unsettling. This, according to Morrisette (2000) includes school personnel. If the school counselor holds stereotypical beliefs, they will manifest in interactions with students, parents, and community at large. Both Morrisette (2000) and Cross and Burney (2005) note that the consequences of this kind of prejudice from a school counselor likely has profound adverse effects on students' efficacy levels, performance, and efforts toward educational achievement. To support and encourage students, the counselor or any school staff, for that matter, must operate from a strengths-based orientation, which affirms and genuinely advocates for a broad array of educational options for all students (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Morrisette, 2000).

Broadened Rural School Counselor Responsibilities

Now that we have established the uniqueness of rural communities and therefore, rural schools, the foundation is laid to consider the uniqueness of the role of the school counselor in a rural school. It is not this writer's goal to misrepresent the everyday issues faced by school counselors practicing in rural settings. Like other professionals in rural areas, the rural school counselor, too, will very probably have to deal with isolation, lack of appropriate professional supervision, and limited access to opportunities for professional growth. Morrisette (2000) rather aptly described the experience of the young school counselor relocating to rural America from an urban setting as "... culture shock" (p. 2). Because of the challenges inherent in the rural lifestyle alone, says Morrisette (2000) this person is more likely than not to abandon this position within the first year.

One of the hallmarks of the rural community is the lack of anonymity compared to that of urban areas. The school counselor, like other professionals in rural America, cannot simply disappear after the closing bell. As a part of the community, this person operates in multiple overlapping relationships. The community's view of this person is as a professional with little tolerance for deviations from that role. Morrisette (2000) likens this type of existence to that of living in a fish bowl. Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, (2004) caution that this high level of visibility, coupled with a broad scope of responsibilities and limited resources, can become the recipe for professional burnout.

Research has consistently confirmed burn-out to be of great concern for rural service providers (Hann-Morrison, 2003; Hann-Morrison, 2006; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). In rural communities school counselors, like mental health providers, struggle with finding the balance between their professional beings and their private beings in an environment that is so interdependent. In settings where everyone holds considerably more intimate knowledge about everyone's comings and goings (a feature of survival in rural communities) it becomes a challenge for the professional to ebb simply into the background at the end of the workday.

Despite these challenges, there are rewards in providing school counseling services in the rural setting. Among them, according to Morrisette (2000) are such things as flexibility to design and implement programs, less bureaucracy, and probably most importantly, community engagement. Some of the more common areas of new responsibilities for the rural school counselor include such chores as providing parent education sessions, community coalition building, and conducting home visits. These items are included among what Christiansen (1997) calls protective factors. Protective factors, according to Christiansen (1997) are elements from the community that "... buffer children from stress and trauma and lead to resilience" (p. 203).

According to Mitchell and Bryan (2007), as a parent educator, the school counselor must exercise sensitivity regarding parents' hours of availability, transportation issues, and probably most importantly, educational levels. The school counselor, in accordance with the task of developing, implementing, and evaluating activities to facilitate children's educational achievement, may no longer

function in the capacity of a typical 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. professional. According to Cross and Burney (2005), for example, one of the charges of the new school counselor is parent education. In rural communities, especially, providing parent education, more often than not, will entail significant changes the conceptualization of traditional work hours. With rural community members working generally blue collar types of job, with rigid work hours and conditions, the better option for parental participation will more likely be evenings or weekends (Cross & Burney, 2005; Christiansen, 1997). While sites for parent education training are generally not so much of a hardship, as the school building seems to serve that purpose superbly, the bigger issue appears to be one of tailoring instruction to the consumers' level of understanding. Mitchell & Bryan (2007) caution educators to avoid assuming all parents will operate at a basic or elementary level.

Community coalition building involves the school counselor's willingness to work collaboratively with other community institutions. This, according to Mitchell & Bryan (2007) may mean meeting with the mental health practitioner, or sitting on a multi-disciplinary task force to help resolve a community issue or an issue with a particular child or family. In the capacity of coalition building, Christiansen (1997) suggested that the school counselor collaborate with the teacher to find creative ways of getting parents actively involved in school activities, and thus involved in the child's education. Such efforts may include guest for a day' programs, whereby a parent is invited to speak/present to a class on a particular topic. Other ideas include inviting parents to special assemblies or coaching an athletic or academic event (Christiansen, 1997). These kinds of efforts, says, Christiansen (1997) are apt to promote positive relationships between teachers and parents.

It has been this writer's experience that professionals tend to struggle with the notion of doing home visits. This takes professionals out of their comfort zone, and for some, creates great anxiety. Both Mitchell and Bryan (2007) and Cross and Burney (2005) hail the benefits of home visits as being among the most efficient means of gathering knowledge about the population with which one hopes to work productively. Further, they challenge the merits of some professionals' contentions regarding personal safety as a deterrent to home visits. Christiansen (1997) and

Walsh, Howard and Buckley (1999) offer home visits as an optimal mechanism for relationship building between school personnel and parents. Both teams of researchers recognize that children who are at risk for school failure are more than likely parented by adults who have little or no social connection with the school culture. Walsh, Howard, and Buckley (1999) propose that by prompting and securing an invitation to the homes of children and meeting parents on their own turf, at least two positive outcomes will likely occur. First, school personnel will garner a better understanding of, and thus, greater sensitivity to the everyday challenges faced by the family. Second, home visits by professionals tend to demonstrate to parents a sense that the professional has an interest in the family. While home visits are not recommended in every situation, as a rule, this mode of service delivery and assessment have proven to be safe and effective (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007).

It is prudent to note a caveat, here. At least two contingencies seem to exist regarding the school counselor's willingness to participate actively with the community. First, how connected does the school counselor feel to the community? Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy (2004) found, for example, that most school counselors who practiced in rural schools believed their roles should expand to community partnerships. They note, further, though, that elementary school practitioners perceived their community partnership roles to be more important than middle and high school counselors. Second, the expansion of school counselor services outside the traditional domain of the school building is generally not at the sole discretion of the counselor. Hopper, Pankake & Schroth (1999) found that a major factor in the development of such school- community connections depends on the level of commitment of school administrators. In their assessment of rural school district superintendent's perceptions of inclusion, for example, Hopper, Panake & Schroth (1999) demonstrated that when high level administrators embrace change and innovation, the positive energy created is often channeled downward. They add, further, that superintendents' community visibility and district authority positions them to create the energy necessary to support effective school-family-community partnerships.

What Has Worked

A hallmark of the rural community is its lack of traditional resources. Paradoxically, though, rural communities may be seen as being quite rich, especially so in that there tends to be a strong sense of ownership of the community, and therefore, above average willingness to share and donate resources for the common good. People in rural communities seem more apt than those in urban settings to assist their neighbors. This neighborliness and fictive kinship mentality is not limited to micro-systems, but may be observed at broad levels of functioning within and across rural communities (Hann-Morrison, 2003).

Bryan and Holcomb-McCoy (2004) call the collaboration between and among school and community entities, school-family-community (SFC) partnerships. These partnerships, they contend, appear to be more prevalent in rural settings and work in unison to plan, coordinate, and implement programs such as mentoring opportunities; home visit programs; tutoring services; and parent centers. SFC partnerships ultimately emphasize improving academic success for students as well as social and emotional support that will facilitate gains in academics.

In rural America, one of the most powerful institutions is the church. This particular asset, in combination with other community factors, has proven to be a potent force in assisting children and their families to turn around low academic performance. Hann-Morrison (2003) found that rural students experiencing academic challenges also seemed to have unmet psychological needs that manifested behaviorally in the classroom. The school family collaboration between educators (e.g., school counselor or teacher), the church, and parents and students proved beneficial at several levels. First, students' behaviors improved. Moreover, the researcher noted improvements before the complete intervention unfolded during the study. Second, students' grades improved. Third, teacher-parent relationships showed notable improvement, and finally, there was a relationship founded between the church and the school. All these relationships and outcomes serve to illustrate the profundity of SFC partnerships in school districts where at first glance, a person might see the glass as half-empty. Hann-Morrison (2003) concluded that ". . . among the most vital benefit of program participation . . . was the perception of parental empowerment . . . in their

children's educational process" (p. 6). Parents and school counselors will likely not only generalize these lessons of empowerment to other children and other circumstances but also generalize them to other domains of life in the rural community.

Another such example of positive outcomes related to (SFC) partnership in a rural setting is Project Aspire (Cross & Burney, 2005). Cross and Burney (2005) describe a three-year grant funded program designed specifically for academically gifted children in a rural community. The program, they contend, included an intense counseling component and resulted in clear implications for school counselors in rural schools. The premise of Project Aspire is that counseling services will enhance students' opportunities for academic achievement by providing assistance in dealing with non-academic issues that hinder academic performance. The program also emphasized professional development counseling for school counselors and other personnel to assist them in better understanding the characteristics of rural students and the rural community.

Based on an analysis of interviews with 21 counselors working in 14 rural schools, the researchers were able to identify issues significant to rural school counselors in their effort to develop, implement, and evaluate school-family-community partnerships. Consistent with tASCA's (as cited in Helker, Schottelkorb, & Ray, 2007) description of school counselors' roles, Cross & Burney (2005), too, found repeated themes related to advocacy. Results from Project Aspire demonstrated a positive correlation between students' academic performance and the quantity and quality of school counselors' advocacy. Advocacy efforts included basic steps such as securing space, time, and/or permission for students to complete homework assignments on school property and rallying support for students' participation on community boards. Another finding of this study included issues related to school counselors' respect for, and genuine belief in students' capabilities.

Conclusion

This writer offers considerations as a clinician, an educator, and a rural community resident and posits that the emotional, educational, and professional development in rural communities is no less a goal than it is in urban settings.

The second goal of this article is to facilitate readers' understanding of the interrelatedness of the community and the school in achieving emotional, educational and professional development for rural students. Along with this second goal goes the inherent understanding that the educational, emotional and professional development for people residing in rural communities is not only expected, but is also achievable. The human desire for self-actualization is no less a goal of rural people than any other population.

This writer understands fully, that many challenges face the rural school counselor. Unfortunately, though, the greatest challenge may not necessarily be the lack of tangible resources, but rather a profound lack of the resource we know as expectation. What the professionals serving rural communities bring with them in terms of their belief in what is possible is often among the greatest contributor to the ultimate outcome.

Rural communities and their component institutions recognize that their culture is unique and that there are significant challenges inherent in this environment. These communities are, however, prepared to offer themselves up wholly to improve the lives of their constituents. Rural communities have long subscribed to a communal notion of being; to a readiness to collaborate and share ideas, ingenuities, expertise, time, and whatever else is at their disposal to contribute. This is simply a cultural imperative in rural communities.

With the school serving as a primary, stable, and valued entity in the rural community--- and the one with probably the greatest depth of intellectual and creative resources, it seems reasonable to expect it to assume the lead in mobilizing change. Counselors subscribe to a belief in facilitating emotional and social growth and encouraging human beings to reach their greatest potential. This alone, should be the catalyst for school counselors' efforts.

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