

## Article 93

### **Preparing School Counselor Trainees to Work With Students With Exceptionalities**

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#### **Abstract**

Professional school counselors play an important role in the education of all students. As a result, school counselor trainees need to be properly prepared to work with students with exceptionalities. This paper reviews laws impacting students with exceptionalities, discusses various roles of school counselors in the education of students with exceptionalities, and focuses on several educational strategies utilized by one professor in order to better prepare school counselor trainees for working with students with special needs. Examples of in-class activities, assignments, and field experiences are provided to help counseling faculty members improve the preparation of the school counselor trainee when working with students with exceptionalities.

*Keywords:* students with special needs, school counselor trainee

The role and function of the professional school counselor is to meet the needs of all students, including students with disabilities. The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA; 2013) position on students with disabilities states that the school counselor will "advocate for students with special needs, encourage family involvement in their child's education and collaborate with other educational professionals to promote academic achievement, social/emotional wellness and college/career readiness for all" (para. 6). Further, the 2016 Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs Standards (CACREP; 2015) also stress the need for school counselors to consult with families, school personnel, and community agencies (Standard 5.G.) to meet the needs of all students. This charge put forth by ASCA and CACREP is

also important for school counselor trainees as they transition into the role of the professional school counselor.

Milsom (2002) indicated that college preparation programs for counselor educators vary considerably in the number of required courses and activities specifically concentrating on students with exceptionalities. As a result, a greater focus on training is needed, including helping counselor trainees acquire information about students with disabilities and providing them with practical experiences to help trainees feel more comfortable working with students with exceptionalities.

Before the mid-1970s, there were a limited number of resources for K–12 students with disabilities. Many states did not require public schools to serve students with disabilities if the school systems felt the students would not benefit from education (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). However, legislation introduced in the 1970s changed how many students with disabilities were educated, and counseling services were addressed in the legislation.

## **Laws Impacting Students With Exceptionalities**

### **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act**

When preparing school counselor trainees to work with students with exceptionalities, it is important that they understand laws impacting students with exceptionalities and their roles in working with the students as outlined by those laws. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a “federal law designed to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities in programs and activities that receive Federal financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education” (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2015, para. 3). Through Section 504, students with disabilities often receive a plan of accommodations to help them experience academic success in the general education classroom. According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (1991), to meet the requirements of Section 504, students with disabilities must be offered equal opportunity as their non-disabled peers to participate in counseling services. Furthermore, school counselors are sometimes asked to serve as a team member when 504 accommodation plans are developed for students (Shaw & Madaus, 2008).

### **Individuals With Disabilities Education Act**

While the passing of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973 helped protect students with disabilities from discrimination, even more protection was offered through the passage of PL 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, in 1975, and counseling services were also addressed in this law. The purpose of the law was to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free, appropriate public education in the form of special education and related services and have an Individualized Education Program, commonly referred to as an IEP (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975). Since the law was first established, it has been reauthorized five times and is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The last reauthorization in 2004 changed or clarified several definitions and topics in IDEA, including, but not limited to, highly qualified teachers, early intervention services, and discipline procedures for students with disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children, n.d.).

However, one of the most significant changes listed in the reauthorization deals with the identification of students with learning disabilities. In lieu of using the more traditional discrepancy model that requires a severe discrepancy between a student's intellectual ability and his or her achievement level, states may choose to implement a process that determines whether or not students respond to scientific, research-based interventions when determining if a student has a learning disability (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2006). This process is often called Response to Intervention (RtI).

Counseling services are directly addressed in IDEA. Section 300.34 lists counseling as a possible related service and defines counseling services as follows: "services provided by qualified social workers, psychologists, guidance counselors, or other qualified personnel" (U. S. Department of Education, 2004, Section c.2.). As a result, counseling services can be listed on a student's IEP if they are needed to help the student benefit from special education services.

### **Role of School Counselor and Students With Exceptionalities**

The professional school counselor often is responsible for or is a team member that is part of the IEP meeting, as well as the Section 504 Plan. The IEP is based on the student's current level of academic achievement and functioning, with a focus on establishing measurable goals and services/accommodations for the student in order to meet his or her learning needs. The IEP team consists of the parent/guardian, regular education teacher, special education teacher, representative from a local agency, school psychologist or other professional to evaluate results if needed, related services personnel (including the school counselor) when appropriate, and the student (if appropriate).

The Section 504 Plan is designed to set forth accommodations and services that are needed by the student, which includes developing a plan that meets the students unmet needs in the least restrictive fashion. The 504 team is often comprised of a core group that includes the parents, referring teacher(s), administration, school counselor, school psychologist, and special education teacher (Shaw & Madaus, 2008).

The school counselor can and should play an important role in each of these meetings as an advocate and liaison for the student, parents, and families (ASCA, 2013). One direct way the school counselor can help is to provide support to the other team members in the understanding of the student's personal traits, social behaviors, and academic needs (Milsom, Goodnough, & Akos, 2007), as well as providing individual counseling for the student as needed (Badittoi & Brott, 2011). In addition, the school counselor serves a central role in "consulting and collaborating with staff and families to understand the special needs of a student and understanding the adaptations and modifications needed to assist the student" (ASCA, 2013, para. 4). This role as a consultant is important to the overall role and function of the school counselor to support the needs of all students in the school, especially those with special needs. The school counselor needs to work together with students, parents, other educational staff, and community agencies to help develop goals and implement the IEP and Section 504 Plans (Quigney & Studer, 2016).

## **Preparing School Counselor Trainees Through Coursework**

School counselors can enhance the education of students with disabilities in many ways. In order to better prepare school counselor trainees to work with students with exceptionalities, the following activities were developed or revised by a professor based on trainee feedback from course evaluations. These sample course activities/assignments noted below are part of a graduate-level course that introduces school counselor trainees to working with students with exceptionalities.

### **Class Discussions and Activities**

Interactive class discussions and activities help school counselor trainees become familiar with each of the laws impacting students with disabilities, as well as the laws' impacts on school counselors and their fellow educators, noted by Wood-Dunn and Baker (2002) as an effective strategy for increasing school counselors' confidence levels in supporting students with disabilities. Intense discussion and comparison of laws impacting students with exceptionalities help the trainee to advocate and address barriers within the school that hinder access and equity (CACREP, 2015, Standard 2.F.1e.), as well as to think about the transition process for students with special needs. This progression is an important process for the school counselor to help prepare the students with exceptionalities for these new life challenges (Connor, 2012; Milsom & Hartley, 2005).

Through interactive classroom discussions, trainees also learn about each disability category under IDEA and general instructional strategies for working with students with various disabilities. The trainees practice differentiated teaching strategies while in class since, as noted by Ryan, Kaffenberger, and Carroll (2011), school counselors may have an opportunity to work with students with exceptionalities in an instructional setting through the implementation of RtI. Additionally, activities such as role playing IEP meetings and other parent conferences provide the school counselor trainees the opportunity to practice responsibilities they may hold when becoming a school counselor.

### **Field Experiences**

Field experiences are one of the most valuable tools for helping the school counselor trainee learn about the role and function of the professional school counselor, especially in working with students with special needs. In order to better prepare trainees in working with students with exceptionalities, trainees in the course complete a minimum of 15 hours of field experiences as part of a graduate level course that introduces them to special education. The field experiences require trainees to:

- interview a self-contained special education teacher and observe his or her classroom,
- interview a resource or inclusion teacher and observe in his or her classroom,
- interview a job coach or transition specialist,
- interview a current school counselor about working with students with disabilities, and
- volunteer at locations that serve students with disabilities, such as the Special Olympics, or businesses that employ adults with disabilities.

After completing each of these events, trainees write reflections about their experiences and relate them to topics discussed during the course and in their textbooks. These various field experiences help the school counselor trainee better understand the role of the school counselor as a leader, advocate, and systemic change agent in the schools (CACREP, 2015, Standard 2.F.). In addition, trainees become more familiar with students with exceptionalities, learn about the role of the school counselor in special education from individuals already working in the field, observe examples of theory put into practice, and develop an understanding of their potential role in the IEP process.

### **Resource Notebook**

School counselor trainees also complete a resource notebook that helps them learn about school and community resources that can be used once employed in the K–12 setting. The information gathered by the trainee will help them to learn to assist K–12 students with exceptionalities, to serve as advocates for the students, and to assist their parents and families.

Section 1 of the resource notebook contains a minimum of four evidence- and/or research-based counseling strategies for working with students identified as having each of the following exceptionalities: learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and autism spectrum disorders. Additionally, the students will research counseling strategies for attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); gifted and talented students, including those who are considered twice-exceptional; and English language learners. The notebook allows the students to research best practices for working with students with exceptionalities, and it also helps them identify strategies to help eliminate barriers (CACREP, 2015) for students with special needs.

Section 2 of the resource notebook requires students to find at least 10 local and state agencies, journal articles, books, and Web sites that may be helpful for parents of students with exceptionalities, including those who are English language learners. This assignment helps the school counselor trainees become familiar with resources available to the parents and families of students with exceptionalities in order to be knowledgeable and helpful if parents ask for suggestions. This component of the notebook is important because school counselors may be asked to provide parents with information regarding community programming and services that may be available for the student (Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012), as well as to provide consultation to help families successfully collaborate with the educational system (Wood-Dunn & Baker, 2002; see sample outline in Appendix A and rubric in Appendix B).

### **Action Plan**

In order to put their collaborative and communicative skills into practice, school counselor trainees complete an action plan with other trainees in the teacher education and educational leadership programs in an introductory graduate level course for students with special needs. Trainees from all three disciplines work together on a fictional case study to complete an action plan to help this student by utilizing research-based strategies and information from their resource notebooks completed earlier in the semester. The action plan assignment also helps school counselor trainees become familiar with transition planning for students with disabilities, as they will be an important part of the IEP and Section 504 teams in their schools. A collaborative role with school faculty and

staff is critical in order to insure the best possible outcomes for students with disabilities (Milsom, 2006). Further, Myers (2005) reported that school counselors indicated that working with other staff and faculty members to achieve certain goals helped them gain new strategies for working with students and also made it possible to better serve the personal and social needs of students with disabilities.

This assignment helps trainees foster collaboration and teamwork in the schools and understand their role in student support and school leadership teams (see sample case study assignment in Appendix C).

### **Conclusion**

School counselors play an important role in the IEP and Section 504 Plan meetings to advocate, support, and help meet the needs of all students with special needs. The school counselor also needs to consult and collaborate with family members (ASCA, 2013) and serve as a liaison to ensure that developmentally appropriate goals and objectives are established for the student (Quigney & Studer, 2016).

The incorporation of these interactive activities will help better prepare the school counselor trainee for what he or she will experience in the internship and full-time school counseling role. Field experiences help the trainee gain practical experience beyond what is learned in the classroom or read in a textbook. Real-life interactions help better prepare the trainee for future clinical experiences. In addition, the resource notebook assignment significantly benefits the trainee as a resource that can be used once out in the field to help the school counselor have a ready-made list of information that can be used to contact community members and to provide parents and students with additional information and support (Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012). Lastly, the action plan helps challenge trainees to think about the actual procedure used to help a student with special needs and encourages them to collaborate with other important school stakeholders, including teachers and building administrators. This collaborative role is critical to meeting the needs of students with exceptionalities (Milsom, 2006). Each of these activities helps build a foundation for the school counselor trainee in working with students with special needs and establishes and supports the valuable role that the professional school counselor fulfills with this population.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Resource Notebook**

Students will create a resource notebook to utilize during their internships and careers. Students in the Counselor Education program should complete the assignment listed below.

#### Assignment

##### Section 1

- Section 1 of the resource notebook should contain at least four evidence- and/or research-based counseling techniques for working with each of the following special populations:
  1. Students with learning disabilities and/or ADHD
  2. Students with emotional disturbance and/or behavioral difficulties
  3. Students with autism spectrum disorders
  4. Students who are considered gifted and talented and/or twice-exceptional
  5. Students who are English language learners
- At least three sources should be used for Section 1 of the notebook.
- References should be cited utilizing APA guidelines.

##### Section 2

- Section 2 of the notebook should contain 10 each of the following resources for parents/families of students with disabilities, including some resources for families that are culturally and linguistically diverse:
  1. Local resources
  2. State resources
  3. Web resources
  4. Books and/or journal articles
    - A brief description of each resource must be included.
    - Proper contact information for local and state agencies must be included.
    - Books and journal articles should be cited properly, utilizing APA format.

##### Tips

- Please consider utilizing the suggested format listed below.
- Several agencies offer services in Spanish or other languages. Since part of the resource notebook requirement is to include some agencies for parents of students from diverse cultures, including English language learners, if an agency offers services in various languages, you can indicate in a manner similar to the following: “Services Also Offered in Spanish.”
- Remember to use the resource notebook rubric to see how your notebook will be graded.
- You may personalize your notebook by adding clipart, dividers, etc., if you so choose.

Suggested Format

**Resource Notebook**

**Section 1**

<b>Special Population</b>	<b>Evidence-/Research-Based Counseling Technique</b>	<b>Source</b>

**Section 2**

<b>Local Agency</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Source</b>

**Appendix B**

Resource Notebook Rubric for Counselor Education Students

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

	<b>Level 1 (1 point)</b>	<b>Level 2 (2.5 points)</b>	<b>Level 3 (5 Points)</b>	<b>Score</b>
<b>Number of Strategies</b>	The notebook contains less than 3 counseling strategies each for each of the following: 1. LD/ADHD 2. ED/BD 3. Autism 4. Gifted-Talented/Twice Exceptional 5. English Language Learners	The notebook contains at least 3 counseling strategies each for each of the following: 1. LD/ADHD 2. ED/BD 3. Autism 4. Gifted-Talented/Twice Exceptional 5. English Language Learners	The notebook contains at least 4 counseling strategies each for each of the following: 1. LD/ADHD 2. ED/BD 3. Autism 4. Gifted-Talented/Twice Exceptional 5. English Language Learners	____/5
<b>Content of Strategies</b>	Less than 75% of counseling strategies are specific and easy to understand and provide specific examples.	At least 75% of counseling strategies are specific and easy to understand and provide specific examples.	All counseling strategies are specific and easy to understand and provide specific examples.	____/5
<b>Evidence-/Research-Based Sources</b>	Fewer than 75% of the strategies are evidence-and/or research- based.	At least 75 % of the strategies are evidence-and/or research-based.	All strategies are evidence-and/or research-based.	____/5
<b>Family Resources</b>	Fewer than 7 parent/family resources are listed for each of the following: 1. local resources 2. state resources 3. Web resources 4. books or journal articles	At least 7 parent/family resources are listed for each of the following: 1. local resources 2. state resources 3. Web resources 4. books or journal articles	At least 10 parent/family resources are listed for each of the following: 1. local resources 2. state resources 3. Web resources 4. books or journal articles	____/5
<b>Notebook Organization</b>	Notebook is not logically organized, is difficult to follow, and/or contains numerous grammatical and/or mechanical errors.	Notebook is logically organized and easy to follow but contains up to 12 grammatical and/or mechanical errors.	Notebook is logically organized, easy to follow, and free of grammatical/mechanical errors.	____/5
<b>References</b>	At least one reference is cited in the strategies section. APA format is attempted when citing references for strategies and when citing books and journals; however, there are several errors in the formatting.	At least two references are cited in the strategies section. APA format is clearly attempted, with only minor errors, when citing references for strategies and when citing books and journals.	At least three references are cited in the strategies section of the notebook. References for strategies and books and/or journals are cited in correct APA format.	____/5

Total Points: \_\_\_\_/30

## **Appendix C**

### **Action Plan**

James is a ninth grader who is considered twice-exceptional. He has always loved math but has been identified as having a learning disability in the area of reading. In elementary school, he was in a separate classroom for language arts and social studies. While in middle school, he attended general education English and social studies courses but received extra help in a resource room for students with learning disabilities. James made the varsity football team this year and is worried that attending a resource class will affect his popularity with other football players. As a result, he is asking to be removed from special education. He and his parents have requested a meeting to consider this option. In the meantime, he has asked permission to arrive late to the resource room so his buddies will not see him entering the classroom. Unfortunately, he is struggling in his history course and appears to need extra assistance. James' parents have expressed an interest in inclusion classes where co-teaching takes place; however, co-teaching is not currently being practiced at your school.

In your action plan, please address the following questions:

1. As a twice-exceptional student, what are five characteristics that James may demonstrate?
2. As a history teacher, provide four examples of strategies that you would utilize when teaching a specific lesson.
3. As James' counselor, what is one way you would raise his confidence levels in history? What is one way you would help him deal with anxiety regarding his friends knowing he receives special education services?
4. As the school psychologist assigned to James' school, do you feel that it would be appropriate for James to arrive late to his resource room? Please explain. If you feel that it is appropriate, what is one idea you have to help his teacher implement this in a way that is fair to both James and his classmates? If you do not feel that it is appropriate, what is an alternative strategy that you feel may benefit James?
5. As an administrator in a school where inclusion and co-teaching are not currently implemented, what are two specific steps you would take to implement co-teaching in your school?
6. Explain two age-appropriate ways you would introduce careers related to history to James and his classmates.