The Role of School Social Workers from the Perspective of School Administrator Interns: A Pilot Study in Rural North Carolina

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Abstract

As a pilot study, students in a Master of School Administration (MSA) program in southeastern North Carolina were surveyed about their perceptions of school social workers. Different priorities and perspectives can make it difficult for professionals to work together, particularly if the two groups misunderstand each other's goals and intentions. The purpose of this study was to assess the MSA student intern's perception of school social workers and use this information to improve the way they function in the schools. Understanding these perceptions can lead to graduate education programs geared toward the establishment of cooperative relationships between social workers and administrators as they work side-by-side in the schools.

Keywords: School Social Work, Master of School Administration, Education

Introduction

School principals understand that no one professional person can be all things to all people. There must be an organized pattern of services in which each member of the school administrator's staff has a clear knowledge of how everyone contributes to the goals of the larger system (Demsch, O'Connor, & Friedman, 2001). By utilizing specialists as components of the school community, a principal can facilitate teamwork, with school social workers as an important part of that team. School social workers focus on school-community-child-parent interaction and work to help children reach their potential through the most effective use of their educational opportunities. However, the role of the school social worker can only be realized if school leadership accepts the value of such service. The principal is responsible for ensuring that social work services are being used to their fullest extent; therefore, it is imperative that administrators fully understand the role of service providers available to students in their school (Demsch, O'Connor, & Friedman, 2001). Sources note the striking lack of literature addressing the similarities and differences among school social workers and administrators' perceptions of services and their associated outcomes (Bye, Shepard, Patridge, & Alvarez, 2009). This paper reports on a pilot study that examined the perceptions that school administrator interns have of school social workers. A better understanding of how school administrator interns view school social workers is vital to the graduate school educators who are preparing them to establish cooperative relationships with support staff who they will work side-by-side with in the schools.

1.0 Review of the Literature

1.1 School Social Worker

The school social worker has been a part of the American educational system since the early part of the 20th century, but is considered a relative latecomer to the American educational system (Livingston & Rock, 1985; Wang, 2003). The need for professional school social work was fueled largely by immigration, poverty, and the idea that every child has the right to an education. Initially, social workers were identified as "visiting teachers" (Agresta, 2004, p.151) and were responsible for enforcing attendance and facilitating understanding between teachers and new immigrant students. In the 1940s and 1950s, the term visiting teacher was replaced with "school social worker" (Agresta, 2004, p. 151). Through the years, the general public has viewed the school social worker as a stand-in educator, psychotherapist, social planner, and liaison between home and school. It is little wonder that social workers are seen this way, considering that they act in all these capacities in the course of their work. However, this broad capacity has contributed to the ambiguity of the role of the school social worker since the inception of school social work as a specialized area of social work practice (Wang, 2003).

The family and the school are the two primary factors in a child's development (Constable, 2009). Today, school social workers are trained to recognize individual, peer, family, and community risk factors and to provide individual and group counseling to meet mental health needs of children and facilitate peer and social support (Newsome, Anderson-Butcher, Fink, Hall, & Huffer, 2008). Unfortunately, school social workers often have little communication with key educational stakeholders like principals, directors of special education, and school board members. As a result, the role they play in helping children and families achieve and maintain emotional health and well-being is often misunderstood (Garrett, 2006). Furthermore, school administrators who are unfamiliar with school social workers have a propensity to hold negative attitudes towards school social workers (Garrett, 2006).

1.2 North Carolina Job Description for School Social Work

Because the present study is based in rural North Carolina, it is necessary to clarify the specific roles and responsibilities of social workers practicing in North Carolina. According to the North Carolina School Social Worker Job Description (2008):

> The School Social Worker promotes and enhances the overall academic mission by providing services that strengthen home, school, and community partnerships and address barriers to learning and achievement. The School Social Worker significantly contributes to the development of a healthy, safe, and caring environment. Such an environment is achieved by advancing the understanding of the emotional and social development of children and the influences of family, community, and cultural differences on student success along with the implementation of effective intervention strategies (p. 7)

As in other states, this specific job description drives the delivery of services that school social workers are able to provide within school settings in North Carolina.

1.3 School Social Workers Struggle for Professional Legitimacy

For over a century, social welfare agencies have provided "school visitors" (Altshuler & Webb, 2009, p. 207) who were devoted to the safety and well-being of children. This practice was later adopted by school systems to address barriers, inside and outside of school, that prevented parents from supporting their child's educational realization (Altshuler & Webb, 2009). Over time, school visitors have evolved into a specialized profession, present in all 50 states. The 2001 enactment of No Child Left Behind, in addition to strict school budgets and the demand for evidence-based interventions in the schools, has made it imperative for school social workers to be able to clearly identify and communicate how their outcomes affect student learning (Bye et al., 2009). The overall purpose of today's school social workers is to address environmental factors that prevent the most vulnerable and disenfranchised students from achieving academic success (Altshuler & Webb, 2009).

Many schools across the country employ a school counselor, school social worker, and school psychologist. In contrast to school counselors and school psychologists, however, school social workers often face the daunting task of having to legitimize their presence and the services they provide.

One possible reason that social workers find it difficult to get results is the perceived lack of authority; school social workers often struggle to establish a formal and informal power base within the school. Research also postulates that the conflict among professionals within the school is due to the systemic change school social workers endorse, which is in opposition to the clearly defined expectations and educational requirements to which school counselors and psychologists adhere (Altshuler & Webb, 2009). Another factor in this professional conflict is the overlap in student's educational, sociological, and environmental needs (Sisson, 1990). Historically, school social workers have served as support staff in schools. This position involves negotiating collegial and hierarchical relationships between school administrators and teachers that is beyond the scope of most traditional social work practice and experience (Livingston & Rock, 1985).

School social work celebrated its 100th anniversary as a specialized profession in 2006, but there is still confusion and lack of knowledge among county and state school systems about the role of the school social worker. These issues continue to plague school social workers, hurting not only the credibility of the profession, but also children and families who would benefit from social work services.

1.4 School Administrators

Although a school social worker determines what services are appropriate and to what capacity the services are provided in the school setting, school administrators have tremendous power in supporting or inhibiting these services (Wang, 2003). It is necessary to understand that no one professional can meet the needs of all stakeholders in the school. Instead, a school must be an organized system of services in which every staff member has a clear understanding of their individual contribution (Demsch, O'Connor, & Friedman, 2001). It is not uncommon for school administrators to expect school social workers to do more than time allows or to change their priorities to meet the immediate and political needs of the school's administration. School administrators often want social workers to focus on crisis intervention rather than using their skills for prevention and planning strategies (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 2000). Social work values, priorities, and expectations necessarily differ from those of educators, by virtue of their very function: social workers operate from a person-in-environment perspective in which children are viewed in the context of their family, neighborhood, and community, whereas educators are primarily interested in students as individuals and students as learners (Dane & Simon, 1991; Hare, 2004).

1.5 School Administrators' Job Description

The school principal is considered one of the most important and influential figures in the school setting (Wang, 2003). The school principal is the educational leader, responsible for managing the policies, procedures, and regulations to ensure that all students have access to a safe learning environment that meets the curricula requirements and mission of the school. Inherent in the position are the responsibilities for scheduling, curriculum development, extracurricular activities, personnel management, emergency procedures, and facility operations. School principals, especially those in the public school system, have a myriad of leadership and managerial duties in the day-to-day operations of their respective profession. In addition to being held responsible for student outcomes and achievement, the principal is more and more often in charge of money and other school resources (Lyons & Algozzine, 2006). In order to achieve academic excellence, the school principal must not only communicate effectively with students and parents, but he/she must work collaboratively to direct and support all members of the school staff hired by the school board. The historically ambiguous role of the school social worker coupled with the power that school administrators have in relation to the delivery of services in schools serve as the impetus for the present study. Through this research, we aim to shed light on how school administrator interns view their school social worker.

2.0 Rural Education and the Delivery of Services

It is imperative to have a working definition of a "rural" setting as it pertains to this research study. At its most basic form, a rural setting refers to the environment, systems, and inhabitants who live in a sparsely populated area in small towns or country. Students living in rural areas face a myriad of barriers in their environment, such as substandard homes, illiteracy, and lack of transportation, and the geographical location of these communities leave many students and families isolated as compared to their urban counterparts (Caudill, 1993). Empirical data suggests that the problems of living in a rural environment are the most evident in the educational system (Caudill, 1993) and it is school administrators and school social workers who must work together to support these students.

In a rural environment, the gaps in social services are usually financial and personnel-related (Caudill, 1993). The term used to describe the lack of access to funding in rural settings is "institutionalization of disadvantage" (Caudill, 1993, p. 7). This term is based on a funding formula that factors in a community's population density and school enrollment. This formula may seem appropriate for rural settings, but is problematic in that it does not take transportation into consideration, which in a rural setting can be expensive and involve great distances. Enrollment-based funding is also discriminatory because rural communities have declining school enrollment (Caudill, 1993). In terms of the perceptions school administrators have of social workers the influence of the study setting could not be negated; the students' environment proves to have a significant influence on the delivery of services in rural environments.

3.0 Study Setting

This section further describes the context for the present study, focusing on the community in which the research was conducted. The University of North Carolina at Pembroke is located in southeastern North Carolina, in Robeson County. The sample was drawn from interns in the School Administration program at the University who were working in southeastern North Carolina. Southeastern North Carolina is comprised of Robeson, Hoke, Scotland, Cumberland, Columbus, Bladen, Anson, Montgomery, Moore, and Richmond counties, respectively. In 2009, Robeson County had a population of 129, 559 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In the 2009-2010 school year, the demographics of Robeson County public schools were as follows: 43.7% of the student population was American Indian; 6% Asian; 9.2% Hispanic; 29.6% Black; and 16.9% White. Eighty-four percent of Robeson County students participate in the free lunch program ("Public Schools of North Carolina", 2011). Although MSA students were surveyed in the entire region of southeastern North Carolina, the majority of respondents were from Robeson County. The racial composition of the sample for this study mirrors that of the racial composition of Robeson County, North Carolina.

4.0 Methods

This study utilized a cross-sectional design representing a convenience sample of school administrator interns (Cook & Campbell, 1979). The research was conducted following approval from the Institutional Review Board. At the beginning of the fall 2010 term, a list was compiled of students who were currently interning in the public school system as a required field component from The University of North Carolina at Pembroke Master of School Administrations (MSA) program. An email outlining the nature of the project was sent to students in the MSA program. Email addresses of students in the MSA program were provided via the Principal Investigator, who is also the Associate Dean of the School of Education and MSA field instructor. In November, 2010, a survey was drafted and created via Survey Monkey. The use of an online survey questionnaire made it convenient for students interning at different schools to participate in the study. In addition, research indicates that computer-based survey designs often yield responses that are comparable to self-administered surveys (Bandilla, Bosnjak, & Altdorfer, 2003).

Based on the North Carolina job description for school social workers and school administrators, survey questions were drafted that were germane to both professions. The survey included a cover letter with information about the purpose of the study and ethical considerations such as voluntarism, informed consent, and the potential risk to confidentiality that comes with information on the Internet. Items on the survey included, "Please mark the following tasks you perceive that your school social worker performs on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. Examples of the responses included "Completion of Social Histories, Faculty Meetings, Family Consultation, etc." The survey items utilized a Likert-type response format and the survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the items on a five-point scale (1 = Disagree, 2 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Somewhat agree, and 5 = Agree).

Three days after the initial inquiry email, reminders were sent to respondents who had not completed the survey. In hopes of yielding a greater response rate, a direct link to the survey was embedded into the email sent to the participants. Three percent of the emails failed to reach the recipients; this may have been due to incorrect addresses or the person no longer being employed at the facility. Surveys to the MSA interns yielded a 93.1 % return rate. Twenty-nine surveys were returned partially completed and twenty-seven fully completed surveys were returned. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and research findings are presented in the next section.

5.0 Results

Analysis of the demographic information presented in Table 1, revealed that the respondents (N = 29) ranged in age from 26 to older than 50 and were primarily female, 88%. While the sample was primarily comprised of Caucasian respondents (n = 10; 42%), other groups were represented: Native American (n = 8; 33%); African American (n = 5; 21%); and Latino/Latina (n = 1; 4%).

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

	n	%		n	%
Ethnicity	24		Age	26	
Caucasian	10	42.0	20-25	0	0.0
African American	5	21.0	26-30	7	27.0
Black/ African	8	33.0	31-35	3	12.0
Latino/ Latina	1	4.0	36-40	5	19.0
			41-45	4	15.0
			45-50	5	19.0
			>50	2	8.0
Gender					
Male	3	12.0			
Female	22	88.0			

Tables 2 and 3 highlight information regarding perceptions of MSA students towards school social workers. Table 2 presents MSA interns' views of school social workers, and Table 3 outlines how MSA interns believe school social workers view school administrators. Most respondents reported favorable views of school social workers, with the majority of MSA interns viewing school social workers as Competent, (n = 23; 85%) Essential (n = 23; 85%), and Personable (n = 22; 82%). As indicated in Tables 2 and 3, MSA interns in this sample view school social workers in a similar way that the interns believe the school social workers view school administrators. Most MSA interns in this sample believe that social workers view them as Competent (n = 22; 82%), Essential (n = 24; 89%), Available (n = 18; 67%), Resourceful (n = 20; 74%), and Personable (n = 22; 82%).

Table 2: MSA Students' Views of School Social Workers (n = 27): n (%)

Item	Response		
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Competent	2 (7.4)	2 (7.4)	23 (85.2)
Essential	3 (11.1)	1 (3.7)	23 (85.2)
Available	5 (18.5)	4 (14.8)	18 (66.6)
Resourceful	2 (7.4)	6 (22.2)	19 (70.3)
Personable	3 (11.1)	2 (7.4)	22 (81.5)

Table 3: MSA Students' Perceptions of How School Social Workers View Administrators (n = 27): n (%)

Item	Response		
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Competent	3 (11.1)	2 (7.4)	22 (81.5)
Essential	1 (3.7)	2 (7.4)	24 (88.9)
Available	5 (18.5)	4 (14.8)	18 (66.6)
Resourceful	5 (18.5)	2 (7.4))	20 (74.0)
Personable	4 (14.8)	2 (7.4)	22 (81.5)

Table 4 shows data MSA interns' views of how social workers use their time. Almost half of MSA interns surveyed perceived school social workers to spend 5 to 15% of their time on truancy issues, while about a third (*n* = 8; 31%) believed school social workers to spend 35 to 50% of their time on truancy. Almost all of those surveyed (*n* = 18; 90%) believed that proctoring state exams comprised a small portion of school social workers' time on the job (5 – 15% of time). Eighty-five percent (*n* = 17) also believed program development was how social workers spend 5 to 15% of their time.

Table 4: Perceptions of MSA Students on the Percentage of Time a School Social Worker Spends on Specific Activities: n (%)

Percentage of Time	5 – 15%	20 – 30%	35 – 50%
Truancy	12 (46%)	6 (23%)	8 (31%)
Finding Resources	15 (58%)	5 (19%)	6 (23%)
Family Consultation	11 (42%)	7 (31%)	7 (27%)
Individual Therapy	12 (50%)	7 (29%)	5 (21%)
Individualized Education Plans	15 (65%)	5 (22%)	3 (13%)
Student Behavior	11(48%)	7 (28%)	7 (28%)
Faculty/ County Meetings	15 (65%)	3 (13%)	5 (22%)
Health Related Concerns (Immunization, Medication, etc.)	11 (46%)	7 (29%)	6 (25%)
Proctoring State Exams	18 (90%)	1 (5%)	5 (5%)
Parent Teacher Association	17 (81%)	2 (10%)	2 (10%)
Completion of Social Histories	14 (61%)	6 (26%)	3 (13%)
Program Development	17 (85%)	2 (10%)	1 (5%)

The data reveals that MSA students perceive school social workers to be spending small percentages of time on a vast array of activities. In response to each perceived task of school social workers, the majority of MSA students perceived that the school social worker spent only 5 to 10% of their time on the specific task under scrutiny.

6.0 Discussion/Implications

A better understanding of how school administrators perceive school social workers has implications for how educational services are delivered. This study was a first step in that it explored how school administrator interns view the school social worker. The literature is clear that schools need to be organized environments in which personnel have a clear understanding of expectations for each other in order to provide the best possible educational environment (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Demsch, O'Connor, & Friedman, 2001).

This study, however, provides early evidence that MSA interns do not have a united understanding of how school social workers spend their time. In fact, the data displays that MSA interns have very diverse perceptions on the demands of school social workers time. This apparent confusion as to the exact nature of the school social workers' responsibilities and corresponding ways they allocate their time leads one to believe that accurate and clear perceptions do not exist on behalf of the MSA interns.

Because school administrators work with various professionals, such as social workers, it is necessary for them to be familiar with other disciplines. Graduate students studying school administration and school social work would benefit from having more exposure to one another while in the classroom and also in the field placement. Educators training these students could facilitate education activities such as student assessment, case studies, and role plays where the school administration partners with the social work student. For example, Kolomer, Quinn, and Steele (2010) report on bringing health education nursing students and social work students from two universities together to develop interdisciplinary health fairs as a service-learning project for their geriatric courses. Similarly, it is likely that introducing future school administrators and school social workers to one another early on in their educational career will foster and support their future collaboration. Case studies could be incorporated into class discussions as students work through it as a team to reach a common goal.

7.0 Limitations

There are several limitations in this study that should be noted. First, although an effort was made to survey both MSA and MSW interns, the small response rate from social work students (n = 3; 30% response rate) prevented this data from being included in this study, despite the fact that several email reminders were sent to both sets of students in hopes to encourage increased participation. And although the sample size for the MSA interns was also small (n = 27), it represented 71% of the sampling frame (n = 38). A second limitation is that this pilot study provides only descriptive data; no causal inferences can be made about why MSA interns have certain perceptions about school social workers. Lastly, it is likely that the social desirability bias was present during data collection. Particularly on the items measuring perceptions, MSA interns may have felt compelled to indicate a high level of agreement that school social workers are "Competent", "Resourceful", and so on. That having been said, this study is useful in that it represents a first step in better understanding the relationship between school administrators and school social workers, especially in a rural area. This research and future studies can provide guidance to those training future administrators and social workers to better understand the roles and responsibilities of one another, so as to strengthen services provided to students.

8.0 Future Research

This research serves as a starting point by attempting to describe how graduate students in school administration view school social workers. Understanding the perceptions of student interns in MSA and BSW/ MSW programs has implications for how these beliefs about other professionals might play out in their employment. Negative or even ambivalent attitudes towards others professionals will likely manifest in fractured services to students and their families. As stated earlier, this study was not able to access a sufficient sample of MSW students; future research should examine how MSW students in school field placements perceive their school administrators. In addition, future research should look at the perception of those *employed* in school administration and social work positions. The ultimate goal of these future studies is to positively impact the education of both school administrators and school social workers so that the relationship between these two professionals provides the greatest benefit to the children they serve.

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