

Sustaining Education Through Enhanced Collaboration Between Teachers and School Counselors

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In order to support every student in both academic and social emotional learning, collaboration between stakeholders becomes more imperative. Recognizing the importance of systemic collaboration, especially between teachers and school counselors, the authors examined the literature on collaboration between education professionals. After discussing challenges in collaboration, the authors suggested a cross-disciplinary in-service training program model for educators of school counselors and teachers. In addition, suggestions for future research are presented.

Keywords: collaboration; educator; school counselor

The popular media in the United States (U.S.) frequently highlights the evidence for ineffective schools (e.g., DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Post, 2013). Students are depicted in these sources as dropping out at unprecedented rates, and federal and state laws are frequently changing

in the attempt to meet the educational needs of all children. To many in the public, the school has traditionally been viewed as the lone purview of teachers and administrators. Yet, without close partnerships across the bounds of school, family, and community, raising the next generation of healthy and educationally prepared children is a daunting task. This article first defines collaboration and then examines the importance of partnership among educators, and more specifically, between school counselors and teachers. In an attempt to discern clear trends, we also review the teacher-school counselor collaboration literature. After a discussion of various collaboration challenges and obstacles facing teachers and school counselors, we suggest an integrated model of preservice training for school counselors and teachers.

Definition of Collaboration

Themes of collaboration run through the school reform vocabulary, and it is helpful to maintain a common definition. For the purposes of this article, collaboration will be defined as “a style for interaction between at least two co-equal partners voluntarily engaged in shared decision-making as they work toward a common goal” (Friend & Cook, 1990, p. 72). This definition encompasses several elements of collaboration that will be highlighted as we explore the thematic and empirical literature on school counselor-teacher collaboration: mutual goals, parity, shared accountability, and shared resources (Friend & Cook, 1990).

Importance of Collaboration

As alluded to previously, one of the greatest concerns and challenges in preparing adolescents to be ready for college and career is the number of students leaving high school before graduation. Across the U.S., low graduation rates are alarming. There are currently close to one million high school dropouts each year, and the overall dropout trajectory is decreasing very slowly (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2012).

Even more troubling is the percentage of dropouts continues to be very high for minority students. According to the Grad Nation task force brief, only six in 10 minority students finish high school with their classmates (Balfanz et al., 2012, p. 5). The Civic Marshall Plan and Grad Nation task force has set in place a goal of reducing so called drop-out factories (schools which produce the highest percentages of dropouts) and raising graduation rates to 90% by the year 2020 (Balfanz et al., 2012, p. 5). Progress toward this goal can be gauged by benchmarks established by the task force, and a review of the benchmarks indicates that the biggest impact would ensue if more school staff and faculty collaborated instead of working as single crusaders to ensure the success of their students (Balfanz et al., 2012). Most recently, Balfanz et al.'s (2013) report confirmed that educator collaboration is one of the strategies that has contributed to reducing the overall dropout trend and increasing graduation rates in 2011 and 2012.

Collaboration between Teachers and School Counselors

While collaboration in education can and should be practiced among all stakeholders, partnerships between school teachers and counselors appear to be one of the most important factors in improving student outcomes (Van Velsor, 2009). Considering the amount of time students spend in class and the focus on social emotional learning (SEL) as well as academic achievement, it is no wonder the school counseling literature consistently emphasizes collaboration between teachers and school counselors.

Although there is little empirical research specifically investigating the collaboration between teachers and school counselors, there is a precedent in the conceptual literature for such partnerships (see Sink, 2008, for a review). The enthusiasm for collaboration has emerged from the professional school counseling literature. According to Sink (2008, 2011), school counselors should take a more central role in providing services (e.g., collaborative interventions and blended instructional lessons) to all schoolchildren at the onset of the school year. Likewise,

when creating guidance lesson plans where students focus both on important academic and social emotional skills, counselor-classroom teacher collaboration is critical (Van Velsor, 2009).

One of the main foci of the counselor-teacher collaboration literature points to the role of school counselor as a consultant (Baker, Robichaud, Dietrich, Wells, & Schreck, 2009; Henfield & McGee, 2012). Utilizing the school counselor's knowledge and skills on group process and dynamics helps teachers enhance the learning environment for students (Fazio-Griffith & Curry, 2008). One pilot study examining school counselors' preventive and proactive role in middle school students' mathematics placement suggested that these professionals can support teachers by improving school-to-home communication and helping to integrate differentiated exploratory activities in mathematics for K-12 courses (Akos, Shoffner, & Ellis, 2007).

Webb, Webb, and Fults-McMurtery (2011) recommended that physical education teachers who are working with students with disabilities collaborate with school counselors to develop a more holistic understanding of their needs. One ethnographic study on working with students with disabilities listed teachers and school counselors as individuals who are most likely to collaborate for the good of the child with disabilities (Myers, 2005). This perception was shared when assessing the importance of collaboration to gifted education teachers. Hébert and Sergent (2005) suggested that school counselors collaborate with teachers in gifted education programs, providing effective classroom guidance and assisting these teachers to become more aware of their students' needs.

While research evidence indicates that classroom collaboration between school counselors and teachers benefits SEL, Baker et al.'s (2009) study reinforced a common finding that teachers do not fully understand the various roles and functions of school counselors. Moreover, these authors reported that collaboration may be more likely if teachers are educated about the consultant role a school counselor may play. For instance, school counselors were more welcomed into classrooms once teachers understood their roles as consultants and were

more likely to engage in continued collaboration once this role had been adequately defined. Similarly, the authors found that school counselors were more likely to gain access to classroom teachers if they initiated the contact and did not wait for teachers to approach them. Finally, school counselors must be educated on how to effectively consult with teachers and serve in school leadership roles, both key functions embedded in the professional standards considered below.

Further, Henfield and McGee (2012) pointed to the importance of school counselors' collaboration efforts being both strengths-based and culturally congruent. The authors noted that if a teacher is going to invite a school counselor into their classroom, the school counselor must be aware of the internal culture of that classroom and conduct the consultation with that knowledge in mind (Henfield & McGee, 2012). In turn, teachers need to understand the importance of SEL processes that impact students' academic performance and feel comfortable inviting school counselors in their classroom.

Studies on collaborative curriculum programs indicate that such collaboration across school personnel may indeed have a positive impact on students' academic and socio-emotional achievements (Sink & Edwards, 2008). Similarly, research on adolescent development has investigated resilience in young persons and found that, by far, collaborative adult and community support of a child has the greatest impact on their ability to thrive (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). According to Marlow, Bloss, and Bloss (2000):

it is becoming more evident that it does "take a village" to educate children. In fact, it can be said that it takes a whole school to educate a child.... Therefore, teachers and counselors must work [to] begin to provide information regarding their attitudes toward collaborative teaching, planning and facilitation in order to work together to best produce a nurturing educational environment. (p. 668)

Challenges in Collaboration

Even though there appears to be consensus in the conceptual literature

about how important collaboration between school staff is, there is also little evidence that such collaboration is occurring on a wide-scale basis. One potential reason for the lack of implementation of a known best practice may be due to the unclear emphasis placed on collaboration in the professional standards documentation for school counselors and teachers.

Professional Standards

In an effort to identify the professional standards for teachers collaborating with school counselors, we performed a search of published standards at the national and state (Washington) level. There is surprisingly little written about how teachers may or ought to cooperate and partner with school counselors to ensure the success of their students.

The U.S. National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) outlines 12 standards in which board certified teachers must show evidence of proficiency. Four of these standards could be expected to promote the partnership between teachers and school counselors on a school campus: (a) knowledge of young adolescents, (b) social development, (c) family partnerships, and (d) collaboration with colleagues. While each of these standards does cite the importance of collaboration and provides a thorough infrastructure of support for students, none but the fourth mentions school counselors in particular. The Knowledge of Young Adolescents standard states:

Recognizing that specialists and support personnel have valuable insights into early adolescents' development and abilities and ways to facilitate learning, teachers willingly collaborate with them to strive to meet the needs of all students and to promote their chances for success. (NBPTS, 2001, p. 8).

The lack of discussion surrounding collaboration may seem like a particularly egregious omission as school counselors are specifically trained to identify needs, design interventions appropriate to those needs,

and evaluate the success of the intervention (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2009). Teachers, as people who would spend most of the time with the students in school, should be able to work directly with school counselors and school psychologists. The vague wording of the standard makes no indication of this paramount relationship between teachers and school counselors in addressing and meeting the needs of the student.

The Social Development, Family Partnerships, and Collaboration with Colleagues standards (NBPTS, 2001) are likewise vague and lacking in clear definition of the importance of a teacher working closely with the school counselor. All three standards cite the importance of partnering with other adults to ensure a student's chance of success, but the former two standards do not use explicit language to indicate with whom these partnerships should be forged (outside of family members). The latter standard does allude to a partnership with school counselors "as necessary" in a two-sentence overview of which support personnel a teacher may consult in the event that they do not have the expertise to offer all that is necessary to support a child. This lack of attention to the benefit that could arise from a tight collaborative relationship between teachers and school counselors appears short-sighted, particularly in light of the expectation that teachers be members of "learning communities." However, when discussed in the standards literature, these learning communities seem to consist only of other teachers and perhaps an administrator, but do not include school counselors (or coaches, librarians, support staff, etc.).

At the state level, Washington does not have specific state standards for teachers other than the National Board standards. There is nonetheless a state document outlining the *Nine Characteristics of High-Performing Schools*, and this document makes no mention of school counselors in particular, but refers to "other staff" in schools with whom teachers and administrators are expected to maintain high levels of collaboration and communication (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). This document draws a clear distinction between faculty and staff members throughout, and we might consider redefining school counselors as

faculty members to reflect their professional educator characteristics, and ensure that they are included in more leadership and collaboration efforts within the schools. School counselors are reportedly ready to take on this added leadership and responsibility of increasing the success rates of their students (Balfanz et al., 2012). This role redefinition would also enable teachers to see school counselors as true peers and may make the difference between a closed-door policy and using counselors as schedule adjusters to integrated intervention across all modalities of education in the school building.

A stark difference is seen between teacher standards and those for school counselors when considering the role collaboration takes in their training. Though one does not necessarily find encouragement of collaboration in standards of the teaching profession, both the national- and state-level associations of the school counselor profession (i.e., American School Counselor Association [ASCA] and Washington School Counselor Association) strongly emphasize school counselors' collaboration with teachers. ASCA's (2010) *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* set aside a section called "C. Responsibilities to Colleagues and Professional Associates," and encourage professional school counselors to "[e]stablish and maintain professional relationships with faculty, staff and administration to facilitate an optimum counseling program" (section C.1, para. a). In addition, ASCA (2010) clearly states that professional school counselors must "[r]ecognize that teachers, staff and administrators who are high-functioning in the personal and social development skills can be powerful allies in supporting student success. School counselors work to develop relationships with all faculty and staff in order to advantage students" (section C.1, para. c). Further, section C.3 reinforces that school counselors should collaborate and educate all the stakeholders around the role of the school counselor (ASCA, 2010).

Along with *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (ASCA, 2010), *ASCA National Model* (ASCA, 2012) describes the mandate for school counselors to enter the classroom and deliver the school counseling core curriculum aligned with student competencies appropriate

to the developmental level. This model suggests that school counselors “team teach or assist in teaching the school counseling core curriculum, learning activities or units in classrooms or other school facilities” (ASCA, 2012, p. 85).

At the state level, for example, *School Counselor Residency and Professional Level Benchmarks* (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2006) reflected in Section 181-78A-270 of Washington Administrative Code (2013) states that school counselors “support teachers and parents in helping students develop knowledge and skill for learning” (Standard 2). Furthermore, in the standard for collaboration with school staff, family, and community, it is clearly noted that “certified school counselors work collaboratively with school staff, families, and community members to achieve common goals for the education of students, improvement of schools, and advancement of the larger community” (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2006, Standard 7). Thus, it is clear that the imperative to collaborate is heavily biased on the side of school counselors, but that the professional literature for teachers places little emphasis on it. This one-sided emphasis creates some disconnect in school buildings.

Challenges in Action

Although professional standards in the school counseling profession emphasize collaboration with teachers more than standards for the teachers profession do, it is evident that school personnel, especially teachers and school counselors, need to work together in helping students succeed in school. The reluctance to collaborate may in part be due to a lack of information teachers receive about the trends of school counseling preparation programs and the training school counselors receive surrounding advancing educational achievement.

According to a recent national study (Reiner, Colbert, & Pérusse, 2009), teacher participants seem to understand school counselors’ “appropriate” (agreeing 13 out of 16) and “inappropriate” (agreeing 5 out of 12) responsibilities as recommended by ASCA. However,

this study also indicated that participants' understanding of school counselors' role is limited in that they considered "working with one student at a time in a therapeutic, clinical mode" (p. 329) as the major school counselor's role, which is not consistent with ASCA's (2012) conception of a working comprehensive school counseling program.

This lack of understanding can lead to a closed-door policy against school counselors and misunderstandings about how school counselors can benefit the core curriculum classroom. Teachers may be less prone to allowing school counselors to pull students out of the classroom for individual counseling or small-group counseling as they did in traditional school counseling model because teachers are concerned about students' academics and do not wish to interrupt classroom learning time (Clark & Breman, 2009). Even in cases where teachers and school counselors understand each other's role, when it comes to take action in implementing intervention/prevention programs, teachers and school counselors would not know what to do in terms of collaboration. While one study investigating the partnership between school counselors and teachers in literacy circles reported a negligible difference in student learning between a control and treatment classroom, the authors noted the importance of structuring collaboration with clear goals in mind (Stringer, Reynolds, & Simpson, 2003).

Implications for Educators: Cross-disciplinary Preservice Course

As indicated in the literature, collaboration in education is not a new topic. Efforts to collaborate between teachers and school counselors have been made in K–12 classrooms. However, to reiterate, the research shows that those efforts are fraught with obstacles and challenges. For example, there is a lack of role definition between teachers and school counselors, making collaboration difficult. Authentic collaboration is rarely achieved by teachers and school counselors, as this process requires an investment of time and clarification of processes and roles. With a comprehensive understanding of roles, and a thorough exploration of

the processes and guidelines involved in collaboration, such partnerships need not be so rare.

Similar difficulties were noted in the collaboration between school counselors and principals, highlighting the lack of role definition and mutual understanding. There is evidence of a discrepancy between principals' and school counselors' perceptions on school counselors' roles (Fitch, Newby, Ballestero, & Marshall, 2001; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005) and support for the concept that educators begin collaboration during graduate programs. This suggestion is demonstrated in the pilot program between preservice school counselors and principals (Marie F. Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Despite the focus on understanding professional roles, Kirchner and Setchfield (2005) concluded that such efforts are not comprehensive enough to impact the school system as a whole. The authors suggested that some barriers to comprehensive impact could be lack of resources and support, and the study indicates that systems need a more holistic approach to ensure the needs of all students are being met.

Several schools of education are taking the importance of collaborative training seriously and offer preservice-level pilot programs to enhance school counselor collaboration with other school staff (Hayes & Paisley, 2002; Marie F. Shoffner & Briggs, 2001; Melanie Shoffner & Morris, 2010). Learning from the examples in collaboration between principals and school counselors in preservice opportunities, it appears that what to do and how to collaborate in the pressing reality of school settings needs to be included in graduate program coursework (Melanie Shoffner & Morris, 2010). Collaboration between teachers and principals resembles that of the partnership between school counselors and principals in that they learn about each other's professions in service rather than in preservice training programs. We recommend that preservice courses focus on providing background on the roles of each professional. Along with a few studies reporting that teachers and school counselors got together to deliver integrated lessons and sharing successful stories (Akos et al., 2007; Melanie Shoffner & Morris, 2010), several collaboration models were suggested in the literature (see Clark

& Breman, 2009; Hayes & Paisley, 2002; Henfield & McGee, 2012; Marie F. Shoffner & Briggs, 2001; Marie F. Shoffner & Williamson, 2000; Melanie Shoffner & Morris, 2010). Some approaches specifically delineated an inclusive seminar course where teachers and school counselors learn at-risk factors and prepare how to respond to the classroom reality (Hayes & Paisley, 2002; Melanie Shoffner & Morris, 2010). However, these suggested courses were short-term, some as short as a single 70-minute workshop, not nearly enough time to fully understand the background and crossover between educator professions. Instead, we recommend a course similar in purpose, but with a more comprehensive model of collaboration that includes a student-focused, strengths-based curriculum.

The course would be offered as a cross-disciplinary requirement for all preservice educators, including school counselors and teachers, with optional integration of administrators-in-training. The quarter- or semester-long course would consist of the following five elements: (a) learning about at risk factors, (b) understanding developmental assets, (c) understanding and designing support systems, (d) creating classroom guidance, and (e) demonstrating through presentation.

Learning About At-risk Factors

Many times teachers begin their practice with a general knowledge of human development. However, graduate students' learning needs are very specific depending on their background. Clearly then, teachers must ascertain the strengths and limitations of their students in order to devise ways to better assist them. Knowing the students and understanding their culture and needs can be accomplished, in part, by conducting needs assessments and using other informal tools (e.g., cognitive, psychosocial surveys) (Sink & Edwards, 2008). In our suggested cross-disciplinary course, both teachers and school counselors learn about how needs assessments are deployed and consider how they can use the results in their classroom preparation and teaching.

Understanding Developmental Assets

Related to the above, in order for school reform to be more prevention-focused, educators need to learn about students' strengths and implement the programs that can enhance their developmental assets (Marzano, 2003; McEwan, 2006; Scales & Leffert, 2004). Many teachers are prone to respond to misbehaviors rather than each student's strengths because they are preoccupied with classroom management. Learning in-depth about positive developmental assets may help teachers and school counselors build positive perspectives on students' learning (Palmer, 1993; Scales & Leffert, 2004).

Understanding and Designing Support Systems

After understanding students' specific needs and building positive perspectives on students' learning, role definitions are clarified highlighting how professionals can work together. Preservice educators partner with local school districts to learn about what successful intervention models have been implemented in the school districts. This class component includes school and classroom visits and focus groups with a select group of current professionals. Listening to educators provides helpful background knowledge on different types of support systems. Teachers and school counselors then share ideas for collaboration they have gleaned from interaction with current district employees.

Creating Classroom Guidance

Teachers are experts in creating lesson plans and delivering that in the classroom setting. However, teachers generally do not realize that school counselors are responsible for helping elementary-through-high-school-age students meet ASCA's (2004, 2012) developmental standards and competencies related to classroom instruction. This course provides a useful environment for teachers to learn what needs to be

accomplished in the academic, career, and SEL domains. Together preservice teachers and school counselors learn how to integrate ASCA standards into those already in place for classroom instructors (see e.g., Common Core Standards distributed in the U.S.) (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). Some schools set aside advisory time, which makes it easier for school counselors to deliver classroom guidance; however, many schools do not have such periods. Because research indicates the difficulty in integrating the ASCA standards into the general education classroom (Schulz, 2010), practicing how to integrate these standards in the cross-disciplinary course should help teachers and school counselors apply the standards in real-world classrooms. In short, this module includes cross-disciplinary teams creating lesson plans together for core curriculum subject areas.

Demonstrating Through Presentation

After collaboratively creating this model lesson, this module requires cross-disciplinary teams to present the lesson as a way to receive constructive feedback. Demonstrating what students have learned together in front of an audience is always challenging due to schedule and logistics. We suggest that presentations are initiated using an invitational format, where local schools are requested to participate in the experience. Demonstration of classroom lessons with integrated standards provides indirect learning for other students, feedback for presenting teachers and school counselors, as well as an opportunity to modify lesson plans based on meaningful feedback.

Suggestions for Future Research

Since the integration model of preservice cross-disciplinary training is a relatively new approach, empirical research on the effects of such collaboration is quite limited. The first step in filling this research gap is to pilot a program similar to the one described in this article. Such a pilot study would be longitudinal in nature and would include a

comparison group from another local university educational program where students are involved in a traditional, non-cross-disciplinary training model. Points of analysis would include qualitative analysis of perceptual data surrounding role definition at the preservice level and role implementation in service. Though it might be cost-prohibitive to evaluate the direct influence of teachers and school counselors' collaboration on students' success in such a study, it is possible to evaluate the effectiveness of this integrated model on addressing role perception. The integrated training could also be evaluated on the degree to which teachers and school counselors build strengths-based perspectives of students and implement intervention/prevention programs. In summary, longitudinal research should be conducted on student and school culture changes after the integrated training model has been implemented. Comparisons with traditional models should be included as well.

Conclusion

This article outlined some of the major issues related to enhancing collaboration between teachers and school counselors. Surprisingly, even though the professional school counseling standards reinforce the need for interdisciplinary partnerships, the amount of actual teacher-counselor collaboration is suboptimal. We have also pointed out that while research on specific outcomes of teacher-counselor collaboration is lacking, there is increasing consideration of the collaboration among professionals (for example, Baker et al., 2009; Clark & Breman, 2009; Fazio-Griffith & Curry, 2008; Melanie Shoffner & Morris, 2010). To improve this situation for the benefit of all students, we recommended a preservice cross-disciplinary training course, one that illuminates the professional commonalities among teachers and school counselors. Such a course would enable a natural bridge to be built before new professionals enter their chosen fields.

Cross-disciplinary courses, such as the one described above, should encourage greater teamwork and peer understanding between teachers

and counselors. The ultimate goal would be to increase the effectiveness of identification of student needs and the implementation of interventions across the school setting. While it is beyond the scope of this article to present the full curriculum for such a course, the outline provided lays the foundation for Colleges of Education in the U.S. and internationally to revisit their teacher and counselor preservice training. It is essential that schools eliminate the silos of duty that are in place long before new professionals enter service. With greater responsibility to reach all children in all schools, and fewer specialist resources in many schools, large-scale interventions are not sustainable without teamwork across the buildings. It is imperative that teachers and school counselors capitalize on the natural affinity of their vocations so that children do not just pass through schools but flourish in them.

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