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Examining the Impact of Non-Counseling Supervisors on School Counselor Self-Efficacy

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Abstract

School counselors rarely receive clinical supervision and are often expected to perform duties that fall outside of the American School Counselor Association’s list of appropriate responsibilities. This can contribute to underutilized clinical skill development, reduced career satisfaction, increased burnout, and, over time, decreased self-efficacy. Despite evidence that a lack of administrative support and understanding are important factors in school counselor functioning, there have been no studies directly relating supervisors’ training backgrounds to counselor self-efficacy. This manuscript discusses the results of a study that examined supervision and its influence on school counselor self-efficacy. Findings suggest a difference between supervision from non-counseling personnel (principal, vice principal, etc.) and those trained as counselors (e.g., Director of School Counseling Services). Advocacy for counseling supervisors and peer supervision, as well as implications for future research, are discussed.

Keywords: school counseling, supervision, self-efficacy, advocacy

The construct of self-efficacy, which represents people’s beliefs about their ability to be successful in various situations, has received much attention for its impact on work performance (Bandura, 1986). According to Bandura’s social cognitive theory (1977a, 1977b), the strength of self-efficacy beliefs influences one’s decisions to attempt tasks and determines the level of effort expelled and the persistence of the individual to
successfully complete these tasks. Specific to counselors, self-efficacy has similarly shown to have significant impact on perceptions of their own skills and abilities, as well as their commitment, motivation, perseverance, and resilience in achieving their goals (Cashwell & Dooley, 2001). It has been suggested that self-efficacy can affect not only people’s decision making but also their ability to cope with stress and difficulty in their work (Bandura, 1986). Loganbill, Hardy, and Delworth (1982) found that counselors’ perceptions of their own abilities are critical factors in skill development. According to Barnes (2004), counselors with high levels of self-efficacy consider themselves highly capable professionals, making them more apt to advocate for their professional roles and responsibilities. Given what we know about the importance of this critical characteristic, it is important to understand the factors that impact self-efficacy. One prominent factor in the literature on school counselors has been the impact of colleagues and, especially, those who provide direct supervision.

**Role Stress in the Profession**

Historically, the role of the school counselor has been both misunderstood and misrepresented by administrators, teachers, and practicing counselors alike (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Confusing, conflicting, or ambiguous messages are a source of role stress within supervisory relationships and could be associated with very negative outcomes. Messages from administrators certainly impact school counselor functioning and may relate to job dissatisfaction and burnout when they conflict with preferred roles and functioning (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Moyer, 2011; Pyne, 2011). Sutton and Fall’s (1995) research highlighted these concerns, as they found evidence that school climate factors had an impact on the development of school counselor self-efficacy. For instance, their findings suggested that colleagues’ and administrators’ understanding of participants’ school counseling programs were significant predictors of self-efficacy levels. This is especially concerning in light of Studer and Oberman’s (2006) findings that participants working within a comprehensive developmental model “reported that their principals had little understanding of their program” (p. 86).

Sutton and Fall’s (1995) study also provided evidence that self-efficacy was impacted by the appropriateness of duties assigned to a school counselor, as delineated by comprehensive school counseling programs such as the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2012). Moyer (2011) shared complementary findings suggesting that higher levels of non-counseling duties increased the symptoms of burnout displayed by school counselors. While ASCA has provided a model of comprehensive school counseling, as well as standards for best practice in the profession (Campbell & Dahir, 1997), there is evidence that these models are not being utilized by many practicing counselors (Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2008; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). While there are many reported reasons behind the underutilization of the ASCA National Model and standards, one area of obvious concern appears to be the lack of consistent role definition and implementation in the school setting. This ambiguity not only can affect school counselors’ beliefs about their abilities to successfully deliver a comprehensive counseling program, but may also have affective implications impacting role stress and overall job performance.
Non-Counseling Supervisors

A large amount of research on school counselor practice has consistently revealed a discrepancy between preferred and actual functioning and between actual functioning and best practice as advocated for in the ASCA National Model (e.g., Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). Among many factors, including grade level, time of service, and membership in a professional association, the extent to which administrative supervisors dictate functioning has been offered as an explanation for this discrepancy (Moyer, 2011). Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, and Solomon, (2005) concluded that the continued gap between actual functioning and best practices is due in part “to the influence of non-counseling individuals within the school system to whom school counselors are directly accountable” (p. 58). Culbreth et al. (2005) referred to non-counseling supervisors as individuals within the school system who do not have a training background in counseling. These personnel include principals, vice principals, and other administrative or teaching staff who may be responsible for providing direct supervision to school counselors.

The gap between administrators’ and counselors’ perceptions of the role of the school counselor results in a dilemma for the counselor that may impact professional identity development and practice. A cycle of role confusion persists when administrators assign non-counseling related tasks (Lieberman, 2004). It appears this trend continues because of two different and distinct reasons: (a) many principals and other school administrators are unaware of best practices and current models of school counseling practice because their training background and professional identity are in educational leadership (Herlihy, Gray, & McCollum, 2002), while (b) others, although aware of the movement from traditional “guidance” models to comprehensive approaches such as the ASCA National Model, continue to rely on school counselors to fill these roles simply because the roles are necessary and the tasks need to be accomplished by someone (Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005). Conflicting messages about the roles and functions of the counselor can lead to higher levels of burnout (Culbreth et al., 2005) and lower levels of job satisfaction (Pyne, 2011). School counselor self-efficacy may likewise be compromised resulting in decreases in motivation and performance outcomes. The need to continue to explore factors that promote (and compromise) school counselor self-efficacy is evident. To date, there is a paucity of research that has examined the influence of supervision from a non-counseling supervisor on school counselor self-efficacy. The primary research question examined in this study, What is the relationship of supervisors’ training background to school counselors’ feelings of self-efficacy? was chosen to address this gap.

Methodology

Participants

The target population consisted of school counselors within a northeastern state who met several professional criteria, which were established by the information in the directory published by the state’s school counselor association. For the purposes of the study, only counselors working in public schools and listed in the directory as school or “guidance” counselors were eligible to participate. Based on these criteria, the sampling frame was approximately 2,700 counselors. Three solicitations to participate were sent
via e-mail to each counselor; an introduction, an invitation, and a follow-up. A total of 210 completed surveys were collected online, representing a response rate of 7.8%.

Instrument

The School Counselor Self-Efficacy (SCSE) Scale, developed by Bodenhorn and Skaggs (2005), was designed to measure school counselors’ confidence in their abilities to carry out identified tasks and responsibilities and follow professional guidelines. The 43-item scale has been extensively analyzed for validity and reliability and has been utilized in other recent research studies (e.g., Gundoz, 2012). Participants indicated their level of confidence in their ability to complete each item on a Likert scale of 1 (not confident) to 5 (highly confident).

School counselors in this study were asked to indicate the job title of the person who provided them with the most direct supervision. They were given a definition of the term supervision and indicated whether a counseling supervisor (e.g., Director of School Counseling Services or Director of “Guidance”) or a non-counseling supervisor (e.g., Principal, Vice Principal, or “other”) provided them with the most direct supervision.

Data Analysis

Once the data were collected, they were transferred into SPSS. Answers to the question of “What is the title of the person who provides you the most direct supervision?” were coded using “0” for non-counseling supervisors such as Principal or Vice principal and “1” for counseling personnel such as Director of School Counseling Services. A set of independent samples t-tests was used to measure the differences in scores on the SCSE Scale between school counselors with non-counseling supervisors and those with counseling supervisors. This test was chosen because a dichotomous, categorical variable (non-counseling supervisor) was being compared to a continuous dependent variable (SCSE Scale scores; Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

Results

In this study, supervision was defined as a relationship between a junior member of a profession and a more senior member of that profession (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Of the 210 school counselors in this study, 50.5% indicated they were being supervised most directly by a non-counseling staff member such as a Principal or Vice Principal (n = 106), and 45.5% indicated they were most directly supervised by a Director of School Counseling Services or Director of “Guidance” (n = 104).

Self-efficacy was measured using the School Counselor Self-Efficacy (SCSE) Scale, a measure created specifically for school counselors. The 43-item scale requires participants to indicate their level of confidence on tasks associated with current best practices in school counseling as defined by the national standards and aligned with the ASCA National Model. Each item is answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not confident) to 5 (highly confident), representing a possible range of 43 to 215 with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-efficacy. The scores on the SCSE Scale in this study ranged from 106 to 210 with a mean score of 180.46 (SD = 20.25; see Table 1). Bodenhorn and Skaggs (2005) used a sample of 226 responses from practicing school
counselors in their initial item analysis of the SCSE Scale, which produced a mean score of 180.97 ($SD = 19.86$).

A $t$-test of independent samples was utilized to measure differences between groups in mean SCSE Scale scores. Results revealed a significant difference between those who were mostly supervised by counseling staff ($M = 183.55$, $SD = 17.65$) and those who were mostly supervised by non-counseling staff ($M = 177.42$, $SD = 22.18$), $t (199.58) = 2.22$, $p = .03$ (see Table 2). These findings indicated a difference in mean scores such that practicing school counselors with non-counseling supervisors had generally lower self-efficacy scores.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Independent Variables and Self-Efficacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Non-Counseling Supervisor (n = 106)</th>
<th>Counseling Supervisor (n = 104)</th>
<th>Total (n = 210)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy (SCSE)</td>
<td>177.42</td>
<td>22.18</td>
<td>183.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Results of Independent Samples $t$-tests by Supervisor Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$df$</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SCSE</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>199.58</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.68, 11.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 210. Non-counseling supervisor coded as 0. Counseling supervisor coded as 1.

Discussion

This study directly compared self-efficacy levels of practicing school counselors based on the training background of their direct supervisor. Interestingly, most practicing school counselors in this study identified their direct supervisor as non-counseling personnel. Principals, vice principals, teachers, and school counselors share some goals and responsibilities. Some professional identity constructs may also be shared by these professionals, or as Bodenhorn and Skaggs (2005) suggested, “School counseling can be seen as a hybrid of teaching and counseling” (p. 27). However, school counselors are also professionals within a school responsible for preventing and addressing a variety of student issues, including personal/social problems that impact student achievement (ASCA, 2012). Therefore it would seem logical for most school counselors to receive supervision from someone who is trained as a counselor. Moyer (2011) wrote that “counselors receiving adequate supervision feel more competent in their duties. It is a means of support that may lessen feelings of incompetence and increase empathy for students and their presenting issues” (p. 22). If the professional identity of school counselors encompasses elements of both counselor and educator (Cinotti, 2014), then the supervision provided to them should address the needs of both.

Non-counseling supervisors often may not have an understanding of school counselor roles, especially when counselors are utilizing a comprehensive approach such
as the ASCA National Model (Studer & Oberman, 2006). As a result, they may be focusing their supervision on administrative issues, which are more aligned with their expertise. Either implicitly or explicitly, administrative supervisors may not be encouraging the use of the ASCA National Model, which forces school counselors to choose between functioning as they would prefer and as they likely have been trained or adapting to their supervisors’ expectations. The findings in this study may be due in part to school counselors choosing to fit their practices to the expectations of their supervisors (Studer & Oberman, 2006).

Ideally, counselors should be receiving three types of supervision each with a different focus: administrative, clinical, and program. Non-counseling supervisors are likely to be providing only administrative supervision (Herlihy et al., 2002). Additionally, school counselor are much more likely to receive administrative supervision than either of the other two types (Somody, Henderson, Cook, & Zambrano, 2008). Administrative supervision focused on adherence to school policy, professional behaviors, and performance in non-counseling duties is aligned with administrators’ training and professional identity. There is evidence to suggest that administrators often consider clinical and program supervision less necessary (Herlihy et al., 2002; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005). The findings in this study suggest that school counselors who receive most of their supervision from these non-counseling supervisors reported slightly lower self-efficacy than colleagues with counseling supervisors.

Implications for Practice

The Need for Clinical Supervision

Bernard and Goodyear (2009) defined supervision as a relationship in which a more experienced member of a profession transmits “skills, knowledge and attitudes” (p. 6) to a less experienced member. The relationship extends over a period of time and includes a mutual agreement to achieve two goals: (a) improving and enhancing professional functioning and (b) offering quality services to those with whom they are working. In this way, the supervisor is acting as a gatekeeper for those who wish to obtain professional status. Through this relationship, supervisees develop competencies and necessary skills as well as the ability to critically examine their own practices.

The benefits of clinical supervision include performance improvements, knowledge and skill enhancement, and increased career satisfaction (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Dollarhide & Saginak, 2008; Herlihy et al., 2002; Lambie & Sias, 2009). Negative consequences of receiving little to no clinical supervision include professional identity problems, poor performance, decreased competence, and a resulting increased likelihood in unethical practices and malpractice (Dollarhide & Miller, 2006; Herlihy et al., 2002; Somody et al., 2008).

One theory behind the lack of clinical supervision for school counselors may be a difference in priorities for both administrators and practicing school counselors. On one hand, principals and district supervisors may find administrative supervision to be most valuable (Herlihy et al., 2002). On the other hand, there is a lack of clarity as to whether school counselors in fact strongly desire more clinical supervision (Herlihy et al., 2002; Lambie & Sias, 2009). A review of the literature by Dollarhide and Miller (2006) summarized the issue as both a lack of available supervision for those who want it and a
lack of appreciation of supervision from those who do not. This dichotomy is both affected by and contributes to a lack of continuing clinical supervision in the field.

The current state of school counselor supervision in which clinical supervision is mostly replaced with administrative supervision is clearly impacting practicing counselors’ feelings of self-efficacy. Many school administrators are acting on the perception that school counselors do not require consistent clinical supervision. This misperception includes the assumption that instead of clinical skill development and usage, school counselors’ primary focus and responsibilities should be on academic advising, scheduling, and other non-counseling related activities (Herlihy et al., 2002). This is consistent with traditional “guidance” programs, which rely on reactive, remedial approaches and focus on counselor functions over student outcomes (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006; Studer & Oberman, 2006). It is therefore incumbent upon stakeholders in the school counseling and counselor education professions to advocate for change. The following sections discuss opportunities to support more school counselor clinical supervision and offer strategies to help supervisors foster the development of self-efficacy throughout these experiences.

Advocating for Clinical Supervision

Due to the misperceptions of the role of counselors, in addition to the potential ethical and legal ramifications of inappropriate clinical interventions, it is suggested that school counselors would best be served through supervision by counseling professionals (Miller & Dollarhide, 2006). Gysbers and Henderson (2006) specifically suggested that “Supervisors certified as school counselors should perform clinical supervision if it is to be effective” (p. 287). Furthermore, Lambie and Williamson (2004) highlighted additional consequences that may result if non-counseling staff represent the only supervisory opportunities for school counselors.

Most principals do not have counseling backgrounds and have received little training in counselor education and supervision. As a result, principals frequently attempt to provide counselor supervision using existing models of teacher supervision. This . . . results in counselors not receiving much substantive feedback about their clinical skills. (p. 130)

It therefore seems that the most appropriate people to provide such clinical supervision are those with strong counseling professional identities and clinical skills.

Building School Counselor Self-Efficacy Through Clinical Supervision

Advocate for counseling supervisors at the administrative level. Depending on district personnel, advocating for clinical supervision might begin with the Director of School Counseling Services, if one exists. Unfortunately, this may not even be an option, as current school district trends and finances have either led to the hiring of non-counseling supervisors in this role or the elimination of this position altogether. The position of Director of School Counseling Services might not have been seen as vital to the district’s goals in recent years. However, the development of a strong comprehensive school counseling program begins with committed, motivated, and persistent counselors who are confident in their abilities to perform their multiple functions. Building self-efficacy in counseling personnel might begin with something as simple as the hiring of a counseling supervisor at the administrative level. The results of this study indicate a
relationship between the training background of the individual providing supervision and the self-efficacy of the supervisee. It is crucial that stakeholders see the impact of counseling supervisors on the districts’ counseling staff and through them, on the students they serve.

**Engage local counselor education programs.** Counselor education faculty and students may be in a prime position to help advocate for the clinical supervision needs of practicing school counselors by connecting with area school districts in a number of ways (Blackman, Hayes, Reeves, & Paisley, 2002). Districts often have mandated trainings that involve the social, emotional, and physical safety of children and adolescents in the schools. For counselor educators, offering to provide these workshops and consult with district administrators, teachers, and counselors may be an important step in advocating for practicing school counselors’ professional development needs. In connection with these partnerships, and as a potentially mutually beneficial endeavor, counselor education programs may consider also offering individual supervision training and/or supervision groups to area professionals. Not only can this support the clinical development of practicing school counselors, but it may also help to promote the programs and services of university counseling programs and their students in the surrounding communities.

While individual supervision sessions may be ideal in a lot of ways, this may be both financially and time prohibitive on both ends. Offering supervision groups may allow for greater outreach to school districts and more program marketability for universities as well as more school counselor connections and richer supervisee discussions for practitioners. For universities, opportunities to promote advanced certificate programs, doctoral programs, and even joint partnership undergraduate programs may be highlighted throughout the process. Likewise, this setting may also afford doctoral students or advanced certificate students an opportunity to participate in a supervised internship experience in supervision. This has the potential to promote greater supervision efficacy for current students and stronger partnerships between universities and school districts.

**Seek out peer supervision.** Peer supervision is a viable and perhaps more cost-effective means for providing clinical supervision to new professionals (Crutchfield & Borders, 1997). Very little empirical data exists on the impact of peer supervision on school counselor self-efficacy. However, Benshoff and Paisley (1996) proposed a Structured Peer Consultation (SPC) Model for school counselors which “could be initiated by a state school counselor association, an individual school system, or even by two or more counselors working together independently” (p. 317). The researchers found qualitative evidence for the effectiveness of the SPC Model in providing performance feedback and support; two important factors in counselor self-efficacy.

Crutchfield and Borders (1997) examined the impact of peer supervision, including the SPC Model, on school counselors. The researchers found evidence that peer supervision could produce positive gains in job satisfaction, effectiveness, and self-efficacy if given over time. Although peer supervision produced no significant changes in these outcomes over the short period of the study (2.5 months), the intervention produced small gains in all three outcomes. More research is needed to substantiate the impact of peer supervision on school counselors. However, given the importance of peer support (Sutton & Fall, 1995) and performance feedback (Daniels & Larson, 2001) to self-
efficacy building, a peer supervision model such as the SPC is a viable alternative in the absence of a counseling supervisor.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study yielded important information on the differences between counseling and non-counseling supervisors and their impact on school counselors’ feelings of self-efficacy. More data on the impact of supervisors’ training background on school counseling outcomes may have implications for the need to promote future educational leadership and school counseling training partnerships. Future research should incorporate data directly from school counseling supervisors, as it is often difficult to accurately assess supervisors’ behavior from supervisees’ reports. Qualitative interviews may be added to provide additional insight into the perspectives of non-counseling supervisors and their experiences supervising personnel from various professional backgrounds. Furthermore, future inquiry into the outcomes of administrative versus clinical supervision could clarify the idea that clinical supervision contributes to counselor self-efficacy more than administrative supervision.

**Conclusion**

Gysbers and Henderson (2006) asserted that “Professional supervision is the most effective means of assisting another’s growth and development” (p. 286). Providing school counselors with appropriate clinical supervision from a counseling supervisor can be an effective way to increase self-efficacy, provided that the supervisor is supportive, knowledgeable, and well-trained as a counselor. This article outlined the results of a study that examined the impact of non-counseling supervisors on school counselor self-efficacy and provided strategies to help supervisors and counselor educators advocate for the clinical supervision needed to promote more confident practice, greater performance outcomes, and higher career satisfaction for practicing school counselors.

**References**


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