

PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF IDEAL COUNSELLOR ROLE

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Abstract

The literature indicates that secondary school principals are significant determiners of counsellor role.

Tension between principals and counsellors is not from day-to-day function but from differences in basic roles. In terms of priority, principals' primary concern is the institution, and secondary concern is the individual. Thus conflict in role but not duty or function may be built into the situation. Principals' expectations of secondary school counsellors include administrative support, information source, effective relationships and delivery of guidance services. Principals favour counsellors serving as facilitators of educational and vocational planning, as consultants, and as administrative agents. It is crucial that principals, counsellors and teachers understand their respective roles through negotiation and cooperation in order to maximize the learning process.

Résumé

Si l'on s'en tient à la recherche faite à date, il appert que les Directeurs des écoles secondaires déterminent en quelque sorte le rôle du Conseiller en orientation.

Il peut y avoir certaines tensions entre la direction et les préposés à l'orientation mais celles-ci ne trouvent pas leur raison d'être dans l'opération journalière de l'institution mais bien dans la nature même des rôles qu'est appelé à jouer chacun de ces deux groupes.

Si l'on étudie les priorités, on a tôt fait de se rendre compte que la direction se préoccupe avant tout du bon fonctionnement de son école; son souci de chaque étudiant comme individu vient en deuxième place. Quant au Conseiller en orientation ces deux préoccupations sont renversées. Alors s'il y a conflit, c'est bel et bien un conflit de rôle et non pas de responsabilité ou de fonction. Les Directeurs des écoles secondaires s'attendent à ce que les Conseillers en orientation puissent les appuyer dans leur rôle administratif, sachent leur procurer les renseignements nécessaires, soient en mesure d'établir un rapport efficace tout en jouant leur rôle d'orienteurs compétents. En d'autres mots, les Conseillers en orientation deviennent des aides dans le domaine de la planification des programmes, consultants et agents d'administration.

Il est donc important que la direction, les orienteurs, le corps professoral déterminent et comprennent les paramètres de leurs responsabilités respectives et dialoguent dans une atmosphère de coopération et d'harmonie afin d'assurer le succès de l'institution.

Background of the Study

Over the past decade the development of guidance services in the secondary schools of Canada has brought into focus certain problems related to the function of guidance programs in education. Paramount among these has been the varying perception of the role of the school counsellor held by school administrators, teachers, students, counsellor-educators, and the counsellors themselves.

The need for this study springs from the confusion that exists today concerning these varying expectations of the functions of the secondary school counsellor. There is also a need for better understanding of the different priorities which those who utilize his services assign to the numerous professional activities of the counsellor. These conflicting expectations were described some time ago (Hatch, Dressel, & Costar) in the following way:

The counsellor has a primary responsibility to the counsellee, but he also has a responsibility to the school administration and to society. Conflicts often develop among these responsibilities, and there may be cases where the order of importance is difficult to determine. (p.8)

The result has been that job descriptions for secondary school counsellors often include duties which are broad in their scope, vaguely defined, and sometimes incompatible. Further statements of inconsistencies and conflicts could be cited, all of which point to the difficulties involved in clarifying the school counsellor role.

Over the past decade many attempts have been made to define and clarify the role and function of school counsellors, both in Canada and throughout the world. These have usually taken the form of statements developed by professional school counsellor organizations, government departments, and authors of related books, articles and dissertations. Examples include a committee report completed for the Ontario School Counsellors' Association entitled *The Role of the Counsellor* (1971), a statement by the American School Counselor Association entitled *The Role of the Secondary School Counselor* (1974), curricula outlines from various state and provincial departments of education, and publications by practicing counsellors and counsellor-educators.

Among all of the above statements, the three most common dimensions of the school counsellor's role are counselling, consulting and coordinating guidance services. Despite all these attempts to clarify the function of the school counsellor, it is evident that many differences of opinion still exist. Because of this, the counsellor himself has difficulty in determining just what his role should be. This is due, in part, to the strong influence of school principals.

Because the principal is usually in the best position to influence the structure of his school's organization, he/she is probably the most significant determiner of the school counsellor's role. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the key person to help eliminate the confusion regarding the role and function of the school counsellor is the principal with whom he works. Kehas (1972) was very empathic about this point when he wrote:

The key person to be considered has to be the principal. Educational administration texts and written law notwithstanding, the simple truth is that schooling takes place in separate buildings and that principals are in charge of their buildings. . . . Principals have different priorities, different understandings of human behavior and its relation to self-development, and different commitments which grow out of

(and/or lead to) different responsibilities. The principal has much more power than the individual counsellor or the counselling department. (p. 3)

At the same time, many principals hold a different view of the proper role for school counsellors from that held by most members of the counselling profession.

Although there have been a number of attempts over the years to describe this difference, there has been little research designed to explain why it exists. Different perceptions of counsellor involvement, and the gradations in the importance of that involvement, are derived from the differing sets of expectations held by principals and by counsellors. Thus, there is considerable evidence of a need for additional research which focuses upon perceptions of the secondary school counsellor's role as seen by school principals, the chief determiners of the counsellor's role and function within their schools. This point is stressed by Hill (1964):

The school administrator plays a significant role in the matter. He nominates many of the counsellors who seek the preparation. He selects and appoints them. He directs their on-the-job efforts which often actually define the counsellor's functions. One of the badly neglected aspects of the development of guidance in American schools is the more systematic professional involvement of school administrators in the definition of the counsellor's function. (p. 57)

Thus, the need for a better understanding of the principal's perceptions of the secondary school counsellor's role and function is clear.

Purpose of the Study

Since the need is quite evident, this study was designed to explore the current perceptions of the "ideal" role for counsellors in secondary schools as seen by school principals. More specifically, an attempt was made to discover and analyze the differences between the perceptions of the "ideal" counsellor role held by secondary school counsellors and those held by their principals, with major emphasis upon the principals. The chief focus was on the underlying reasons why these differences exist.

The importance of the study is indicated by the magnitude of the differences in perceptions of the school counsellor's role held by counsellors when compared with those held by school administrators. These differences have been revealed in several ways.

One way is through surveys conducted by provincial education departments for the purpose of evaluating guidance services. Such surveys often

reveal misconceptions about the objectives and services of the guidance program held by students, parents, and teachers as well as principals. It is surely crucial that those persons responsible for providing school guidance services should be aware of this problem and the underlying factors. It is equally important that the recipients of the school counsellor's services be aware of the kind and quality of service to which they are entitled. It is particularly vital that both principals and counsellors strive to avoid duplication of services and to ensure that scarce resources be wisely allocated.

Design of the Study

The scope of the study included counsellors, principals and vice-principals in all the secondary schools under the public county boards of education in the five counties with one exception. Three counties, Elgin, Kent and Middlesex are located in Region 5, Southwestern Ontario; two counties, Grey and Oxford, are in Region 4, Midwestern Ontario. The exception is the city of London, which has its own board of education and its own research facilities, so it was excluded from the study. From 33 counties in Ontario, the five counties listed exhibit similar characteristics in both demographic and educational aspects and so are considered representative of the Province.

The investigation included all the principals, vice-principals and counsellors in all the secondary schools in these five counties, insofar as the collection of data in Phase I of the study is concerned. The total number of personnel in Phase I consisted of 67 administrators and 96 counsellors in 33 secondary schools. These schools included large, medium and small enrollments, urban and rural schools, collegiate institutions and district high schools.

The study explores the perceptions of the "ideal" counsellor role and function held by principals, vice-principals and counsellors. It does not make provision for the "performed" role-function as compared to the "ideal" role-function. Thus, the study has been delimited to focus upon perceptions of what the secondary school counsellor *should* do rather than what he/she does.

The study was carried out in three phases. The purpose of the first phase was to discover the areas of greatest disagreement between secondary school principals and counsellors in regard to what the counsellor's "ideal" role should be. Emphasis was placed upon what the counsellor "should" do rather than what he/she "does". The findings were used to identify the areas most worthy of further exploration in the interview which was carried out in the next phase of this study.

As was pointed out earlier, this particular study was limited to only one of the role determiners of the counsellor — the principal. In the process of exploring principals' perceptions, several dimensions were viewed. First, the specific ten counsellor tasks in which principals and counsellors reported greatest differences. Second, principals were presented with six situations and asked to state how they would deal with these and the reasons for their decisions. The assumption was that the principal, as chief administrator, may choose to deal with the case exclusively or he may refer to another person and follow through while retaining primary responsibility. A third alternative would be for the principal to share the responsibility with others, e.g., a case conference or a meeting with staff members in a team approach. A fourth alternative would be one in which the principal would delegate complete responsibility to another person, for example, the counsellor. This would represent the least degree of administrator involvement. The principal, by indicating his style of dealing with each problem, would also reveal the degree to which he considered it appropriate to consult with other resource personnel within the educational system or the community.

In the third part of Phase II (*Structured Interviews*) principals were asked to explain their reactions to the counsellor acting in six specific roles. These roles, drawn from the literature, included the counsellor acting as an administrative agent, a student advocate, a consultant to principal and teacher, an educational and career planning facilitator, a disciplinarian and a therapist. The rationale in this part was to provide principals an opportunity to express their expectations of the appropriateness of a counsellor serving in these six different types of roles.

Additional attention was paid to the principals' sense of the importance of the traditional guidance service area or areas of function. The purpose was to obtain principals' priorities by ranking the seven areas in order of importance as they perceived them. This information was valuable in establishing the degree of importance principals assigned to the different services in the school guidance program and reflected their attitude toward the allocation of counsellors' function.

Phase III (*Structured Interviews*) was designed to further explore principals' perceptions of the ideal role of the counsellor in order to validate the finding of the first two phases.

Principals were asked to describe what they thought should be the role of the counsellor and to specify their reasons. This enabled principals to express, in their own words, their expectations of the professional school counsellor.

As a further dimension, principals were requested to express how they saw themselves as role determiners and to justify their position. It is clear that principals hold the power of sanctions and rewards for their staff members.

Principals were also asked to react to the findings reported by principals in Phase II regarding six specific counsellor roles.

Findings

In both direct and indirect ways principals influence the roles of their counsellors, and thus are significant role determiners.

Second, it is evident that in very broad, general terms there is agreement between principals and counsellors in their perceptions of ideal counsellor function. The Phase I results and the interview results indicate that the groups tend to agree that the counsellor should serve primarily in the traditional six guidance areas: Counselling; Information; Orientation; Student Data; Placement and Follow-up.

Third, however, it is fair to conclude from the evidence that there are definite differences between principals and counsellors in the perceptions they hold of the ideal counsellor role. Most principals view the counsellor as a generalist with competencies to deal with a number of areas, like student data, rather than as a specialist with one exclusive function, i.e., counselling.

Fourth, the perceptions of counsellor role held by principals varied considerably with the demands upon their own position. They tended to favour counsellors serving as administrative agents and consultants. This was based upon their needs for control and leadership, and for information on which to make administrative decisions and evaluations.

Fifth, principals themselves experienced role pressures, role strain and role conflict. These pressures came most often from the demands of their superiors in board and ministry offices and usually took the form of requests for more statistical information. This resulted in delegation by principals in order to balance their own expectations.

Sixth, principals and counsellors tended to use role bargaining to negotiate their roles. Negotiation and consultation are means of reducing the dissonance and resolving strains and conflicts inherent in the different perspectives. In this process principals held greater sanctions and thus tended to exert greater influence than counsellors in the power structure. However, counsellors were perceived as holding some degree of influence through the students and their ability to interpret student needs to both principal and teachers.

Seventh, principals perceived counsellors as only one kind of personnel responsible for the delivery of the six traditional services. From the principals interviewed, the evidence showed that counsellors were not seen as unique. They did not hold a monopoly over the provision of guidance services. This conclusion is based on the responses that alternative methods should be explored using teachers, counsellors, specialists, parents and administrators.

Eighth, principals saw the need for greater clarification and communication of the counsellor role to the various publics. They felt that this communication should be maintained in order to produce maximum benefit from the resources available and to meet the demands for accountability in the provision of quality education.

SUMMARY

The main finding of the study was that there was a definite difference between the perceptions of ideal counsellor role held by principals and counsellors. While there was considerable agreement as to the functions of the counsellor, there was much disagreement as to the school counsellor's role. Principals saw the counsellor's role as largely one of administrative support. Their perspective was most often from the point of view of the institution while that of the counsellors' sprang from the needs of individual students.

Such conflict is inherent in most schools. It stems from the discrepancy between the almost universally stated goal of education — to meet the unique needs of the individual students — and the operational structure of most schools in which educational programs are organized around groups of 30 or 35 pupils. Principals, because of their obligations to boards and departments of education, tended to be more concerned about the institution, the group, and the student body. Counsellors, on the other hand, because of their professional training had as their main concern, the needs and welfare of individual students. In terms of priority, the principal's primary concern was for the welfare of the institution and his or her secondary concern was for individual students. With counsellors the opposite was true. Thus, conflict in role perception is almost a certainty.

If either the principal or the counsellor is unaware of this inherent role conflict they may personalize it. In such a case, each may resent the other. Where principals do not understand the value of a student advocate, they feel more comfortable psychologically when the counsellor adopts either a role similar to theirs or operates as an administrative support person.

The need for both a student advocate and a protector for the student body is apparent. Tension between the principal and the counsellor results not from differences in their day-to-day activities but from differences in their basic roles. Thus, principal-counsellor conflict is an inherent part of staff relationships in most schools today. To work within this framework requires both understanding and considerable skill at interpersonal conflict resolution on the part of both the principal and the counsellor.

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