

ABSTRACT

WINDLE, MICHELLE HURT. Counseling Matters: A Multi-Case Study of High School Counselors and Their Perceptions of Their Role in the School Community. (Under the direction of Dr. Paul Bitting).

There is limited qualitative research that addresses issues high school counselors have in common, their job expectations, and how those factors contribute to their professional self-efficacy. This multi-case study of six practicing high school counselors in the state of North Carolina makes a contribution to existing literature by providing an increased understanding of high school counselors' real and perceived roles within the high school community. It enhances the existing knowledge of some of the common goals and frustrations high school counselors share, while looking at their job expectations and how those expectations are similar and different from the reality of their jobs. Finally, it explores high school counselors' lived professional experiences and examines the relationship between those experiences and counselors' professional self-efficacy, expressed in the counselors' own words. The results of this study demonstrate the need for further research and dialogue surrounding how counselors are used in schools, the factors that contribute to counselors' job satisfaction, and the alignment of existing school counseling programs with recognized professional school counseling standards.

Counseling Matters: A Multi-Case Study of High School Counselors and Their
Perceptions of Their Role in the School Community

by
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Dedication

This research is dedicated to my parents, Kenn and Germaine, who raised me to be the person I am today, and to my husband, Mike, who has been my inspiration and support and who has continued the love and encouragement my parents began.

Biography

As an elementary school student, I can remember crying if schools were closed because of the weather, or if, because I was sick with a cold or a fever, my mother would say I had to stay home. School was my favorite place to be. From kindergarten through high school, I loved my teachers, soaked up knowledge like a sponge, took books home every night, and tried to learn as much as I could.

Earning an undergraduate degree in special education, I became a teacher. From my first day in the classroom, I knew I would never work anywhere but in a school. After fifteen years as a classroom teacher, I yearned to learn more about my chosen field, and began to work on a Masters degree in special education. I took two and three classes at a time, and loved every minute, finishing in three years. After a time, I began to explore life outside the walls of my classroom. What did the big picture look like, I wondered. Told by many that I was well organized and had strong leadership skills, I decided to take classes in school administration. I fell in love with the inner workings of the institution I had loved since childhood, continued my classes, finished another Masters degree, and went to work as a school administrator.

Ten years later, my husband's job took us to North Carolina. Living among so many colleges and universities, it was the perfect time to pursue a doctorate. I was still working in a school, but by then I was a little older and decided to take just one class at a time. It was the right decision for me. I have enjoyed every moment of the journey that has culminated in

this research about high school counselors. I have worked with counselors for my entire career and see them as having the potential to have a powerful impact on students' lives. It is my hope that this research will provoke some thought among counselors and those who supervise them, so that their defined roles will allow them to spend more time with their students and serve to validate their work in the place we call school.

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Counseling Matters: A Multi-Case Study of High School Counselors and Their Perceptions of Their Role in the School Community

Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

In the United States of America, attending school is a significant part of almost every child's weekday routine. Numerous factors, both in and outside the school environment, continuously influence students' educational progress, their post-secondary choices, and their personal/social development. Some, such as the socioeconomic status of families, the tax base of communities, and observed religious beliefs and traditions, fall well outside the influence of public education. Between attending classes and participating in any number of after school and weekend extracurricular activities however, high school students spend from six to eight hours a day at school, and their lives cannot help but be shaped by the adults there with whom they regularly interact. The expectation for counselors, according to Schiffbauer (2000) is that they embody an atmosphere of help and responsiveness within the school community, and Webster (1989) defines the term counselor as "a person who counsels or advises." Counselors are, by definition, key to optimizing the educational experience for all students. They differ from teachers, administrators, office staff, and custodians because of the nature of their jobs and the flexibility of their schedules, and therefore are the adults at

school with whom students should have the most opportunity for individual, ongoing, and personalized interaction. The disconnect between the role high school counselors should play in their students' lives and that which research demonstrates they actually do is the foundation for this study of six high school counselors currently working in the state of North Carolina.

According to research conducted in North Carolina by the National Consortium for State Guidance Leadership, while 80% of a school counselor's time should be devoted to direct services to students (American School Counselor Association, 2005), and a student to counselor ratio of 250:1 is the ongoing standard recommended by the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) most recent position statement (ASCA, 2005), those figures do not reflect what is actually happening in many large North Carolina High Schools (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2000). The student load for a single counselor in a typical large high school in the state of North Carolina is far above that number, averaging from four to five hundred students (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2000). Additionally, public high school counselors serve students representative of a broad range of socioeconomic level, ethnicity, family structure, and intellectual potential, and the issues and needs they encounter in doing so are as diverse as the students themselves. The North Carolina research results (2000) also suggest that school counselors may not consistently spend their time in accordance with the suggested national standard and that they devote a significant amount of time to non-counseling activities that have, over

time, become part of their overall job descriptions (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2000).

Definitions

- High school counselor: A school counselor is an individual who has completed a unique and distinctive preparation, grounded in the behavioral sciences, with training in clinical skills adapted to the school setting. The school counselor assists in the growth and development of each individual and uses his or her highly specialized skills to protect the interests of the counselee within the structure of the school system (ASCA, 2003). A high school counselor works with students in grades nine through twelve. When the word *counselor* is used in this study standing alone, it will always refer to a high school counselor.
- Dean: The chair of the counseling department who coordinates the counseling program, assumes some administrative responsibilities within the department, and is the lead counselor.
- Comprehensive school counseling program: A comprehensive school counseling program focuses on what all students, from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade should know, understand, and be able to do in three domain areas: academic, career, and personal/social. The emphasis is on success for every student, not just those students who are motivated, supported, and ready to learn. The

comprehensive school counseling program helps all students achieve success in school and develop into contributing members of society (ASCA, 2003).

- Professional self-efficacy: Self-efficacy is the set of beliefs about one's own ability to successfully perform a given behavior. Professional self-efficacy narrows that set of beliefs to those behaviors and abilities associated with one's profession.
- School community: For the purposes of this study, the term "school community" is used to refer to the school setting as a community in and of itself, not the community at large where the school is located. Parents are included as members the school's internal public, as their primary activities within the school concern their children as students.

The Problem

The reality of their large student loads and ever-expanding job descriptions suggests that high school counselors may be over-burdened with non-counseling related duties and expected to serve far too many students. School counselors do not work in isolation; instead, they are professionals integral to every student's total educational program and experience. Educational reform, school safety, and accountability standards affect all of the programs in a public school, including counseling. Yesterday's counseling programs were defined by direct service to students and responding to crisis situations. Today, however, the trend is toward a comprehensive, competency-based program that is also accountable in terms of program implementation and student success (ASCA, 2005). I have witnessed counselors spending a significant amount of time during the school day on non-counseling activities

such as coordinating testing, covering classes, and conducting registrar activities. I see practices such as these as grossly unfair to students and a misuse of counselors' time and training. In and of themselves, my observations are far too narrow and subjective to be the basis of a strong and solid study. In response to the aforementioned accountability trends, however, I believe it is important to examine counselors in public high schools in terms of their perceptions of the various roles they play within the school community, their overall job satisfaction, and the changes that may become important as they strive to optimize their professional self-efficacy, their own accountability, and their students' success.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this multi-case study lies in its examination of the phenomenon of the impact of the increasing responsibilities high school counselors face on their overall job satisfaction and professional self-efficacy. This research provides a possible revelation for high school administrators concerning how the impact of their expectations of counselors may affect counselors in terms of their professional identity, job function, job satisfaction, and professional self-efficacy. The study makes a significant contribution to the bank of existing knowledge about high school counselors and may encourage high school administrators to more closely examine and seek to understand counselors' perceived roles within their schools.

The Research Questions

1. What are the common issues high school counselors perceive in terms of their roles within the school community?

2. Is high school counseling what they expected it would be and if not, how is it different?
3. Do the day to day job situations high school counselors encounter shape their professional self-efficacy?

Subjectivity Statement

While I have never been a high school counselor, and therefore cannot speak from that frame of reference directly, I have worked with numerous counselors in my thirty years as a high school educator. They have been my colleagues, my allies, my friends. I was a high school special education teacher for fifteen years and have spent the past fifteen as a high school administrator. During my tenure as an administrator, I have evaluated counselors' work and spent hours observing what they do. My daily activities as both a teacher and an administrator have often led me to the counselors' office to discuss a student, obtain family information I needed to sort through a problem, or to discuss a conflict between students or between a student and a teacher. I have served on a variety of student support committees and other school-based teams that included counselors. I have seen students and groups of students hovering around a counselor's doorway waiting to talk, as phones rang incessantly and counselors took one call after another. I have witnessed a counselor standing in the hallway serving an assigned lunch duty while a distraught parent waited in the office to talk with him about her child, who was failing all of his classes. Just how, I have often wondered, do they manage to get it all done? On the occasions when I, as a school administrator, had to add yet another task to a counselor's already overflowing plate, I found myself lamenting the

fact that counselors are not immune to the reality that public education's shrinking budget has public school employees taking on more than they can reasonably handle. Additionally, the national impetus to raise academic standards and student performance has touched virtually every school system nationwide, and I wondered whether standardized achievement test scores, a primary measure of school accountability across the nation, might improve if counselors had more time for direct intervention with poorly motivated and underachieving students. The escalation of school violence in recent years has left all educators nervous and wondering how such outbreaks might be prevented on their own campuses, and as I studied long term planning for initiatives that foster non-violent school communities, I pondered the practical expertise counselors might provide. My observations and experiences, however, are not enough. I believe the educational community needs to see a picture of counselors and their day to day lived realities, expressed in their own words.

Delimitations of the Study

Individual counselors in a limited number of high schools is admittedly a small sample from which to assume any sort of generalizations or attempt to develop definite conclusions. As generalizations and far-reaching conclusions are not the purpose of qualitative research, it is not my intention as the writer of this research to imply that the experiences recorded and the thoughts expressed by the study participants particular to this research are those of every counselor in every high school. Individual personalities, life experiences, and working conditions are all variables outside my control that influenced individual counselor responses. However, given that the sample reflected in this research

represents the experiences of a diverse group of counselors in terms of age, school demographics, ethnicity, approach to the job, and years in the profession, variables over which I exercised some control, common issues that transcend some of the differences emerged, and those issues became the focus of my conclusions and recommendations. An enhanced understanding of school counselors' experiences from similar contexts may also be gained from this study's findings.

Limitations of the Study

The most obvious limitation of this study is its population. My interest is in counselors at the high school level, as that is where my experience lies. For accessibility purposes, study participants were limited to one geographic area. The data collected were from counselors in Wake County in the state of North Carolina. Wake County is the largest school system in the state, surrounding the state capital, and counselors working there would not be likely to encounter the same issues as those in some of the smaller, sparsely-populated areas. Wake County is also experiencing rapid growth, doubling in student population since 1985, resulting in new staff in all areas, including counseling. In order to spend adequate interview and observation time with each counselor, and relying primarily on interviews, I was not able to use a large sample, and possibly missed multiple opportunities for good information from counselors I never met. The sample became one of purposeful selection to allow me to spend a sufficient amount of time with each participant and less time in transit from one location to the next. Purposefully selecting the counselors for the study, to make sure they were diverse in terms of variables such as age, gender, school demographics, years

of experience, and ethnicity presented a significant challenge, as did gaining their trust to ensure honest and candid responses in a relatively short period of time. Both were adequately accomplished for the purpose of this study through purposeful counselor selection and the time spent with each participant.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

According to the American School Counselor Association's most recently published position statement, professional school counselors are certified, licensed educators trained in school counseling and possessing unique qualifications and skills to address students' academic, personal/social, and career needs. They should serve a vital role in maximizing student achievement. Collaborating with the other stakeholders in the school, counselors should address the needs of all students through prevention and intervention strategies that are a part of a comprehensive school counseling program. Professional school counselors should support a safe learning environment and work to safeguard all students' human rights. They should promote opportunity and access to rigorous educational experiences for all students. To maximize counselor effectiveness, the American School Counselor Association recommends a counselor-to-student ratio of 1:250 (American School Counselor Association, 2005).

The statement also emphasizes that school counselors should provide services to students, parents, school staff, and the community in a number of areas. They should coordinate systemic activities designed to help students set personal goals and develop future plans. They should provide individual and group counseling directly to students, work with parents, consult with teachers, make referrals to community agencies, and foster confidential

relationships with students to help them resolve or cope with problems and developmental concerns (American School Counselor Association, 2005).

The ASCA further recommends that professional school counselors serve on advisory teams made up of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members, in order to use student data to study systemic change within the school system so that every student has the opportunity to benefit from attending school. They should help develop action plans for prevention and intervention services that define desired student competencies and results (American School Counselor Association, 2005).

Our nation's schools are facing increased challenges. Violence, drug abuse, eating disorders, school phobia, behavior problems, and suicide permeate the environment of twenty-first century high schools. There is a shortage of highly qualified school counselors prepared to deal with a range of students, from those who are gifted to those who are in pain (Schwab, 2001). Many new school counselors have found the realities associated with their positions disconcerting and disappointing (Good, 1992), and this may be due in part to their unrealistic expectations and poorly defined roles on the part of school administration. This research has the potential to provide useful information to high school administrators concerning appropriate job descriptions and realistic expectations for the counselors in their schools.

Direct Services to Students

Recent research conducted by the National Consortium for State Guidance Leadership (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2000) recommends that

counselors directly serve students 80 percent of the school day. These direct services, the researchers said, should be divided into three broad categories based on those defined by Gysbers and Henderson (2000): academic development, career exploration, and social/personal issues. When the results of an August, 2000, survey of how counselors in North Carolina spend their time were tabulated, however, fewer than half of the high school survey respondents actually reported spending the nationally recommended amount of time in those three identified areas (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2000). More than one third of the responding high school counselors indicated they spend between 10 and 40% of their time on test coordination, an activity that involves no direct student contact, and one that is typically assigned by an administrator. Twenty percent of high school counselors enter their student schedule changes into a computer themselves, and reported spending almost 30% of their time on that activity. Counselors also reported that they spend a significant amount of time on such assigned non-counseling activities as covering classes, registering incoming students, and assuming bus and lunch supervision. (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2000). The availability of counselors and their perceived effectiveness are also highly dependent on the counselor-student ratio and counseling facilities should be in an area that maximizes student access and counselor accessibility (Borders, 1992).

As evidenced by the aforementioned North Carolina survey's 57% return rate, counselors want their voices to be heard. As one respondent commented, "I am so glad that you are collecting this data. I think we have a problem with counselors not being able to do

the job we were supposed to be hired to do. So many children's individual needs are going unmet because school counselors are spending time in classrooms, in cumulative records, on testing, and at committee meetings, rather than focusing on the childrens' needs. I hope that you will use this data to remind school systems and school principals what the appropriate functions for school counselors are" (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2000, p. 16).

My study examines the current impact that increasing job responsibilities and large caseloads have on high school counselors' ability to meet the day to day needs of individual students, as reported by six practicing North Carolina counselors. It supports the NCDPI data collected in 2000, and demonstrates that counselors are still facing the same issues in 2009.

Other Duties as Assigned

As a group, counselors are perceived as flexible, friendly professionals, always willing to help no matter what the task (Madden, 2002). Often, however, this attitude results in "other duties as assigned" expanding to consume too much of a counselor's time and threatening to thwart the effectiveness of comprehensive school counseling programs. The Montgomery County Public School System (MCPS), a Maryland school district that borders Washington, D. C., chose to confront this issue through data collection and analysis. In Montgomery County, counselors have delivered services under a comprehensive school counseling program since 1985 (Madden, 2002). The four critical components: career, educational, personal, and social, as delineated by Gysbers and Henderson (2000) have been

established at the County level as the foundation for the MCPS counseling program. Despite the comprehensive program that forms the framework for MCPS counseling services, many counselors, particularly those at the secondary level, expressed concern that non-guidance tasks consumed their workday (Madden, 2002).

In an attempt to develop a realistic picture of program implementation and the impact of non-counseling responsibilities on counselors' daily work, the MCPS Guidance Department at the County level and the school district's Office of Shared Accountability conducted a time-on-task survey for counselors during the 2000-2001 school year. A questionnaire was generated and distributed to counselors that explored time spent on activities such as individual student planning and case management, the guidance curriculum, responsive counseling, school program support, testing, bus duty, lunch duty, master scheduling, balancing class size, and recruiting students to participate in community activities. Each counselor was asked to select one day in each of the four grading periods and to answer the survey questions as they related to that particular day. Preliminary data were obtained for the first two grading periods and analysis started, but the results had not yet been disaggregated by time of year, school level, position, school demographics, and number of years in the profession. Because the survey results were so preliminary, it was not possible to draw valid conclusions from them. Data from the first and second quarters of the year were yet to be thoroughly analyzed, and data from the third and fourth quarters were yet to be collected and studied.

When all of the data have been obtained, disaggregated, and analyzed, the district plans to use trends tied to time of year, school level, position, school demographics, and years of experience for program planning and staff development aimed at both counselors and administrators. Guidance administrators at the County level plan to study obstacles to effective program implementation revealed by survey results, including the identified non-guidance tasks. Using information obtained from year-end reports required of every counselor, appropriate next steps will be taken to ensure that a developmental comprehensive school counseling program is thoroughly and successfully implemented system-wide.

My study is related to the MCPS research, but while the MCPS research was conducted quantitatively, I studied some of the same issues from a qualitative perspective. My research explores how closely Wake County's counselors believe they are participating in a comprehensive counseling program, and the things that may keep their individual school programs from being all they can be.

Counselors and the Curriculum

The counseling program in a school, according to Gysbers and Henderson (2000) is at the same time an integral part of and an independent component of the total educational program. Although counseling has its own curriculum that is very different from the various academic curricula in a school, its underlying purpose is to facilitate the instructional process and students' academic success. In this sort of an integrative approach, counseling is infused into all areas of the traditional curriculum. For example, communication skills naturally fit into the language arts curriculum, problem solving into science and math, social skills into

social studies, and mental health concepts into health and science (Gysbers and Henderson, 2000).

One implication of this approach key to the research is that it supports the notion that counselors are school team members and all school staff are ideally participants in the counseling curriculum. Staff participation may be informal or structured, as in student advisory or crisis intervention initiatives, respectively. This integrative posture often manifests itself in teachers and other school staff perceiving themselves as part of a student support system and increasing their involvement with students in settings other than in the classroom or on the athletic field, thus assisting with duties that counselors may otherwise assume in isolation.

Measuring Excellence

Direct counseling interventions should promote students' personal and social growth and foster their academic and career development. Wiggins and Moody (1987) compared the activities of counselors in schools that were rated excellent, average, and below average by students. Counselors in the schools rated excellent reported that they provided substantially more direct service, such as individual and group counseling than counselors in the average and below average rated schools who said they spent considerably more time doing clerical tasks. Furthermore, students who believed counselor-student confidentiality was assured reported seeking help from their counselors on a regular basis and rated the counselors at their schools favorably. Those who indicated they believed their disclosures would not be kept confidential said they seldom visited their counselors and rated them as below average

(Wiggins and Moody, 1987). In a study by Miller (1988) counselors in elementary, middle, and high schools rated excellent by the United States Department of Education were surveyed regarding the most important aspects of their jobs. Counselors at all three levels said that counseling and consultation were the most important functions in the programs at their schools, indicating that counselors in high quality programs are likely to spend a significant percentage of their time in counseling and counseling related activities.

These studies, however, were conducted some twenty years ago. The more current data my study provides will supply important information for counselors and schools as they seek to determine whether or not similar conclusions might still be evident today.

Counselors and the Administration

The overall quality of a school's counseling program appears, to some extent, to be dependent upon the level of support from building and district level administrators. Historically, however, there has been some confusion among administrators concerning the role and function of school counselors (Gysbers and Henderson, 2000). Administrators are not always cognizant of the training school counselors receive and the specialized skills they acquire, and as a result, may assign them to such nonguidance activities as discipline and clerical tasks (Borders, 1992). Additionally, counselors often interact with other student services professionals concerning particular student needs. To enhance the goal of serving students, these relationships should be characterized by mutual respect, collaboration, and cooperation (Gysbers and Henderson, 2000).

A school counselor survey by the Indiana Task Force on Student Services (Reynolds, 1988) suggested that counselors may reinforce the idea that they are administrative agents by the way they spend their time. The study noted that even though counselors reported spending an average of 29% of their time providing direct services to students, the next two most time-intensive activities were administrative and clerical tasks at 19% each. These data may reinforce the view that administrative and clerical tasks have traditionally consumed a significant percentage of school counselors' time. Alternative strategies for completing these tasks are needed if counselors are to contribute their full professional potential to the school community.

In a discussion surrounding the role and training of high school counselors, Coy (1999), cautioned that most high school principals continue to believe that appropriate duties for school counselors include clerical tasks that do not require a counseling degree such as student registration and scheduling, administering cognitive, aptitude, and achievement tests, and maintaining student records. The school counselor, Coy (1999) maintained, has the skills and the knowledge to provide counseling, coordination, guidance, and referrals within the total framework of the school system. He contended that to ask counselors to use their time simply to make student schedule changes is a misuse of their education. Equally important, as defined by House and Martin (1998), counselors should defend their profession to the extent that they contribute to defining the appropriate tasks for school counselors. They must be clear about their roles, so that school administrators will be less likely to define their roles for them (House & Martin, 1998).

My study supports the House and Martin research and suggests that it is important for counselors to meet with their administrators regularly to clarify program goals and the appropriate use of their time and talents. Role clarification and understanding is critical to a healthy working relationship between a principal and his or her counseling team.

School counselors and principals have not traditionally viewed one another as partners in educational leadership, according to Carolyn Stone (2001). Yet, in her opinion, the two can be powerful allies for school reform, focusing on helping students understand and meet more rigorous academic standards. As part of the high school principal's team in his or her school, Stone, an Assistant Professor and Co-Program Leader at the University of North Florida, views school counselors as vital in supporting academic achievement by acting as proactive leaders and advocates for student success. Although they have separate and specific roles to carry out, the school counselor and the principal share common goals for the school and its students. According to Stone (2001), new attitudes about school counselors and principals joining forces for leadership and student advocacy can positively affect a school's mission, its climate, and its students' ability to achieve.

Counselors can collaborate with principals to conduct inservice training for teachers and parents in such important areas as educational planning, motivation, identification and interventions for special needs students, and issues of student diversity (Stone, 2001). Other examples of counselor-principal facilitated staff development topics may include learning styles and strategies, student leadership training, cooperative discipline, study skills, and college admission procedures. The goal of such collaboration, according to Stone (2001) is

to assist the principal in using counselors to provide support to teachers and parents in their areas of training and expertise.

Finally, my research illustrates some of the differences between counselors' and principals' perceptions regarding certain responsibilities, roles, and functions expected of counselors in high schools. These differences, which may lead to role expectations and work assignments that take counselors away from their primary mission emerged as an important component of the study. Trying to meet many external demands, principals search for internal personnel to help with various assignments and responsibilities that may not seem to the counselor to be counselor related. This phenomenon can present a conflict for the counselor. Some counselors have become frustrated with this conflict to the point that they leave the school counseling profession. The potential loss of licensed, educated counselors is tragic for public schools, which serve diverse student populations and demand a broad range of services to assist with students' academic, career, and social/personal development. Research demonstrates the need for schools to look for solutions as they strive to implement comprehensive school counseling programs that optimize counselor effectiveness, professional self-efficacy, and job satisfaction.

The Counselor's Role

Role definition is a significant challenge for school counselors (Sears & Granello, 2002). The term "role" may be defined as a set of expectations placed on an individual in a particular position in an organization. These expectations are not only defined by the individual, but also by others within the organization's boundaries. For high school

counselors, this means that those stakeholders within the school (students, parents, teachers, and administrators) have an influence and an impact on the definition of their professional roles. If they receive conflicting messages and are struggling with their own professional identity, there is a potential for school counselors to experience role stress. Role stress, according to Coll and Freeman (1997) consists of three separate constructs, specifically role conflict, role ambiguity, and role incongruence. Role conflict occurs when an individual is faced with conflicting role demands, such as when a counselor has different expectations than those an administrator might associate with his or her position. When roles are not clearly articulated, as in a vague job description or no written job description at all, role ambiguity may be the result. Role incongruence exists when there are too many roles to be fulfilled without appropriate support, such as a counselor being asked to take on the role of testing coordinator but not given release time to attend the trainings. Baker (2000) noted that such challenges to the school counselor's role and professional identity may discourage some from entering the profession and cause others to leave the profession early, disappointed in their training and career decision. Coll and Freeman (1997), in an early study addressing role stress in school counselors, found that school counselors did experience role incongruence and role conflict. They also looked at differences between elementary and secondary school counselors and found that elementary school counselors reported significantly higher levels of role incongruence and role conflict than their secondary school counterparts.

In a more recent study, Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, and Solomon (2005) surveyed 512 practicing school counselors selected at random from the total ASCA

membership to determine levels of role conflict, role incongruence, and role ambiguity. The questionnaire used for the study consisted of the Role Questionnaire (RQ) developed by Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman in 1970 for use with occupational groups and a demographics survey about the respondents' training experiences, work characteristics, and personal characteristics. Two-thirds (67.1%) of the respondents reported that they believed their training prepared them for their position as school counselors. About half (51.4%) believed their experiences matched their initial perceptions of the job. A perceived match between initial expectations of the job and actual experiences as a school counselor was the single most significant predictor of lower role stress, true across all three role stress scales and for each grade level.

Culbreth (2005) extended the work of Coll and Freeman (1997) with regard to role stress among practicing school counselors. While Coll and Freeman found significantly higher levels of role conflict and role incongruence among elementary school counselors than those working in middle and high schools, the results of the Culbreth study did not support that finding. For the counselors in the more current study, the opposite was true. Elementary school counselors reported less role conflict and role incongruence than did high school counselors. Coll and Freeman suggested that their findings may have been related to unclear expectations and job definition at the elementary level. Since 1997, however, there has been a significant effort to redefine the role of the school counselor at all levels and to address this redefinition in school counseling education and training. (Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005).

Counselor Self-Efficacy

In a study by Sutton and Fall (1995), a survey of school counselors was conducted to measure counselor self-efficacy as it related to school climate, counselor roles, and several demographic variables. The results indicated that supportive administrators were among the highest predictors of high counselor self-efficacy. A high level of support from school staff and the expectation of fewer activities not related to counseling also emerged as strong correlates.

My study further explores the administrative support variable and its overall impact on high school counselors. The six counselors responded to interview questions surrounding administrative support and understanding of their role.

The elements of elementary, middle, and high school counselors' work, the impact of their overall job satisfaction and levels of their job related stress are not only felt by themselves, but by the individuals with whom they interact on a daily basis. Their own job satisfaction is integral to the quality of the services they are expected to provide to students, parents, and others with whom they work. It has been hypothesized that school counselors' stress levels are lower and job satisfaction is more readily achieved when they receive support both from within the school community and from outside resources (DeMato & Curcio, 2004). Rayle (2006) hypothesized that if school counselors perceive that they matter to the different groups of individuals they work with, their levels of job related stress will be more manageable and their satisfaction with their work will increase.

Rayle (2006) found no significant differences in job stress and mattering to others between counselors who had been teachers prior to becoming counselors and those who had not. She did, however, note significant differences in overall job satisfaction between the two groups. School counselors who were not teachers before becoming counselors reported significantly greater satisfaction with their current jobs (Rayle, 2006). For those running comprehensive counseling programs at their schools, there were no significant differences in job stress when compared to counselors not running comprehensive programs. However, for mattering to others and job satisfaction, differences were found between the two groups. Those counselors running comprehensive programs reported greater job satisfaction and greater perceptions of mattering to those with whom they worked.

Rayle (2006) further explored the construct of mattering to others. Four dependent variables were used: mattering to students, mattering to parents, mattering to teachers, and mattering to administrators. No significant differences were found among the three levels of school counselors on their perceptions of mattering to students and mattering to parents. Middle school counselors reported the highest levels of mattering to teachers, followed by elementary school counselors. High school counselors reported the lowest levels of mattering to teachers, as well as mattering to administrators, with elementary counselors reporting the highest levels in that category (Rayle, 2006). The research explored whether or not this finding may have implications for the working relationships between high school teachers and counselors and how counselors perceive themselves through the eyes of the teachers. If high school counselors perceive that they do not matter to the teachers in their

schools, collaboration may suffer and counselors may begin to feel that their efforts are not supported by the teaching staff (Rayle, 2006).

Summary

High school counseling in the twenty-first century is a demanding profession. The ever-changing needs of students consistently present counselors with new goals and challenges. Overlap exists in the everyday manifestations of role ambiguity and self-efficacy issues. Considering their growing number of students and both counseling and non-counseling duties assigned to them, school counselors are logically susceptible to job related stress and reduced satisfaction with their jobs, especially if they feel unable to meet the expectations of others and provide effective service to their students. Existing research indicates that some high school counselors experience a low level of job satisfaction, have a high level of job-related stress, are consumed by duties that are not related to providing direct service to students, are assigned caseloads that far exceed the national standard, and do not believe they matter to the other professionals with whom they work. What the research doesn't provide, however, is an understanding of high school counselors' real and perceived roles within the high school community and the effect that phenomenon has on their perceptions of themselves as professionals, which is the framework surrounding the current study's research questions. What are the common goals and frustrations high school counselors share in terms of their roles within the school community? The existing research also does not explore counselors' expectations for the job versus day to day reality and how that reality impacts their professional self-efficacy. Is counseling what they expected it

would be? Do the day to day situations counselors encounter shape their professional self-efficacy? Existing research contains related data and has developed some viable conclusions, but only the counselors know the real answers to those questions, and possess an understanding of the issues they face. My research expands the current knowledge base about high school counselors and their jobs and moves our awareness forward, from sets of data and a series of conclusions to an exploration of lived experiences, expressed in their own voices, by the counselors themselves.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Case Study Research

Case study research, as explained by Stake (1994), seeks to understand a particular case in terms of its idiosyncrasy and complexity, in this instance, a small sample of six practicing high school counselors. I studied counselors from five Wake County, North Carolina, high schools, each school somewhat different from the others. My objective was to have the opportunity, by studying counselors at multiple sites, to interact with a relatively diverse group in terms of age, school demographics, gender, ethnicity, and years of experience in the field.

Robert Yin (2003) defines case study research as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). The research conducted was empirical in that I studied counselors through their real life practices and experiences. How high school counselors perceive the increasing responsibilities they face in the overall context of their jobs and how those perceptions affect their professional self-efficacy represents a contemporary phenomenon. The counselors, their actual assigned roles within the public school, and how they perceive those roles represent the real life context of the research. Counselors’ assigned roles and their perceptions of those roles can be seen as related and having overlapping parameters.

The Study Demographics

The Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) is the second largest system in North Carolina, serving some 125,000 students in grade K through 12. All of its high schools are accredited by the State of North Carolina and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Its population has grown by about 30,000 students to 125,000 between 1999 and 2009, and current projections place student enrollment at over 200,000 by the year 2020. WCPSS was recently named by *Forbes* magazine as the third best school district in the United States (Schiffman, 2004), and is consistently among the high achieving school districts in North Carolina. One of the greatest challenges facing the school system is keeping up with growth while finding ways to personalize the high school experience for students who attend its very large high schools (Pierrie, 2005).

Wake County is located in the research triangle area of North Carolina, a region rich with universities and defined by a diverse and highly educated population. In addition to higher education, technology, medicine, pharmaceuticals, and industry provide a significant economic impact and help to shape and support programs in the schools (Pierrie, 2005).

The district's mission statement reads as follows: *The Wake County Public School System will educate each student to be a responsible and productive citizen who can effectively manage future challenges.* Consistent with this mission, the Board of Education adopted Goal 2008 on November 5, 2003. Goal 2008 committed WCPSS to academic excellence by striving for 95% of all students in grades 3 through 12 to achieve at or above

grade level, and for all student groups to demonstrate high growth on end of grade and end of course tests. Clearly, the focus is on excellence for all students (Pierrie, 2005).

The Study Participants

Six counselors, working in five different high schools in Wake County, North Carolina, were selected to participate in the study. Letters describing the study and asking for volunteer participants were emailed to all of the county's 129 high school counselors (see Appendix A) along with a questionnaire (see Appendix B), and 22 initial responses were received. From the 22 respondents, nine counselors were purposefully selected as potential participants, were notified by email and telephone, and were asked to complete a brief commitment to participation. Of the nine counselors initially selected, six returned the commitment to participate and subsequently became the study participants. Counselors were initially chosen who represented both male (5) and female (4) perspectives, a range of experience in the field, and both African-American (4) and Caucasian (5) ethnicity. Of the six counselors who returned the final questionnaire and were selected as the final study participants, three are male and three are female; four are Caucasian and two are African-American. The youngest counselor in the group is 32; the oldest is 62. Three have classroom teaching experience. Participation was voluntary, and the counselors were told they could withdraw from the study at any time. Some of their personal background information has been slightly altered and their names have been changed to protect their privacy. Advance informed consent was obtained from each participating individual and the

principals of the schools represented, and confidentiality has been assured and maintained through the use of fictitious names and descriptions.

Jack, the youngest of the six participants, is 32 and has been a counselor for three years in a small-town high school about 20 miles from Raleigh. He came to his school of 1800 students from a much smaller high school in another state, where he also completed a counseling internship and did some substitute teaching during graduate school. Forty percent of the students who attend Jack's high school represent various ethnic minority groups. Student achievement and socio-economic backgrounds, according to Jack, "vary greatly."

Angie, age 40, was a language arts teacher in Wake County prior to becoming a high school counselor ten years ago. She has worked as a counselor in three different Wake County high schools, and this is her first year in her current position. She describes the student and faculty populations as "very eclectic", with a balance of cultural, racial, and socio-economic groups, and the expectations of the administration as "very high." Angie's high school has a student population of roughly 1500.

Andrew and Callie work at the same school. Andrew has been a counselor for fifteen years, and has worked in middle school, high school, and college environments. At age 37, he has spent the last ten years of his career as a high school counselor. Callie is 62, a former physical education teacher, and has been a high school counselor for fifteen years. Their high school is a suburban school near the Research Triangle, populated by children of predominantly upper-middle class families. Of the approximately 2000 students who attend there, the graduation rate is high and over 70% of the students go on to four year colleges and

universities after high school. The school has a large English as A Second Language (ESL) population, which helps to create some diversity in what would otherwise be a largely Caucasian student body.

Paul is 33 and has been a counselor for eight years. He relocated to Wake County from a large metropolitan area three years ago, and is currently working at a relatively new high school in a somewhat isolated setting west of Raleigh. Paul worked at another Wake County high school the first two years he was in the area, and this is his first year in his current position, where he serves as the Dean. The majority of the 2200 students in Paul's school are Caucasian, Asian, and Multi-racial, and almost eighty percent of them go on to some form of higher education after high school. Paul describes the overall student achievement level at his school as "extremely high" and disciplinary issues as "almost abnormally low."

Mara has had many jobs, but she claims counseling as her "only career." At 56, she has been a Wake County counselor for 30 years. She worked briefly as an elementary and middle school counselor, but "found her niche" at the high school level, where she has spent the majority of her career. She has been a counselor at three Wake County high schools, and this is her first year in her current school. She has been a Dean, but stepped down from that role this year so that she would have more time with students and fewer administrative responsibilities. Her current school is in the city of Raleigh, and it houses a magnet program in addition to the students assigned there by home address. There is a large ESL population,

and over thirty percent of the 2200 students at Mara's school are eligible for free or reduced lunches. According to Mara, the dropout rate is "high."

The Interview Questions

The interview questions selected for this qualitative multi-case study of high school counselors were designed so that their answers may contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon of counselors' perceived roles within the high school community, using the actual voices of practicing school counselors (see Appendix C). Data were collected over a period of approximately four months according to an established time schedule from a variety of sources, but the primary source of data, due to the nature of the questions, was the counselors themselves. Open-ended questions were investigated to study the phenomenon of counselors' perceived roles, daily activities, goals, and overall thoughts about their jobs. Prior to the study, the questions were reviewed by a panel of four practicing high school counselors not associated with the study in order to gain and incorporate feedback on their clarity and relevance for gathering the desired data. The primary research method for the study was a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with each of the participating counselors. The interview protocol included open-ended questions in order to encourage the participants to discuss what was meaningful to them in their own on the job experiences. The protocol included questions about their backgrounds, training and experience, their experiences with external demands on their time, the amount of control they believe they have regarding their jobs and job descriptions, the level and sources of support they believe they have within the school community, the ways they contribute to the school and how those

contributions are acknowledged, and their beliefs about what makes a good counselor. Questions about their individual workloads and what they would change about their jobs were also a part of the interview process. As common themes emerged, a focus group was convened to further explore similarities and differences among the six participants and their schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

A demographics data questionnaire, a series of job satisfaction statements, two individual interviews with each counselor, and a focus group in which all of the counselors participated were used to collect data and explore information relevant to the research questions. The initial interview questions and job satisfaction statements were evaluated prior to their use by four practicing high school counselors, and minor revisions were made based on their recommendations. Second interviews with each of the six participants were conducted for clarification of responses and to gain additional information from each counselor with regard to their answers to specific questions in the initial interviews. The focus group protocol centered on common themes that emerged during the interviews such as caseload, professional expectations, and overall job satisfaction in their current positions.

Triangulating the Data

To further validate the study results with additional data collection, the counselors were contacted individually during data analysis regarding identified goals for themselves and their programs that emerged during the interviews and the focus group. Job descriptions are also a data source that represents a natural connector between a counselor's vision for his

or her job and the actual requirements at the worksite. With this in mind, I requested and was provided the written job description for North Carolina counselors and studied it for validation purposes, as well as to compare it with what the study participants were actually doing.

Study Reliability and Validity

Concerning reliability and validity in qualitative research, theorists Guba and Lincoln (1981) emphasize that while all research must have rigor, loosely defined as truth value and consistency, to be considered worthwhile, the nature of knowledge gained qualitatively is different from that gained using quantitative methods. Within the quantitative paradigm, the criteria to reach the goal of truth and consistency in research are internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Guba and Lincoln, 1981). On the other hand, Guba and Lincoln (1981) proposed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as their criteria for rigor in the qualitative world. The work of these authors was rapidly followed by others expanding their criteria and using different labels to meet similar goals. This sequence of events resulted in confusion and a lack of clarity concerning how rigor is discerned in qualitative research. Perhaps as a result of this lack of clarity, standards, or judgements of the relative worth of research applied on completion of a project, were introduced in the 1980s for post-hoc evaluation of qualitative inquiry. While these standards may be useful for evaluating relevance and utility, they do not in themselves ensure that the research is relevant and useful (Morse, et al. 2002), and are therefore not as credible as their supporters would indicate. In terms of my research, I considered verification strategies described by Morse et

al. (2002) during the research process to actively attain reliability and validity, rather than relying on the standards of external reviewers at the end of the process. The strategies I considered include investigator responsiveness, sampling adequacy, and a concurrent collection/analytic stance (Morse, et al., 2002). Investigator responsiveness speaks to the researcher being open, using sensitivity and insight, and being willing to relinquish ideas that are poorly supported, regardless of the excitement and potential they first appear to provide. Secondly, the sample must be appropriate, consisting of participants who best represent the research topic. Sampling adequacy means that sufficient data are obtained to account for all aspects of the studied phenomenon. Seeking negative cases is also essential, ensuring validity by pointing out aspects of the data analysis that were initially less than obvious. Third, collecting and analyzing data at the same time creates an interaction between what is known and what one needs to know. A good qualitative researcher moves back and forth between design and implementation to ensure congruence among question formation, literature, data collection, and analysis (Morse, et al., 2002). These verification strategies helped me, as the researcher, to know when to continue, stop, or modify the research process in order to ensure that my research was as reliable and valid as it could be. I concur with Morse's (2002) assertion that standards and criteria applied at the end of a qualitative study cannot direct the research as it is conducted, and therefore cannot be used proactively to effectively manage threats to reliability and validity.

Validity in qualitative research can also be determined through the use of quotations from study participants obtained from field notes and transcriptions of interviews, and the

stories of the six counselors participating in this study have been told in their own words. My results were also validated by prolonging the process of on-site data gathering, and asking more questions, making sure data collection reached a saturation point, providing greater information upon which to formulate conclusions and interpretations.

Robert Yin (2003) discusses reliability in terms of potential replication of the same research yielding similar conclusions, either by the same or a different researcher, the goal being to minimize errors and biases in the study. In order for this to be possible, he recommends following a case study protocol to assure comprehensive documentation. He recommends conducting research as though “someone were always looking over your shoulder,” so that an auditor could theoretically repeat the study with the same group and arrive at the same results (Yin, 2003, p.38). By keeping detailed notes and taping the interviews and the focus group conversation, my procedures are documented so that another researcher could repeat the procedures and arrive at similar results.

The term “reliability,” according to Merriam (1998), in the traditional sense, is something of a misfit when applied to qualitative research. She purports that rather than looking at whether another researcher obtains the same results, a qualitative researcher desires that an outsider would concur that, given the data collected, the results make sense. The question is not whether the results will be found again, or found to be reliable, but whether they are reliable in that they are consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 1998).

Summary

In conducting this case study of six practicing high school counselors, my goal as the researcher was to accurately and fairly collect, analyze, and present sets of data in order to provide a better understanding of counselors' issues, job expectations, and professional self-efficacy. I purposefully selected counselors in Wake County, North Carolina as the source of my data. Interview and focus group questions were formulated based on a thorough review of existing literature and designed so that their answers might contribute to an understanding of counselors' roles within the high school community. Questions were reviewed by a panel of practicing high school counselors not involved in the study to help ensure their relevance in terms of gathering the desired and appropriate information. To maximize reliability and validity, I followed strategies proposed by Morse (2002) in that I was open to all of the counselors' expressed ideas and opinions, chose study participants who best represented my research topic, and obtained sufficient data to account for all aspects of the research questions. As Yin (2003) recommended, I conducted the research so that another researcher could theoretically repeat the study with the same group and arrive at the same results. In the next chapter, the results will be reported using the words of the six counselors themselves, providing the reader with a snapshot of the counselors' world, including their issues, their job expectations, and their beliefs about their own professional self-efficacy.

Chapter 4

Results

Use of the Data

The data for this qualitative case study of six Wake County, North Carolina high school counselors were collected using a demographics questionnaire, reactions to statements regarding their job satisfaction, two individual interviews with each counselor, and a focus group discussion. The job satisfaction tool consisted of ten statements, and each counselor responded to the statements positively, negatively, or neutrally. The counselors' responses to the job satisfaction items emerged as valuable preliminary indicators of their issues and expectations, and the impact of their jobs on their professional self-efficacy. The same responses generated the need for further questioning, and became the baseline for second interview questions and focus group subject matter. The job description for North Carolina counselors was also reviewed and used as a frame of reference for specific interview questions and as a data triangulation tool.

The factors, specific to the research questions, namely key issues, expectations, and professional self-efficacy impact were each evaluated through the discovery of patterns using six different variables. The themes reflected in the research questions and the variables identified in the literature, specifically role definition, administrative support, time, caseload, the reality of the job and professional self-efficacy factors were supported by response analysis and became the main focus of the results. The counselors' responses were organized under three main categories that reflected the three factors specific to the research questions:

issues, expectations, and impact on professional self-efficacy. As the relevant information was identified and categorized, individual responses to interview questions and contributions to the focus group discussion were organized according to theme, topic, and counselor for analysis and reporting purposes. In order to fully illustrate the experiences of the six high school counselors interviewed, their comments were documented in their own words.

The Issues

Role Definition and Administrative Support

The variety of jobs assigned to them at their various schools and their perceptions of how they were viewed by others in the school community were factors that seemed to contribute to the counselors' own definition of their roles. Their responses to the job satisfaction statement "My principal understands my role" was generally negative. The study participants further indicated that their duties were not always clearly defined, and were not always reflective of their written job description, as indicated by their responses to both "I believe I have control over the way my job is defined" and "I have control over my working conditions."

In discussing their roles in their schools and the perceptions of others surrounding their role in the school community at large, the counselors varied in the degree to which they believe it is their ethical responsibility to define their role for others in the school and be accountable to others for what they do. Mara, a counselor for over thirty years, stressed that she is conscious of others' expectations of her as a professional, and that she tries to help them understand what she, as a counselor, can and cannot do. She added that she strives to

prevent others' views from influencing what she ethically and professionally believes is her job and in the best interest of her students. She summarized her feelings by saying, "I try to make the students the center of my job, not me."

Paul, who just this year has taken a job as Dean at his current school, was a bit more cynical. "Do you mean," he asked, "are there people at my school who think we just sit around in our offices and chat all day?" Answering his own question, he quickly added, "Probably, yes." He elaborated that he believes those who think counselors don't have enough to do are not looking at the big picture, something he has had a greater opportunity to do since assuming a supervisory role. He went on to say that he knows he is fair in the way he uses his time and takes care of his job, and that his personal and professional integrity won't allow anything else.

Andrew talked about his own peers in the counseling department at his school, stating that some of them have taken issue with his willingness to work toward new initiatives, and try new things with students. Andrew is a doctoral student in counseling, and believes in remaining abreast of new techniques and initiatives in the field. Of some of his less creative colleagues, he said other counselors certainly do not have to approach the job the same way he does, but "no complaining when I choose to participate in something that I see as a way to connect with a larger complement of students." He cited the example of a time when he opened an after-school scholarship site search to any student who wanted to participate. "Someone got mad because I included students who were on their caseload. I wasn't trying

to step on anyone's toes. But if an activity gives a student a chance to connect with another adult at school, I see that as a positive."

Jack, the youngest of the six study participants, is a relatively new counselor as compared with the rest of the group. He is still very excited about the job, and his responses to the interview questions were overwhelmingly positive. On the subject of role perception, Jack indicated that he sees his role as working in tandem with teachers and the administration to make sure students are consistently doing their best. He sees his role as one of support, and said he does not have all of the answers, and talked about a team approach to working with students. Jack said he believes the perception of counselors is the same at his school across the board. He referred to himself as having a "can-do" attitude and explained that people around him expect a lot of him for that reason. "But," he elaborated, "if I'm doing my best, then I'm satisfied, and I don't think I'm expected to answer to anyone else for that."

Three of the counselors talked about control issues surrounding the definition of their jobs. Angie, who has been a counselor for ten years, expressed that the administrators at her current school, where she has worked for just one year, depend on the counselors more than at her previous schools. She and her fellow counselors have been assigned various tasks and functions they view as unrelated to counseling, and have discussed that they would not have chosen tasks such as lunch supervision and setting up rooms for testing for themselves. "I would like to have more control over the way my job is defined," she stated. "At my other schools, I felt like I had more autonomy. I could choose to go into the cafeteria to see a

student. That's a different feeling than standing in the cafeteria forced to talk with students there because we're on duty."

Mara has seen changes in the structure of schools, the needs of students, and expectations from the state over the years that she views as lessening her flexibility and causing her to need to prioritize differently than she might have ten or twenty years ago. Working at a large high school with a sizable proportion of students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, she sometimes feels she can't meet all of the needs vying for her attention. She expressed the feeling of being pulled in several different directions at the same time, asking, "Am I supposed to see more students and at the same time create, plan, refine, and implement programs the state or somebody downtown sees as important that I may or may not see as student-centered or even beneficial to my students?"

Jack, on the other hand, still sees himself as having some control over the way his role is defined at his school. He talked about having specific tasks and objectives that he is expected to carry out, but expressed that how he does his job is, to a great extent, left up to him. He said his principal encourages him to be creative and try out new ideas and "that makes me feel like I have some control."

Callie talked about some of the things she could accomplish if she were relieved of some of the non-counseling demands imposed on her by her administration. "I could call more parents; go to more parent conferences, instead of having to wait until they email me about a problem. I could be more proactive that way." Callie does not think her principal

knows or is interested in what the counselors in his building do, and expressed that she feels somewhat undervalued by his apparent lack of interest in or understanding of her role.

Andrew expressed a different view of the principal/counselor relationship in terms of role, and he and Callie work at the same school. When asked if his principal knows what the counselors in his building do, he answered this way, “You know, you can sit in your office with your door closed day in and day out and expect the principal to know what you do. I’ve worked with counselors like that and it just ticks me off. I mean, the man has a job to do, and we have to be visible, too. And we have a responsibility to cultivate that relationship, so if we need something from the administration, we’re comfortable asking for it. That door swings both ways.”

Mara said that in her experience, when conversations between a principal and a counselor do occur, they tend to be focused on one issue, something that is happening right then, or a discussion with the Dean about counselors in general. She has only experienced one principal who engaged in conversation with counselors about what happens in their world. That principal had been a counselor, and that, Mara said, was a different story. “She had been there.” She went on to say that generally speaking, her current administration appreciates counselors in that they are somewhere to put a problem. “They’re grateful,” she said, “when we manage a problem for them”

One of the issues that emerged during the focus group when the counselors discussed their role was how they see themselves as contributors to the school community and how their contributions are acknowledged. Jack, once again, presented his ideas to the group in a

positive manner, stating that the culture in his building is very supportive overall. He walks the campus several times each day, checking in with students, teachers, and the administration. He sees himself as someone who is always ready and willing to lend a hand and help, whatever the situation. He mentioned that his principal is very good about praising the staff's efforts to help students be successful, and said the counselors at his school do a lot of celebrating within their department.

Callie, who has had some less than positive experiences with the current administration at her school, continued to maintain that others in her school do not quite understand or appreciate what she does as a counselor. She serves on the School Improvement Team, which she enjoys and sees as a good fit for her because she likes the idea of being her department's voice on school policy, procedures, and climate. She also sees her service on the team as an opportunity to be involved in change. "I believe," she said, "if others' perceptions can be changed to be more in line with my true role, they would be more cooperative in assisting me with my true responsibilities and perhaps be more appreciative of me and my contributions here."

Andrew talked about making an unplanned and unexpected contribution outside the school day when a student approached him at a local restaurant and asked him a question. "The tone," he said, "was like, even though you're not my counselor, you know what you're doing, so I think you know the answer. That kind of stuff is so affirming, and it's a big part of what keeps me doing this job." He disagreed with Callie and emphasized that he thinks

the teachers and the administration are supportive of what he does, but added, “I cultivate those relationships by being visibly supportive of them.”

A former Dean, Mara stated that having been in a leadership role in the past, she was learning how to follow and contribute, rather than to lead, and that the learning curve had been a little larger than she had expected. She said she thinks teachers have a hard time conceptualizing what counselors do, and that is what makes it hard for them to acknowledge a counselor’s contribution to the school. “They think we have it easy,” she laughed, “until they need us or we do something that helps them.”

Paul, currently in a Dean’s position, agreed. “Sometimes,” he said, “it feels like the teachers think the counselors are just here to make sure they don’t end up with 45 kids in a class.”

Time and Caseload

Both the North Carolina School Counselor Job Description (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2006) and the ASCA (2005), recommend that 80% of a school counselor’s time should be spent in activities that are characterized by direct contact with students. A student to counselor ratio of 250:1 is the ongoing standard suggested by the ASCA’s most recent position statement (ASCA, 2005). Study participants’ responses to statements concerning their own job satisfaction and their answers to interview questions both suggest that those figures do not accurately represent what is happening in their high schools. Their responses to the job satisfaction statement “I think I have too much work to do” were indicative of feelings of overload in terms of responsibility, and to the statement “I

have enough time to spend with my students,” their responses were, overwhelmingly, that they do not.

During the initial interviews, caseload size emerged as a common area of interest and concern. The study participants’ caseloads range from 450-600 students, well above the number recommended by the ASCA. Paul, who in his current position as Dean does not have his own caseload, talked about his surprise at the large caseloads in Wake County when he relocated there from another state a few years ago. “In New York,” he stated, “my caseload ranged anywhere from 250-300 students. In my department here, we have four counselors for 2200, and I feel that’s too much. A smaller caseload definitely makes the job more manageable.”

Andrew’s caseload is 500 students, and he discussed his frustration with the large number, expressing that some days he just ends up troubleshooting and “putting out fires”, and other days small problems are put aside because he can only get around to handling the really big things. Those days, he said, are when he fears something important might go unnoticed or “fall through the cracks.” Andrew uses lists and an electronic calendar to manage his time. He stressed the importance of staying organized all the time. “I’m running about double (the number of students) what I should be right now,” he said. “It’s easy to get worn out and feel beat up sometimes. A task stays on top of the pile until it’s done, because if it gets buried, it’s not happening. Out of sight, out of mind.”

Angie, who said she feels as though her caseload, currently at about 450, gets bigger every year, spends a lot of time prioritizing. Knowing what needs to be done right away and

what can wait is the way she likes to start her day. “I would love to have a smaller caseload,” she said. “I really enjoy working with the students, and I wish I could get to know all of them better.”

Jack compared managing his caseload of 600 freshmen to a roller coaster ride. “There are times I can sense the anticipation of going up a step incline and getting ready for the perilous drop, like during registration.” But he also said there are quieter days, when he can take some time to plan for the next big event. Prior to becoming a counselor, Jack worked at a busy restaurant for about seven years. “If you think being a counselor is busy, you should be behind that bar on a Saturday night,” he smiled. “It was a great training ground for this job, let me tell you.”

Mara monitors 350 high-risk ninth graders and provides traditional counseling services to about 100 tenth and eleventh graders at her school. She loves working with high-need students, but the workload, she said, “is huge.” Mara keeps a daily, weekly, and monthly calendar. “For me,” she stated, “advance planning is key. And my calendar is not packed full every minute. I have to leave time for emergencies and meeting the daily expectations of others that never seem to appear on any of my calendars.”

Callie talked about balance, and said she tries not to think about the fact that her caseload tops 500 students. “I’m happy,” she commented, “for the ones who can handle things themselves, that I don’t have to see as much. That leaves more time for the ones I really need to see, so in a way, it works out.” The size of Callie’s caseload is not as disturbing to her as the extraneous occurrences during the day that keep her from meeting

with her students, such as being asked to cover the front desk phone, last minute administrative requests for data, and parents who drop in unexpectedly. “Those are some of the things,” she lamented, “that get in the way of counseling students and meeting all of their needs.” Callie added that one of the biggest things that keeps her from seeing as many students as often as she would like is parents. She said it often seems they want her to meet their needs more than those of their children. She referred to answering an almost endless stream of emails and voice mails on a daily basis.

At Angie’s school, counselors have been asked this year to take the lead in reducing attendance problems. Her principal has designated it as one of their main responsibilities, and she sees this expectation as a little unrealistic. “It is a big issue,” Angie stated, “but it’s all falling on us. We are supposed to set up a meeting with every student who misses more than five days of school. In theory, that’s great, but realistically it doesn’t happen, because it just can’t. There are not enough hours in the day.”

Paul also talked about all of the extra things that administrators seem to like to delegate to the counselors, and feels there isn’t enough time to accomplish everything. He talked about confrontations with parents that he sees as unnecessary. “Let’s say a parent wants a kid out of a teacher’s class, and hasn’t talked with the teacher or even an assistant principal. But that parent is at my door demanding I take him out. Only has the kid’s side of the story. Those things take so much time to sort out, and it’s really between the kid and the parent and the teacher. I’m just thrown into the mix and I’m supposed to solve the problem for everybody.”

The amount of work that needs to be done, coupled with a large caseload and limited time and support can result in chronically stressful days for counselors. The counselors in this study often feel there isn't enough time to accomplish everything. During the focus group, they discussed how their workload affects their stress level, emotional well-being, and motivation.

"I don't focus on my workload or how much I have to do," Jack commented. "That's never productive. What's productive is doing." He said he just tries to get his job done to the best of his ability, and if he leaves school at the end of the day knowing he has done that, he is satisfied. He said he has decided it doesn't matter if everything on his list gets done, as long as he has given his best. He did say it is easy for him to become overwhelmed with paperwork, and that he becomes frustrated when he can't meet student needs because of paperwork demands. Lately, Jack said, he has recognized the importance of eating a healthy diet and getting enough sleep, and he said he has recently stopped checking his school email from home. "I had to set that boundary," he shared. "School is school and home is home."

Paul commented that when he overworks himself, he finds himself starting to hate the job, and that he feels as though much of his job consists of "putting out fires." He mentioned that the job gets tiring with all of the hats he has to wear and all of the different personalities he encounters during the day, and said he stresses every day about the things he doesn't get done. Paul said he tries to leave work at a reasonable hour, and works out several times a week to help him manage his stress.

Callie expressed frustration because she does not have the tools she needs to effectively do her job. “For example,” she said, “I have been missing several letters on my keyboard for awhile now, and no one seems all that concerned. The last person I asked said he couldn’t guarantee anything would be done about it.” Callie said her energy for the day is usually high when she comes to work in the morning, but that exchanges like that make her feel discouraged and weary and add to her stress.

Mara finds school and working with students generally a positive and affirming place to be. She commented that she finds great fulfillment in helping students manage their world within the walls of the school. Her biggest challenge this year has been stepping back and realizing that she does not have to make all of the decisions for the department or do all of the planning. She has had to let go and let someone else be in charge, and learning to do that has reduced her stress level significantly. “I will always have opinions and ideas,” she said with a smile. “But I am motivated to learn how things are done at this school so I can really contribute. You might say my energy has become refocused.”

Issues the six counselors interviewed for this study identified as critical included low personal control regarding how their role is defined, high external demands on their time, overwhelmingly large caseloads, and too much work to reasonably accomplish within the workday. They talked about their principals requiring them to perform non-counseling related duties, and some were concerned about what they perceive as an absence of administrative support. Those who did not feel supported by their administrators expressed the belief that administrators give them more work to do because they lack an understanding

of what counselors are actually supposed to be doing. Three counselors expressed that their administrators see them as a place to put a problem or someone to do the jobs the administration doesn't want to do. All six spoke of their inability to meet all of their students within a semester, and about not being able to recognize some of them when they encounter them in the hallway or the cafeteria. All but two spoke of parents as distractions or interruptions rather than partners in the counseling process. However, despite their large caseloads coupled with limited time and exacerbated by somewhat fuzzy role definition, the counselors agreed that working with their students is the part of the job they enjoy the most and that it is the students who make their jobs worthwhile.

The Expectations

While the requirements for counseling credentials are in place at colleges and universities where licensed school counselors receive their education and training, and state boards of education generally require that aspiring counselors pass a written exam before they can be hired, individual schools and school districts establish their own job expectations for practicing counselors (ASCA, 2005). In some cases, that can mean counselors are assigned tasks that have little to do with their skills and training (Madden, 2002). The counselors participating in this study talked about a shift in thinking as they face new accountability requirements. Analyzing student performance data and tracking suspensions, truancies, and expulsions have become part of their jobs. They expressed that in order to demonstrate that they are making a difference in students' lives, what they do sometimes feels more data-driven than student-driven. The counselors voiced their own expectations in

terms of working as partners with others in the school to prevent problems before they happen, of helping to close academic achievement gaps, and of finding referrals for students and families who need more help than the school can provide. They emphasized again that there are too few of them looking after too many students with too many needs, and that they believe some students and their problems are falling through the cracks as a result. To the job satisfaction statement, "School counseling is what I expected it would be," the counselors expressed mixed feelings, and talked about some of the challenges they did not expect to encounter. To "I am happy in my current position," their responses indicated that they are. The six counselors' answers to related interview questions further reinforced that they believe there may be more to being a high school counselor than they anticipated, in both reinforcing and challenging ways.

"When I made the decision to become a counselor," Callie shared, "I truly felt like I could make a difference." She went on to say she expected that she would be working with students and their families surrounding issues that can be really hard for families to overcome on their own, and added that to a certain extent, that has happened. Callie also expected that each day would be full of its own unique challenges, and affirmed that has proven to be true. She went on to say that she hoped she would have opportunities to interact with her colleagues in a consultative and supportive working relationship, and that she has been disappointed that in her current position, that has not been the case. She also reinforced what she perceives as a lack of support from her principal, and said that has been a disappointment as well.

Jack said that he didn't bring any expectations with him when he became a counselor. He explained that he tends to live by the credo "to live without expectation is to truly have freedom." Jack is happy at his current school, located in a small town, and shared that it is very different, in a positive way, from the school up north where he completed his internship. "I didn't think, the parents here would be as laid back as they are, because it wasn't that way in my internship. We felt like we were on the verge of being dragged into court all the time up there." He mentioned that he would like to have more ongoing personal contact with students than the nature of his position and the size of his caseload allow.

Andrew acknowledged that he knew high school counseling would be more administrative in nature than elementary and middle school, but said he still thought he would have more opportunity to effect change with his students. He also commented on the logistics of the job and "all you have to know how to do to get things done for students and parents" and sees those concepts such as completing financial aid applications and finding a substance abuse counselor as "kind of off the table in grad school." He said it was pretty hard to tell what school counseling was going to be about sitting in class and talking theory and reading about other people's experiences. "When I got into my internship," Andrew disclosed, "that's when the light bulb went on for me and it was like, this is it. This is what I want to do."

Paul indicated that his professional satisfaction dropped significantly when he changed schools and moved into the Dean's position. That particular reaction to both changes was unexpected. He talked about the parents and students at his current school and

their strong sense of entitlement, and shared that he thinks that factor has forced a lot of staff, both counselors and teachers, to leave the school. “They seem to think they should get whatever they want,” he shared. “They send you an email, and if you don’t respond within 24 hours, sometimes within the same day, they’re in the building asking to see you. From that aspect, this job is a lot more difficult than I envisioned. But I feel it’s largely because of where I am.”

Angie emphasized the time factor. As a mother of two young children, she has to be home at a certain time to meet the bus. “I think I underestimated the time involved in a job like this,” she said. “I have to be home to get my six year old off the bus and that has changed the way I have to approach my day. Half the time, I end up following the bus down my street because I haven’t been able to leave on time.”

Mara shared that her personal and professional satisfaction comes from meeting the needs of her students, and that she expected the same of herself when she entered the profession. She acknowledges that “it’s a new day now” with all of the accountability standards and the systemic approach to counseling that has counselors teaming with parents, teachers, and the administration “with the student sandwiched in there somewhere.” Mara talked about parents and their high expectations and that they often don’t have a perspective that extends beyond their child. She talked about the constant emails, voice mails, and text messaging, and opined that for all the good technology does, it has made us an impatient society and more into the need for instant communication. But she emphasized that she went into counseling to help students, and “that’s where I have to go home every day.”

Just for fun, during the focus group, the counselors talked about what they would change about their jobs if they were given a magic wand. The answers were, predictably, as different and interesting as the counselors themselves. Callie wanted guaranteed cooperation between herself and her colleagues and a more open relationship with the administration. Angie wished for a smaller caseload and more time with her students. Paul wanted higher pay and better benefits, stating “I don’t think they’re enough for some of the stuff I have to deal with.” Jack asked for a more manageable caseload so that he could have a greater impact on his students’ lives. Andrew shared that while he would like for his caseload to be more in line with what is reasonable, the one thing he would really like is for his colleagues to contribute more equitably to the team. Finally, Mara wished for fewer students and more resources for them. On a lighter note, she laughed and added, “A warmer office and a newer computer.”

Is counseling in a high school what the counselors expected it would be? In discussing their expectations, the quantity and quality of the time they spend with their students was a universal element that continued to prevail as the counselors contemplated the reality of their jobs. They all said they expected to and wanted to be able to spend more time with their students. They discussed the need to respond to multiple requests from different people in the school community, all of whom appear to see their needs as the most important; and they talked about constant demands on their time from people other than their students, specifically parents and administrators. Andrew and Callie spoke of a lack of an atmosphere of support and trust among their colleagues, and expressed that the feeling of teamwork at

their school is not as strong as they would like it to be. All six expressed some degree of incredulity and frustration over the amount of work that they have to do, coupled with limited time, energy, and support. Their general feeling was that there is often insufficient time in the day to accomplish everything they want or need to do. They indicated that they did not expect to feel so consistently overwhelmed by the demands on their time, the number of students assigned to them, and their experiences with unrealistic parental expectations. Andrew spoke about his graduate school experience being rooted in theory and practice with little consideration for the day to day tasks he performs on the job. While only Paul and Callie openly expressed genuine unhappiness and discontent, and Jack was the most optimistic about his current situation and his school, none of the counselors were especially optimistic about change. All of them, however, have thought about changes that would make their jobs better, primarily in relation to the number of students they serve and the external demands on their time.

The Impact on Professional Self-Efficacy

Professional self-efficacy is the set of beliefs about one's own ability to be successful in his or her profession. It is an important component in the way people think, feel, act, and motivate themselves. As individuals examine aspects of their work such as job satisfaction, stress level, and commitment, positive or negative feelings of professional self-efficacy can be the result. A positive relationship has been suggested between positive self-efficacy and work adjustment, job satisfaction, and resiliency toward career goal achievement (Bodenhorn & Skaggs, 2005). The counselors' responses to each of three statements created for this

study that addressed professional self-efficacy, “I have more good days than bad at work,” “My career positively impacts the quality of my life,” and “I believe I am good at what I do” were positive, suggesting a relatively high level of professional self-efficacy among the study participants. The six individuals in this study further discussed the impact of the daily situations they experience as high school counselors as they reflected on their beliefs about what makes a good counselor, their own feelings of effectiveness and success, and their overall satisfaction in the profession.

Andrew feels most effective as a counselor when he knows he has helped a student work through an issue. He likes to help students develop their own solutions to problems and stay in touch with them concerning their progress and follow-through. When all of that comes together, Andrew said, “Life is good. For him and for me.”

The challenge for Mara when it comes to feeling effective professionally is that “all of our successes don’t occur in front of us.” She talked about students growing over time, and that sometimes something she has said to a student may click with that student years later. She feels good about her job when she thinks she has made a positive difference for a student, or been part of a positive change. “I’ve been doing this long enough,” she smiled, “that I’ve had the opportunity to see them come back with their husbands and wives and babies and their medals of honor and their advanced degrees. That’s the reward for me.”

Jack talked about how affirming it is to be given a task to do by one of his supervisors and knowing that he has the freedom to approach it in his own way. “Knowing they trust me,” he said, “is very empowering.”

For Angie, the satisfaction comes simply from knowing that she enjoys being with her students, listening to them, and helping them get through tough times. She acknowledged that for some teenagers, high school can be difficult, and said she feels good just being there for them, knowing that they know she cares.

Paul shared that he feels most effective when he is working with a student or a family who truly need and appreciate his help. “In my current school,” he lamented, “that doesn’t happen very often.”

Feeling a connection with her students is important for Callie. “I feel good,” she said, “when I’ve really connected with a student and put a good plan for him or her into action,”

Some of the most interesting answers from the individual interviews came in response to the question of leaving the profession. Have the six counselors in this study ever considered leaving? They talked about the factors that might lead them in that direction, such as family, going back to school, and factors concerning their current positions.

Angie, a young mother of two, talked about family, and said the only reason she might leave high school counseling would be if she had an opportunity to work at a school that was on the same schedule as the one her children attend, allowing her to spend more time with them. However, she said she has seen herself as a counselor since she left teaching ten years ago, and that is what she sees herself continuing to do.

Andrew discussed the need to have another pool to draw from, such as family, to remind him that what he deals with every day is not necessarily how it is in everyone’s world. He said if he didn’t have an outlet, it would be easy to allow himself to be

emotionally emptied out, and went on to say he thinks that is what forces some people out. “We hear the worst of the worst in this job,” he said, “because his job is supposed to be about dealing with problems. When a kid is experiencing a tragic life event, like abuse or mortal illness, that stuff can be hard to take.”

Mara admitted to almost leaving the profession a number of years ago when she had a principal who was not supportive of her and who questioned her integrity. “He definitely made me doubt my skills.” But she said she has made peace with that situation over the last few years, and has come to see it as something over which she had very little control. She now has decided that she has proven herself many times over since then, and knows her skills are better than average. She plans to stay in counseling until she retires.

Paul, on the other hand, admitted that he thinks about leaving every day. He referred to himself as “in survival mode,” and again referred to the sense of entitlement he sees among the students and parents at his school. Paul was offered and almost accepted a job with a pharmaceutical company several months ago. He said the only thing that held him back was the security he felt as a public school employee. The economy was showing signs of a downturn, and he was afraid the job with the drug company wouldn’t survive a potential recession. But he said he would go in a minute if something came along that offered the same security, pay, and benefits he has now.

Callie has never considered leaving counseling. She enjoys the students in spite of her frustrations with some of the other aspects of the job. A teacher first, and a counselor for

the last fifteen years, she has worked in the field of public education since her own children were small. She is a widow, and she also enjoys the freedom and flexibility the job provides.

Jack, surprisingly, said he would leave counseling at some point, but not because he doesn't enjoy what he is doing. He referred to his future plans as a higher calling and said he would leave eventually if an opportunity presented itself. "You might say," he quipped, "Dr. Clancy has a nice ring to it."

Having spent over thirty years working in the field of public education at nine different high schools, I have known and spent professional time with close to one hundred counselors. A few were outstanding, and I will remember them and their work with students for a long time. Many ranged from very good to mediocre, and a handful were quite obviously just working for the paycheck. Based on my experiences and interactions with the counselors in this study, they all appeared to be very good at what they do, and I became interested in learning what, from their perspective, makes a good counselor.

"I have a phrase that comes to mind," Jack began. "It's jack of all trades, master of none. If you can't multi-task with these numbers, there is no way you can be an effective counselor." He referred again to his restaurant background, adding that he thinks it is important to be able to interact well with people at all levels. Jack concluded by saying that he thinks knowing when it is time to move on is very important, and cited the analogy of the frog in the water. "You drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, and he jumps out. But if you put him in there when the water is barely warm and heat it up to boiling, he'll stay in there and die. It's good to have that sense of when it's time to go."

Paul talked about a sense of humor and the ability to establish a relationship with students and their significant adults. He said he loves the interaction with the students, and regrets that there is not enough of that in his current position, which is more administrative in nature and involves working with paper more than working with people. “The job I’m in now,” he said, “it’s important to learn how to work within the system.”

Callie named flexibility as the most important attribute of a good counselor, because “you can’t predict or anticipate everything that is going to happen in a given day.” She sees a counselor’s job as a reactive one, and said while she prefers to be proactive, that is not always possible as a counselor. She also referred to the need for a sense of humor, stating, “I don’t think I could get through life, much less my job, without my sense of humor.”

“I think it goes without saying,” Angie commented, “that you definitely have to like kids.” She went on to say that it is important to be sensitive to what students are not saying as well as what they are saying, because they typically do not tell the whole story the first time. Angie also talked about patience, and knowing the right and wrong questions to ask. “You have to know when to just be quiet and let them talk,” she said. “I think most of that comes from experience.”

Mara believes the skill that has helped her the most as a counselor, and the one that she sees as most important is the ability to change and to keep reinventing parts of herself to meet the changing needs of her students. She also talked about adaptability, and the willingness to “switch gears at the drop of a hat” when there is a need that is totally outside

the plan. “I mean,” she explained, “you can’t just tell a student to hold that suicidal thought until your committee meeting is over or you’ve finished your lunch duty.”

For Andrew, it’s all about the students. “The kids are what keep me coming in every day.” He referred to flexibility, willingness to work through change, and the ability to work with all kinds of people, but in his comments, he kept going back to the students. “They’re what it’s all about for me.”

To the final interview question, “Do you think you are a good counselor?” the answer from each of the six counselors was yes. Paul said that some days he is a better counselor than others, but that overall, he believes he is good at his job. The job itself, he admitted, is not always as affirming as he would like it to be, largely because of the limited student contact. Jack agreed that there are good days and bad days, but sees himself as a good counselor and a good fit for his current school. Angie expressed that she thinks being a parent has made her a better counselor because having her own children has helped her to have a clearer picture of student issues from a parent’s point of view. While Callie believes she is a good counselor, she expressed that she doesn’t have the patience every day for some of the situations she encounters, and acknowledged that even at age 62; she still has some growing to do. She commented that the size of her caseload and other assigned duties have limited some of her professional growth in that there isn’t time to take part in professional growth and development opportunities with all of the other demands on her time. Mara credited a sense of balance, a willingness to change over time, and acceptance of the fact that she is a counselor and not a therapist as the qualities that make her a good counselor, and

Andrew talked about the affirmation that comes from seeing students reach their potential and helping them through extremely troubling times, and said he knows he is in the right place and doing the work he was meant to do.

Despite their large caseloads, a seemingly infinite amount of work to do in a finite amount of time, administrators who do not always understand what they do, and some degree of role ambiguity, the study participants agreed that for the most part, their professional experiences have had a positive impact on their lives and their professional self-efficacy. Once again, only Paul and Callie expressed feeling of true discontent and a sense of disillusionment with certain aspects of their jobs, but even so, continue to believe in themselves and said they see themselves as good counselors. All of the counselors acknowledged that they consistently feel overwhelmed by their large caseloads and the demands on their time, as well as by unrealistic expectations from administrators and parents. They admitted that they often have to work long hours and work on their own time to meet their own and others' expectations. However, they seemed to view the challenges and the frustrations they expressed as energizing and thought-provoking aspects of the job as opposed to catalysts for self-doubt and self-deprecation. The impact of the day-to-day happenings relative to their jobs appears to have positively impacted their feelings of professional self-efficacy.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter includes a brief summary of the study, conclusions that were drawn from the results, implications for schools, and recommendations for further research. Although results in qualitative research are not intended to be generalizable beyond the immediate issues addressed with the current participants, the lived experiences as told by the six counselors in this study demonstrate the value of dialogue and need for further research surrounding the issues they identified as important.

Summary

The existing literature surrounding high school counselors and their professional issues encompassing role, job expectations, and self-efficacy provided the framework for this study's relevance. Researchers have typically used quantitative means such as surveys (Culbreth, et al., 2005), blanket questionnaires (Madden, 2002), and time studies (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2000) to explore the school counselor's world, and very little recent research appears to exist that ties day to day professional issues and job expectations to counselor self-efficacy. I chose to look at the aforementioned factors from a qualitative stance, interviewing counselors and asking them to respond to statements about the day-to-day realities that they perceive as the current state of the profession. I expected to find they were overwhelmed by job expectations unrelated to serving students, that their caseload numbers were higher than the number recommended by the ASCA (2005), and that

they did not see their roles as clearly defined, all of which were issues identified in the existing literature. The six counselors who participated in this study predictably acknowledged that their roles were not always clearly defined, that their caseload numbers are too high, and that caseload size coupled with a preponderance of other duties significantly impacts the time they are able to spend directly serving their students. Their answers to questions and reactions to statements surrounding self-efficacy, however, were something of a surprise. The counselors expressed frustration with day-to-day job related issues, but overall they strongly stated that they enjoy what they do, they plan to remain in the profession, and they see themselves as good counselors who are effective with their students and in their schools.

The purpose of this study was to examine six high school counselors' experiences within the school community in a large North Carolina county school system and to explore the impact of their identified professional issues on their overall job satisfaction and professional self-efficacy. The awareness created by their commentary is intended to provide a gateway for increased understanding of the potential impact large caseloads, high parental demands, low personal control, and limited or inappropriate administrative support may have on high school counselors' overall job satisfaction and their perceived ability to adequately serve their students.

The review of existing literature portrayed the high school counselor as performing a number of stereotypical duties that were not related to providing direct services to students, and indicated that the time counselors spend with students during their workday is far below

the 80% recommended by the ASCA (2005) and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2000, 2006). Additionally, the literature revealed that the average high school student to counselor ratio is over 400:1, far above the 250:1 ratio recommended by the ASCA. According to Borders (1992), administrators have not been cognizant of counselors' specialized skills and as a result, have assigned them to unrelated duties and responsibilities, significantly compromising the time they have available to provide direct services to their students. Current research by Sutton and Fall (1995) indicated that a high level of administrative support and the expectation of fewer activities not related to counseling were highly correlated with positive professional self-efficacy among the counselors in their study. The literature review further indicated low levels of job satisfaction among counselors who are consumed by duties not related to providing direct services to students and who are assigned caseloads in numbers far above the national standard. The responses, however, to interview and focus group questions surrounding job satisfaction and professional self-efficacy were positive among the group I studied, indicating that while they found some of their day-to-day job issues and situations frustrating and challenging, they enjoy being high school counselors, have no immediate plans to leave the profession, and believe they are effective with the students they serve. The common concerns that emerged and their minimal impact on the professional self-efficacy of the counselors in this study are not only an indication that continued study is needed to further explore the results, but represent a significant addition to the data the existing research provides.

Conclusions

One contribution that this study makes to the bank of existing literature regarding school counselors is an increased understanding of their real and perceived roles within the school as a community. In light of this information, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction may want to consider looking at the need to place some emphasis on the school counselor's role as it is defined by the ASCA and in the state job description. Effective school counseling programs are important to the climate of a school and a critical element in improving student achievement. Graduate programs in school counseling are rooted in theory and practice, creating a realization of the day-to-day-tasks and duties of counseling after they have been assigned, often by administrators who have little knowledge or understanding of the school counselor's defined role. Role ambiguity results when there is not a clear definition of what a counselor's role should be. Administrators, counselors, and sometimes even parents can have conflicting beliefs about the counselors' role, resulting in unrealistic demands on counselors' time that can limit the time they have available for student contact. A universal role definition is needed to clarify counselors' duties and responsibilities and empower them as professionals.

This study's findings further support, by providing an enhanced knowledge of some of the common goals and frustrations high school counselors share, that they want to spend more time with their students. Although they are unable to devote the recommended amount of time to providing direct services because of intervening factors, they still view the students as the most important part of the job, and agree that it is the contact with the students that

keeps them coming to work every day. The counselors are challenged by the demands of the job, the size of their caseloads, and administrative perceptions of their role and function as members of the school community. They are frustrated by parents and their demand for immediate answers and constant communication during the school day. While the counselors are overwhelmed by the requirements of their jobs versus the needs of their students, they are interested in exploring solutions that will allow them more time to directly contribute to their students' academic, personal/social, and career potential.

Finally, despite their disproportionately large caseloads, administrators who do not always know what counselors are supposed to do, an absence of clarity in terms of their role, and too many tasks to accomplish in too little time, the six counselors in this study are, for the most part, happy in their jobs and believe they are good at what they do. They expressed a desire and a drive to face the obstacles and frustrations before them and accept them as opportunities for change and challenges to overcome.

Implications

The findings of this research, based on comments from two of the participants, suggest the need for some collaborative planning among counselors as they strive to contribute to students' academic, personal/social, and career development while concurrently struggling with the ever-increasing demands of their jobs. As overwhelming as the workload might sometimes seem, counselors can contribute to potential solutions by spending time working in collaboration with one another. Research and practice do not have to be mutually exclusive activities, and counselors may find that by working as a team, they can accomplish

more. Additionally, if school counseling remains a profession in which its practitioners work largely in isolation, the knowledge that dictates their role will continue to come from those outside the profession and will be unlikely to reflect professional counseling standards.

School administrators may need to look to their counseling staff for ways to be better informed about the characteristics of a comprehensive school counseling program and the array of services a qualified counselor can realistically provide in a school. Joint staff development activities, ideally coordinated by county level administrators who supervise school counselors, would be beneficial in helping counselors and administrators work together to improve communication, establish role clarification, and contribute to an increasingly healthy and productive counseling staff and school climate.

Recommendations

The results of this study demonstrate the need for additional research surrounding the issue of how counselors are used in schools. School principals need to be better informed about what a comprehensive school counseling program is and about the services counselors can provide. A study of preparation programs for school administrators may be helpful in determining the kind of information principals need to more effectively define the counselor's role in their schools.

There is also limited research surrounding the factors that contribute to job satisfaction and professional self-efficacy in practicing high school counselors. If counselors are experiencing high levels of job satisfaction and professional self-efficacy despite the issues explored in this study, what are the contributing factors that have not been explored?

Further research is needed to gain increased insight and a heightened awareness of this important relationship. Taking a look at the factors that contribute to counselor burnout may be another way to expand this research by talking to counselors about the issues that actually do diminish their overall job satisfaction and professional self-efficacy.

Finally, a comparative study of the role of school counselors as it is defined in the professional literature, as it is implemented through the Department of Public Instruction through job descriptions, program guidelines, and evaluation instruments, and as it is practiced in schools may provide helpful information toward the development of school counseling programs that are more closely aligned with professional standards, and that promote high levels of counselor self-efficacy and job satisfaction.

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Appendices

Appendix A

September 18, 2008

Dear Wake County High School Counselor,

Good morning! I work in the Student Services area at Apex High School, and am currently beginning research that will culminate in a doctoral dissertation. I plan to graduate with an EdD from North Carolina State University this coming May. My committee approved my proposal last spring, and I recently received approval from E and R to conduct my research in Wake County. The research for my dissertation, titled Counseling Matters: A Multi-Case Study of High School Counselors on Their Role in the School Community, will require me to conduct individual interviews and a focus group with five high school counselors. Due to the nature of the study, I will select participants from a pool of volunteers in order to make sure my sample is diverse. The time commitment will be approximately 8-10 hours during second semester of the current school year. Names of participating counselors and schools will be fictionalized to ensure anonymity. If you would like to apply to participate, please complete the attached questionnaire and return it to me via email by October 12, 2008. If you are selected to participate, you will be notified via email by November 5, 2008. I look forward to hearing from many of you! If you have questions, please feel free to contact me. Have a happy and safe beginning to the school year.

Sincerely,

Michelle Windle
Apex High School
September 18, 2008

Appendix B**Research Participant Questionnaire****Name:****School:****Grade level:****Gender:****Ethnicity:****Age:****Home State:****How long have you worked in WCPSS?****Total years of Experience:****Is counseling your first career?****If not, what was your previous career?**

Questions were designed to allow the researcher to select a diverse sample. Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please return it via email to Michelle Windle, mwindle@wcpss.net. Study participants will be notified by November 5, 2008.

Appendix C

Initial Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a high school counselor?
2. Tell me about your professional background.
3. Describe your school's demographics in as much detail as you can.
4. In how many high schools have you worked as a counselor?
5. In which of these jobs did you have the best experience?
6. What factors made it the best?
7. In which of these jobs did you have the worst experience?
8. What factors made it the worst?
9. Do you see your role as having changed over time, and if so, how?
10. Are you aware of others' perceptions regarding your role change over time and how has that awareness occurred?
11. How are the perceptions of others consistent or inconsistent with your view of your role as a counselor?
12. How do others' expectations of you as a counselor affect the way you do your job (colleagues, administration, teachers, parents, students)?
13. How do these expectations impact you professionally?
14. In what ways do you think you have control/no control over the way your job is defined?
15. What would you change about the way your role is defined in your school?
16. Describe the ways you contribute to the school community as a counselor. How well do they match the way you define your role?
17. In what ways are your contributions acknowledged and supported by your colleagues? Administrators? Teachers? Parents? Students?
18. Do you have the tools you need to do your job well? What do you need that you don't have/expect to receive?
19. How have your experiences of support of the lack of it impacted you professionally?
20. Describe your workload and how you manage it.
21. How does your workload affect your stress level, emotional well being, level of energy, motivation?
22. Has work impacted your personal life in any adverse ways? What are they?
23. In general, what types of situations lead you to feel effective on the job? Ineffective? How do situations like those match with your current job?
24. What is the best thing about your current job?
25. If you had a magic wand and could change anything about your current job, what would it be?

26. Have you ever seriously considered leaving school counseling? Are there factors that would make you think about leaving your job? What are they?