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The Role of School Counselors in Serving Students with Disabilities

Milsom, A. S. (2002). Students with disabilities: School counselor involvement and preparation. *Professional School Counseling, 5*(5), 331-338.

What role do school counselors play in serving students with disabilities? This is a difficult question to answer when one considers the multifaceted role of the school counselor and the great diversity of the students with whom school counselors work. There is little research about this critical component of the school counselor role and function.

Milsom (2002) examined the role that school counselors play in the academic lives of students with disabilities by conducting a survey study with the intent of determining: (a) the activities that school counselors engage in related to students with disabilities; (b) school counselors' level of preparedness to perform these activities; and (c) trends in school counselor education programs in training school counselors to work effectively with students with disabilities.

Method

Research Design and Participants

In this exploratory study 100 practicing school counselors were given the School Counselor Preparation Survey-Revised. Participants were recruited through the American Counseling Association (ACA). The participating school counselors were required to have completed their graduate work between 1994 and 2000 to ensure that the participants were working after the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and to "provide time for the integration of relevant content with respect to students with disabilities into school counselor education programs."

The age of the participants ranged from 24 to 60. Eighty-four percent of the participants were female and 16% were male. Ethnicity of the participants included 3% African American, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3% Latino/Latina or Hispanic, 2% Native American, 90% White, and 1% identified as other. Twenty-eight percent of participants worked in elementary schools; 38% worked in middle/junior high schools; and 34% worked in high schools. Participants had an average of 2.63 years of experience as school counselors.

Instruments

The School Counselor Preparation Survey-Revised (SCPS-R) was developed for this study. The SCPS-R was designed to measure the activities school counselors perform with students with disabilities, the school counselor's preparedness level in working with this population, and the education/training they received to work with students with disabilities. The survey is divided into four sections. Section I asked participants to indicate the number of students in their overall caseload and how many of those students are identified as having a disability. Section II asked participants to indicate, using a six-point Likert-type scale that ranged from "completely unprepared" to "completely prepared," their overall level of preparedness to provide various services to students with disabilities. These services included 11 items related to individual and group counseling, advocating, and assisting with behavior modification plans. In section III, participants were asked to indicate how many of the 11 services they had performed for students

with disabilities. Section IV asked participants to specify the number of graduate courses they had completed which focused on students with disabilities, the number of courses in which this population was discussed, and the number of practical experiences they received during graduate school in working with students with disabilities.

Results

Providing individual and/or group counseling to students with disabilities was the highest performed activity, with 82.8% of the participants stating that they had provided these services. Delivering transition services was identified as the least performed activity, with only 40.4% citing involvement in this activity. A majority of the participants indicated that they felt “somewhat prepared” to work with students with disabilities. Additionally, the participants indicated that they felt “prepared” to assist this population in planning for transitions (school-to-career and postsecondary) and “prepared” to provide these students with individual and/or group counseling.

Participants reported taking an average of 0.8 graduate courses that focused on students with disabilities, with an overall range of 0 to 6 courses, and an average of 2.40 courses that presented information on students with disabilities. Participants reported having between 0 and 10 practical experiences ($M = 1.76$) during graduate school (i.e. internship, practicum) working with students with disabilities. The researcher further examined the relationship between the participants’ education in working with students with disabilities and the participants’ feelings of preparedness to provide services to this population. Results of this multi-linear regression found that the more courses the participants completed the more prepared they felt to work with students with disabilities.

Discussion and Implications

Results demonstrate that school counselors perform many activities with students with disabilities, but have little training in working with this population. This disparity between training and job expectations may have consequences for school counselors’ ability to effectively work with students with disabilities. Further research is needed to determine if level of training is related to effectiveness of the delivery of student services.

To address the issues of school counselor training and preparedness to work with students with disabilities, Milsom encourages school counselors to advocate for three changes. First, graduate programs should better train school counseling candidates to work with students with disabilities. This may require current school counselors to advocate for this change by contacting their graduate training programs and informing those educators of the need for classes on issues related to disability populations, special education law, and the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process. Second, school counselors can advocate for disability education in their own schools through in-service activities and professional development. Third, school counselors can create networks with one other, administrators, and other school personnel to provide support and mentoring in working with students with disabilities.

Critical Analysis

The author reported four limitations to the study.

1. The results cannot be generalized to the entire school counselor population because data was gathered from members of the American Counseling Association (ACA) rather than the American School Counseling Association (ASCA). The author indicates that differences likely exist between school counselors who join ACA as opposed to ASCA, and vice versa. The researcher could have addressed this issue by asking participants about their professional affiliations.
2. The study does not address how well the participants perform the 11 activities listed on the survey. The author suggests examining the school counselors' level of preparation in relation to their performance of these activities.
3. The author points out that there is a large variability in school counselors' educational preparedness for working with students with disabilities, making it difficult to get an accurate measurement of any one particular experience or intervention that was helpful in working with this population.
4. The SCPS-R that was developed for this study lacks reliability and validity data.

Other areas of limitations of the study not identified by the author:

1. The author did not disaggregate the data by the school counselor's environment: elementary, middle/junior high, and high school. Transition, counseling, and career guidance services differ at each of these levels. By not providing information regarding differences among these three groups, we cannot truly understand the role that school counselors play in working with students with disabilities on such pertinent issues. To obtain comprehensive data for each of these groups a larger sample size representative of the three environments is needed.
2. Since school counseling activities and the role of the school counselor vary from school to school, it may be difficult to answer one of the original questions of the study, "What activities do school counselors engage in for students with disabilities?" The answer to this question may differ based on the perceived role of the counselor in a given school. Some school counselors are viewed more as administrators and may spend much of their time disciplining students and administering tests, whereas others are seen as mental health counselors and may spend more time engaging in individual and/or group counseling activities. Allowing the participants to identify their primary roles and functions in their school would help in determining their level of interaction with students with disabilities.
3. The author did not provide information regarding the areas in which the participants felt the least prepared. This information would be useful in helping to better train school counselors in particular areas.

Further Research: The Role of School Counselors in the IEP Process

Further studies are needed about the role of the school counselor in working with students with disabilities. One particularly important area of focus for future research is the role the school counselor plays in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process. In this study, 80.8% of the participants served on multidisciplinary teams and 73.7% provided feedback for multidisciplinary teams. Although the author does not define what a multidisciplinary team is, it is likely that this work is related to IEP teams. Research questions of interest include: What role do school counselors typically play in regards to the IEP team? What training have school

counselors received regarding providing input to the IEP process and/or writing IEPs? When school counselors are involved in the IEP process, are there differences in the student outcomes?

With over 6.6 million, or 13.7%, of students in the U.S. being served under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005), school counselors can have a significant impact in the lives of students with disabilities. School counselors provide transition planning, career exploration, educational interventions, and other services for students with special needs, and thus need academic and training experiences to ensure that they are supporting success for this population. The recommended next step is to explore the role of the school counselor in the IEP process and to develop a set of best practices that can be used as an educational training guide for the school counseling profession.

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References

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