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The Role of the Professional School Counselor in Reducing Teacher Anxiety

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Rose F. Kennedy once said, "neither comprehension nor learning can take place in an atmosphere of anxiety," (n.d.). Although anxiety can empower an individual to perform intensely, this increase in performance may come at the cost of others. Since the legislative passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, an increasing number of teachers face challenges on a daily basis to meet NCLB guidelines, as well as state and local regulations (Simpson, LaCava, & Garner, 2004). Some of these requirements include: (a) teaching regulated benchmarks (Albrecht & Joles, 2003), (b) maintaining accountability for each student in their classroom (Bowen & Rude, 2006), and (c) meeting the academic and social needs of a diverse population of students (Neill, 2006). As such, teachers have experienced a shift in roles, responsibilities, and identities during the past two decades.

Changes in roles and expectations within the United States' education system have resulted in teacher burnout and high teacher turnover rates (Darling-Hammond, 2003). For example, Marvel, Lyter, Peltola, Strizek, and Morton (2007) indicated that 3.2 million teachers were employed in U.S. public schools during the 2004-2005 school year. Of those teachers, 8% of them left their schools, 15% of those under the age of 30 moved to a different school, and 9% left the teaching profession all together. The authors also indicated 55% of those teachers who left the profession felt that they had more control over their work environment in their non-teaching positions as well as a more manageable workload. Thus, teachers are leaving the profession at an increasing and unprecedented rate (Ingersoll, 2001).

More recently, the Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE, 2005) stressed that approximately $2.2 billion are spent per year replacing teacher positions. AEE further

indicated that about 65% of teachers who leave the profession do so due to the lack of planning time, 60% due to heavy workload, 53% due to problematic student behaviors, and 52% due to a lack of influence over school policies. Thus, attrition of teaching professionals does, in fact, hold fiscal implications, in addition to the repercussions on the student population.

It is becoming increasingly evident that there exists a problem with attrition of teachers (Boone & Boone, 2009). However, it should be noted that facing challenges is not a new concept to the teaching profession. For instance, teachers have long dealt with discipline problems (Pass, 2007), violence (Johnson, 2009), excessive paperwork (Boone & Boone, 2009), lack of administrative support (Otto & Arnold, 2005), and autonomous changes in curricula (Santoli, Sachs, & Romey, 2008). Though literature supports that teacher experiences with the aforementioned stressors influences a teacher's decision to leave the profession, increasing demands by NCLB significantly contribute to teacher attrition.

Prior to NCLB, various studies identified the following common themes as sources of stress for teachers: lack of student motivation, enforcing discipline, time management, workload demands, poor working conditions, and the ambiguity of the teaching profession (Benmansour, 1998; Pithers & Soden, 1998; Travers & Cooper, 1996). In 2001, NCLB made federal funding for education contingent upon students' performance on academic performance on academic tests. Although the original intent of NCLB was to make positive improvements in schools by making teachers accountable for student learning, Dollarhide and Lemberger (2006) suggested that an overwhelming amount of controversy regarding NCLB currently exists in educational literature. With regards to teacher attrition rates pre and post NCLB, Darling-Hammond (1998) found that teacher attrition was about 30%; however, in 2005, Allen (2005) reported that within the first 5 years of being hired, 50% of those teachers left their initial teaching assignment. Thus, schools are now losing about the same number of hired teachers every year partially due to the demands placed on teachers by NCLB (Botwinik, 2007).

Another challenge for teachers falls within the category of overall job satisfaction. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) noted teachers' complaints of stress and anxiety typically stemmed from impairment in teacher-parent relationships, conflict with other teachers, and school reform policies. Emotional responses, such as anxiety, have also been noted from teachers who work with specific student populations (e.g., students with Limited English Proficiency [Karathanos, 2010] and students who qualify for exceptional education services [Everhart, 2009]). Other outstanding sources of teacher anxiety originate from the collaboration with other educators who possess varied views on education, non-classroom duties (e.g., cafeteria, bus, etc.), and parents who make continued demands for teachers to meet the needs of their children (Iosif & Elisavet, 2010). Therefore, it appears that teachers encounter a variety of sources (e.g., educational legislation, school reform policies, teacher-parent relationships, conflict with other teachers, etc.) that may result in increased anxiety. Unfortunately, many teachers may be ill-equipped to handle such stressors for more than 5 years (Allen, 2005), much less for an entire career.

In spite of the literature and research that documents the debilitating role that anxiety plays in the lives of teachers, it seems that the culture of the teaching profession leaves the individual teacher with little to no support (Chang, 2009). Furthermore, Fullan

(2001) indicated that ongoing feelings of isolation lead teachers to reluctantly struggle, privately, with their anxieties. As such, it seems that teachers may lack direct access to resources that could help them lead an emotionally, physically, and spiritually well life.

Prilleltensky, Dokecki, Frieden, and Wang (2007) defined *wellness* as a positive state of being, which is brought about by satisfying one's personal, relational, and collective needs. From the above discussion, it may be plausible to argue that the amount of stress and anxiety that teachers experience on a day-to-day basis could significantly impact their well-being. Despite the common occurrence of teacher anxiety and burnout, teacher preparation programs are not required to emphasize teacher wellness. For instance, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), a major accrediting body for teacher preparation programs, does not require their accredited programs to train their students (i.e., future teachers) to cope with these real, day-to-day stressors. Furthermore, Lauzon (2003) indicated that the professional and personal wellness of the teacher receives little, if any, attention within social science research. As such, it is possible that teachers may have little to no exposure to wellness and wellness strategies.

Unlike NCATE, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009), an accrediting body for counseling programs, indicated that students who graduate from counseling training programs should be able to demonstrate an understanding of wellness programs (CACREP, 2009, School Counseling, C1). Furthermore, CACREP specifically dictates that professional school counselors (PSCs) should have the ability to present program to teachers. Thus, the purpose of this article is to highlight how PSCs could implement their formative wellness training into their schools in order to decrease teacher anxiety and promote teacher wellness. Specifically, the authors will (a) describe holistic wellness, (b) highlight the benefits of holistic wellness for the teaching profession, and (c) provide suggestions of how PSCs could assist teachers in becoming holistically well.

Wellness and Disposition

National Institutes of Health (2007) defines anxiety as feelings of apprehension or fear. These feelings may be accompanied by such physical indicators as muscle tension, rapid breathing, irritability, irregular heartbeat, and difficulty concentrating. The aforementioned symptoms are similar to those described by American Psychiatric Association (APA; 2001) for Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). Further symptoms concerning GAD, per the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., text rev; APA, 2000), include excessive anxiety (occurring for less than 6 months), difficulty controlling worried feelings, restlessness, fatigue, and, sleep disturbances. Although the authors are not implying that teachers who experience anxiety should acquire a diagnosis of GAD, it is important to note that the abovementioned symptoms could result due to an over-demanding work environment (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). In terms of the teaching profession, teachers encounter a plethora of challenges (e.g., educational legislation, school reform policies, teacher-parent relationships, conflict with other teachers, etc.) that could potentially induce symptoms of anxiety. Nonetheless, administrators and parents still expect teachers to maintain well-balanced dispositions.

Maintaining a well-balanced disposition could be a source of anxiety in itself. For example, Maslach and Jackson (1981) defined burnout as an increased feeling of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, which becomes apparent at the endpoint of continuous, unsuccessful coping. As such, the contention can be made that if teachers encounter multiple sources of anxiety and are unable to effectively cope with their anxious feelings, then that state can potentially result in teacher burnout (Anderson, Levinson, Barker, & Kiewra, 1999). Additionally, teachers' performance and consequent job satisfaction may be linked to their levels of anxiety and potential for burnout. Due to the formative training in wellness and wellness models that PSCs receive (Pedrotti, Edwards, & Lopez, 2008), the authors contend that PSCs could positively impact the disposition of overstressed and burnt-out teachers. The next section will highlight the potential benefit of holistic wellness for the teaching profession.

Wellness for the Professional Teacher

Teacher shortages have been a plague on the educational system in the United States for many years. Teachers have the responsibility of not only meeting student needs to ensure quality teaching, but they also have the added responsibility of being accountable for meeting benchmarks that are established at the administrative level, the district level, the state level, and the national level. Minding these issues and maintaining life satisfaction can prove to be a difficult balancing act; thus, many teachers may succumb to unhealthy living filled with stress and anxiety.

Myers, Sweeney, and Witmer (2000) indicated that the concept of wellness has recently emerged as an alternative to traditional treatment for mental and physical disorders. Wellness, in its truest essence, is a holistic concept (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). In other words, the concept of wellness should not only include physical well-being, but holistic health should include self-direction, work and leisure, friendship, and love (Myers et al., 2000). Shillingford, Ngazimbi, and Patel (in preparation) conducted a qualitative study that sought to capture the key factors that contributed to teacher anxiety and burnout. In their study, the authors identified three themes that resulted in teacher anxiety and burnout: (a) initial journey and motivation to be a teacher; (b) the realities of being a teacher; and (c) accountability in relationships in and outside the school. Thus, teachers experienced anxiety and burnout in the very areas that could contribute to well-being, given the opportunity to learn about holistic wellness.

Lauzon (2003) conducted a mixed-methods study which was explored (a) how teachers defined wellness and (b) how teachers planned for their professional and personal well-being. Overall the study found six distinct themes as it pertained to defining wellness: holistic, finding balance, sense of self, self-responsibility, job satisfaction, and connection/support. Among the findings of the quantitative portion of the study, Lauzon suggested that teachers were desirous of self-care and wellness education, as this was something that lacked from their formal training. Therefore, it does seem that teachers could profit from trained professionals to teach them various strategies of holistic wellness. The following section will discuss how the formal training of PSCs could be utilized to enhance the overall holistic wellness of the teachers in their schools.

Role of the Professional School Counselor in Teacher Wellness

Standard C.2.g. of the 2005 American Counseling Association (ACA) *Code of Ethics* dictates that "Counselors assist colleagues or supervisors in recognizing their own professional impairment and provide consultation and assistance when warranted with colleagues or supervisors showing signs of impairment and intervene as appropriate to prevent imminent harm to clients," (pp. 9-10). As such, it is incumbent that PSCs provide services to those teachers who are being affected by high levels of stress and anxiety. In addition to maintaining a comprehensive understanding of wellness, CACREP dictates that PSCs should possess the knowledge, understanding, skills, and ability to consult and collaborate with teachers (CACREP, 2009, School Counseling, M.4., N.3., and O.4.). Moreover, PSCs should possess the training to effectively plan and present programs for use with teachers at their school (CACREP, 2009, School Counseling, P. 2.). Given the current condition of the teaching profession, PSCs play a pivotal role as system change agents. Thus, PSCs who understand the plight of teacher anxiety could better understand their role as effective change agents in the school system.

Although ACA and CACREP emphasize the ethical responsibility of PSCs to address wellness with teachers, these guidelines do not ensure the incorporation of such services within the school system. In fact, the national model set forth by the American School Counselor Association (2008) does not address the role of PSCs in teacher wellness. Additionally, a thorough literature search yielded no articles that spoke to this particular topic. From a systemic perspective, it is the authors' contention that focusing attention on this matter not only promotes the role of PSCs in the school system, but ultimately teacher wellness will affect student outcomes.

Potential Impact of Professional School Counselors on the Teaching Profession

PSCs could, in fact, have a positive impact on teachers who experience feelings of anxiety by working with them on the psychological aspects of accountability and relationships. Previous literature indicates that a strong sense of accountability impacts the degree of job satisfaction that teachers experience (Lauzon, 2003). Accountability can be related to issues concerning the role of a teacher within school and outside of school. It could be presumed that teachers who perceive their responsibilities as being obtainable or manageable would enjoy their roles as teachers more compared to teachers who perceive that their responsibilities are unattainable. Therefore, the perception of accountability plays a significant factor in one's feelings concerning his or her role as a teacher.

Since the amount of accountability required by teachers from administrators, parents, and students seems to increase their levels of anxiety, PSCs could potentially bolster healthier working environments for teachers. Several researchers have made strategic recommendations for combating anxiety through wellness practices (Lawson, 2007; Roach & Young, 2007). Although much of their work focused on using these strategies within the counseling profession, it is our assertion that these strategies may also be advantageous to those in a similar helping profession – teaching. For instance, Roach and Young (2007) suggested that creating successful balance between work and leisure may decrease the likelihood of professional burnout for counselors. Similarly,

Yager and Tovar-Blank's (2007) wellness model for counselor education teaches future counselors the strategies that establish, maintain, and enhance personal wellness. As such, PSCs may adapt these practices by encouraging teachers to become aware of the benefits of self-care and self-growth.

PSCs can also play a pivotal role in supporting teachers by duplicating wellness strategies that have been found to be beneficial among counselors. PSCs can encourage a systemic wellness approach that can fit into the teachers' daily routine by empowering them in recognizing their intrinsic strengths to overcome work-induced anxiety (Hartwig, Green, & McQuiston, 2008). Lawson (2007) also commented that increased awareness of potential work stressors may lead to increased awareness to seek out needed support. This wellness directive certainly supports Yager and Tovar-Blank's (2007) suggestion to encourage pursuing of personal counseling. Therefore, PSCs can assist teachers in reducing anxiety by helping them become aware of stressors caused by anxiety and the subsequent benefits to seeking professional support.

PSCs may also support teachers with wellness practices that would advance more positive relationships within the school by encouraging novice teachers to build strong mentoring relationships with colleagues who are dedicated to the profession. For instance, Wester, Trepal, and Myers (2009) explored the wellness of novice counselor educators and work-related stressors. They found that counselor educators reported a decreased sense of stressors when these individuals were able to connect with supportive colleagues. Thus, the contention can be made that PSCs can encourage teachers to seek out individuals within their districts, higher education communities, and among their peers, who could advance wellness practices through positive mentoring.

In conjunction with formative training that counselors receive, Yager and Tovar-Blank (2007) discussed the concept of *modeling wellness*. Here, PSCs model wellness for their struggling colleagues; that is, they model wellness "directly with their own behavior" (p. 145). Thus, modeling may entail demonstrating how one might react at moments when they begin to feel anxious or overwhelmed (e.g. using relaxation techniques). *Communicating that perfection is not the goal of wellness* is yet another practice that Yager and Tovar-Blank recommended. Indeed, PSCs, through their modeling, can educate teachers that wellness is a continuous process and not an outcome. Therefore, wellness and self-care should constantly be adjusted and readjusted to maintain much needed personal, social, physical, spiritual, and professional balance. Lastly, PSCs can *encourage personal counseling as an option for support*. Yager and Tovar-Blank indicated that personal counseling may provide the support needed for enhancing wellness practices as a lifestyle change and not a temporary means to combat professional stressors. Thus, PSCs are in an ideal position to promote wellness among teacher colleagues by promoting an atmosphere of wellness in the school community through modeling, intrinsic empowerment, seeking personal counseling support as well as professional support, and most importantly, helping teachers identify their stressors and the need for proactive interventions.

Conclusion

Negative relationships may result in feelings of anxiety; conversely, Roach and Young (2007) highlighted the benefits of supportive relationships in decreasing potential

burnout and increasing satisfaction. In the teaching realm, relationships encompass professional associations and personal associations. PSCs could be of service to teachers by assisting them to develop strategies that will help them balance work and family expectations.

Myers, Mobley, and Booth (2003) found that counseling students showed greater holistic wellness than the general population. Furthermore, Roach and Young (2007) indicated that counseling students place a high importance on wellness due to the emphasis that counselor educators place on wellness throughout the counseling curricula. As such, it seems that the formative wellness-training that PSCs receive places them in an ideal position to infuse their training in their schools to decrease teacher anxiety and burnout.

The limited research on teacher wellness concludes that teachers who perceive the majority of their relationships to be satisfying reported greater all-around satisfaction and more definitive professional roles as teachers (Lauzon, 2003). As this article is a conceptual piece, future studies should research the effect of PSCs wellness-training on teacher anxiety and burnout. For instance, potential research could focus on the usefulness of wellness workshops on the promotion of holistic wellness strategies among teachers. Myers and colleagues (2000) indicated that interventions such as wellness workshops facilitate positive growth and change for professionals. Thus, PSCs could promote teacher wellness by incorporating their wellness-training as part of a professional development session.

In summary, it is the assertion of the authors that PSCs can make a difference in the school community by helping teachers effectively combat stress and anxiety-provoking occurrences. Teacher anxiety seems to be a significant issue in the United States, which is having a severe impact on the nation's children. As such, PSCs can have favorable impact on this situation by increasing awareness and helping teachers to view their professional and personal relationships in a healthy and positive manner. According to American best-selling author, Greg Anderson (n.d), "Let us be about setting high standards for life, love, creativity, and wisdom. If our expectations in these areas are low, we are not likely to experience wellness. Setting high standards make every day and every decade worth looking forward to." Indeed, setting high standards of holistic wellness may well contribute to an increase in teacher job satisfaction, decrease in teacher attrition, and advancement in more positive educational outcomes.

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