Transforming Urban School Counselor Preparation for the Next Century

Dr. Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair of the Department of Counseling and Human Services at Johns Hopkins University

Dr. Anita Young, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor in the Counseling and Human Services department at Johns Hopkins University

Leana Gonzalez, M.Ed., Ed.S.
Coordinator of the School Counseling Fellows Program at John Hopkins University

It has been documented in the literature that preparing school counselors for high-need urban schools is a challenge requiring a reexamination of counselor education programs (Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005; Lee, 2005; Owens, Pernice-Duca, & Thomas, 2009). To prepare effective school counselors for 21st century urban schools, we believe school counselor education must shift from a clinical mental health counseling emphasis to more of a school-based emphasis with extensive field experiences including early school-based observations, simulations, and data/accountability exercises. The reasons for this new training shift are linked to the critical need for urban school counselors who are prepared to counsel large numbers of linguistically and ethnically diverse, and frequently low-income students, and the most recent “call” from the federal government for increased numbers of students who are college and career ready (ACHIEVE, 2008). President Obama (while a candidate for the presidency) called for a “radical transformation” of urban schools, placing emphasis on the “recruitment and training of transformative principals and more effective teachers” (Obama,
We propose that a transformed framework for urban school counselor preparation is also needed in order for counselors to meet the extensive needs of urban school communities. We also believe that a transformative approach to urban school counselor preparation where faculty create varied and extensive opportunities for pre-service school counselors to connect what they learn in didactic courses (e.g., lecture courses) to actual practice in urban schools while under the supervision of skilled, “master urban school counselors” is warranted. More importantly, we propose that pre-service urban school counselors gather data about their practices and evaluate whether or not students are influenced by counselor interventions.

The purpose of this article is two-fold; one, to describe the critical needs that school counselors will be expected to address in 21st century urban, inner city, and/or metropolitan schools and two, to describe our proposed framework for training effective school counselors who will be prepared to work in those schools.

The Need for Evidence-Based School Counseling Services

American education is experiencing critical changes and is at a crossroads. The overarching question is “How do we best ensure a quality education for all students, regardless of race/ethnicity, parents’ income, gender, and geographic location?” Current education reform initiatives are attempting to respond to this question but new debates among national and state education leaders and policymakers about the viability of American schools and solutions to pervasive education problems still persist. Initiatives and reports include the Race to the Top Fund (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), and President Obama’s Blueprint for Reform (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Race to the Top is a competitive grant program of four billion dollars which funds states that create innovative strategies for comprehensive education reform. The Race to the Top and A Blueprint for Reform (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) both focus on four core areas that guide the reauthorization of the ESEA: (a) Enhance and reward principal and teacher effectiveness; (b) build data systems that inform parents and educators about student achievement and guide instruction; (c) develop college- and career-ready standards and assessments aligned to those standards; and (d)
implement effective interventions and support that will improve academic achievement in the lowest performing schools. In particular, the Blueprint for Reform emphasizes the importance of meeting the needs of students with the highest learning needs, (i.e., culturally diverse learners, diverse English learners, children with disabilities, students of migrant families and workers, homeless students, and underprivileged children in rural and the highest need districts). Indeed, Title I, a central component of the ESEA, may tie funding for high poverty schools to their ability to articulate and measure college and career readiness for students.

Although family factors and poverty can deeply affect student performance, research has consistently shown that school counselors have a significant impact on students' access to educational opportunities, particularly post-secondary opportunities (Perna, et al. 2008). Interestingly, current education reform groups and organizations have challenged the value of school counseling. The recent Gates Foundation Public Agenda report “Can I Get a Little Advice Here” (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, 2010) highlighted college students' perceptions of school counselors' roles in the college going process. Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, and Dupont surveyed 614 individuals between 22-30 years old who had some postsecondary education experience. Between 54% and 67% of the young adults rated school counselors as only poor or fair in helping them decide what school is right for them, finding ways to pay for college such as financial aid and scholarships, thinking about different careers, and in explaining and helping with the college application process. Almost 50% of the young adults felt that school counselors merely saw them as “just another face in the crowd” while 47% felt that school counselors made an effort to get to know them as an individual. In addition, out of those who felt like a face in the crowd, 18% delayed going to college as opposed to 13% who felt like counselors made an effort to get to know them. In response, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) asserted that the report “illustrates what can go wrong when there are not enough school counselors to support students and when school counselors are placed in positions preventing them from performing the functions they were trained and hired to do” (ASCA, 2010).

To prepare school counselors for the unprecedented responsibilities and challenges they are required to take on, school counselor education programs
must be dramatically transformed. And, in urban educational settings, the need for effective school counselors are even more pronounced. For instance, urban schools tend to be larger with fewer resources and located in areas with higher poverty rates. The student populations in urban schools are more likely to be comprised of people of color or of students whose first language is not English. In addition, children in urban areas are more often exposed to conditions that endanger their health and well-being, such as limited access to medical care and increased exposure to violence and crime. Each of these preceding factors influences the academic development of students. Hence, even after controlling for poverty, students who attend urban schools are less likely than their suburban counterparts to complete high school. And, those who do graduate are more likely to be unemployed or living in poverty (McClafferty, Torres, & Mitchell, 2000)

In order to help the nation compete in a global economy, today’s school counselors in urban districts are challenged more than ever before. Given the aforementioned factors that can impede their academic success, urban students are expected to complete high school and enter college and the workforce at the same rate as their suburban peers. Therefore, urban school counselors must have the ability to assist students in urban schools become college and career ready, which includes having access to rigorous courses and a school climate that promotes excellence and high expectations. Urban school counselor education programs must also ensure that pre-service school counselors are able to counsel students from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, are able to build strong partnerships with diverse school communities, and have the ability to balance a focus on academic-issues with an ability to respond to each student’s social-emotional needs.

These realities are having a significant impact on urban school counseling programs and training practices. For instance, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2011) has put forth a set of competencies that outline the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that ensure that school counselors are equipped to meet the rigorous demands of our profession and the needs of our pre-K-12 students. Likewise, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) has also established new school counseling accreditation standards that require programs to prepare school counselors in advocacy, consultation, leadership,
data-driven programming, in addition to the other general counseling standards and curriculum areas.

**What Needs to Be Done**

We recognize that revamping urban school counselor education is much more than requiring additional hours for counseling internships and new courses. Actually, many school counseling programs have made these significant improvements (Dahir & Stone, 2006; Perusse & Colbert, 2007). Instead, we recommend more extensive changes that include the selection of pre-service counselor applicants who are desiring to work in urban schools, more accountability activities and assignments, and restructuring the curriculum to include knowledge of urban schools and education, and knowledge of how poverty and oppression play out in communities and schools. Below is a brief description of three main components that we propose for urban school counselor training.

**More Rigorous Accountability**

Urban school counselor education programs should be accountable for how well pre-service school counselors can address the various needs of urban schools and school communities. This will require that school counseling faculty communicate and partner with urban school districts to design assignments, projects, and activities that reflect not only the needs of schools where pre-service school counselors will work but also the impact of pre-service school counselors' work with students and families.

Learning activities where pre-service school counselors are required to collect and analyze school data that reflects a population of students (e.g., Latina girls, African American males in 9th grade) who are in need of assistance or a problem (e.g., attendance) that has presented a barrier to student success are valuable exercises that helps pre-service school counselors understand the importance of data in determining inequities. Pre-service school counselors can then follow up by developing interventions (e.g., counseling, group work, parent consultation) that can address the “problem” uncovered by their data collection. Data collected at the end of the intervention should then be analyzed to determine the “impact” that the school counselor had on the
students who participated in the intervention. Resources such as “Making Data Work” (Young & Kaffenger, 2009) and “School Counselor Accountability: a MEASURE of Student Success (Stone & Dahir, 2006) are excellent for training pre-service urban school counselors to implement data-driven programming.

*Strengthening the Selection Process*

In order to make school counselor education programs more selective and diverse, the selection process must take into consideration not only test scores (e.g., GRE scores) but key dispositions that lead to effective, equity-focused, and data-driven urban school counseling. Stone and Hanson (2003) outline a protocol for selecting and recruiting school counselor candidates. The protocol consists of extensive recruitment efforts including recruiting applicants with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for their program’s new vision. Applicants can be recruited from local school districts and local undergraduate institutions, with special emphasis on targeting graduates of equity-focused departments (e.g. Pan African Studies). Selection also should be a collaborative effort among the universities, school districts, and communities. School counselors, teachers, parents and advanced graduate students join university faculty make up selection committees to make admission decisions. From an urban perspective, we propose that the school counselor candidates write about their “passion” or desire to work in urban schools. Some programs may even require students to read an excerpt from an article or book chapter related to urban education and then they would be required to write a response or give an impromptu “talk” about what they read. These types of interview activities give the selection committee some insight on the candidates’ knowledge, awareness, and skills for working in urban schools. One article that the authors have used as part of the selection process is Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade’s “Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete.” School counselor candidates read Dr. Duncan-Andrade’s article and then write a reflection of their thoughts about the his dimensions of “hope” in urban schools.

We also propose that university faculty develop opportunities for pre-service school counselors to work in diverse school settings early in their training programs. Special emphasis should be placed on placing pre-service school
counselors in challenging urban schools with extensive supervisor support during their second semester in the program.

Re-Structuring Clinical and Course Curricula

Counselor education faculty and urban school partners (i.e., district supervisors, school counselors) should work in partnership to develop a seamless curriculum that integrates coursework and clinical practice in schools. Pre-service school counselors should be given experiences beyond the practicum and internship required for accreditation and should be provided continuous, supervised, school experiences that coincide with classroom learning. While at school sites, pre-service school counselors should routinely observe how counseling and/or human development theory and research informs counseling practice. Counselor education faculty and supervisors should work with site supervisors to develop assignments and exercises that highlight and emphasize how theory and practice come together. Also, supervisors (both university and at the site) should provide an abundance of modeling, where they are demonstrating evidence based counseling practices, appropriate uses of data, advocacy, and leadership activities/duties.

Deepening and enriching the knowledge of urban pre-service school counselors for working with a diverse student body should be a central tenet of an urban school counselor program. Coursework that develops new counselors’ knowledge of urban education, poverty, oppression, advocacy, empowerment, and systems theories should be central to the curriculum. Also, diversity and multiculturalism as assets rather than deficits should be woven throughout the curriculum. No matter how transformative course work can be, coursework may be insufficient to educate counselors of diverse urban students. Therefore, knowledge and experiences in communities and family-school-community partnerships becomes very important to urban school counselor preparation. We propose that school counselors engage in some form of community-based learning combined with service learning where pre-service school counselors learn about the assets of students’ home communities but also about community–defined needs. This type of field experience may be early in the training program and could include some type of action research.
Conclusion

School counselors need to be trained in new ways to be effective and fully prepared for the uncertainties and challenges they will confront in 21st century urban schools. An approach to urban school counselor preparation that involves accountability, rigorous admission selection and student placement, a re-vamped curriculum, and extensive school-based as well as community experiences are essential. As new school counselors enter the profession and are hired in urban schools, the pendulum toward educational equity and access to opportunities for all students becomes necessary. We believe that investing heavily in re-focusing and transforming our efforts to recruit, train, and develop urban school counselors who are committed to providing equitable and increased opportunities for urban students is one of the most critical challenges in education today.

References


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