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Professional Development Needs of Urban School Counselors: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Current research on urban school counseling is reviewed and critiqued as a rationale for more scholarly inquiry about the professional development and supervision needs of urban school counselors. Research recommendations are provided.

The practice of urban school counseling is influenced by the larger landscape of urban education, inherent with opportunities and challenges. Urban education is characterized by unique contextual and demographic characteristics. The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) defines an urban area as one that is densely populated or clustered with a core block of at least 1,000 people per square mile and surrounding blocks with at least 500 people per square mile. Wilczenski, Cook, and Hayden (2011) further described qualities of urban communities as having a high degree of economic and social interaction, which frames urban living within a cultural context. Lee (2005) discussed urban communities as uniquely characterized with significant population density, high concentrations of people of color and recent immigrants, complex transportation patterns, high rates of reported crimes, strong cultural stimulation, diverse range in property values, and inequitable access to healthcare. The diversity within urban communities (e.g., economic, racial, ethnic, political, lingual, familial) can be a catalyst for significant learning among students living in such environments. Equally, the challenges (e.g., potentially concentrated poverty, higher crime rates, inequitable access to health care) can function as barriers to student educational success. These characteristics specific to urban communities can influence how school counselors serve students in urban schools.

Urban communities are disproportionately affected by phenomena such as poverty, family challenges, and violence (Holcomb-McCoy, 1998; 2005), which can have a detrimental influence on the educational experience of urban students. These influences can include lower attendance rates, higher attrition rates, and lower academic performance (e.g., grade performance, grade promotion). Urban school counselors, through direct and indirect services, address these unique needs to help close opportunity and outcome disparities between students. Researchers have investigated the preparation of urban school counselors in the last 20 years

(Evans, & Carter, 1997; Green, Conley, & Barnett, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy, 1998; Lee, 2005; Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009; Wilczenski, et al., 2011). However, comparatively little research has identified the ongoing supervision and professional development needs of practicing urban school counselors (Owens, Pernice-Duca, & Thomas, 2009). What follows is a synthesis and critical review of urban school counseling research over the last 20 years, highlighting what the literature has identified as the unique challenges of urban school counseling, counseling service delivery models in urban schools, and the professional development needs of urban school counselors. Recommendations for further research in this area will be provided, in hopes that school counselor educators may continue this work.

Challenges of Urban School Counseling

School counseling researchers have developed consistent language about how urban school counseling can differ from school counseling in rural and suburban settings (Holcomb-McCoy, 1998; Lee, 2005; Owens, et al., 2009; Wilczenski, et al., 2011). Common themes from the literature suggest that urban school counseling practice is inclusive of several characteristics. One characteristic is delivering counseling services that confront serious impediments to student development as a consequence of the aforementioned contextual challenges (e.g., significant population density, complex transportation patterns, inequitable access to healthcare) (Lee, 2005). Another characteristic unique to urban school counseling is acknowledging and supporting students' multiple intelligences (e.g., developing skills to communicate with diverse community members, accurately navigating relationships with authority figures) that develop as a consequence of living and learning in such environments (Forbes, 2004). A third characteristic of urban school counseling practice includes an involved ability to collaborate with families and

community agencies to support and advance student and family wellness (Holcomb-McCoy, 1998).

The unique challenges confronted by urban students can yield both opportunity and achievement gaps as compared to suburban or rural peers. Opportunity gaps are the unequal and/or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities between students within the same school community or between students from different communities (Thompson, 2012). Examples of these gaps include differences in course availability (e.g., honors/AP courses, foreign language offerings) and after-school support, compared to schools with access to more resources.   Achievement gaps are differences in educational outcomes between student populations (Thompson, 2012). Research continues to cite examples of how achievement gaps persist between students in urban districts, compared to peers in more resourced districts in domains such as graduation rates (Stetsar & Stillwell, 2014) and college enrollment and completion rates (Aud, Hussar, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp, & Tahan, 2011) providing school counselors and school counselor educators a rationale for a closer look at these phenomena. School counseling services aimed at closing these gaps align with scope of effective practice, as evidenced in the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2010), the ASCA National Model (2012), and the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success (2014).

The ASCA School Counselor Competencies (2012) delineate counselor knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes that support students' academic achievement, career exploration, and personal/social development. These competencies apply across school setting types (e.g., urban, rural, suburban), however, research suggests that the application of knowledge, abilities and skills are more urgent in urban settings than in other school settings. For example, the need for

cultural competence and responsiveness among school counselors (Henfield, 2013; Lee, 2005) in multilingual, urban schools may be stronger than in schools not as linguistically diverse. Likewise, school counselors working in under-resourced urban districts may practice from a systemic or ecological approach because of some urban schools' need to leverage community-based resources unavailable in schools. These considerations provide a framework that has helped urban school counselors and counselor educators develop contextually appropriate and culturally-responsive school counseling models for practice.

Urban School Counseling Service Delivery

School counselors in general, urban school counselors specifically, are encouraged to be intentional in identifying an appropriate service delivery model for comprehensive school counseling services (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2008). School counseling literature has identified several delivery models that include, but are not limited to the: Strategic Comprehensive Model (Brown & Trusty, 2005); Results-Based Program Delivery Model (Johnson & Johnson, 2003); Domains/Activities/Partners Model (Dollarhide & Saginak 2003); and, the Developmental Guidance and Counseling Model (Myrick, 2003), on which the ASCA National Model was developed. These models differ in their implementation, based on factors such as focus on outcomes, level of engagement with stakeholders, and the extent to which the models are prescriptive or non-prescriptive (i.e., models that have pre-designated roles, functions and assignments versus models that are more flexible in nature and practice).

The Strategic Comprehensive Model (Brown & Trusty, 2005) is a non-prescriptive program that emphasizes flexibility to deliver services based on factors including availability of resources, characteristics of the student body and broader community. A focus in this model is academic achievement and closing opportunity and achievement gaps. The model's core

components are facilitating life-skill development, serving at-risk students, and fostering school citizenship.

The Results-Based Program Delivery Model (Johnson & Johnson, 2003) is a non-prescriptive model that emphasizes the use of data to determine how students are different as a result of the school counseling program. Through consistent summative and formative feedback, programs using this model emphasize the flexibility to determine how to best meet students needs, particularly students identified as most at risk for underperforming. The Domains/Activities/Partners (D/A/P) Model (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2008) is a non-prescriptive program model that emphasizes the development of student competencies through intentional collaboration between school counselors and students, parents/guardians, school colleagues, community colleagues, and other stakeholders.

The Developmental Guidance and Counseling Model (Myrick, 2003) is a prescriptive model that comprises six functions: individual counseling, small group counseling, classroom guidance, consultation, coordination, and peer facilitation. While the Developmental Guidance and Counseling Model (Myrick, 2003) is among the most popular delivery models, the work of urban school counseling has a particular social justice framework that influences service delivery. Holcomb-McCoy (2007) asserts that inequity, oppression, and socio-cultural barriers continue to create access, opportunity and achievement gaps for students from diverse groups—many of whom are from urban communities. Furthermore, the author states urban school counselors that intentionally subscribe to a social justice framework incorporate six elements (Six Cs) in their comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCPs): counseling and intervention planning; consultation; connecting schools, families, and communities; collecting

and utilizing data; challenging biases; and coordinating student services and support (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

In practice, the literature suggests urban school counselors are using developmental, prescriptive delivery models reflective of the Developmental Guidance and Counseling Model (Myrick, 2003). Holcomb-McCoy and Mitchell (2005) found over 100 urban school counselors from six urban centers in the northeastern and mid-Atlantic regions of the United States (n = 102) largely adhered to comprehensive school counseling models such as those developed by Gysbers and Henderson (2001) and Myrick (2003) (i.e., Developmental Guidance and Counseling Model) and participants reported low family functioning, academic underachievement, and poverty as pervasive issues among the students served in the urban schools represented in the study. What the literature has not suggested is the potential need for service delivery models that are non-prescriptive and offer opportunities to cater interventions to address the unique needs of students in urban schools (e.g., Domains/Activities/Partners Model). The ASCA National Model (2012) makes recommendations for the amount of time school counselors should spend delivering direct and indirect services (i.e., 80%/20%). However, a significant portion of the extant literature on urban school counseling has addressed direct services for students.

Direct Counseling Services in Urban Schools

In the last 15-20 years, urban school counseling scholarship has focused on specific modalities of service delivery. The modalities most frequently highlighted include: individual counseling provided by school counselors, counseling provided by mental health professionals other than school counselors, (e.g., clinical mental health counselors, social workers, school psychologists), and the critical need for coordination and collaboration (Bryan, 2005;

Eschenhauer & Chen-Hayes, 2005; Evans & Carter, 1997; West-Olatunji, Frazier, & Kelly, 2011). Within the domain of individual counseling, Eschenhauer and Chen-Hayes (2005) suggested individual counseling provided by urban school counselors be re-conceptualized as an act of advocacy and accountability to help eliminate barriers, such as access, opportunity and achievement gaps. This reconceptualization is reflective of a social justice school counseling framework (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The authors recommended urban school counselors implement the Transformative Individual School Counseling (TISC) model, which requires a functional behavioral assessment approach to define problems; systemic, solution-focused, and narrative counseling approaches to address problems; and single-case study designs to document the effectiveness of interventions. The importance of the TISC model is how its implementation aligns with and meets two overall goals: (1) to increase student wellness through individual counseling; and, (2) to support the educational mission of schools in advancing academic achievement in an era of school counselor accountability. Implementation of the TISC is particularly important considering how the ASCA National Model (2012) recommends school counseling programs directly aligning their scope of services with school and district level mission statements to reflect congruence within the school system.

Another consistent theme in urban school counseling literature is the increased reliance on other counseling and allied mental health professionals delivering individual, group, and/or family counseling services in the school setting (Bryan, 2005; Evans & Carter, 1997; West-Olatunji et al., 2011). The role of urban school counselors is not always explicitly stated within the literature, although several comprehensive school counseling programs models articulate the role of school counselors to include collaboration and coordination (ASCA, 2012; Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012; Lee, 2005) to support student and family wellbeing. This multidisciplinary team

approach is designed to support student wellness and offers proximal resources to students who may not otherwise access such services outside of school. One limitation emerges, however, when various school personnel (e.g., teaching faculty, administrators) and the allied mental health professionals (e.g., clinical mental health counselors, social workers) overlook or misunderstand the clinical competencies school counselors possess (e.g., providing individual and group counseling), in addition to their ability to collaborate with stakeholders to coordinate services.

West-Olatunji et al. (2011) discussed the importance of wrap-around counseling services for students in urban schools to mitigate challenges they confront. However, the authors leave out how school counselors can be involved in the development, implementation, and/or evaluation of this intervention. They briefly presented a potentially expanded role of urban school counselors by providing more holistic counseling services. Similarly, Evans and Carter (1997) highlighted the need for family counseling within urban schools to provide ongoing support for students and their families. Citing the influence of family systems on students' educational experiences and learning, the authors developed the School-Based Family Counseling Model (Evans & Carter, 1997) to help teachers and parents engender academic success within students. The school-based family counselor (SBFC) develops interventions to facilitate teacher-parent collaboration to address problematic classroom behaviors and assumes a central role in facilitating family-school-community partnerships. In their recommendations, however, the authors discuss how the identification of a SBFC can come from the current school counseling staff or the development of a new position. While this proposal is relevant, it is limited considering budgetary challenges and sometimes-competing priorities within urban school districts.

Bryan (2005) and Taylor and Adelman (2000) reiterated the importance of urban school counselors' capacity for effective coordination and collaboration skills in creating school-family-community partnerships. Research studies have suggested that school-family-community partnership involvement is considered a central aspect of the school counselor's role (ASCA, 2012; Bemak, 2000; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004), school counselors are in an ideal position to provide leadership for partnerships between school, families, and communities (Colbert, 1996), and that school counselors agree that their roles in school-family-community partnerships are important (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). One conclusion to be drawn from this research is that effective urban school counseling (e.g., support of student academic, personal, and career development) can largely depend on the depth and sophistication of their collaborations with a wide variety of stakeholders. These deep collaborations, while important in other settings (i.e., rural, suburban), are critical in urban schools that often experience economic resource deficits germane to urban communities.

Preparation and Professional Development of Urban School Counselors

There exists a gap in the literature when comparing scholarship about urban school counselor preparation (i.e., pre-service) and professional development (i.e., in-service or practicing). The literature is rich with recommendations for urban school counselor preparation. Holcomb-McCoy (1998) offered some of the earliest recommendations for urban school counselor education, encouraging programs integrate learning experiences for students that introduce them to urban education issues and challenges, study multicultural issues extensively, and support urban teachers' professional development and retention in the profession. Green, Conley, and Barnett (2005) suggested embracing an ecological clinical orientation that is aware of and responsive to the dynamic interplay between counselors, students, schools, and

communities, which can enhance urban school counselor education. Wilczenski et al. (2011) offered comprehensive recommendations for urban school counselor education curricula, citing the critical need for students to learn through an intentional curriculum, community engagement activities in urban communities, and student reflection.

Unfortunately, researchers have not captured the ongoing professional development needs of urban school counselors as readily. Dahir, Burnham, and Stone (2009) sampled the professional development needs of Alabama school counselors (n = 1,244) in their implementation of the ASCA National Model. Elementary school counselors reported needing professional development in academic and career development interventions, while high school counselors reported needing professional development in classroom guidance, group counseling, and personal/social development. While this study makes an important contribution, disaggregated information about respondents' districts (e.g., rural, suburban, urban) would help distinguish if differences exist between the counselors' districts and their professional development needs.

The challenges of urban education provide evidence of what urban school counselors' professional development and supervision needs might include (e.g., closing the gap interventions, family counseling support, advocacy training), but these speculations are not data-driven. In one study, Owens et al. (2009) found urban school counselors (n = 55) self-reported their most significant professional development needs included training in dropout prevention programs, violence prevention programs, counseling interventions for underperforming and unmotivated students, and developing and executing needs assessments. This is a valuable study that validates the ongoing challenges in urban school counseling and the range of support urban school counselors need. However, this study was limited to counselors in one state. One

resulting question that emerges from the literature is: *What do urban school counselors report to be their most salient supervision and professional development needs?* Counselor educators can use this question to empirically identify these needs, assist counselor education programs, and be a support to urban school districts in meeting the needs of their school counselors.

Despite important contributions to the urban school counseling knowledge base, current scholarship on urban school counselors' supervision and professional development needs is lacking. Research continues to inform school counselor educators about the range of effective learning experiences for pre-service urban school counselors. Immersion experiences, case studies, and the embracing of a deep commitment to social justice advocacy for disenfranchised members of urban communities are vital for pre-service urban school counselors. Extending important research on factors that contribute to academic success of urban students is equally important. The work of Henfield (2013), Henfield, Washington, and Byrd (2014), Hines and Holcomb-McCoy (2013), and Harper and Associates (2014) have all investigated what students from urban communities identify as important supports for their academic and personal success. The literature further suggests urban school counselors (i.e., pre-service and practicing) develop the ability to engage a wide-range of stakeholders to support overall student and family well being in and out of school. Although school counseling frameworks (e.g., social justice) and counseling modalities are suggested in the literature, additional research is needed to provide a more holistic perspective on the professional development needs of urban school counselors.

Research Recommendations

Research that extends the work of Owens et al. (2009) is critical for urban school counselors. Qualitative and quantitative research on the supervision and professional development needs of urban school counselors are useful ways to deepen the knowledge base in this area. Qualitative studies that seek to better understand urban school counselor professional development needs in specific contexts are important. Specifically, research questions addressing their successes, challenges, and opportunities related to professional development are warranted. These studies can use a range of qualitative methodological traditions that include, but are not limited to phenomenology, narrative inquiry, and grounded theory.

Quantitative studies investigating urban school counselor supervision and professional development needs are needed as well. Studies using inferential statistics (e.g., correlational, regression) that sample urban school counselors to measure the relationship between professional development and self-efficacy in counseling practice is one example of how the gap in school counseling scholarship can be filled. Studies that investigate mediating and moderating factors that influence urban school counselors' practice or student educational outcomes would also be helpful. Regression studies that assess if specific variables in urban school contexts predict specific professional development needs will inform the knowledge base. Lastly, research that investigates the perspectives and experiences of urban school students to document their school counseling needs is needed. Moving forward, the school counseling profession has much to learn about the practice of urban school counseling and how to effectively support and prepare school counselors working in urban settings providing critical services to students in urban communities.

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