What Counselors Say About Their Role with Deaf Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This article reports the qualitative findings of a larger study which examined the role of public school counselors serving deaf students. The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) has a model that prescribes a specific role for school counselors. However, the 6 participants revealed experiences that were different from the ASCA model. Five themes were identified from the interviews. Themes were experience as authority, Director of Negotiations/Collaborations, isolation, surrogate parent/social confidante, and martyr. Implications for practice and research are provided for practitioners, researchers, and counselor educators.

Keywords: deaf, school counseling, counselor role, qualitative research

Introduction

Since the passage of P.L. 94-142 in 1975, there has been a decrease in enrollment at residential schools for the deaf and an increase in enrollment of deaf students in public schools (Luckner, Muir, Howell, Sebald, & Young, 2005; Moores, 2006). Due to the migration of deaf students, teachers of the deaf are readily found in many public schools across the United States. However, related service providers such as counselors, social workers and school psychologists qualified to work with deaf students, readily available in residential schools, did not make the migration to public schools. When one examines the Annual Reference Edition of the American Annals of the Deaf (Moores, 2005), it is clear that the inclusion of related service providers, including counselors for deaf students, is inconsistent in public school programs for the deaf across the nation.

This article reports a portion of the findings of a larger study conducted by the first author who examined the role of counselors primarily serving students identified as deaf and hard of hearing in public schools. The purpose of the research was to more clearly identify the role of school counselors serving deaf students in public schools, advocate for additional personnel to serve deaf students in public schools, advocate for the needs

of deaf students, and identify additional implications related to this niche area.

Literature Review

Prior studies found that students who are deaf or hard of hearing have unique educational (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996, Moores, 1996; Schein, 1989) and emotional needs (Antia & Kreimeyer, 1996; Spencer, Erting, & Marschark, 2000). Although they have unique needs, Vernon and Andrews (1990) reported that deaf students were historically counseled primarily by untrained staff until the 1970s. Some of these early "counselors" were teachers or dormitory supervisors at residential schools, frequently fluent in American Sign Language (ASL) but most not formally trained in theory and practice of professional counseling (Vernon & Andrews). Today, more than 70% of all deaf students in the United States attend their local public schools (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2003), placing the counseling responsibly of these students on local public schools. The shift from residential schooling to public schooling for deaf students creates a unique challenge for public school counselors as they are charged with meeting the needs of increasing numbers of deaf and hard of hearing students. Current studies on the effectiveness of school counselors' ability to meet the unique counseling needs of deaf students are not available. This study fills a gap in the literature by examining how school counselors in public schools serving the deaf are attempting to meet the counseling needs of students they serve.

A constant problem in the field of school counseling is ambiguity regarding the role and function of the counselor (Baker, 2001; Dahir, 2004; Henderson & Gysbers, 1998; Kuranz, 2002). This role ambiguity has existed since the inception of school counseling (Henderson & Gysbers; Myers, 1923) and continues today (Bryant & Constantine, 2006; Butler & Constantine, 2005; Kuranz, 2002; Walsh, Barrett, & DePaul, 2007). Role ambiguity persists as significant numbers of administrators continue to identify the role as inclusive of many duties not embraced by the American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) model for school counseling programs (Fitch, Newby, Ballestero, & Marshall, 2001). However, it is important to note that the role of professional school counselors is constantly expanding as counselors are expected to perform a larger number of duties (Dahir, 2004; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Kuranz, 2002) including accepting responsibility for meeting the counseling needs of increasing numbers of deaf students (Lomas & Van Reusen, 1999). The ASCA model (ASCA, 2003) prescribes the role

of school counselors working at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The ASCA model gives clear divisions of time on specific tasks and identifies roles counselors should and not fulfill. Furthermore, Transforming School Counseling (DeVoss & Andrews, 2006), a movement to reform the role of school counselors, also offers clear role recommendations. Because there has not been a study on the role of counselors that are employed by local educational programs for the deaf, it is unknown if any of these traditional models for counseling are effective in meeting the academic and psychological needs of deaf students.

Methodology

Qualitative research offers depth to the examination of the role and function counselors by providing a "voice" to their experiences. The emic perspective, sometimes referred to as "the insider's or native's perspective of reality" (Fetterman, 1998, p. 20), is critical when trying to understand or describe a situation and allows for multiple perspectives of reality in a given study (Fetterman, 1998). This study addressed the following research question: How do counselors serving deaf students in public schools describe their role?

Participants

Participants were selected based on their experience as counselors in public educational programs for the deaf and were located by calling deaf education program counselors and coordinators in various states. Participants in both Texas and Ohio agreed to join in the study. The sampling was purposeful, as counselors working with deaf students in public schools were needed to develop research in this area. Bogdan and Biklin (2003) described purposeful sampling as selecting "particular subjects to include because they are believed to facilitate the expansion of developing theory" (p. 65). Participants demographics varied; four white females (ages 30-59), one African American female (mid-30s), and one white male (mid-40s). Their years of experience varied as well, with a range of 3 to 25 years in the field. Furthermore, work sites were diverse (primarily suburban and inner city), though all were employed in relatively large programs serving from 100 – 200 deaf students. Five of the interviews were conducted in spoken English. One participant's interview was conducted in ASL due to the participant's self-described hearing status as a culturally Deaf person. A summary of the demographic characteristics of these participants is found in Table 1.

Table 1:

Demographics of Participants in Qualitative Interview (N=6)

Participant	Gender	Age	Hearing/Deaf	Race	State
1	F	40-49	Hearing	White	TX
2	F	30-39	Hearing	Black	TX
3	M	40-49	Deaf	White	TX
4	F	50-59	Hearing	White	OH
5	F	50-59	Hearing	White	TX
6	F	30-39	Hearing	White	TX

Instrument and Data Source

An interview protocol was developed to identify themes that would address the research question. The result was a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. The questions focused on (a) guidance curriculum, (b) assessment, (c) counseling needs of students, (d) roles and responsibilities that are challenging or rewarding, and (e) professional development available to the counselor. The participants all responded to the same set of questions. Thus, the comparability of responses with one another was inherent. By using a standardized protocol, bias was minimized (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Finally, by conducting multiple interviews, the potential for acquiring objective and balanced findings was maximized. Interviews varied in length from 45 minutes to 3 hours and 10 minutes.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audiotaped or videotaped and transcribed, and then sent back to the interviewees for proofing. Member checks, having the respondents review the transcripts and analysis for accuracy, were also conducted. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), getting feedback from the respondents is a logical and essential procedure to establish validity. Data were analyzed using the Constant Comparative method to capture the multiple, but equally applicable and legitimate aspects of individual experiences and perspectives (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2006). Constant Comparative methodology is based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in which a researcher "looks at a particular situation and tries to understand what is going on" (Lichtman, 2006, p. 66). Using this method, data are collected through observations and interviews and then compared for each interview (Lichtman, 2006). For the purpose of this study,

data collected from the first participant were transcribed then analyzed for pertinent issues or ideas. These pertinent issues were then compared with data revealed in the subsequent interviews. As additional interviews were conducted, data were compared using simple codes on an ongoing basis. New data were compared with what had been previously collected and analyzed. These codes were then grouped into broader categories or themes. From the themes, patterns were identified in an effort to explain the role of counselors working in public schools serving deaf students.

Results

Five themes emerged to clarify the participants' experiences. The first theme, *Experience as Authority*, was present for all respondents since they all deferred to their experiences rather than utilize the school district's guidance curriculum. Two respondents indicated they did not use individual education plans (IEPs) for their counseling services because their programs had never required it. The other three used IEPs only for specific students, not all. Thus, experience served as authority to circumvent policies or laws that mandate the use of an education plan when on-going counseling was provided. Readers are referred to Table 2 for sample responses to all themes.

The second theme was *Director of Collaborations/Negotiations*. There was clear evidence among all respondents that they worked to maintain some control over their job roles. They frequently decided what they would do and how. It appeared they often resisted following what other counselors in general education were doing.

The third theme was *Isolation*. Isolation was a powerful theme among all of the respondents. The respondents generally felt that they lacked colleagues in counseling and deafness. They also expressed a great deal of autonomy in their work. It appeared that many critical decisions about service provision were left to the judgment of the counselors. Isolation was also expressed by comments about how their population was unique among all other populations. A common concern of all respondents was the lack of a guidance curriculum that is tailored for deaf students. All respondents stated their school district has adopted a guidance program but they complained that the resources provided are inappropriate for deaf students. They also indicated they were unable to provide as much guidance as they would have liked to. A final common concern related to isolation among the respondents was the lack of professional development opportunities. Respondents

indicated traditional workshops and conferences are targeted at the general population and adapting trainings to apply to deaf students is usually difficult or impossible.

The fourth theme was *Surrogate Parent/Insightful Social Confidante*. All of the respondents expressed problems with communication between students and their parents. Many of the counselors took on parent-like roles and responsibilities. The respondents stated that the deaf program was like a family to the students who did not have a good family model. They universally agreed that poor communication by parents who don't use sign language contributed to poor relationships at home. Additionally, the respondents felt they had exceptional ability to listen and find the core of problems.

The fifth and final theme was *Martyr*. All of the respondents indicated some level of martyrdom. They indicated that their population was very demanding, seeking counseling for concerns that students in the general population would not. They perceived their role as overworked, either with sheer numbers of students on their caseloads or with added paperwork. Finally they projected blame on various players in the lives of students, such as parents, teachers, or others.

Table 2

Themes related to participant role and function

Theme	Sample Response
Experience as authority	"I write guidance and counseling on the service page; that's the way it's worked since 1993."
Director of Negotiations/ Collaborations	"I choose to deal with them a lot."
Isolation	"I really miss being able to talk to anyone else who does any counseling with deaf and hard of hearing students in school."
Surrogate Parent/ Social Confidante	"I think the biggest reason for the counseling needs are because of the communication in the home, which affects their relationships and their value development."
Martyr	"It seems I'm the low man on the totem pole."

Discussion
Limitations

Qualitative research is always limited to the experiences of the population studied. However, it is likely that common experiences of the participants are likely to be common experiences of others performing this role. The small sample size ($N = 6$) is certainly a limitation of the current study. Still, Borg and Gall (1989) indicated that small sample sizes are appropriate when working with a small population.

Recommendations for Practice

Clearly, the roles of general school counselors and counselors working with deaf students are different in a number of ways. The roles of the counselor serving the deaf students appears to be more heavily weighted in direct counseling and guidance whereas the general education counselor is likely to be more heavily weighted by administrative tasks, many of which are endorsed by the ASCA model (ASCA, 2003). Of utmost importance in this area is that schools should examine the unique role of this population to create a job description that meets the counseling needs of their deaf students. Additionally, counselors working with deaf students in public schools must find a way to connect with each other. Communicating with colleagues may help to reduce the feelings of isolation.

Isolation in the field of school counseling and deafness was an identified theme in this study. Many educators of the deaf have historically fought to keep deaf students at residential schools or in large numbers within public schools to maintain a *critical mass*, or large number, of deaf students, primarily to prevent isolation (Moores, 2001). What is understood as unhealthy for deaf students is likely unhealthy for those who serve these students. Counselors working with deaf students in public school programs must find a way to connect with each other. Connections can occur through local or regional networking, professional organizations, and by using technology such as the internet or other means. Regardless of how the connections occur, respondents in this study found isolation to be a common experience that needed to be addressed.

Another specific area is related to the theme *Surrogate Parent/Insightful Social Confidante*. It's a well-known fact in the field of deaf education that 90% of deaf children are born to parents who hear and know nothing about

deafness or sign language (Moores, 2001). This phenomenon is one reason for poor parent-child communication. Regardless of the cause, it is quite clear that transference is occurring (the students see the counselor as a parental figure) and counter-transference follows (the counselors take on the role of parental figure). A search of literature points to the likelihood that transference and counter-transference has never been studied in the context of a deaf student and their school counselor. However, this phenomenon has been studied extensively among the general population (Shapiro, 1994). The use of transference and counter-transference in the therapeutic relationship varies, depending upon the training and orientation of the counselor. However, counselors should always be aware of potential transference and counter-transference as these phenomena may impact the objectivity of the counselor and turn the counseling away from the needs of the client (Shapiro). It is usually difficult for counselors to identify transference and counter-transference in helping relationships. Therefore, these phenomena are often addressed in supervision. However, several of the themes from this study point to the fact that these counselors do not have adequate supervision. They often function as islands, separated from the direction and regulation that their peers in general education must follow.

Recommendations for Research

The ASCA Model (2003) states that *all* students should receive direct counseling and guidance services from a school counselor [emphasis added]. However, how that is defined is left largely to local school districts. The respondents to this study were all specialists in working with deaf students. Their presence on a campus may absolve the responsibility of the general education counselor from providing services to the deaf students. Still, the role and function of the counselor working with deaf students should be examined with more scrutiny to further delineate similarities and differences when compared with counselors serving students in general education. Once this is done, professional identity in the field can be more pronounced and will better foster advocacy.

Guidance was also an area that warranted further research. Respondents indicated they do not provide as much guidance as they would like to. Furthermore, respondents expressed a desire for an appropriate guidance curriculum, something that was designed for deaf students. The ASCA model (2003) endorses school counselors providing guidance and suggests that elementary counselors provide guidance between 35% and 45% of

their time. Clearly, implementation of a guidance program is a central role and function of school counselors. Researchers should examine the use of time in delivering guidance, curricula that are appropriate for use with deaf students, and characteristics of current curricula that make them appropriate or inappropriate for deaf students.

Comparative studies need to be conducted to examine programs that have counselors who work with the deaf students compared with programs that do not employ an individual with this specific training. Data such as behavior ratings from teachers and parents might be a rich source of information on the efficacy of school counselors for the deaf. Additionally, outcome data such as access to college, rates of child abuse, access to transition programs, and rates of prison incarceration may have a relationship to the presence or absence of a specialized counseling professional within the school.

Another area for potential research is a comparison of the role of public school counselors for the deaf with counselors who work at residential schools for the deaf. Similarities and differences with these two groups might further extrapolate the role of each group. Furthermore, this research might help with defining role differences among school counselors employed in different settings including public schools and specialized settings.

Finally, the field of counselor and school counselor supervision is rich with literature on research and practice. Yet, there appears to be a paucity of research on the supervision of counselors serving deaf students. The fact that this study revealed a number of experiences unique to the field calls for further examination of the supervision of counselors serving deaf students.

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