School Counsellors' Perceptions of their Effectiveness

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Abstract

This exploratory study investigated the perceptions of school counsellors regarding their effectiveness. The sample consisted of the entire population of counsellors within an urban school district, and included 30 school-based resident counsellors and 8 staff specialists. Participants were interviewed utilizing the Critical Incident Technique. Analysis of the interviews resulted in the identification of eight problem areas in which counsellors perceived having an impact or in which there was little perceived impact. The participants also identified a number of variables that were instrumental in their effectiveness. Counsellors pointed to several barriers that prevented them from meeting the needs of students, including high student-to-counsellor ratios, increasing numbers of crisis cases, and inadequate training to handle certain problems. This study points out the possibilities of counsellors, administrators, and counsellor educators working to improve the effectiveness of school counselling services.

Résumé

Cette étude exploratoire a examiné les perceptions de conseillers scolaires face à leur efficacité. L'échantillon comprenait tous les conseillers travaillant dans un conseil scolaire d'une région urbaine, incluant 30 conseillers scolaires assignés à une école et 8 spécialistes. Les participants ont été interviewés avec l'utilisation de la "Critical Incident Technique" (Technique d'incident critique). L'analyse des interviews identifient huit champs problématiques dans lesquels les conseillers perçoivent jouer un rôle ou encore dans lesquels ils ne percevaient pas avoir d'impact. Les participants ont aussi identifié un nombre de variables qui se sont avérées instrumentales au niveau de leur efficacité dans leur travail. Les conseillers ont mentionné qu'ils rencontraient plusieurs barrières qui les empêchaient de répondre aux besoins des étudiants, entre autres les ratios élevés d'étudiants pour un conseiller, le nombre croissant de cas en crise et une formation inadéquate qui rend difficile la maîtrise de certains problèmes. Cette étude mentionne les possibilités pour les conseillers scolaires, les administrateurs et les conseillers éducateurs de travailler ensemble pour améliorer l'efficacité des services du conseillers scolaires.

The effectiveness of school counsellors has been researched from a number of different points of view. During the 1960's and early 1970's the emphasis was placed on the qualities of the counsellor as a person (Boy & Pine, 1978; McConnaughy, 1987) and the qualities of the counselling relationship (Belkin, 1981). Other studies have measured counsellor effectiveness in terms of specific interventions utilized (Gerler & Crabbs, 1984; Muro, Kameen & Brown, 1978; West, Sonstegard, & Hagerman, 1980).

Recently, some researchers have measured counsellor effectiveness according to their time and work emphasis. Wiggins and Moody (1987) found that counsellors were perceived by students as being highly effective when over 70% of their time was spent in direct individual and group counselling activities. These counsellors also had organized counselling

programs. Boser, Poppen, & Thompson (1988) found that counsellors were perceived to be less effective by students, parents, and school staff as student-to-counsellor ratios increased and as the number of students who could not be adequately serviced by the counsellor increased.

Studies done in the area of school counsellor effectiveness have mainly relied on quantitative data or on objective criteria such as questionnaires as a means of measurement. There is a shortage of studies that have utilized qualitative data or subjective criteria such as interviews to study the factors that make counsellors effective. A search of the literature revealed only one qualitative study (Murray, Levitov, Castenell, & Joubert, 1987) that gathered the subjective impressions of school counsellors about their own effectiveness. That study was limited in its scope and population. Neimeyer & Resnikoff (1982) emphasize that richness and depth can be added to studies by uncovering the subjective meanings of events.

The intent of this paper is to describe an exploratory study that was designed to involve directly school counsellors in evaluating their effectiveness by looking at the areas in which they perceived having had an impact or having had little impact. School counsellors believe certain factors make a difference in their ability to have an impact and it was felt that an in-depth study of their day-to-day experiences would provide valuable information about these factors.

METHOD

The Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986) was utilized. It was anticipated that the open-ended nature of this method would allow for the emergence of incidents that were significant to the counselling staff interviewed, while also providing for in-depth exploration of the specific events that were instrumental to the outcomes of the incidents described.

Sample

The sample consisted of the entire population of counselling staff within an urban school district in the province of Alberta. The population of counselling staff within this district included 30 school-based resident counsellors (i.e., 18 elementary-junior high and 12 high-school counsellors), and 8 staff specialists who provided assessment, psychological testing, and behaviour management services to the schools within the district. There were 19 females and 19 males in the sample; 10 participants' highest degree was a bachelor's degree, 15 participants had a graduate diploma, and 13 participants had a Master's degree. Counselling experience of the participants ranged from 2 to 24 years.

Data Collection

Interviews of approximately 30 minutes were conducted with each staff member by a trained graduate student. Interviews were audio-taped to ensure complete content coverage which is central to the Critical Incident Technique. Participants were asked to be specific when describing incidents in order to enhance the quality of the information collected. Clarifying information was sought surrounding the people, events, or circumstances that were instrumental in the outcomes for each of the incidents. Table 1 outlines the interview guide used for the study.

TABLE 1

Interview Guide

"Please focus on your experience as a member of the counselling staff within the school system. Presumably there have been times when you felt as though you were making a difference. There may also have been times when you felt as though you made little or no impact. Please turn your attention to both your successes, and to what you perceive as experiences of little impact."

The Critical Incidents

"Please identify and describe a particular incident where you felt as though you made a significant impact as a member of the counselling staff."

• Search for additional incidents

"Please identify and describe an incident where you felt as though you made little impact as a member of the counselling staff."

• Search for additional incidents

Data Analysis

The incidents identified by counsellors were written on cards. These cards were sorted into the problem areas identified by counsellors in which they perceived themselves as being effective or ineffective. Cards were then sorted according to the variables that contributed to each incident having had a positive or negative impact.

RESULTS

The incidents described by the counsellors fell into two major groupings consistent with the interview questions (i.e., incidents in which counsellors perceived having an impact and incidents in which there was little perceived impact). Sorting of the carded incidents within each group identified eight problem areas. Further analysis of the problem areas identified themes (i.e., people, circumstances, or events) that made a difference to the outcome in each of the identified problem areas. Table 2 indicates the frequency of problem areas in which an impact or lack of impact occurred. Table 3 shows the themes identified by counsellors as

having contributed to a positive outcome. Table 4 indicates the themes identified by counsellors as having contributed to a negative outcome.

TABLE 2

*Frequency of Problem Areas
in which Impact or Lack of Impact Occurred*

Problem Areas	Number of incidents in which impact occurred	Number of incidents in which little impact occurred
School Problems*	27	29
Family Problems	18	12
Suicide	7	6
Sexual Abuse	5	2
Peer Relationships	5	1
Student Pregnancy	3	1
Vocational	1	1
Miscellaneous†	4	3
Total	70	55

* School problems included disruptive classroom behaviour, truancy, achievement problems, and placement of students into more suitable programs.
† Miscellaneous problems included problems that were unique to one student.

TABLE 3

*Frequency of Themes by Problem Area
in which Impact Occurred*

Theme	School Problems	Family Problems	Suicide	Sexual Abuse	Peer Rel.	Student Pregnancy	Voca-tional	Misc.
Counsellor Support	22	13	6	4	3	3	1	3
Parent Involvement	11	10	7	3	1	1	—	—
Teamwork	16	2	5	3	1	1	—	—
Use of Resource Agencies	2	3	2	4	2	1	—	—
Client Motivation	1	1	—	1	—	—	—	1
Follow-up	1	4	1	—	—	—	—	—
Group Counselling	—	1	—	—	2	—	—	—
Assessments	3	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Other Circumstances	5	1	—	—	—	—	—	—

TABLE 4

Frequency of Themes by Problem Area in which Little Impact Occurred

Theme	School Problems	Family Problems	Suicide	Sexual Abuse	Peer Rel.	Student Pregnancy	Voca-tional	Misc.
Inappropriate Conceptualization of Cases	3	—	1	—	1	—	—	—
Lack of Parent Involvement/ Co-operation	7	4	4	—	—	—	—	—
Ineffective Teamwork	5	2	—	1	—	—	—	—
Lack of Referral Resources	4	1	1	—	—	—	—	—
Lack of Client Motivation	8	1	—	—	—	1	—	—
Lack of Time	3	2	—	2	1	—	1	—
Lack of Adequate Training	—	—	1	1	—	—	—	3
Other Circumstances	1	1	2	1	—	—	1	3

Reliability

Upon completion of the classification of the data an independent researcher who was familiar with the Critical Incident Technique was asked to sort a random sampling of the incidents into the categories established by the researcher. Forty-five cards were randomly chosen from the stack of 125 cards on which the problem areas were identified. The Researcher was able to classify correctly 41 out of 45 incidents, obtaining 91% agreement.

Summary and Elaboration of Results

As indicated by Table 2, the 38 participants in the study reported 70 incidents for which they perceived having an impact and 55 incidents for which they felt they had little impact. The major areas identified by counselling staff in which they perceived having an impact included school problems (N=27), family problems (N=18), suicide (N=7), and sexual abuse (N=5). The major areas identified by counselling staff in which they felt they had little impact included school problems (N=29), family problems (N=12), and suicide (N=6). In working with school problems, counsellors saw themselves as having an impact most often with classroom behaviour problems and with placing students into more suitable programs. School problems for which counsellors felt least effective included truancy and achievement problems.

As indicated by Table 3, the major factors counsellors identified as having an impact included counsellor support, parent involvement, and teamwork. Participants provided 55 examples in which counsellor support given to students and parents had been important in bringing about a positive outcome. In working with behaviour problems, for example, some participants described working for a year or more with a student in individual counselling sessions. Counsellors described the importance of establishing a trusting counselling relationship, being an effective listener, and recognizing and using the strengths of the student. Many participants described obtaining a positive outcome with family problems after calling parents by telephone, visiting the home of a student, or involving the family in counselling sessions.

Counsellors provided 33 examples of parent involvement that resulted in positive change. They emphasized the increased potential for having an impact that results when parents become involved in helping to resolve the problem. Several participants described their role as an intermediary or mediator between students and parents, or between students and teachers, stressing the importance of establishing open communication channels in order to resolve problems effectively.

Counsellors provided 28 examples in which consulting with other staff members had brought about an impact, and emphasized the importance of effective teamwork in dealing with difficult cases. One counsellor described having had an impact with a case in which a student was referred to her after a suicide attempt. This counsellor worked closely with other staff members and involved several resource people. She emphasized the shared responsibility, support, and added expertise that had been provided through teamwork.

Other variables that counsellors perceived as contributing to their effectiveness included use of resource agencies, motivation of the client, group counselling sessions, follow-up work, and use of assessments.

As indicated by Table 4, the major factors that counsellors said contributed to their inability to have an impact included lack of parent involvement or co-operation, lack of client motivation, and lack of time. Counsellors provided 15 examples in which lack of parent involvement had been instrumental in a negative outcome. Several participants reported having had little impact when parents or significant adults in the student's life refused to acknowledge the problem or when parents neglected to follow through with the suggestions provided. One counsellor talked about having worked with a student who was not attending school. Despite several interventions including individual counselling, visiting the home and consulting with the student's mother, the truancy problem continued.

Counsellors related 10 examples in which lack of motivation or co-operation on the part of the student had resulted in an inability to have

an impact. Students with family problems, for example, were sometimes unwilling to involve their parents, or were not ready to take advantage of the help available to them. In other cases counsellors perceived having had little impact when students left the school without resolving the problem adequately.

Participants described 9 examples in which they perceived having had little impact due to insufficient time to perform counselling, consulting or follow-up functions adequately or consistently. One counsellor stated that she felt she had had little impact with a student who had been raped. In this case, the counsellor was working in another school on the day following the incident when the student sought her support. This counsellor expressed her frustration at being unavailable to this student at a crucial time.

Other variables that counsellors perceived as contributing to their lack of effectiveness included inappropriate conceptualization of cases, ineffective teamwork, lack of referral resources, and insufficient training or experience to deal adequately with certain cases.

In addition to the insights provided by counselling staff about the specific incidents in which they perceived themselves as being effective or ineffective, many of the participants also identified other barriers they perceived as preventing them from adequately meeting the needs of students. Over half of the counsellors stated that high student-to-counsellor ratios had severely limited the number of roles and functions that they could perform. Many expressed concern and frustration about being unable to spend adequate time carrying out developmental or preventative classroom work. At least 10 of the 38 counsellors emphasized that ever-increasing numbers of severely troubled children have necessitated a focus on crisis intervention, to the further exclusion of other tasks and other students. Several participants described feeling inadequately trained to handle certain crisis situations, and expressed a desire to receive further education and training in areas such as behaviour management, family counselling, and crisis counselling.

DISCUSSION

The major purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of school counsellors regarding their effectiveness, thereby directly involving them in an evaluative role. The findings indicate that the counsellors from this school system view their major roles as those of counselling students and consulting with parents and other school staff. This is consistent with other studies which have found that counsellors place their major time and work emphasis on counselling and consulting roles (Carreiro & Schulz, 1988; Tennyson, Miller, Skovholt & Williams, 1989).

The majority of incidents described by the counsellors in this study revolve around school problems and family related problems. Partici-

pants place a high priority on individual counselling sessions and also emphasize the importance of involving parents, school staff and resource agencies in helping them to be more effective. Some studies indicate that students also perceive counsellor effectiveness to be related to the direct contact of counsellors with students and availability of counsellors to students, teachers and parents (Wells & Ritter, 1979; Wiggins & Moody, 1987).

The major barriers that counsellors identify as preventing them from adequately meeting the needs of students include high student-to-counsellor ratios, increasing numbers of crisis cases, and inadequate training to handle certain problems. This finding is similar to that of other researchers (Boser et. al., 1988; Hassard, 1981), who have concluded that role conflict, high student-to-counsellor ratios and increased focus on crisis situations have resulted in the potential for decreased effectiveness and increased stress and risk of burnout for school counsellors.

Practical Implications

Since the participants interviewed were from a single, urban Alberta school system, care must be taken in generalizing the findings. However, this study has a number of practical implications for counsellors, administrators, and counsellor educators that are applicable to similar systems.

The counsellors interviewed for this study describe having positive results in many of the cases with which they had worked. The incidents described provide evidence of the many strengths that school counsellors bring to their work, including counselling skills to work with a wide variety of problem areas, motivation to communicate and work effectively with students, parents and other staff, and abilities to co-ordinate effectively the many tasks with which they are presented on a daily basis. Overall, the counsellors in this school system felt very positive about their effectiveness.

The findings of this study suggest the importance of working towards enhancing the possibilities for school counsellors to have impact with even greater numbers of students. The counsellors in this study had a number of suggestions for support that could be provided to decrease their stress level and increase their effectiveness. Counselling staff suggested that they could benefit from colleague support groups or in-service programs that would give them opportunities for learning, self-renewal, and camaraderie. Activities of this nature would provide counsellors with additional skills as well as peer sharing and guidance, and would perhaps alleviate some of the job stress associated with school counselling.

Role overload could also be decreased by finding alternative ways to meet the needs of students and families. One resource that could be

tapped for meeting these needs is the potential social support available through the larger community. Counselling staff might consider establishing event-centered support groups comprised of community members as an adjunct service to supplement those services already provided by them. Support groups could provide opportunities for those involved to identify with and learn from others experiencing similar problems.

Counsellors also pointed out the importance of administrators and counsellor educators working with them to establish educational opportunities that meet their current training needs. Growing numbers of social and family problems have resulted in an increased need for school counselling services, and for continuous professional renewal and updated training for school counsellors (Schmidt, 1984; Wilson & Rotter, 1980).

Increasingly diverse student problems and the current economic situation have made the need for effective school counselling services even more critical than in the past. Counsellors provide unique services within the school that no other school personnel are trained to provide, and contribute much support to the educational process. Maximizing counsellor effectiveness is a shared responsibility of counselling staff, administrators, and counsellor educators. It is imperative that counselling staff take a proactive role in identifying their training needs to counsellor educators and in dialoguing with school administrators about their workloads and their needs. It is also imperative that administrators and counsellor educators respond with active awareness to the needs of students and, in turn, the counsellors who work with them.

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