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Developing School Counselor Advocacy Competencies Within a Leadership Role in Education Reform

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In this article we present results from a pilot research study of school counseling students playing a leadership role in school reform. This is followed by a discussion of how knowledge and skills used by counseling students in our study relate to school counselor advocacy competencies (Trusty & Brown, 2005).

Although advocacy has been a common theme in counseling throughout its history, there has been a renewal of this concept in the school counseling literature (Baker & Gerler, 2004). This new focus on school counselor advocacy reflects the current transforming school counseling initiative (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2004) and the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) National Model (ASCA, 2003). However, neither ASCA nor the literature has articulated the knowledge and skills school counselors need to be effective advocates in today's schools. By delineating a specific set of competencies for school counselors' role in advocacy, Trusty and Brown (2005) have provided guidelines for research, training, and practice of 21st century school counselor advocates. Trusty and Brown's school counselor advocacy competencies are organized into three categories: disposition, knowledge, and skills. Briefly, *disposition* refers to those personal qualities that school counselors must have in order to gain the knowledge and skills needed to become effective advocates. For example, school counselors with an advocacy disposition are autonomous in their thinking and behavior; altruistic, with student well-being their major concern; and willing to take risks to help students meet their needs (Trusty & Brown, 2005, p. 260). *Advocates* need to have knowledge of resources, parameters of practice, dispute resolution mechanisms, advocacy models, and systems change. *Skill areas* include communications, collaborations, problem assessment, problem solving, organizational, and self-care (Trusty & Brown, 2005, p. 261).

Our pilot study depicts what some of these competencies look like when school counselors

advocate for the academic success of every student within the context of school reform. First, however, we present the theoretical foundation of our research.

Theoretical Foundation of the Research

The Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) is one means to get a handle on the teachers'/staffs' communications about school innovation/reform through the "concept of concern" (Hall, George, & Rutherford, 1979). According to this model (van den berg, Slegers, Geijsel, & Vandenberghe, 2000), three types of concerns, which can emerge within the implementation of education reform initiatives, stand out: self-concerns, task concerns, and impact concerns. Initially, individuals tend to reflect on exactly what the reform initiative means for them. This type of concern is referred to as self-concern. As self-concern decreases, people begin to consider what the initiative entails for the daily operation of a task. This form of concern is called task concern. When teachers are more focused on their students and colleagues than themselves or the task, this is called impact concern. Impact concerns occur when teachers who understand the impact of a program, along with their colleagues, institute a reform initiative and become ready to actually implement the reform task. The specific focus of our study has been on school counselors playing a collaborative leadership role in identifying and communicating teacher/staff concerns about their role in the school reform initiative referred to as advisories.

Advisories consist of a small group of students (12 to 15) assigned to a staff member of the school who regularly meets with his or her group for a designated period of time. The purpose of the advisories varies and can include group guidance lessons, exploring career options, developing an individual education plan, learning conflict resolution skills, and participating in a community and/or school governance (Sinner, 2004). The school district under study, an urban center in the northeast region of the United States with

predominately African American and Hispanic students from lower socioeconomic-level families, has implemented advisories in all three comprehensive high schools. Our pilot study was conducted in one of these urban high schools.

In the next sections of this article, we present a rationale for why it is important for school counselors to play a leadership role in helping teachers/staff members increase their capacities to implement advisories. This is followed by a description of the intervention (utilizing school counselors in a collaborative leadership role), and then the identification of specific advocacy competencies articulated by Trusty and Brown (2005) that are used in counselors' leadership role in advisories.

Rationale for School Counselor Leadership Role in Advisories

Advisories have been found to be a successful way to improve student academic achievement (Hess, 2003). Advisories can improve student achievement through the delivery of guidance lessons that address student academic, career, and social developmental needs (ASCA, 2003). Research has shown guidance program participation to be related to positive student outcomes such as higher grades, more positive relationships with teachers, and specific postsecondary school career plans (Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2003). However, many schools that have adopted advisories are not seeing positive student outcomes due to low teacher buy-in for teacher/staff implementation and lack of teacher willingness to conduct guidance lessons (Hess, 2003). This means that large amounts of human and fiscal resources for education innovation are not being optimally utilized.

Description of a Pilot Study of School Counselors Playing a Leadership Role in Advisories

In a pilot study investigating the feasibility of school counselors' role in increasing teachers'/staffs' capacities to implement advisories, we paired master's level school counseling students with teachers in charge of advisories. The graduate students collected data on the School Counseling Program Evaluation Scale (SCoPES; Whiston, 2002) instrument, and designed guidance lessons based on students' needs. Simultaneously, the Stages of Concerns (SOC) questionnaire (Hall, George, & Rutherford, 1979) was administered to teachers to identify teacher concerns about their role in advisories. Results from the SOC were shared with teachers and the principal who used it to make changes in operational procedures in

advisories as well as staff development to address teachers' concerns (Hall, George, & Rutherford, 1979). After only 1 year of the intervention, it was found that those teachers who had been paired with a student (for 6 weeks) and received the SOC sharing and subsequent activities to address concerns (for 1 school year) had statistically significantly fewer self-concerns than those who were not similarly paired or received the intervention for addressing teachers' advisory concerns. While lower self-concerns do not automatically lead to greater task and impact concerns, these findings are in the right (theoretical) direction. Therefore, we are encouraged that school counseling students collaborating with teachers as in our pilot study would help more teachers implement their advisory role, thus extending the benefits to greater number of students.

Given the short time period of only 6 weeks, we did not collect posttest SCoPES' data from the high school students who participated in the advisories guidance lessons. In the future, however, we plan to collect pretest and posttest data using the SCoPES so that we can determine whether advisory guidance lessons over an extended period of time will affect students' academic, career, and personal/social developmental competencies. Posttest content and process data were collected, and examples of students' comments are as follows:

- *Students' favorite part of advisory guidance lessons*
"Getting to know other people."—ninth grader
"Drawing what I like 'cause it helped me draw a future."—ninth grader
- *Students' general comments about advisory guidance lessons*
"It was the best time in the class."—ninth grader
"Thank you for being here."—ninth grader

Additionally we collected posttest data from teachers to find out their views of the graduate students serving in the role as just mentioned.

- *Comments about the experience from teachers who collaborated with graduate school counseling students*
".....occupied every minute of their time and every student participated, even more so than when I taught lessons alone."
"good connections with students, kept their attentions, not a moment wasted."
"I have used some of the lessons the students (school counseling graduate students)

developed and I plan to use others next year.”

- *Comments from teachers in general about the schools’ school counselors collaborating in advisories as the graduate students’ did*
“It would be very useful because the guidance counselors have much more expertise in the field.”
“Would be useful to have their assistance, but the counselors won’t like it.”
“Guidance counselors could help oversee the vehicle of advisory.”

We are encouraged by the teachers’ and students’ comments indicating satisfaction with graduate students participating in advisories in a collaborative and leadership role. Additionally, we are optimistic about our continued research in this area, especially because teachers’ comments support our future research plans to include the actual schools’ school counselors in the collaborative leadership role in advisories. In the next section, we discuss how the leadership collaborative role in our study demonstrated advocacy competencies articulated in the Trusty and Brown model (2005).

Specific Advocacy Competencies

Our focus here is on advocacy knowledge and skills (Trusty & Brown, 2005). Specific knowledge areas discussed are resources and system change (Trusty & Brown, 2005, pp. 260–261). Specific skill areas are collaboration and problem assessment.

Knowledge Areas

Resource knowledge pertained to human and material regarding guidance lessons in our research. Many teachers rejected their guidance role due to their concerns that they did not have the knowledge and skills to conduct guidance lessons. School counselors are trained to develop and implement guidance lessons; therefore, they have access to resources to implement this role. In the case of our pilot study, these resources included written material on how to develop and implement guidance lessons. Also, students accessed their own knowledge and skills regarding guidance lessons; thus students themselves were resources. The principal was used as a resource when graduate students helped facilitate the identifying and addressing of teachers’ concerns about their advisory roles. The principal provided access to the monetary resources needed to implement specific staff development to address teachers’ concerns about their advisory roles.

Systems change knowledge in our research centered on the concept of teacher concerns as

conceptualized in the CBAM model (Hall, George, & Rutherford, 1979; van den berg et al., 2000). Students understood that by helping teachers and the principal identify and address teachers’ concerns about their role in advisories, the chance that greater numbers of teachers in the school would implement guidance lessons during advisories increased, thus more students in the school would gain benefits of participating in a school counseling program activity. *School change* here refers to the graduate students getting personnel within the whole school to change how they interacted with one another to gain desired student outcomes. Specifically, teachers and the principal worked together and formed consensus for staff development about the school reform initiative advisories.

Skill Areas

Collaboration skills were basic in graduate students’ work with teachers and the principal. Students had to go into a situation wherein most teachers were not feeling positive about their roles in advisories. Students had to work hard to establish a trusting working/collaborative relationship with teachers and the principal, and convince them that they would benefit by collaborating with the students.

Problem-assessment skills were demonstrated when students administered the Stages of Concerns questionnaire to teachers to find out their concerns about implementing advisories. The problem assessed was what could be done to get more teachers to actually implement their role in advisories. This led to their collaboration with teachers and the principal for addressing teachers’ advisory concerns. Additionally, by assessing students’ academic, career, and personal/social developmental needs using the SCoPES, graduate students demonstrated problem-assessment skills.

Implications and Conclusion

This work provides counselor educators with access to research and training for school counselor advocacy. In those settings where counselor educators have partnerships or are trying to find a partnership focus with local school districts, this research provides one. For a more detailed account of how to develop a school-university partnership for this line of research, the reader is referred to Colbert and Bouknight (2005). Moreover, this focus allows counselor educators to include their graduate students in the research/partnership, which gives them a field setting to apply advocacy knowledge and skills learned in the classroom. Lastly, practicing school counselors in schools where counselor educators and graduate students collaborate with teachers and principals have

access to developing these advocacy knowledge and skills.

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