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Self-Monitoring as a Counseling Technique and an Accountability Strategy

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Abstract

Self-monitoring was studied as an individual and small group counseling technique and a source of accountability data. Five school counselors/interns engaged in self-monitoring with 22 clients. It was perceived as a successful counseling technique 82% of the time. The findings indicated that self-monitoring was enhanced by counselor competence, client buy-in, and counselor and client motivation to persevere. Data were produced that demonstrated whether students' goals were being met and provided accountability evidence for local stakeholders.

Keywords: self-monitoring, accountability, evaluation

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2012), “Now more than ever, school counselors are expected to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs in measureable terms” (p. 99). This ASCA position on accountability emphasizes the importance of being able to monitor student achievement, continually evaluate school counseling programs, demonstrate the impact on students, and have a positive impact on stakeholders.

Considerable emphasis recently has been placed on the importance of evidence-based accountability in the professional school counseling literature. Accordingly, school

counselors are challenged to: (a) be more certain about whether they are making a difference with students (Cobia & Henderson, 2007), (b) recognize accountability as an ethical imperative (Dimmett, 2009), and (c) understand that school counseling may be at risk because of the lack of systematic evidence that supports the effectiveness of school counseling programs (Whiston, 2007). Correspondingly, the advantages of successfully providing stakeholders with meaningful accountability evidence include: (a) a pathway to being viewed as leaders among the schools' stakeholders (Stone & Dahir, 2007), (b) a vehicle for believing their evaluation efforts are useful and beneficial (Astramovich, Coker, & Hoskins, 2005), and (c) opportunities to intentionally select activities based on evaluation data and witness programmatic impacts on student improvement (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006).

Although the calls for evaluation and accountability in the professional literature often come from professional leaders and counselor educators, in reality, it is the school counselor practitioners who bear the brunt of conducting the evaluations and providing accountability data for their stakeholders. In addition, the professional school counselor's role consists of several functions that do not necessarily lend themselves to similar data collection and reporting processes such as those classroom teachers have (e.g., classroom guidance presentations, individual and small group counseling, consultation, and assessment). For example, while classroom teachers are usually evaluated via scores from achievement tests, school counselors engage in a variety of functions that each demand different evaluation strategies. The goals of classroom guidance and individual counseling interventions are proactive and responsive respectively. Consequently, the goals differ, as do the evaluation assessment strategies.

Several evaluation strategies have been presented historically for school counselors to consider when engaging in evaluation and accountability functions, and they have been addressed recently in the ASCA National Model (2012). Data gathering ideas therein for individual counselors include acquisition of outcome data. Outcome data can take many forms, each of which is designed to provide evidence of the effects of the school counselors' interventions and interactions. An example would be to have participants in a classroom guidance intervention unit complete a survey at the beginning and at the end of the program in order to acquire evidence about the effects of the intervention. Outcome data has been touted at the most important form of accountability data (ASCA, 2012; Johnson & Johnson, 2003).

Perhaps the most important and most difficult form of outcome data to collect and report is that which occurs in confidential settings behind the closed doors of individual and small group counseling sessions. Individual and small group counseling are important responsive services involving meaningful interactions between school counselors and student clients (ASCA, 2012). Considerable time is devoted to developing and refining individual counseling skills in counselor education training programs (i.e., theories courses, techniques enhancing pre-practicums, and field-based practicums and internships). Yet, little seems to be known to important stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, and students about what goes on behind the closed doors beyond which school counselors are engaged in these important responsive services.

The goals for the present study were to present a framework for evaluating individual and small group counseling sessions that provided accountability data for stakeholders and also present findings from an evaluation of the framework. The

framework was designed to address the following challenges associated with attempting to evaluate individual and small group counseling sessions: (a) objectives and content of the sessions vary across student clients, (b) intervention strategies vary across cases and counselors, (c) the length and number of counseling sessions varies, (d) identification of outcome variables to assess is challenging, and (e) determination of a useful data collection system is daunting.

The principles upon which the present framework is founded are as follows: (a) there is a common system for collecting evaluation data across individual and small group counseling sessions, (b) all school counselors can use the same system, and (c) data from the system can be converted to evidence to be shared with stakeholders while also maintaining confidentiality. The components of the evaluation framework are: (a) helping student clients set measurable goals, (b) using simple methods to measure goal attainment, (c) helping and encouraging student clients to engage in self-monitoring of the goal attainment process, and (d) learning to record self-monitoring data graphically.

Self-monitoring was presented to the school counselor interns in the training program where the present investigation originated because it had potential for being useful both as a counseling technique and an evaluation/accountability strategy for individual and small group counseling interventions. The self-monitoring process helps counselors to work cooperatively with student clients to identify goals and means of evaluating progress toward those goals while also offering a method for recording progress toward goal achievement over the duration of the counseling relationship. Consequently, self-monitoring serves as both a component of the counseling intervention process and a method for collecting evaluation data that have potential for achieving accountability goals.

Self-monitoring is a cognitive-behavioral counseling strategy in which clients keep records of their progress toward achieving treatment goals over the duration of the counseling intervention process, including when not engaged in counseling sessions (Cormier, Nurius, & Osborn, 2013). Counselors work cooperatively with clients to identify goal-based behaviors or attitudes that can be monitored over time to provide evidence of progress toward achieving the goals. For example, a school counselor helped a middle school student determine that he wanted to be more successful academically and have more confidence in himself as a student. They decided that a specific behavior to monitor was increasing the amount of time devoted to homework daily, and how confident he felt as a student was an attitude they decided to monitor. The homework data were collected graphically with days of the week on the horizontal axis and minutes or hours of the day on the vertical axis. The confidence-as-a-student data were collected daily on a 10-point scale with zero being the lowest and 10 being the highest possible ratings. The data collection process can be therapeutic because clients tend to be more motivated to achieve their goals, can see evidence of their progress and are actively engaged in their treatments because of the monitoring activities. The self-monitoring data also provide counselors with information about the effectiveness of their intervention efforts.

The study reported herein was focused on two important components of the framework. That is, the primary research questions were as follows:

1. Can school counseling trainees successfully help student clients set measurable goals?
2. Can the trainees employ the self-monitoring component of the framework in a manner that leads to their clients making progress toward achieving their behavioral or attitudinal goals?

Method

Evaluation Team and Research Design

The study team consisted of three faculty members and five student interns. One faculty member trained and supervised the students. The five interns used self-monitoring as a counseling strategy and provided the data for the study. The remaining two faculty members conducted the investigation of the data produced by the interns. They were adjunct faculty members who were not acquainted with the interns. The university institutional review board approved the study.

The interns responded to guided-reflections presented to them as they implemented the self-monitoring strategy with their student clients in an effort to understand the usefulness of self-monitoring process. They were aware of the goals of the study and motivated to make the self-monitoring process work. Therefore, pre-determined categories of data were collected from all interns in the study (Miles & Huberman, 1984). An in-depth case study approach was used to explore the experiences of a group of school counselor interns who were all at similar places in their development as clinicians and were responding to the same questions. According to Wilkinson and McNeil (1996), case studies with multiple participants must explore the same questions.

Participants

The context for the study was a CACREP-accredited counselor education program at a Southeastern Research I land-grant university. The interns were enrolled in the 600-hour internship during the final 15-week semester of the training program. The sample consisted of five women (4 White, 1 Asian American). The average age was 26 and the standard deviation 2.24. Because of the qualitative component of the study, each of the participants is described briefly below.

Amanda. A 25-year-old White woman, Amanda was employed as a probationary school counselor in an elementary school located in a semi-rural community on the edge of a growing suburban population during her internship.

Angie. A 23-year-old Asian American woman, Angie was an intern in a large suburban magnet high school.

Kate. A 26-year-old White woman, Kate was an intern in a large urban high school.

Sarah D. A 29-year-old White woman, Sarah D. was employed as a probationary school counselor in a large suburban high school.

Sarah I. A 27-year-old White woman, Sarah I. was an intern at an urban middle school.

Training of the Interns

Prior to the study, while enrolled in the primary investigator's introduction to school counseling course during their first semester in a 2-year training program, the interns were introduced to self-monitoring as a responsive counseling technique and an evaluation/accountability strategy and to the method for recording and analyzing the self-monitoring data. When enrolled in their internships during the last semester of the 2-year program, the self-monitoring and data recording information was reviewed at the beginning of the semester after they had agreed to participate. The principal investigator was the co-university supervisor of their internships. The investigator provided the updated training and related discussion at the beginning of the data collection process and provided consultation and supervision throughout the semester. Instructional time at the beginning of the study was devoted to dealing with questions about the process, attitudes about the self-monitoring strategy, and readiness to begin using the targeted techniques at their school sites. To a large extent, the interns engaged in the self-monitoring process independent of each other and of the principal investigator while out in the field at their respective school sites.

Procedure

Data collection. The study began in early January of the participants' final semester in the training program and ended in early May. The interns documented their guided reflections once per month over the duration of the 4-month semester. To further explore their experiences, the interns also responded to three additional open-ended guided reflections and the accountability question at a later date after the conclusion of the internship semester.

Given the goals of the study and defined domain of the self-monitoring activities, the two research team members conducting this analysis determined that there were specific areas of information for the participants to address. Miles and Huberman (1984) indicated that this is a normal part of qualitative research when the investigator believes in the conceptual importance of the variable and when the analysis occurs in the context of a multiple-case study that requires comparability of formatting and measurement. Guided reflections were designed to allow the interns to fully explore the topic and ensure that the desired areas were addressed. The interns were instructed to respond reflectively to open-ended questions provided by the investigators as they implemented the self-monitoring strategy with their student clients in an effort to understand the self-monitoring process. The following instructions and questions were used to generate ongoing reflections: "Describe your thoughts about implementing the intervention. How ready did you feel? How comfortable? Describe how you felt the intervention went. What worked? What could have been improved? Describe what you feel you have learned as you implemented the self-monitoring intervention (about yourself, your comfort, your skills, etc.)." Upon completion of the internship semester, the participants reflected on the following questions: "Describe what you feel like you have learned about program evaluation during your internship. Describe the role that self-monitoring has played in understanding any growth you've felt as a professional during your internship. Describe your readiness to take on the responsibilities of being accountable as a professional counselor after completing your degree." Each of the participants was also asked to respond to the following inquiry after the study was completed: "What are your

comments about whether or not the self-monitoring indicated something of value happening for each of your clients? Did the data indicate improvement from beginning to the end of the intervention process?”

Data analysis. The qualitative data analysis process involved ordering, structuring, and coding the data. The raw data from the interns’ guided reflections were organized into matrices consisting of the five interns on the vertical axis and the three observations across the horizontal axis. The conceptually clustered meta-matrix allowed each of the two investigators to review the data from several perspectives (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The frequency with which a category or theme was present in the data and the uniqueness of the themes or categories suggested important qualities of the data. The categories clustered around each question prompt for the participant’s guided reflections. Each question became a heading for each column of the matrix and individual responses to each category were displayed in rows under each column. With data organized in this manner, participant-specific themes could be explored by reviewing data along the horizontal axis, and broader themes could be reviewed along the vertical axis.

The two investigators used the same procedure to increase the dependability and credibility of the process and to allow for the possibility of greater understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness was established through the collaboration of the investigators when reviewing the themes they had previously established independently in order to achieve consensus and derive common themes from the data.

Results

Two primary thematic categories emerged from the qualitative data analysis. One category was the participants’ experiences associated with implementing the self-monitoring process, and the second was their observations and recommendations about the self-monitoring intervention idea.

Experiences Associated With Implementing the Self-Monitoring Process

Four of the five interns expressed initial anxiety and insecurity over using the self-monitoring process at the beginning or goal-setting phases of the counseling interventions. Amanda stated:

This intervention process made me a little uncomfortable because it was harder to establish goals and figure out where to begin working with the student. As sessions progressed. . . . [I] felt more comfortable and ready to assist this student.

These interns also expressed concerns initially about how well prepared they were to implement the self-monitoring strategy and also felt responsible for the success of the intervention. They seemed to link their performances with client outcomes and wondered how directive they needed to be about the self-monitoring process with their student clients. Angie commented: “I am not very comfortable implementing this intervention. I feel like I am the one now responsible for checking to see that the student has done his work.”

Over the duration of the semester, all the interns reported experiencing more comfort and increased awareness that a balance of counselor/client responsibility was

needed for the process to work. An increased understanding of the self-monitoring process tempered the initial concern with concrete details and the accompanying anxieties. Sarah I. commented on the initial importance of “perseverance” and the later sense of “feeling comfortable.”

The interns’ responses were consistent with the literature on developmental supervision of counselors-in-training. These models posit that supervisees move from higher anxiety and concrete thinking to being less anxious and demonstrating increased insightfulness and higher levels of conceptual and cognitive skills (Stoltenberg, 1981).

Observations and Recommendations

Five themes emerged within the observations and recommendations category. They are presented below.

The importance of the counselor/client relationship. The stronger the counselor/client relationship was perceived to be, the more comfort interns felt when implementing the self-monitoring strategy. Amanda shared that “as we continue to work together the student seems to become more open, which allows the interventions to become more successful.” According to Kate, “the students that I have a good relationship with seemed more willing to do it since they know me and trust me more.”

The importance of student client “buy-in.” Student clients who viewed the self-monitoring idea positively were more likely to be comfortable with their counselors and collaborate in the process. Conversely, lower levels of acceptance by student clients led to higher levels of frustration for both counselors and clients. Kate stated: “I am having trouble on how to sell this to the students and make them believe I can help them. I don’t want to nag them about completing it.” Sarah D. reflected, “I have also learned the importance of student buy-in. The student did not fully buy into the self-monitoring process which hindered the success of the intervention.”

Logistics. This theme represented the challenges associated with introducing the self-monitoring process to student clients and determining the best forum for implementation (e.g., individual or group counseling). Angie opined, “I am hopeful this experience will be more positive because I feel like I explained the importance of self-monitoring in a better way and also this time it is a one on one assignment versus a small group.” Kate was implementing the self-monitoring process in a small group setting and observed, “It also probably would have been helpful to check with my students individually rather than just in a group setting.”

Self-monitoring not equally useful for all student clients. The interns found that the self-monitoring process may work better for some students than others. For example, Kate reported:

The self-monitoring intervention was not successful with this student. I think this is not something that works well with students that are disorganized and already have trouble completing assignments. . . . I need to try to find clients that are more willing to make a change in their behavior.

Kate also commented on apparent sex differences in her sample:

The girls in my group bought into it more. The boys seemed to think it was dumb. I think I was a little nervous asking the students to try this and I need to be more confident in the way I present them with this idea.

Amanda highlighted the importance of student motivation: “I believe the student was one of the main reasons that this intervention worked. The student is mature enough to think from different perspectives of the situation.”

The importance of preparedness/readiness. Angie concluded: “I think the biggest thing I took away from the intervention was to be more prepared. Often times when I think something is easy to put into action, I overestimate the ease it requires and don’t take adequate time to prepare and be familiar with what I am supposed to do. In other words, I’ll wing it. Winging it did not make me feel very competent, and I left feeling incompetent. Lesson learned.”

Post Hoc Accountability Follow-Up Data

The five interns reported evidence that 82% ($N = 18/22$) of the students across the five schools recorded self-monitoring data that indicated progress toward achieving the goals that had been set in the counseling sessions. There were 238 individual and group counseling sessions in all. In some instances, the degree of success was considered minimal. Comments from the participants indicated that students who were motivated and received support from teachers and parents were more likely to be successful using the self-monitoring strategy.

Discussion

The findings indicated that novice school counselors and counselors-in-training may learn how to conduct a self-monitoring intervention strategy with elementary, middle, and high school student clients when engaged in multiple individual and small group counseling sessions. Although they experienced anxiety and confusion when getting started, a sense of enhanced professional competence was detected over the duration of the study. The interns were also able to analyze the experience to the extent of being able to identify several ideas that would inform them how to improve their counseling services while also generating accountability information that could be shared with stakeholders and serve as a foundation for their evidence-based practice (see ASCA, 2012). In spite of the challenges associated with being novice counselors attempting to employ a new intervention strategy with academically at risk student clients, the self-monitoring data provided evidence that the interns achieved some modicum of success in 82% of the cases.

The findings suggest that the interns perceived themselves as having made a difference with some of their student clients (see Cobia & Henderson, 2007). Some attempts to evaluate their interventions and generate useful findings were often successful (see Astramovich et al., 2005). Consequently, they were able to document the worth of their interventions and witness an impact on the development of their student clients (see Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006). Although the findings were encouraging, there were also challenges that recollected the reasons why school counselors historically reacted negatively to evaluation and accountability in the past (see Gysbers, 2004; Myrick, 2003).

The interns demonstrated that the self-monitoring technique is useful by producing data that had potential to be of interest to the stakeholders in a local setting. Evaluating the counseling process met the need for data that identify potentially helpful

interventions for student clients in local settings. The data generated information about whether student goals were being met, offered information for considering programmatic improvements related to individual and small group counseling interventions, and provided accountability information to share with stakeholders. The local accountability information provided data that can also serve as evidence upon which the local counselors can base their future practices (see Whiston, 2007). Scholars have promoted implementing the same intervention in a variety of ways over a number of times, evaluating the interventions, using the data to improve programs and inform stakeholders, and translating the findings into evidence-based practice (Brown & Trusty, 2005; Costin, 2007; Erford & Wallace, 2009).

Turning to the needs of student clients and the goals of the ASCA Student Standards within the National Model (ASCA, 2012), the findings highlighted the usefulness of focusing on the academic development in conjunction with personal/social development of students via individual and small group counseling interventions. Indeed, responsive services focusing on individual and small group counseling appear to be viable avenues for achieving these goals. Yet, interventions such as the self-monitoring strategy investigated in the present study are challenging, time-consuming, and not always successful. However, without systematic techniques such as self-monitoring, individual and small group counseling strategies may be very challenging to implement successfully.

Limitations

The interns were working in field settings and were relatively inexperienced practitioners and researchers. Consequently, they admittedly struggled to understand and implement the self-monitoring interventions, especially at the beginning of the semester. They were also inexperienced in the process of collecting self-monitoring data.

There seem to be challenges that will have to be addressed wherever the self-monitoring strategy is employed. Unless counseling practitioners know what they are doing, believe it will work, and are prepared to stay the course beyond the first few counseling sessions, the chances of success are severely limited. Concerns about motivation, support, and willingness to stay the course apply to student clients as well. These students are at times at risk academically, personally, and socially and may lack the very qualities that are needed to make the self-monitoring process successful. Successful implementation of the self-monitoring strategy appears to require sophisticated preparation accompanied by careful planning that includes preparation of student clients for the self-monitoring process and acquisition of support from significant parties such as parents, guardians, and teachers.

Recommendations for Practice

Counselor educators are encouraged to consider self-monitoring as a technique to be taught to entry-level students for the dual purposes described above. The process of introducing the foundational information during the introduction to school counseling course provided an opportunity to create a knowledge base and influence attitudes positively. Although a practice assignment was not presented in the introductory course in the training described above, it now seems to be a good idea to have the school counseling students practice the process via simulations during the introductory course.

Repeating the training component at the beginning of the internship and supporting the interns via weekly supervision was helpful and is recommended in the future. Having interns use self-monitoring as a counseling technique when appropriate, help their student clients produce the graphic outcome data, and compile portfolios for accountability purposes as described above would provide interns with an opportunity to engage in the entire proposed training module prior to graduation.

Recommendations for Further Research

Our recommendations for future investigations are for counseling practitioners and for counselor educators. School counselors are encouraged to consider evaluating the effects of the self-monitoring components. Components of interest would include: (a) building trust in the counselor/client relationship, (b) introducing self-monitoring to clients, (c) obtaining client buy-in regarding self-monitoring, (d) and conducting self-monitoring techniques in individual and small group counseling during role played and live recorded supervised counseling sessions. The youngest student client in the present study was 9 years old. There may be an age level when self-monitoring is not viable. Elementary school counselors who are interested in the potential of self-monitoring are encouraged to consider adaptations that address the developmental levels of their students (e.g., teachers or parents observing and recording). Related research thrusts may focus on learning how much local accountability evidence can be generated from collecting evaluation data and how efficacious the data are as evidence upon which counselors can base their local practices.

Counselor educators are encouraged to help their students learn how to successfully engage in the investigations suggested above. What questions will drive these investigations, and how will the data be collected and analyzed? In addition, counselor educators are encouraged to find additional ways to evaluate training modules proposed above if they decide to use them. For example, how useful are the recommendations for including a simulation component in the introductory course and a portfolio assignment in the internship?

Summary

Self-monitoring was introduced and assessed as both a counseling technique and an accountability strategy in the present report. The findings indicated that self-monitoring can be useful for both purposes. Given the interest in finding useful counseling techniques and strategies for acquiring accountability data and accumulating useful evidence-based practice information, self-monitoring appears to be a technique worthy of further interest for counseling practitioners and counselor educators.

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