

# Georgia School Counselors Association **Journal**

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Georgia School Counselors Association  
*Connecting School Counselors...Supporting Students*



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From Your *GSCA* President

School Counselors:

The school counselors in the state of Georgia are fortunate to have a professional publication that highlights the school counseling research being conducting in our schools and universities. This publication is possible because of the priority Georgia School Counselors Association (GSCA) places on advocacy, research, leadership, and publication. The *Journal* editor, a volunteer from the membership, spends endless hours soliciting articles from the field, overseeing the editorial board, and creating a professional appearance for the publication. For the last two years, Dr. Rhonda Bryant has done an incredible job as *Journal* editor, and she is to be commended for her dedication, creativity, and professionalism. Thank you, Dr. Bryant, for your contribution to our profession.

When we research, write, and publish our findings, we are promoting school counseling in a manner that continues to legitimize our work and our positions as professionals. If you are new to the profession or soon-to-be retired, you will find the information in these articles inspiring, informative, and impressive. If you are interested in publishing, the *GSCA Journal* is a place to begin.

The *Journal* aligns with the theme for 2011-2012, *GSCA: Unlocking a World of Potential*. It speaks to the talent, commitment, and high standards of professional school counselors from across the state. Hopefully, you will be able to use the information to unlock the potential of your students and your school counseling program. Thank you to all who contributed to the *GSCA Journal*. I am extremely honored to be associated with you and this most notable publication.

Sincerely,

Gail M. Smith, 2011-2012 GSCA President



From the *GSCA Journal*  
Editor

Greetings!

I am so pleased to offer this issue of the *GSCA Journal*. As professional school counselors and counselor educators, we must highlight the important work that we accomplish with our students and in our communities so that our profession flourishes and remains viable in this era of professional accountability. This issue contains articles that address issues of professional ethics, clinical supervision, and counseling in international, rural, and urban settings. There is a special section on school counselors and attendance interventions. I would like to thank my editorial assistant, Mrs. Debora Knowles, whose support and dedication remain unwavering. Further, I would like to thank my dean, Dr. Kimberly King-Jupiter and my chair, Dr. Deborah Bemby for their encouragement and the latitude to embrace this project. Finally, I offer sincere gratitude to Kawanna Edwards and Tuwanna Edwards for their consistent cheerleading and additional eyes.

Finally, I would like to offer a challenge to counselors and counselor educators to submit an article to the *Journal* for next year. The *Journal* offers a wonderful way to receive feedback about your research and to learn the publishing process. I look forward to your submissions.

Sincerely,

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From the *GSCA Journal*  
Editorial Assistant

It is with enthusiasm that I work to assist the senior editorial staff and the state journal editor, Dr. Rhonda Bryant, with tasks essential to the production of this publication. I consider it an honor to serve on the *GSCA Journal* staff this year to work with Dr. Bryant and to support, in some small way, the development of new professional school counselors and the counseling profession through the *Journal*.

I am excited as a professional school counselor in training to learn first-hand, through the review of professional manuscripts from around the state, of issues and trends addressed, and researched by school counseling professionals. As practicing professional school counselors and counseling trainees collaboratively build and strengthen our collective capacity for K-12 and higher education advocacy, all are uniquely positioned to advance the profession and the significance of professional school counselors.

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Debora Knowles is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where she earned a B.S. in special education and an M.S. in education with an emphasis in urban education. After a number of years in the classroom and over a decade of work as a recruitment/retention specialist in higher education she moved to Georgia in 2006; she returned to work in the public school setting where she served as a district coordinator advocating for parental involvement. Mrs. Knowles is enrolled in the master's degree program in school counseling at Albany State University.

## The Revised 2010 Ethical Standards for School Counselors

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**Keywords:** professional school counselor ethics, school counseling ethics, ethical code updates

### Abstract

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recently revised its ethical code for professional school counselors, the *Ethical Standards for School Counselors*, in 2010. Professional school counselors have a unique challenge in counseling minors in that they provide services in an educational setting. Consequently, school counselors not only have a primary allegiance and ethical responsibilities to student clients, but also have an ethical responsibility to advocate for students with significant others such as parents/guardians, the school, and community. Additionally, school counselors have responsibilities to self, colleagues, and the profession to act in an ethical manner. Changing societal and professional issues require future ethical code revisions to meet the needs of contemporary counselors. This article describes the more than forty new standards and other significant changes on a section-by-section basis.

**Keywords:** ethics, school counselors, ASCA, ethical standards, counseling minors

One characteristic of a profession is the adoption of a formal code of ethics. This code represents the collective concept of what constitutes ethical behavior within that specific group at any particular point in time. The code also provides members with a frame of reference for

making decisions in what are often ambiguous, difficult, and complex situations. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recently revised the *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2010), which the Georgia School Counselors Association (GSCA) and most other state school counselor associations will adopt to serve as their state professional ethics code. GSCA has done that since the initial development and adoption of the *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* in 1984.

ASCA's latest revision of the *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* contains about forty new standards as well as significant changes in existing standards. This represents a greater increase in the number of new standards than the two previous revisions in 2004 and 1998 combined. Why are there so many additions and changes in this revision? Generally, codes of ethics tend to be reactive to changes in the profession and in society as a whole. As the issues confronting school counselors change, so must the profession's code of ethics change? Ethical standards are not static (Huey, Salo, & Fox, 1995).

Numerous environmental forces and societal movements have affected school counselors and provided the impetus for the addition of new ethical standards. These include (a) innovations in technology (Stone, 2009; Williams, 2007; Williams, 2009); (b) changing demographics and inequities in accessing services and resources for multicultural populations (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Paisley & McMahon, 2001); (c) violence and school safety, (Hermann & Finn, 2003; Stone, 2010; Williams, 2009); (d) demands for counselor accountability, (Paisley & McMahon, 2001; Stone, 2005); (e) liability issues, (Huey & Remley, 1988; Stone, 2005; Stone, 2009); and the (f) current economic climate (Tucker, 2010).

Initially developed as ASCA position statements, several of these issues became so pervasive and significant that they evolved into ethical standards (Williams, 2007). Topics such as technology, violence and safe schools, and multicultural equity are examples of issues that were elevated to ethical standards. The ASCA 2010 version of the *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* provides guidelines to address many of these concerns.

The format of this article is essentially identical to one used previously by the author in describing the 1992 revision of

the ethical standards (Huey, 1992) and provides a section-by-section overview of the new standards and other major changes in the revised ethical standards. Because the focus of this article is restricted to the new standards and those with major changes, it is important that counselors obtain a complete copy of the updated standards. Counselors can obtain the latest version of the ASCA Code of Ethics at <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?pl=325&sl=136&contentid=136>.

Mental health professionals generally accept that "the single characteristic that best distinguishes school counselors from other mental health professionals is a direct result of their work setting" (Huey, 1986, p. 321). The uniqueness of the educational work setting includes having minors for clients, and owing responsibilities to collaborate with other significant groups in the students' lives, such as parents/guardians, and the school and community.

Regardless of the amount of detail, no article can replace the knowledge gained from personal reading, review of ethics codes, and attendance at professional development programs and workshops on this topic. As professionals, school counselors must continuously update their knowledge and expertise with respect to ethical decision-making (Huey & Remley, 1988; Williams, 2007). Adherence to ethical standards, as stipulated in a formal code, provides a best practice rationale if it becomes necessary for a practitioner to support or defend his or her actions. According to Remley, Huey, and Sikes (2010), school counselors who know their code of ethics are in a much better position to engage in ethical manners and conduct (p. 8). Consequently, all professional school counselors should become familiar with the changes in the new and revised standards. The *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* is an invaluable document for providing guidance in discerning the best course of action and for reassuring counselors that they acted in a professional and ethical manner.

The 1984 version of ASCA *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* initially consisted of six sections corresponding to the professional school counselors' traditional areas of responsibilities to students, parents, colleagues and professional associates, school and community, self, and profession. Two additional supportive sections were included in the 1992 revision: Section G Maintenance of

Standards and Section H Resources. Revisions made in the 1998 revision deleted Section H due to the growing size of the code of ethics. Revision efforts added the Subsections throughout the document in the 1998 revision providing more structure for the growing number of standards (36 standards in 1984 and over 100 in 2010).

## Preamble

Several items in the preamble have been expanded to specifically address the inclusion of counseling program directors/supervisors and counselor educators as not only qualified for ASCA membership, but mandated to know, support and up-hold the standards as guides for ethical practice. The code states that school counselor educators should "... know them, teach them [ethical standards] to their students and provide support for practitioners and school counseling candidates to uphold them" (ASCA, 2010, preamble).

A new fifth item in the tenets of professional responsibility states, "Each person has the right to feel safe in school environments that school counselors help create, free from abuse, bullying, neglect, harassment or other forms of violence" (ASCA, 2010, preamble). Some educators have commented that it should be the role of the school counselor to initiate and assume responsibility for this task. From this author's perspective, the words to "*help create...*" a safe school climate define the professional school counselor's role in creating and maintaining a safe school environment. There is an important distinction to note that the primary responsibility rests with the administrative staff for coordinating building security and maintaining a safe learning environment. It is, however, critical that professional school counselors are involved in what should be a joint school and community effort to achieve this goal for all students. According to Remley, Hermann, and Huey (2003), school violence remains a key legal and ethical issue for the school counselor. Counselors promote non-violence by 1) supporting programs related to violence prevention and intervention; 2) learning violence risk factors and warning signs; identifying students potentially at-risk as victims or as aggressors; 3) collaborating with other school and community resources to teach non-violent conflict resolution and communication skills; and 4) promoting acceptance and appreciation of diversity.

Supervisors/directors and counselor educators have been added to the preamble paragraph which describes the three purposes of the ethical standards. The third purpose in the previous revision was a generalized statement about informing those served by the school counselor of acceptable practices and expected behavior. In the 2010 revision, the wording is much more specific, "Inform all stakeholders including students, parents and guardians, teachers, administrators, community members and courts of justice, of best ethical practices, values and expected behaviors of the school counseling professional" (ASCA, preamble).

## Section A. Responsibilities to Students

**A. 1. Responsibilities to Students.** This section contains three new standards relating to: (f) the involvement of support networks valued by the student; (g) the importance of maintaining appropriate professional distance in relationships between professional school counselors and current or former students, and specifically prohibits any romantic or sexual relationship with students; and (h) cautions against entering into a relationship with former students or one of their family members.

**A. 2. Confidentiality.** This section was expanded to: (a) place more emphasis on limits to disclosure of personal data, third party requests including (g) requests from the court, the vulnerability of confidentiality (h) with stored and transferred electronic records, and the necessity for signed informed consent. When informed consent is needed and attempts to obtain consent are unsuccessful, the counselor will make decisions on students' behalf.

**A. 3. Academic, Career/College/Postsecondary Access and Personal/Social Counseling Plans.** Revisions to the code include some slight modifications made in this section including a name change from Counseling Plans in the 2004 code. This standard (a) promotes the ASCA National Model and (b) stresses equitable access to academic, career, postsecondary access, and personal/social opportunities for all students. Counselors should use data to close gaps in achievement and opportunities.

**A. 4. Dual Relationships.** Two new standards caution the counselor (b) to maintain appropriate professional distance with students, and (c) warns against dual relationships

with students through communication mediums such as networking sites.

**A. 5. Appropriate Referrals.** This section adds two new standards which (b) expand the referral process to address student concerns that are beyond the professional school counselors' level of education and training, and identifies some therapeutic topics that are difficult or inappropriate in the school setting such as eating disorders, sexual trauma, drug dependency and other addictions. The second new item is (c) which reminds counselors to request a signed release of information when attempting to develop a collaborative relationship with other service providers assigned to the student.

**A. 6. Group Work.** Three new standards regarding group work are (b) recommend notification of the parents of children participating in small groups, (e) counselors need to develop competence in group facilitation skills, and (f) conduct brief and solution-focused groups that are on appropriate topics.

**A. 7. Danger to Self or Others.** The new standard (c) cautions school counselors that when making a determination as to whether a student is a danger to self or others, to be sure that they understand the legal and ethical liability for releasing the student.

**A. 8. Student Records.** The only new item regarding student records, (e), serves to up-date the required compliance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations and clarifies requirements for safeguarding student records. This standard guides counselors in assisting parents in having a voice in the sharing of their student's information.

**A. 9. Evaluation, Assessment and Interpretation.** The only new standard, (c), in this section recommends consideration of additional personal data such as developmental age, language skills, and level of competence prior to student assessments.

**A. 10. Technology.** Two new technology related standards (d) clarify the intent of FERPA regarding electronic record keeping and, (e) suggest monitoring the educational program for instances of cyber-bullying interfering with a student's educational progress.

**A. 11. Student Peer Support Program.** Emphasizes the responsibilities of the professional school counselor for the training and supervision of peer programs.

## **Section B. Responsibilities to Parents/Guardians**

**B. 1. Parent Rights and Responsibilities.** The new standard (e) simply reminds counselors to adhere to the FERPA act regarding disclosure of student information.

**B. 2. Parents/Guardians and Confidentiality.** In cases of separation and/or divorce, standard (e) addresses the importance of maintaining the focus on the student and the avoidance of supporting one parent over the other.

## **Section C. Responsibilities to Colleagues and Professional Associates**

**C. 1. Professional Relationships.** The schools counseling program director/site supervisor and the school counselor educator have been added to this group of responsibilities. The new standard (c) encourages counselors to recognize the importance of establishing and maintaining positive relationships with all teachers, staff, and administrators who can be powerful allies in supporting student success.

**C. 2. Sharing Information with Other Professionals.** Two new standards advocate for counselors to be open and cooperative with other professionals working with the student. Item (e) asserts that professional school counselors work with high functioning faculty and administrators in supporting student success and filter confidential student information on a need to know basis. Consultation with other school counselors may provide assistance in determining *how much* to share *with whom*. Section (f) suggests that counselors keep appropriate records on individual students and develop a plan to manage their transfer to another professional school counselor, if needed.

**C. 3. Collaborating and Educating Around the Role of the School Counselor.** Two new standards encourage counselors to (a) share the role of the counseling program with counseling supervisor/director and counselor educators to ensure data-driven success competencies resulting in specific outcomes and (b) to broker services

both internal and external to the school to ensure that every student receives the benefits of data-driven programs and specific academic, career/college, and personal/social competencies.

### **Section D. Responsibilities to School, Communities and Families**

**D. 2. Responsibility to the Community.** Two new standards (c) promote equity for all students through collaboration with community services, and (d) caution not to use the role of being a professional school counselor to benefit any type of private or consultative practice.

### **Section E. Responsibilities to Self**

**E. 1. Professional Competence.** Four new standards in this section refer to professional competence: (c) self-monitors personal effectiveness and refrains from activities that may lead to inadequate services or diminish effectiveness with the school community, (e) ensure a variety of professional development opportunities are available for self and other educators, (f) enhance personal awareness and professional effectiveness in the area of ethical practice, and (g) maintain membership in professional associations.

**E. 2. Multicultural and Social Justice Advocacy and Leadership.** The name of this section was Diversity in the 2004 version of the ethics code. This section contains five new standards. Professional school counselors should (a) monitor and expand personal multicultural and social justice advocacy awareness, knowledge and skills, and strive to ensure personal beliefs or values are not imposed on others; (b) develop competencies in how discrimination influences self, students and all stakeholders; (c) use inclusive and culturally responsible language in all forms of communication, (d) provide workshops and written information to families to increase understanding, two-way communication provide a welcoming school, and (e) work as advocates and leaders to create equity-based counseling programs close any achievement, opportunity, and attainment gaps.

### **Section F. Responsibilities to the Profession**

The new ethical code augments this section from two to four areas of responsibilities.

**F. 1. d. Professionalism.** One new standard addresses guidelines relating to consent from institutions and parent/guardians to participate in research.

**F. 2. c. Contribution to the Profession.** This item re-emphasizes responsibility of professional school counselors to read and abide by the ASCA Ethical Standards and adhere to applicable laws and regulations.

**F. 3. Supervision of School Counselor Candidates Pursuing Practicum and Internship Experiences.** This is a new sub-section and it contains five new standards about supervision of school counselor candidates. These include (a) providing support and appropriate supervision for interns, (b) ensuring that candidates have experiences in developing, implementing, and evaluating a data-driven program like the ASCA Model, (c) ensuring that practicum and internship experiences have accountability systems in place, (d) ensuring that candidates maintain liability insurance, and (e) ensuring site visits by counselor educators for each practicum and internship student.

**F. 4. Collaboration and Education about School Counselors and School Counseling Programs with Other Professionals.** This is a new sub-section. School counselors and school program directors/supervisors work with other school-related and community personnel to advocate for optimal services for students and all other stakeholders.

### **Section G. Maintenance of Standards**

Professional school counselors are expected to maintain ethical behavior at all times. Restructuring this section includes (a) identifying the procedures to follow when questioning the ethical behavior of a colleague, including keeping documentation of all the steps followed; and (b) defining appropriate procedural steps for professional school counselors to take when forced to work in situations or follow policies, which are unethical. The professional school counselor works in a responsible manner through

the appropriate channels to remedy the condition. Another new item, (c), states that when facing an ethical dilemma, professional school counselors use an ethical decision-making model such as Solutions to Ethical Problems in Schools (STEPS) to seek a solution.

### Summary

Within the revised code, it clearly states that professional school counselors have a “responsibility to read and abide by the ASCA *Ethical Standards for School Counselors*” (F.2.c.) and to “adhere to the ethical standards of the profession” (F.1.e.). Nevertheless, Hermann, Remley, and Huey (2010) state that “...few counselors actually know their ethical standards well, and counselors seldom read codes when problems arise” (p. 5).

As the increased number of new standards in the 2010 revision of the code of ethics illustrates so well, “the profession of school counseling continues to evolve as does the educational system and the world in which we live” (Williams, 2007, p. 9). Practitioners and counselor educators who view the profession from a best practices perspective agree that new ethical issues will continue to emerge as professional school counselors face the inevitable changes in the profession and society as a whole. To maintain relevance, ethical standards should mirror current and emerging school counseling professional issues and will evolve as issues and trends emerge (Herlihy & Remley, 1995; Huey & Gray, 2010). Williams (2009) states for example, “Technology is here to stay, but not in the same forms as we know it now...With each new technological discovery, unintended consequences erupt that often affect students...We must intervene and protect our students, using whatever means available” (p. 9). The reality is that the profession will never finish defining a code of ethics. With each revision, professional school counselors must update their knowledge and expertise continuously with respect to ethical decision-making. Because the concept of what is ethical changes as values, the profession itself and society change, ethical standards which serve as guidelines for proper ethical practice will also continue to develop and undergo further revision. ASCA has a major responsibility to assist members in this pursuit (Huey & Remley, 1988).

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## Status of Clinical Supervision Among School Counselors in Southeast Georgia

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### Abstract

Previous studies have investigated the role of clinical supervision in school counseling practice. This research explored the status and meaning of clinical supervision to school counselors employed in two southeastern Georgia counties. Results indicate that participants value clinical supervision even though their employers did not necessarily support their efforts to access supervision.

**Keywords:** clinical supervision and school counseling; clinical supervision and school counselors; clinical supervision

"Counselors in training during graduate school studies experience practicum and internships in order to develop basic competencies in the clinical skills of counseling. Clinical supervision, viewed as one of the most important pedagogical practices used in these training experiences, is one of the ways future professional counselors gain feedback and direction for further improvement and maintenance of these counseling competencies" (Ehrmann, 2003).

The above statement and the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (ACA, 2005) both make the point that supervision, particularly *clinical* supervision is an excellent tool used to help counselors learn and maintain basic competencies. If ongoing clinical supervision shapes counselor trainee effectiveness, then ongoing clinical supervision of professional school counselors should continue to support optimal professional functioning in the work environment. Further, if clinical supervision is

an essential tool for counselor development, then to what extent do professional school counselors receive clinical supervision? If not, what barriers impede receipt of this valuable tool? Finally, how important do professional school counselors hold clinical supervision as necessary for their ongoing professional development?

## Statement of the Problem

At least three prior studies have used the above questions to query counseling professionals over the last two decades (Page, Pietrzak, & Sutton, 2001; Roberts & Borders, 1994; Sutton & Page, 1994) and comprise the focus of this study. Specifically, the researchers sought to document the current state of supervision for employed school counselors in two southeastern counties in Georgia, with the hypothesis that at least 25% of the population surveyed would be currently receiving supervision. Further, the researchers sought to determine school counselors' desire for supervision, with the hypothesis that at least 50% of the surveyed population would desire or feel that they would benefit from clinical supervision. Lastly, the researchers sought to determine what factors might aid or hinder obtaining supervision, with the hypothesis that factors hindering supervision would have decreased since the prior studies. The study attempted to assess participants' attitudes toward a set of selected goals derived from a set of domains for counselor supervision developed by Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987). These goals addressed eleven common areas of supervision. The researchers hypothesized that the three main goals listed as important to counselors would have changed since the previous studies due to changes in work conditions and expectations in the field of school counseling since the last study in 2001.

## Review of the Literature

Most of the literature on school counselor supervision consists primarily of state-level surveys (Roberts & Borders, 1994; Sutton & Page, 1994). In 1994, Sutton and Page designed a questionnaire and sent surveys to 533 Maine school counselors to establish their use of supervision. Their study found that only 20% of the 493 respondents received clinical supervision even though 48% desired supervision as a viable aspect of professional development. Among the 80% who did not get supervision, 37% indicated that

they felt no need for supervision. When asked to identify major barriers to obtaining clinical supervision, the most common response from the counselors was that they did not have knowledge about how to arrange for supervision for themselves after graduate school. Page, Pietrzak, and Sutton (2001) investigated supervision practices among 267 American School Counselor Association members in the state of Maine. Although there were slight increases in the percentage of school counselors receiving some form of clinical supervision, 47% of the surveyed school counselors were not receiving clinical supervision of any kind. Moreover, even though the majority of the school counselors indicated that they wanted this experience for professional development, 33% of the surveyed respondents indicated that they did not want to receive clinical supervision.

Unfortunately, earlier literature on supervision of school counselors reveals a paucity of research (American Association for Counseling and Development [AACD], 1989) and the apparent lack of practice (Borders, 1991; Roberts & Borders, 1994; Boyd & Walter, 1975). The school counseling task force of the AACD (now American Counseling Association [ACA]), stated, "Essentially, proper supervision of school counselors is lack at best, non-existent at worst" (AACD, 1989, P.20). Since the national study by Page, Pietrzak, and Sutton (2001), few researchers have addressed their findings. Thus, lack of supervision may affect many areas of school counselors' job performance and satisfaction.

## Impact of Unprepared School Counselors on Student Success: Mental Health Issues

Although the specifics of supervision among practicing school counselors has been very limited in the research, other areas impacting counselor's work environments and support needs have been addressed in the review of the literature for this investigation. Several studies have questioned the need for either more support or training for school counselors working in the current school systems of today.

School counselors can support teachers by providing classroom strategies that meet the learning and personal/social needs of students in crisis and which support

teachers' as they cope with the crises too. Providing such support and intervention requires consultation and collaboration skills that Master's degree programs did not make available. Clinical supervision provides a way to develop needed skills (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). Counselors, however, frequently work without the benefit of clinical supervision and often work in unsupportive environments (Sutton & Page, 1994). For many years, supervision of school counselors was an overlooked professional issue (Barret & Schmidt, 1986).

Another area of concern is the mental health needs of at risk students in school. Often, the first line of involvement is with the school counselor. Students fail to be successful in school everyday due to conduct disorders and hindrances to success such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or less noticeable symptoms such as depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many of today's students grow and develop in environments characterized by poverty, substance abuse, child abuse, family instability, and domestic and community violence (Kirst, 1991; Weist, 1997). Children living in geographical regions that have limited community counseling services may have unmet counseling needs that fall on the school system. Without ongoing clinical supervision, how do counselors address students' unmet counseling needs? Limited supervision might impede counselors' ability to recognize certain clinical conditions and orchestrate appropriate referrals or interventions.

### **A Counselors' Reality: Poverty and Crisis among Public School Students**

As mentioned above, numerous factors put students at risk for academic failure or dropping out of school. Keys, Bemak, and Lockhart (1998) state that school counselors have an important part to play in helping schools respond to the increasing number of students whose mental health needs place them at risk. Two primary factors in the lives of students who are at risk for failure and drop out include poverty and emotional crisis.

Kazdin and Johnson (1994) noted that prevalence studies indicate that between 17% and 22% of youth less than 18 years of age suffer developmental, emotional, or behavioral problems. Costello et al. (1996) had similar

findings that 20.3% of children between the ages of 9 and 13 met the criteria for mental disorder as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). These disorders may range from depression, anxiety, PTSD, oppositional defiant disorder, or conduct disorder. Most researchers and clinicians would agree that there is a probable link between depression and other mental health issues, and achievement scores and overall school success (Kirst, 1991; Weist, 1997). However, an important point to note is that many of these students will not meet the criteria for placement in special education. That these students will not necessarily qualify for extra support places the brunt of their support needs solely on the counselors and teachers.

### **School Counselors, Defacto Mental Health Workers**

School counselors encounter complicated cases in which students have acute counseling needs on a regular basis (Borders & Drury, 1992). The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) concluded that without treatment for these students, their schoolwork may suffer, disruption of normal family and peer relationships can occur, and students may engage in violent acts. Counselors often function as the sole mental health professionals able to assist such students, yet they find themselves without the support of regular supervision (Barret & Schmidt, 1986). Typically, conventional approaches instruct school counselors that such cases lay beyond the scope of their training and that these students should be referred (Gysbers & Henderson, 1988). Although this may be true, such methods fail to address fully the needs of these students and counselor responsiveness. The reality is often the school counselor is usually still responsible for children even when these students receive or need outside services.

Although many students receive outside counseling, the school counselor is often called on to manage disruptive or dangerous behaviors that emerge in school, as well as consult with parents and teachers regarding student counseling issues, learning difficulties, or the effects of medication. In addition, the counselor may receive requests to provide counseling to complement the community-based services or to provide counseling if community-based services are not available or not used. Some school

counselors may provide brief therapy for students on campus but may feel that this is either not a prescribed role or a role outside of their training (Brown, 1989; Coll & Freeman, 1997). Dissonance about counselor roles may lead to questions regarding the type of training and supervision school counselors receive. Further, counselors may wonder how this training prepares them to counsel students who need intensive interventions.

## Methodology

### Participants

This was a descriptive study assessing the current practice of clinical supervision in school counseling in two southeastern Georgia counties. The participants included all school counselors, elementary, middle, and high, listed as currently working in the public school systems of two southeastern Georgia counties. This number included all counselors (n=129) in these public school systems as well as all high school vocational counselors. Participants did not identify as graduation coaches or private school counselors. The participants voluntarily completed and returned the questionnaires. The researchers did not collect demographic information to ensure anonymity for the respondents.

### Instrumentation

Researchers distributed a survey used by Page, Pietrzak, and Sutton (2001) in a national survey of counselor supervision. The primary question on the survey asked, "Do you feel that you would benefit from clinical supervision?" Second, the survey queried, "Is clinical supervision available to you?" Third, researchers solicited the number of counselors receiving and expressing a belief that they would benefit from clinical supervision. In addition, the survey instrument solicited information on (a) current clinical and administrative supervision, (b) participants' perception of the importance of selected supervision goals, and (c) participant's reasons for not receiving supervision. Participants received the following definitions to guide survey completion:

- **Administrative supervision** is an ongoing process in which the supervisor oversees staff and staff communications, planning, implementation, and evaluation of individuals, programs, or both individuals and programs.

- **Clinical supervision** is an intensive, interpersonal focused relationship, usually one-to-one or small group, in which the supervisor helps the counselor as he or she learns to apply a wider variety of assessment and counseling methods to increasingly complex cases.
- **A clinical supervisor** is a licensed mental health professional counselor, social worker, or psychologist who has at least 5 years of experience in the field.

Supervision goals were rated on a Likert scale with: 1 = not important, 2 = minimally important, 3 = somewhat important, and 4 = very important. The survey contained ten items designed to elicit information about supervision currently received by the counselor; the counselor's interest in supervision as a future aspect of professional development; four questions on factors that might hinder or facilitate efforts to obtain supervision; and eleven Likert-type items assessing attitudes about the importance of a set of supervision goals.

### Procedure

A questionnaire was mailed to every public school counselor listed as currently employed by two southeastern Georgia county school boards. Researchers constructed the mailing list by counting all school counselors listed for the two counties by the Georgia Department of Education. Next, researchers separated the list of schools by county and included all elementary, middle, high, and alternative schools. Every counselor listed for the schools in their respective counties received a survey through the mail. The packet also contained a cover letter, a copy of the survey (Appendix A), and a return self-addressed stamped envelope. The cover letter provided information about the purpose of the study and asked for voluntary participation. Researchers sent a survey to every school counselor in both counties and followed up with an email two weeks after the initial survey to remind counselors of the survey and to repeat the request for voluntary participation.

### Results

Researchers calculated descriptive statistics for each survey question. Due to the slight differences between this and previous versions of the questionnaire, the researchers did not calculate comparisons among like items from the three prior studies discussed in the literature review.

Out of the 129 surveys sent out 40 (31%) were returned. This response rate represents approximately one third of the sample and meets most recommendations for survey response research. The first hypothesis maintained that the majority of school counselors continue to desire clinical supervision and receive supervision. Because only 5% ( $N=2$ ) of the participants reported receiving supervision, researchers rejected the first hypothesis, which posed that at least 25% of the sample would report receiving current supervision. In this study 68% ( $N=26$ ) of the respondents reported potential benefits from supervision. Consequently, the researchers accepted the second hypothesis, which posed that at least 50% of the surveyed population desired or perceived a potential benefit from clinical supervision. Researchers found no support for the third hypothesis, which sought to determine the factors that might aid or hinder obtaining supervision. Neither county nor school districts offered any clinical supervision. Seventy-one percent of the respondents ( $N=27$ ) said that they would seek clinical supervision if offered by their school systems. Other reasons given for not receiving supervision (besides not being offered by their employer) included 63% ( $N=24$ ) who indicated that they did not know how to obtain supervision; 18% ( $N=7$ ) stated that they did not have the time; and 8% ( $N=3$ ) said that the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) does not endorse supervision.

In addition to these three hypotheses, the survey attempted to assess the participants' attitudes toward a set of goal statements developed for counselor supervision by Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987). These goals covered eleven common areas of supervision. Researchers hypothesized that the three main goals listed as important to counselors would have changed since the previous studies listed in the literature review. The reason for the hypothesized change would be due to changes in work conditions and expectations in the field of school counseling since the last study in 2001. The researchers rejected this hypothesis. The top three rated goals in clinical supervision in order of importance were (a) Understanding Psychotropic Medications, 97% ( $N=37$ ), (b) Taking Appropriate actions with Client Problems, 87%, ( $N=33$ ) and (c) Developing Skills and Techniques, 87%, ( $N=33$ ). These results were very much in line with previous research findings. Counselors in the 2001 National Survey and in the 1994 Maine study rated two of the same goals as most important for clinical

supervision: taking appropriate action with client problems and developing skills and techniques.

## Discussion

### Conclusions and Implications

This study utilized survey data to determine the role of clinical supervision in the professional experiences of school counselors employed in southeastern Georgia counties. The secondary effort of the study also reviewed data to determine the percentages of counselors wishing to receive supervision and factors relating to that concern. In this survey, only 5% of polled counselors responded that receiving such supervision, although the percentage of counselors desiring supervision was in the 60% range.

In the Sutton and Page (1994) study, while 63% of the respondents reported desiring supervision, only 20% received the opportunity. Page, Pietrzak, and Sutton (2001) concluded that only 23% of counselors reported receiving clinical supervision. Although not feasible to compare directly the two earlier studies with the current study, similarities seem to exist. One emerging trend might indicate less school support for supervision, rather than more given only 5% of the counselors polled in this study receive clinical supervision. That either of the two counties polled do not offer supervision may indicate the school system's failure to keep pace with national and state professional trends. If the need and desire exists as indicated in these three studies, why is the counseling field making so little progress in providing clinical supervision for professional school counselors? Moreover, a review of the literature suggests that stakeholders expect school counselors to manage the mental health aspect of students who have unmet or undiagnosed mental health needs. Therefore, based on the results of this survey, professional school counselors may not feel equipped to handle this shift in responsibilities. School counseling has a history of change based on social conditions (Paisley & Borders, 1995). Given the complexity of needs today's students face, traditional school counseling methods may not be effective in assessing counselor effectiveness and planning counselor responsibilities. Keys, Bemak and Lockhart (1998) write that classroom guidance, the backbone of the school counselors' primary prevention effort and main vehicle for life skills development has been criticized for

failing to produce long term results with at risk populations. Some have described classroom guidance as too broad in scope and unable to address fully the needs of failing students (Dryfoos, 1990; Webster, 1993; Weissberg, Caplan, & Harwood 1991). A positive move in supporting school staff and students is the institution of Response to Intervention (RTI). Educators interpret and deliver RTI differently from district to district and even from school to school. However, the focus of having a multi-disciplinary team to review data and to develop strategies for support and success remains the same. This model should ease the burden of the sole counselor in the school setting. The school counselor can be a very helpful person to have on this interdisciplinary team. In order to be able to provide the team with informed best practices for helping students, ongoing counselor development must occur. School counselors need to be more clinically sound if they are to meet the challenges of the ever-demanding communities in which they work.

## Recommendations

The researchers recommend that school districts consider providing or at least allowing release time for school counselors to receive clinical supervision in a group model or through peer support groups. Counselors often serve as the sole mental health professionals available to assist students, yet they find themselves without the support of regular supervision (Barret & Schmidt, 1986). However, as reflected in the results of the present study, the need for supervision may be growing although the support of available supervision has not kept pace.

Although the introduction of the Response to Intervention (RTI) model may improve the interdisciplinary support and communication, RTI will not remove the counselor as the primary staff person relied on as responsive support for all nature of crisis outside of the special education department. The school counselor is often the default staff person elected to provide responsive and crisis, services to students during the RTI process. Before students obtain referral for special education services, their behavior and emotional needs fall under general education services, one domain of the school counselor duties. Furthermore, many students with conduct and other behavioral problems will not qualify for special education but still require ongoing support. All of these factors contribute immensely to being at risk for failure and drop out. Counselors must counsel

with students as part of the students' school plans, in addition to whatever outside counseling supports they are receiving.

A second recommendation offers that ASCA directly and more emphatically addresses the needs of supervision for school counselors, supporting the professional need for clinical supervision. ASCA and affiliated state associations can support counselors' need for supervision by creating a strong role/position statement (Van Zandt & Hayslip, 1994). Specifically, ASCA and the Georgia School Counselor Association (GSCA) need to promote state legislation that mandates clinical supervision of school counselors in Georgia as a professional in-service and re- certification requirement.

Finally, recommendations to improve the research design of this study would include returning the demographic data questions to the survey instrument. The removal of the demographic questions made it impossible to gauge the differences in counselor career stages and the possible needs among the three different components of school counseling, elementary, middle and high school. Differences in communities needs such as rural versus urban might be captured as well by expanding the demographic data. Because of the limitations of the current instrument and the population sampled, we cannot draw any conclusions about the needs of urban schools, elementary, middle, and high as they differ from smaller towns or rural environments. Although this would be a much larger undertaking, an instrument listing clear demographic questions such as age, gender, highest educational level, and area of school counseling would help very much to get a larger picture of why counselors might have responded as they did. Random sampling counselors across the entire state of Georgia would provide information about rural, urban, and suburban areas.

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## Appendix A

### Questionnaire

1. Do you feel that you would benefit from clinical supervision?

68% Yes (N=26)  
32% No (N=12)

2. Is clinical supervision offered by your school district?

Neither \_\_\_\_\_ nor \_\_\_\_\_ County schools  
Systems offer clinical supervision.

3. If you answered yes is there a fee:

68% Blank/No answer (N=27)  
18% No (N=7)  
11% N/A (N=4)

4. If you answered yes there is a fee does the school pay for it?

18% No (N=7)  
11% N/A (N=4)  
71% Blank

5. Is access to clinical supervision available in your town or community?

50% Yes (N=19)  
21% No (N=8)  
21% Unsure or Don't know (N=8)  
8% Blank (N=3)

6. Are you currently receiving clinical supervision?

5% Yes (N=2)  
95% No (N=36)

7. Have you received clinical supervision in the past?

21% Yes (N=8)  
79% No (N=30)

8. Are you currently receiving administrative supervision?

45% Yes (N=17)  
53% No (N=20)  
3% Blank (N=1)

9. If you have **no interest** in receiving clinical supervision:

26% "Do not feel that it is necessary" (N=10)  
16% "Do not feel that school counseling has clinical needs" (N=6)  
<1% "Do not have ready access to clinical supervision" (N=1)  
18% "Do not have time to receive clinical supervision" (N=7)  
8% "Not endorsed by the ASCA model" (N=3)

10. Please list reasons why you are not receiving clinical supervision:

Various handwritten answers

11. Is release time a factor in not receiving clinical supervision?

37% Yes (N=15)  
52% No (N=21)  
1% Blank (N=4)

12. Is financing of supervision cost a factor in your not receiving supervision?

40% Yes (N=15)  
52% No (N=20)  
<1% N/A (N=1)  
1% Blank (N=4)

13. Do you know how to obtain clinical supervision in your community?

37% Yes (N=14)  
63% No (N=24)  
<1% "Don't want it" (N=1)  
<1% Blank (N=1)

14. If clinical supervision was available to you at no cost and supported by your school would you attend?

71%	Yes	(N=27)
29%	No	(N=11)
<1%	Maybe	(N=1)
<1%	Blank	(N=1)

### Importance of Supervision Goals to School Counselors

Goals:

1. Taking appropriate action with client problems

0%	Least important	(N=0)
5%	Somewhat important	(N=2)
21%	Very important	(N=8)
66%	Most important	(N=25)

2. Developing skills and techniques

<1%	Least important	(N=1)
0%	Somewhat important	(N=0)
26%	Very important	(N=10)
61%	Most important	(N=23)

3. Formulating a treatment plan with long and short term goals

8%	Least important	(N=3)
11%	Somewhat important	(N=4)
37%	Very important	(N=14)
32%	Most important	(N=12)

4. Ability to use own reactions/emotions diagnostically

3%	Least important	(N=1)
8%	Somewhat important	(N=3)
42%	Very important	(N=16)
24%	Most important	(N=9)

5. Integrating professional ethics into ongoing counseling practice

<1%	Least important	(N=1)
11%	Somewhat important	(N=4)
32%	Very important	(N=12)
48%	Most important	(N=18)

6. Developing independence/self-directedness

3%	Least important	(N=1)
16%	Somewhat important	(N=6)
24%	Very important	(N=9)
45%	Most important	(N=17)

7. Developing sense of self as a counselor

8%	Least important	(N=3)
18%	Somewhat important	(N=7)
37%	Very important	(N=14)
39%	Most important	(N=15)

8. Developing awareness of personal motivation

5%	Least important	(N=2)
24%	Somewhat important	(N=9)
34%	Very important	(N=13)
32%	Most important	(N=12)

9. Developing respect for individual differences

8%	Least important	(N=3)
16%	Somewhat important	(N=6)
29%	Very important	(N=11)
47%	Most important	(N=18)

10. Understanding student's psychiatric diagnosis

3%	Least important	(N=1)
11%	Somewhat important	(N=4)
29%	Very important	(N=11)
55%	Most important	(N=21)

11. Understanding psychotropic medications

5%	Least important	(N=2)
18%	Somewhat important	(N=7)
34%	Very important	(N=13)
63%	Most important	(N=24)

## **A Short-Term Study Abroad Program for School Counseling Students**

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### **Abstract**

Well planned, short-term study abroad programs can benefit school counseling students through exposure to new and different cultural experiences. Students gain knowledge and skills that will help them serve the diverse cultural groups found in public school settings. The objective of the short-term study abroad program described in this article was to assist students in gaining additional cultural experiences that lead to expanded cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills.

*Keywords:* study abroad, school counseling, culture, cultural immersion

## **A Short-Term Study Abroad Program for School Counseling Students**

While there are many different types of short-term study abroad experiences for undergraduate students, few such experiences are available for graduate students. Short-term study abroad programs are programs that students participate in for less than eight weeks. In the 2008-2009 academic year, approximately 31,000 graduate students received academic credit for any type of study abroad experience (Open Door, 2010); over fifty percent of the students participating in study abroad experiences were involved in short-term programs. However, a far larger number of foreign students attended U.S. institutions of higher education during the same time. Fewer U.S. study abroad programs have specific designs for counseling graduate students and even less directed specifically for school counseling students.

## **Benefits of Short-Term Study Abroad**

There are many potential benefits gained from short-term study abroad programs for undergraduate students. However, little research explores the benefits of study abroad for graduate students. Sutton and Rubin (2004) published results from the Glossari Study that compared undergraduate study abroad students with undergraduate students who chose not to participate in study abroad programs. The results of this study indicated that a higher percentage of study abroad students graduated in four years as compared to similar students who did not participate in study abroad, have higher cumulative grade point averages, and have a more in-depth knowledge level of functional cultural practices. Lewis and Niesenaum (2005) indicated that study abroad programs could change the worldview of participating students. Increased intercultural awareness, personal growth, and increased academic performance have also been associated with study abroad programs (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004).

Study abroad also assists students in meeting multicultural competencies established by the Association of Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD). In particular, the competencies specify that multiculturally competent counselors seek out educational, consultative, and training experiences to improve their understanding and effectiveness in working with culturally different populations (Arredondo et al., 1996, p. 1). In addition, the Ethical Standards of the American Counseling Association (ACA) indicate that counselor education programs should include experiences and activities that train students to gain awareness, knowledge, and skills in the competencies of multicultural practices (ACA, 2011, p.16). Study abroad is an educational experience that allows students to immerse themselves in cultures different from their own and provides the opportunity to increase their cultural knowledge, skills, and competence.

## **Changing Face of School Counseling**

In 2007, there were 105,519 school counselors providing services to approximately 49,000,000 students in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Similar to teachers, the majority of school counselors are White (Packer-Williams, Jay, & Evans, 2010). By 2050,

nearly 60% of all school age children will be students of color (Packer-Williams et. al 2010). School counselors need to understand diversity and how diversity shapes students' home, school, local and global community functioning (Yeh & Arora, 2003). As the demographic compositions of public schools continue to change, so does the need for school counseling students to expand their global experiences in order to increase their understanding of a diverse student population. As suggested by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs [CACREP] (CACREP, 2009), the curricula of school counseling programs need to provide students with experiences that facilitate exploration of social and cultural diversity issues relevant to school counseling. The short-term study abroad program is one means to meet this standard for learning.

### **Program Components**

The authors developed the short-term study abroad program to provide masters level school counseling students with the opportunity to broaden their cultural experiences through a ten-day initiative that took place during the students' spring break. The program aimed to provide students with a cultural experience that fostered learning about and participation in the educational system in Britain while enhancing their exposure to a culture that is similar in language yet very different from their own. The students go abroad during spring break to avoid disruption of class schedules. While students did not receive course credit for the experience, students could log hours for practicum during the time spent in the British Schools and involved in certain activities. The instructor selected London as the main site for the program because of the instructor's knowledge of the city and the working partnership already established with a rural middle school. While in London, faculty and students shared an apartment and learned to use public transportation to travel in and outside of the city adding to students' understanding of the British urban culture.

The program had two components: broad cultural experiences and educational related experiences. Cultural experiences took place throughout the City of London and in nearby cities. The instructor selected these experiences to immerse students in diverse environments over the ten-day period.

### **Cultural Experiences**

Students explored diverse elements of British culture. Museum visits gave students information useful in individual, group or classroom counseling. Traveling to different cities in the area forced students to develop logistical plans including timetables for the tube (subway), buses, and trains, currency transactions, and to develop objectives for the trip. These same types of skills transfer to creating a calendar for the year or for putting together a classroom guidance curriculum. Visiting cathedrals provided time for students to reflect upon the impact of religion and spirituality in cultural development. The trips to the ethnic markets were planned so that students would encounter different cultures at each market. Cultural interactions at the markets included engaging in conversations with individuals, sampling foods from other cultures and viewing different styles of living. The Holocaust Exhibit and speaker gave students a glimpse of what it was like for Jewish people living in Germany during WWI. Students also learned about the consequences that many holocaust survivors have experienced because of being a survivor such as issues related to guilt and trust. These experiences enveloped students in the British culture increasing their cultural understanding while increasing knowledge and skills that are transferrable to working with students in schools.

### **Educational Experiences**

During the ten-day program, school counseling students observed students and conducted classroom guidance for two days in a rural community school about an hour outside of London. The school served middle school students. Prior to going to the school, the school counseling students planned two classroom guidance activities that they would conduct for the British children. Teachers were consulted to determine what type of guidance lessons would best meet the needs of their students. Schools in England do not typically have school counselors; therefore, the school counseling students also had to provide information to each class about the role of the school counselor in the United States. Each day was set up so that each school counseling student was paired with a public school student. The first half of the day was spent observing in classrooms and gaining information about the educational

system in Britain by talking with students and classroom teachers. The second half of the day was spent conducting classroom guidance activities in four different classes. The school counseling students conducted the classroom guidance activities in pairs.

Conducting the classroom guidance lessons was vital to meeting the educational objectives for the study abroad program. These lessons allowed school counseling students to practice skills and to provide information for their British students. The guidance activities were developed so that school counseling students and the British students could share and enhance each other's cultural knowledge. For example, school counseling students were able to conduct a cultural guidance lesson that increased the knowledge of the British culture for middle school students who were preparing for an exchange program with the community school that was visited in Britain. The school counseling students provided first-hand knowledge about the culture and school lessening the anxiety the middle school students were experiencing.

### Sample Itinerary

Table one provides a sample itinerary for the short-term study abroad program in London. The itinerary provides a balance between academic and social pursuits. Students had many opportunities to engage in academic activities but there was also ample free time for students to pursue other activities and explore the City of London and other sights. Counselor educators can change the itinerary to meet the needs of the students and faculty participating in the study abroad program.

**Table 1 Sample Itinerary**

Day 1	Depart for London (~8 hours)
Day 2	Arrive London: (Customs, purchase currency and train tickets, travel cards, and food cards; Sights of London. Start time: 7:30 a.m.; End time: 9:00 p.m.)
Day 3	Portobello Road Market, Borough Market, Shepard's Bush Market, Brixton Market. Start time: 9:00 a.m.; End time: 5:00 p.m.

Day 4 Cambridge, England: Kings College and Trinity College. Start time: 9:30 a.m.; End time: 4:00 p.m.

Day 5 Salisbury, England: Salisbury Cathedral and Stonehenge. Start time 8:00 am; End time: 5:00 p.m.

Day 6 XXX Community School: Observation and Classroom Guidance. Start time: 5:30 a.m.; End time: 6:00 p.m.

Day 7 XXX Community School: Observation and Classroom Guidance. Start time: 5:30 a.m.; End time 6:00 p.m.

Day 8 Imperial War Museum (Holocaust Exhibit); Jewish Cultural Center for Holocaust Survivor Talk. Start time: 9:00 a.m.; End time: 3:30 p.m.

Day 9 Museums: National Gallery, British Museum, Tate. Theater: *Wicked*. Start time: 9:30 a.m.; End time: 10:00 p.m.

Day 10 Free day

Day 11 Free day

Day 12 Return to United States (~9 hours)

### Implications for the Profession

Study abroad is one opportunity for counselor educators to align their counselor education program with state and national standards and for students to gain valuable cultural experiences. Cultural competence and use of data are emphasized in the standards for school counselor programs established by the University System Board of Regents (BOR) and the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Study abroad allowed school counseling students to immerse themselves in another culture increasing their understanding of cultural differences and viewpoints. Instructors can evaluate students' ability to use data as part of a study abroad program. For example, pre and post tests were given as part of the guidance lessons permitting students and faculty to examine the data to determine

how the British students were impacted by the lessons and for the students to evaluate their own performance in this setting. The study also asked teachers and students to evaluate the school counseling students to provide feedback about their classroom effectiveness.

School counseling students engaged in study abroad are able to step into an environment that allows them to practice the cultural skills they already possess and gain additional knowledge and skills. Counseling students who study abroad can use the knowledge and skills gained to interact with multicultural students. The evaluations given by the British teachers and students provided school counseling students with information about how their effectiveness from individuals with a different worldview adds to the learning process.

### Conclusion

Changes in our global community necessitate that school counseling students participate in diverse cultural experiences that increase their understanding of multicultural students. The program described in this article provided an avenue for school counseling students to expand their cultural horizons and to apply the benefits of cultural exchange to their professional competence. The program offered school counseling students the opportunity to become engaged in a different cultures at multiple levels and assisted them in gaining skills and knowledge that they can use when working with individual students, counseling groups, and conducting classroom guidance in the future.

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## The Varied Roles of School Counselors In Rural Settings

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### Author Note

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### Abstract

In an effort to demonstrate the uniqueness of the school counselor's role in rural, as opposed to urban, communities, this contribution will speak to the societal norms that render rural communities cultural entities, in and of themselves. The discussion will start with a brief elucidation of the prescribed roles of the school counselor, before offering a broadened perspective of school counselors who practice in rural communities. This contribution will also consider characteristics of rural schools that may be either liabilities or assets in facilitating children's social and psychological growth.

*Keywords:* rural school counselors; rural school counseling; school counselor roles

Children's academic performance and opportunities for sound academic development hinge not only on abilities and aptitude, but also on psychological and social issues (Walsh, Howard, & Buckley, 1997). As a clinician, this writer remains profoundly aware of how psychological and social issues influence children's development; she has borne witness to the hurdles some children must cross to get an education. Some children require the attention of a counselor if they are to *resolve* interpersonal and psychological issues that hinder their educational process. These interpersonal issues may include, but are not necessarily limited to, such situations as domestic abuse, social isolation, substance abuse in the home, student and/or family members' mood disorders, or adjustment to a new school or community setting. Not surprisingly, school personnel will attend to these clinical services. Additionally,

the parents of these children often need clinical attention. While some parents will require assistance in dealing with an obstinate teenager, others will need intensive skill and knowledge in parenting and child management. Still others will require assistance to empower their children to aspire to greater academic heights.

Regardless of the school counselor feels skilled in clinical delivery, in rural America helping students cope with clinical conditions may fall squarely on his or her shoulders— even though providing ongoing therapy is beyond the scope of practice for professional school counselors. With a profound lack of resources, rural communities rely on the collaboration of every available institution to meet the needs of constituents. The community calls upon the church, the school, and even the municipal government to provide help as possible. By all accounts, this seems to be the ideology of rural functioning. It is a type of kinship care, so to speak, and it requires a commitment to the community, a commitment to the cultural ideals of the rural lifestyle, and great creativity.

### The School Counselor---Deciphering Roles

With the presence of a vast array of professionals and para-professionals in the school setting, one may become confused, or at least, disillusioned about whose responsibility it is to perform which tasks. Even high ranking school personnel may be unclear about the school counselor's role. According to Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skeleton (2006) this may be the case even with the principal. This research team found that counselors and principals often had differing perceptions of the prescribed role of the school counselor, especially with regard to actual counseling duties. This role confusion is not new, as Aubrey (as cited in Monteiro-Leitner, et al., 2006) highlighted this issue more than 35 years ago. One of the factors that contribute to the problem of defining the school counselor's duties seems to be related to the flexibility with which the school counselor must operate and the alterations in this staff person's daily functioning. Local and regional resources, in conjunction with students' needs, govern these daily fluctuations in tasks (Monteiro-Leitner, et al., 2006).

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), (as cited in Helker, Schottelkorb, & Ray, 2007) school

counselors are “. . . certified or licensed professional(s) who address the needs of students comprehensively through the implementation of a comprehensive developmental school guidance program” (p. 32). According to Helker, Schottelkorb, & Ray (2007), consultation and coordination of services are among the four primary interventions in the school counselor's duties. In either of these capacities, the school counselor engages in an array of activities (inside and/or outside of the school building) to help students succeed in the educational system. Helping students become successful in the educational system may translate into tasks as basic as identifying tutoring services for a child or assisting a child in improving his or her personal hygiene skills. Success in the educational setting, for some children, may be the product of resolving such interpersonal issues as anger management, shyness, or dealing with interpersonal victimization. Another child's academic success may only come when she is not charged with covering for a drug addicted mom or an abusive father. Because of the breadth of the school counselor's scope of responsibilities, the person acting in this role must not only be creative, but must also be skilled in resource management, community mobilization, and be able to multi-task (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007).

Mitchell & Bryan (2007) highlight the variety of activities taken on by school counselors in facilitating academic success in a particular immigrant population. In an effort to address barriers to the study population's performance in school the research team concluded that the school counselors under observation developed and implemented interventions that were not necessarily academic in nature. Parent support groups, for example, strengthened the bond between parents and their children, while at the same time, helped parents to understand the local and national rules regarding child abuse. These support groups also encouraged parents to consider alternative discipline methods, while providing a forum for the parents to share and resolve the socio-cultural stressors faced by the parents and children (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). An integral part of this particular effort was a training component that assisted teachers in understanding the cultural ideologies of the study population (Mitchell & Bryan).

Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy (2007) assert that the school counselor may also serve in a clinical capacity, which is especially the case in rural settings. They suggest that the

school counselor may also serve as a guidance person, a vocational advisor, a parent educator, and as a clinician. While the school counselor may assist one student with a schedule or review options for career development, the next student may present with a situation of familial violence, an unplanned pregnancy, or depressive symptoms. Each of these issues requires the attention and expertise of a skilled and knowledgeable interventionist. In rural communities, stakeholders may expect the school counselor to respond to a host of social and emotional issues, and, realistically, these responses will occur under less than optimal conditions (Morrisette, 2000).

As one can plainly see, if the school counselor is to facilitate academic success for students, then s/he must be a problem-solving member of the school's resource team. The school counselor must have skills to provide direct and indirect intervention, to plan, direct, and implement prevention programming, and serve as a student advocate. (Monteiro-Leitner, et al., 2006). Monteiro-Leitner, et al. further offer that planning, development, and implementation require the ability to mobilize and motivate all vested entities, whose energies and other resources the school counselor will ultimately find indispensable in the rural community.

### **The Rural School/The Rural Community**

According to Walsh, Howard, & Buckley (1999) there is an inextricable link among the home, school and the socio-cultural environment. In order to understand and properly serve and promote the development of children in the social, educational, or psychological domain, one must first understand the child's social environment, including his home and his community. Because of its cohesiveness and characteristics, the rural community is a distinct culture. This is not to suggest that those who choose to reside in rural communities are less than their urban counterparts, or that they necessarily suffer any emotional, mental, or cognitive defect. Rather, residency in a rural community often translates into significant differences in one's manner of living. Edwards (2004) considers the rural lifestyle as a society uniquely defined by a framework that “. . . “facilitates, constrains, and shapes the kinds of options that are available to individuals” (p. 3). Edwards clarifies further that the cultural ideology and environmental context of the rural community serves the foundational purpose

of setting norms that affect interpretations and govern individual as well as group interactions. Consequently, concerns regarding specific educational needs and access to mental health services arise and these seem directly related to rural lifestyle.

In considering service delivery in rural communities, the influence of poverty remains of utmost importance and fully considered. Research consistently finds a strong correlation between poverty and rural communities (Cross & Burney, 2005; Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006; & Bryan & Holcomb McCoy, 2007). In southern states, however, the picture seems especially grim. Moore, Probst, Tompkins, & Martin (2005) found that in small rural counties in one southern state, 77% of African American children and 77% of Hispanic children live in households at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. Moore, et al., (2005) contend, further, that the poverty level increases as the child's county of residence becomes more rural.

Most practitioners, educators, and other professional service providers are quick to recognize that rural communities lack resources that would facilitate any degree of ease in service provision. There is no lack of truth in these contentions---rural areas simply do not have the degree or even the breadth of resources one might expect in urban centers. While this lack of resources challenges service delivery, lack of resources also makes for challenges for residents' everyday existence, as well. Families in rural areas, then, face issues that are unique to them, and that are more often than not, a function of their environment. Mink, Moore, Johnson, Probst, & Martin (2005) found, for example, that while rural and urban teens are about equal in their likelihood of exposure to violence, rural teens tend to experience other risk factors that may render them more vulnerable for school failure. According to Mink, et al. (2005) rural teens are at significantly greater risk than their urban and suburban counterparts for using tobacco products, crack/cocaine, and steroids. Of even greater note is the high prevalence of the use of crystal meth among rural teens.

Additionally, Moore, et al. (2005) report that 80% of rural children with potential mental health problems live in counties that do not have community mental health centers. Interestingly, while these problems exist, and are of great

note, especially in rural communities, the services to combat these problems were notably absent or negligible in rural schools. Mink, et al., (2005) found in South Carolina, for example, that while rural and urban schools were equally as likely to have professional school counselors, psychologists, and social workers on staff, these personnel were available for significantly fewer hours in the rural settings. They found, additionally, that counselors in rural schools were significantly less likely to hold proper credentials or to have earned even a graduate degree. Of further interest is the finding that rural schools tended to use significantly less prevention initiatives or preventive policies than schools in urban settings, and relied heavily on more punitive policies when behavioral infractions occurred (Mink, et al., 2005).

Clearly, there is a lot amiss about the schools in rural settings, making them less than optimal for employment consideration for counselors. Despite the deficits noted in these settings, many unique assets of rural communities render them resilient in mediating issues in most, if not all, of their institutions. Moore, et al., (2005) found, for example, that parental stress levels tend to be lower in rural areas than in urban areas. On a scale of 3 – 12 (with 12 being the worst) rural parents averaged stress levels of 3.47, compared to nearly 5.0 for urban parents. The implications of such findings, according to Moore, et al. (2005) translated into the modeling of many types of positive behaviors by parents. The researchers link the lesser degree of parental stress to greater parental availability to participate actively in school-community functions, thereby facilitating greater academic performance by students. They also attribute lower incidences of violence among rural teens to lower levels of parental stress.

While rural schools, like their urban counterparts, seem to be grossly understaffed, the student populations are usually smaller. This, according to Cross & Burney (2005) is undoubtedly a positive for students at either end of the academic spectrum. Gifted students, they assert, benefit especially from the smaller class sizes that rural schools afford them. Rural teachers seem to consider rural gifted students holistically rather than simply through an academic achievement lens. Additionally, Cross & Dixon (1998, as cited in Cross & Burney, 2005) found that gifted students in small rural schools had more social latitude than gifted students attending larger urban schools. The research team noted, also, that important social and

psychological differences existed between rural and urban gifted students. The former, they say, viewed competition in the academic arena as positive, while urban gifted students' experience with competition for academic status was anxiety producing. They also noted that in rural schools, gifted students had greater opportunities for tailored academic instruction (Cross & Burney, 2005).

People in rural communities tend to demonstrate a stake in their communities and all its institutions. Rural fire departments, churches, police departments, municipal government, and schools all tend to enjoy an unyielding kind of support from their respective communities (Alisauskas & Jankauskiene, 2008; Edwards, 2004; Marquart-Pyatt & Petrzalka; 2008;). Not unlike the findings of previously mentioned studies, Alisauskas & Jankauskiene show similar ideologies of rural culture in Eastern Europe and distinguish five key features of rural communities regarding members' willingness to invest energies. At least two of these seem applicable to this discussion. Conventional wisdom suggests that rural people characteristically prefer to solve their own social, economic, environmental, and other problems, and to engage in activities that preserve traditions. Collaboration is a crucial component of survival and is likely to include a broad range of professionals, including educators, farmers, and clergymen. Alisauskas & Jankauskiene aptly call this method of problem resolution the integral method, because issues in rural communities tend to be intensely interrelated.

Cross & Burney (2005) describe the rural community's support of its educational institutions as one that affords students considerable opportunities for participation in a broader range of activities that allow for leadership development. The connectedness between the school and the community is not necessarily a uniquely rural phenomenon, they say, however, the depth of that connection is a characteristic of the rural ideology. Despite the fact of high rates of poverty in rural communities, Cross & Dixon (1998, as cited in Cross & Burney, 2005) found that rural communities tend to express significant support for their schools and school activities. Support, for rural communities, they say, may range from donations of time, goods, monies, or expertise; participation in local and regional activities; or advocacy on behalf of the school.

The greatest challenge and paradoxically greatest help facing the rural community include pervasive stereotypes the practitioner may have. These disparaging beliefs are broad in scope and tend to include portrayal of rural residents as "...simple minded buffoons..." (Giardina, 1993, p.2). Other stereotypes include the belief that people who live in rural communities are backward, un-ambitious, and lazy. While this writer suspects that most readers of this contribution will be fully aware of how irrational these notions are, denying their existence would serve little more than to passively contribute to their proliferation. The new resident to rural America often finds the cultural mores unsettling. This, according to Morrisette (2000) includes school personnel. If the school counselor holds stereotypical beliefs, they will manifest in interactions with students, parents, and community at large. Both Morrisette (2000) and Cross and Burney (2005) note that the consequences of this kind of prejudice from a school counselor likely has profound adverse effects on students' efficacy levels, performance, and efforts toward educational achievement. To support and encourage students, the counselor or any school staff, for that matter, must operate from a strengths-based orientation, which affirms and genuinely advocates for a broad array of educational options for all students (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Morrisette, 2000).

### **Broadened Rural School Counselor Responsibilities**

Now that we have established the uniqueness of rural communities and therefore, rural schools, the foundation is laid to consider the uniqueness of the role of the school counselor in a rural school. It is not this writer's goal to misrepresent the everyday issues faced by school counselors practicing in rural settings. Like other professionals in rural areas, the rural school counselor, too, will very probably have to deal with isolation, lack of appropriate professional supervision, and limited access to opportunities for professional growth. Morrisette (2000) rather aptly described the experience of the young school counselor relocating to rural America from an urban setting as "... culture shock" (p. 2). Because of the challenges inherent in the rural lifestyle alone, says Morrisette (2000) this person is more likely than not to abandon this position within the first year.

One of the hallmarks of the rural community is the lack of anonymity compared to that of urban areas. The school counselor, like other professionals in rural America, cannot simply disappear after the closing bell. As a part of the community, this person operates in multiple overlapping relationships. The community's view of this person is as a professional with little tolerance for deviations from that role. Morrisette (2000) likens this type of existence to that of living in a fish bowl. Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, (2004) caution that this high level of visibility, coupled with a broad scope of responsibilities and limited resources, can become the recipe for professional burnout.

Research has consistently confirmed burn-out to be of great concern for rural service providers (Hann-Morrison, 2003; Hann-Morrison, 2006; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). In rural communities school counselors, like mental health providers, struggle with finding the balance between their professional beings and their private beings in an environment that is so interdependent. In settings where everyone holds considerably more intimate knowledge about everyone's comings and goings (a feature of survival in rural communities) it becomes a challenge for the professional to ebb simply into the background at the end of the workday.

Despite these challenges, there are rewards in providing school counseling services in the rural setting. Among them, according to Morrisette (2000) are such things as flexibility to design and implement programs, less bureaucracy, and probably most importantly, community engagement. Some of the more common areas of new responsibilities for the rural school counselor include such chores as providing parent education sessions, community coalition building, and conducting home visits. These items are included among what Christiansen (1997) calls protective factors. Protective factors, according to Christiansen (1997) are elements from the community that "... buffer children from stress and trauma and lead to resilience" (p. 203).

According to Mitchell and Bryan (2007), as a parent educator, the school counselor must exercise sensitivity regarding parents' hours of availability, transportation issues, and probably most importantly, educational levels. The school counselor, in accordance with the task of developing, implementing, and evaluating activities to facilitate children's educational achievement, may no longer

function in the capacity of a typical 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. professional. According to Cross and Burney (2005), for example, one of the charges of the new school counselor is parent education. In rural communities, especially, providing parent education, more often than not, will entail significant changes the conceptualization of traditional work hours. With rural community members working generally blue collar types of job, with rigid work hours and conditions, the better option for parental participation will more likely be evenings or weekends (Cross & Burney, 2005; Christiansen, 1997). While sites for parent education training are generally not so much of a hardship, as the school building seems to serve that purpose superbly, the bigger issue appears to be one of tailoring instruction to the consumers' level of understanding. Mitchell & Bryan (2007) caution educators to avoid assuming all parents will operate at a basic or elementary level.

Community coalition building involves the school counselor's willingness to work collaboratively with other community institutions. This, according to Mitchell & Bryan (2007) may mean meeting with the mental health practitioner, or sitting on a multi-disciplinary task force to help resolve a community issue or an issue with a particular child or family. In the capacity of coalition building, Christiansen (1997) suggested that the school counselor collaborate with the teacher to find creative ways of getting parents actively involved in school activities, and thus involved in the child's education. Such efforts may include guest for a day' programs, whereby a parent is invited to speak/present to a class on a particular topic. Other ideas include inviting parents to special assemblies or coaching an athletic or academic event (Christiansen, 1997). These kinds of efforts, says, Christiansen (1997) are apt to promote positive relationships between teachers and parents.

It has been this writer's experience that professionals tend to struggle with the notion of doing home visits. This takes professionals out of their comfort zone, and for some, creates great anxiety. Both Mitchell and Bryan (2007) and Cross and Burney (2005) hail the benefits of home visits as being among the most efficient means of gathering knowledge about the population with which one hopes to work productively. Further, they challenge the merits of some professionals' contentions regarding personal safety as a deterrent to home visits. Christiansen (1997) and

Walsh, Howard and Buckley (1999) offer home visits as an optimal mechanism for relationship building between school personnel and parents. Both teams of researchers recognize that children who are at risk for school failure are more than likely parented by adults who have little or no social connection with the school culture. Walsh, Howard, and Buckley (1999) propose that by prompting and securing an invitation to the homes of children and meeting parents on their own turf, at least two positive outcomes will likely occur. First, school personnel will garner a better understanding of, and thus, greater sensitivity to the everyday challenges faced by the family. Second, home visits by professionals tend to demonstrate to parents a sense that the professional has an interest in the family. While home visits are not recommended in every situation, as a rule, this mode of service delivery and assessment have proven to be safe and effective (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007).

It is prudent to note a caveat, here. At least two contingencies seem to exist regarding the school counselor's willingness to participate actively with the community. First, how connected does the school counselor feel to the community? Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy (2004) found, for example, that most school counselors who practiced in rural schools believed their roles should expand to community partnerships. They note, further, though, that elementary school practitioners perceived their community partnership roles to be more important than middle and high school counselors. Second, the expansion of school counselor services outside the traditional domain of the school building is generally not at the sole discretion of the counselor. Hopper, Pankake & Schroth (1999) found that a major factor in the development of such school-community connections depends on the level of commitment of school administrators. In their assessment of rural school district superintendent's perceptions of inclusion, for example, Hopper, Panake & Schroth (1999) demonstrated that when high level administrators embrace change and innovation, the positive energy created is often channeled downward. They add, further, that superintendents' community visibility and district authority positions them to create the energy necessary to support effective school-family-community partnerships.

## What Has Worked

A hallmark of the rural community is its lack of traditional resources. Paradoxically, though, rural communities may be seen as being quite rich, especially so in that there tends to be a strong sense of ownership of the community, and therefore, above average willingness to share and donate resources for the common good. People in rural communities seem more apt than those in urban settings to assist their neighbors. This neighborliness and fictive kinship mentality is not limited to micro-systems, but may be observed at broad levels of functioning within and across rural communities (Hann-Morrison, 2003).

Bryan and Holcomb-McCoy (2004) call the collaboration between and among school and community entities, school-family-community (SFC) partnerships. These partnerships, they contend, appear to be more prevalent in rural settings and work in unison to plan, coordinate, and implement programs such as mentoring opportunities; home visit programs; tutoring services; and parent centers. SFC partnerships ultimately emphasize improving academic success for students as well as social and emotional support that will facilitate gains in academics.

In rural America, one of the most powerful institutions is the church. This particular asset, in combination with other community factors, has proven to be a potent force in assisting children and their families to turn around low academic performance. Hann-Morrison (2003) found that rural students experiencing academic challenges also seemed to have unmet psychological needs that manifested behaviorally in the classroom. The school family collaboration between educators (e.g., school counselor or teacher), the church, and parents and students proved beneficial at several levels. First, students' behaviors improved. Moreover, the researcher noted improvements before the complete intervention unfolded during the study. Second, students' grades improved. Third, teacher-parent relationships showed notable improvement, and finally, there was a relationship founded between the church and the school. All these relationships and outcomes serve to illustrate the profundity of SFC partnerships in school districts where at first glance, a person might see the glass as half-empty. Hann-Morrison (2003) concluded that "... among the most vital benefit of program participation ... was the perception of parental empowerment ... in their

children's educational process" (p. 6). Parents and school counselors will likely not only generalize these lessons of empowerment to other children and other circumstances but also generalize them to other domains of life in the rural community.

Another such example of positive outcomes related to (SFC) partnership in a rural setting is Project Aspire (Cross & Burney, 2005). Cross and Burney (2005) describe a three-year grant funded program designed specifically for academically gifted children in a rural community. The program, they contend, included an intense counseling component and resulted in clear implications for school counselors in rural schools. The premise of Project Aspire is that counseling services will enhance students' opportunities for academic achievement by providing assistance in dealing with non-academic issues that hinder academic performance. The program also emphasized professional development counseling for school counselors and other personnel to assist them in better understanding the characteristics of rural students and the rural community.

Based on an analysis of interviews with 21 counselors working in 14 rural schools, the researchers were able to identify issues significant to rural school counselors in their effort to develop, implement, and evaluate school-family-community partnerships. Consistent with tASCA's (as cited in Helker, Schottelkorb, & Ray, 2007) description of school counselors' roles, Cross & Burney (2005), too, found repeated themes related to advocacy. Results from Project Aspire demonstrated a positive correlation between students' academic performance and the quantity and quality of school counselors' advocacy. Advocacy efforts included basic steps such as securing space, time, and/or permission for students to complete homework assignments on school property and rallying support for students' participation on community boards. Another finding of this study included issues related to school counselors' respect for, and genuine belief in students' capabilities.

## Conclusion

This writer offers considerations as a clinician, an educator, and a rural community resident and posits that the emotional, educational, and professional development in rural communities is no less a goal than it is in urban settings.

The second goal of this article is to facilitate readers' understanding of the interrelatedness of the community and the school in achieving emotional, educational and professional development for rural students. Along with this second goal goes the inherent understanding that the educational, emotional and professional development for people residing in rural communities is not only expected, but is also achievable. The human desire for self-actualization is no less a goal of rural people than any other population.

This writer understands fully, that many challenges face the rural school counselor. Unfortunately, though, the greatest challenge may not necessarily be the lack of tangible resources, but rather a profound lack of the resource we know as expectation. What the professionals serving rural communities bring with them in terms of their belief in what is possible is often among the greatest contributor to the ultimate outcome.

Rural communities and their component institutions recognize that their culture is unique and that there are significant challenges inherent in this environment. These communities are, however, prepared to offer themselves up wholly to improve the lives of their constituents. Rural communities have long subscribed to a communal notion of being; to a readiness to collaborate and share ideas, ingenuities, expertise, time, and whatever else is at their disposal to contribute. This is simply a cultural imperative in rural communities.

With the school serving as a primary, stable, and valued entity in the rural community--- and the one with probably the greatest depth of intellectual and creative resources, it seems reasonable to expect it to assume the lead in mobilizing change. Counselors subscribe to a belief in facilitating emotional and social growth and encouraging human beings to reach their greatest potential. This alone, should be the catalyst for school counselors' efforts.

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## **Urban African American High School Female Adolescents' Perceptions, Attitudes, and Experiences with Professional School Counselors: A Pilot Study**

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### **Abstract**

The authors interviewed African American female students in an urban school district about their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences with their professional school counselors. Data analysis indicated seven primary themes perceived by the participants, some of which included their understanding and purpose of professional school counselors and their perceptions of students who received the most support. Implications for school counselors are discussed.

*Keywords:* urban school counseling; African American female adolescents and school counseling; African American female adolescents' school experiences; African American females and urban education

There is a growing recognition of the need to explore the educational experiences of African-American female students. Historically research on African American males has overshadowed research on African American girls — who remain largely left out of social science research inquiry (Rollock, 2007). For these students, being misunderstood and invisible can lead to feelings of loneliness and profound depression (Jones & Shorter-Goodman, 2003). School counselors have unique training that allows them to provide psychological support for all children and often serve as the only school professional trained to address the

mental health needs of students (ASCA, 2005). Further research on African-American girls is important because of the unique contribution of race, class and gender in the lives of African-American females (Evans-Winters, 2005). Generally, female adolescents seem more likely to participate in gifted programs for language arts and have higher enrollment in literature courses (Sadker, 2000). However, upon graduating from high school, girls will typically consider narrower ranges in careers (Sadker, 2000). In general, African-American female adolescents excel academically (Fordham, 1993), but these impressive scores do not offer a complete and accurate reflection of their schooling experiences. Few studies speak to the schooling experiences of African-American female adolescents (Constantine, 2002; Iglesias & Cormier, 2002), and those that do examine young women from a culturally-deficient perspective (Davis, 2002; Dixon, Lipford Sanders & Bradley, 2005; Schoonmaker, & Philliber, 2000).

Although cross-cultural counseling has received increased attention in social science literature, research remains limited with regard to counseling strategies that assist African-American female adolescents (Lipford Sanders & Bradley, 2005). To recognize and facilitate African American female adolescents' developmental transitions, school counselors need adequate training to conceptualize and ameliorate how racism and other variables may affect these transitions (Lipford Sanders & Bradley, 2005).

### **Cultural Considerations**

Adolescence in general is a time of self-exploration and of finding one's identity. Assuming typical development, adolescents in general are undergoing major changes in physical, psychological, and social development (Erikson, 1963 & 1968). For African-American girls, in particular, they must also consider the impact of race in their lives (Evans-Winters, 2005; Lipford Sanders & Bradley, 2005). Historically, the study of adolescent female development has focused primarily on the experiences and perspectives of White middle-class girls. The literature's lack of strengths based inquiry warrants new studies of African American female adolescents' school experiences.

Taylor et al. (1995) conducted research that focused specifically on the experiences of at-risk girls. The findings revealed that African-American girls resisted the dominate culture's image of the perfect girl. These youths tended

to rebel against the dominate culture's perspective on proper behavior for a young woman (Duke, 2000; Rozie-Battle, 2002) by asserting themselves toward their male counterparts and emphasizing their own individuality. However, African American girls in the study reported negative peer reactions when they behaved assertively. As a result, their peers called the girls names and assigned disparaging labels. Unfortunately, the girls tended to internalize the remarks and thus, the negative social interactions had detrimental effects on both their self-image and the decisions that they made later in adolescence, such as engaging in unprotected sex or dropping out of school (Taylor et al.).

### **Socialization of African-American Girls**

Generally, the socialization of African-American girls involves incorporation of established languages and norms of society (Lipford Sanders, 2002). Racial socialization, in particular, involves learning and understanding cultural practices that will affect their experiences as African-American children in a society that is dominated by the concepts of race and class. Race and class both have a significant impact in the lives of African-American students (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Sue, 2003). Countless authors have examined the influence of these two variables on the experiences and outcomes of schooling for African-American students (Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Horvat and Antonio (1999) found that White cultural rules strongly influenced the schooling process of African American female adolescents and that the intersection of race and class formed another variable that shaped these students' school experiences. African-American female adolescents at a predominately White, affluent school oftentimes focused solely on fitting in. These girls found that in order to do so they had to make others feel comfortable around them, change their dialect, and display the norms of the school. However, a strong alliance to their racial group can have positive effects on the self-esteem of African-American female adolescents (Turnage, 2004).

Schools have a responsibility to focus on the empowerment of African-American female adolescents (Paul, 2003). Schools can empower these students by teaching them to vocalize their thoughts, and school officials must understand and legitimize those thoughts (Paul, 2003). Academic settings for African-American girls must also serve as academic communities in which the community

hears, understands, and accepts their voices. There are a host of factors that school counselors can take into consideration when working with African-American girls. For this reason, we chose to focus our study on African-American girls' experiences with their school counselors and offer implications for those working in this profession.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The researchers chose participants in this study based on two criteria: (a) each had to self-identify as an African American female and b) each had to hold enrollment in a public high school. Moreover, methods of naturalist inquiry guided selection of each participant.

Ten ( $N = 10$ ) African American girls from a midwestern public high school chose to voluntarily participate in the study. The median age for the participants was 15 ( $M = 15.27$ ). The median grade level for participants was 10<sup>th</sup> grade. The majority of the girls ( $n=7$ ) indicated that they were residing in single-parent, female-headed households. The school district has a 31% participation in the free and reduced-rate lunch program. The median household income in the community surrounding the school district is \$59,000. The community is composed of 46% African American, 46.4% Caucasian, 1.3% Latino, and 2.2% Asian. The school enrollment was 1,430 students. The average student-to-counselor ratio at the high school was approximately 476 students to one school counselor.

### **Procedures**

The principal investigator [PI] contacted a school administrator at a Midwestern large urban high school. The PI gave the school administrator an overview of the study, procedures, and methodology. She then asked the administrator's help in identifying participants. The administrator then contacted the PI with a list of 13 students who volunteered to participate in the study. The PI had an initial meeting with all thirteen students and explained the purpose of the study. Once the participants indicated their understanding of the study's purpose, each interested participant received a parental or guardian permission slip. The PI received ten of the thirteen parental permission slips distributed and moved forward with scheduling dates and times to interview the participants. All interviews took

place in a private office inside of the school's counseling center. The researchers collected study data through audio-recorded 30 minute, face- to-face meetings using a reference guide.

### Interview Guide

The researcher selected three factors for exploration of African American high school female adolescents' experiences with their professional school counselors. The three themes were: (a) perceptions of their professional school counselors, (b) attitudes, and (c) experiences with their professional school counselors. Questions were developed to explore all three areas. The questionnaire had 18 items. All participants responded to each item in the same order. The interviewers were African American females. The interviews took place in a private office. Prior to the interviews, the PI apprised students of the study's purpose and intent. The interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes. Participants received no compensation for taking part in this study. Each participant was assigned a number on their interview tapes and demographic forms. An outside researcher, who is a professor of statistics at a Midwestern university, transcribed the recordings. The researchers reviewed the recordings for accuracy.

### Results

This section presents seven primary themes that emerged from African American girls' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences with their professional school counselors. Several of the themes seem interconnected and direct quotes from the interview transcripts will illustrate each theme.

#### *Theme 1: Students generally understood the role of a professional school counselor*

Most of the students in this study (n=8) indicated that they in part understood the purpose and roles of a professional school counselor. The participants generally reported that school counselors have training to assist and help students with their problems. Two students also indicated that professional school counselors were directly responsible for helping students with the career development process, such as selecting classes and assisting students with college information. In the words of one African American female participant: Other than scheduling classes, they are

supposed to be there to counsel us. Kind of like guidance if we have questions such as what we should be doing, classes we should be taking for college. They should be there to help. Toward the end of the year counselors that I had have been very helpful for me. Most times though, I can't really get in there to see them because there are so many kids and they have so much to do.

#### *Theme 2: Most influential persons in their high school career*

The students also repeatedly indicated building relationships with adults who influenced the students' high school careers. The participants generally reported feeling supported by individuals in the school community (administrators and office assistants). These informants also indicated that parents and professional school counselors to some degree were influential. However, the participants overwhelmingly stated that teachers were the most influential people in their high school career. One informant reported, My language arts teacher because he is easy to get along with and supportive. Another student stated, I would say my science teacher from ninth grade and my ninth and tenth grade social studies teachers. We speak to each other on a more personal level but it is still a student-teacher relationship to the point where I can feel comfortable speaking with him.

#### *Theme 3: Perceptions of students who received the most support from professional school counselors*

Generally, students indicated that they were aware that the professional school counselors were extremely busy and had a large caseload. However, the students generally reported that they perceived certain students received more support from professional school counselors than others. In the words of one African American female student, The office aides in the counseling center probably get the most assistance because they are right near the counselors and the counselors really get to know them. Another student said, I think anyone can get help or assistance. However, the school counselor pays more attention to those who are getting suspended or kicked out of school. The other people who need help only get in because you have to get really friendly with your teachers or maybe your family members or somebody who works there. It kind of gives you connections and everything. And that is where you get

the most help at. It is mainly the teachers who help. The counselors aren't people we really go to.

*Theme 4: Talking to their professional school counselors about personal issues*

Most of the students (n=8) understood that professional school counselors were available to assist students with career and personal issues. Students indicated that they had a general knowledge of the roles and functions of professional school counselors. These students also had a general understanding that professional school counselors assist with counseling students through their personal issues. However, most (n= 8) of the respondents indicated that they would not seek support from their professional school counselors if they faced personal problems. One student stated, "I don't talk about personal stuff because its personal and I really would not want everybody in my business." Another participant said, "I don't really talk about personal problems. I would rather talk to my friends." Another stated "personal stuff I keep away from teachers and schools counselors unless I can really trust them". This was perhaps the most surprising finding.

*Theme 5: Experiences with their professional school counselors*

Generally, most of the students (n=9) indicated positive relationships with their professional school counselors and they believed that their professional school counselors had favorable opinions of them. However, a few students mentioned that the professional school counselor was too busy to see them. One student stated, "I'd say not very helpful. "It's hard for me to say because I guess I never actually learned to talk or speak to people. So I don't know how helpful or non-helpful counselors would be. I don't think they are helpful because they don't get to the children who need you." Another student stated, "Because it is hard for me to get in to see her sometimes when I try to get in." Students generally stated that overall, they find their professional school counselors helpful. However, sometimes when the students really need to talk, they cannot access their school counselors.

*Themes 6: Racism and Academic Support*

Most of the students indicated that they have not

encountered racism or acts of discrimination in their school. They generally reported positive attitudes toward their teachers and school administrators. However, the students did indicate that they understood that as African American women, they might face racism when they go off to college or start their professional careers. One informant noted that racism will likely affect her, but she knows that she can overcome it. Another student stated, "If I choose to stay here in state and go to college, I know, I've been to a certain college, and they are very racist. And I think that all through life you're going to be judged on if you are male or female, black or white, homosexual or heterosexual. Race is going to be a big factor though. It is something you just can't fight. There are going to be people who don't like you because of the color of your skin. And especially because I am female and then I am African American that is going to hurt me even more." Another participant stated, "We have a higher need for support because racism might affect us later down the line." Although these young women stated that they faced little racism in school, it became apparent that they understood the implications of race in a larger context.

*Theme 7: Services that can improve school counseling for African American girls*

Almost all of the participants in the study (n =9) gave advice on how school counseling services can be improved for African American girls. A large majority of the students indicated that they would like to see programming and activities that they would be interested in attending (i.e. workshops on increasing social skills and understanding relationships). One participant stated, "Increase academic programs for Black girls." Other students stated that in order to improve counseling services for African American girls, school counselors must first remove their stereotypes. In the words of one African American female student: "I think the best advice I could give is for them to have no expectations or low thoughts ahead of time because if you have an assumption of someone, it alters your relationship with that person. If you hear that someone has done something, you kind of automatically, whether you realize it or not, you start to make yourself not like that person just because of what you heard.": Another student said, "Be fair and do not judge us. I think counselors talk to other people about students before they get to know them for themselves"

## Discussion

This study identified and explored the wide range of perceptions, attitudes, and experiences reported by African-American female students in their interactions with professional school counselors. School counselors must be aware of the cultural influences on the lives of African-American female adolescents and their own unique role in facilitating the positive development of these students. If practitioners wish to improve their performance of these critical services, then they must make greater effort to understand the complex interplay between class, race, and gender in the lives of African-American female adolescents (Evans-Winters, 2005).

One of the most prominent findings of our study was students' reluctance to share and discuss personal issues with school counselors. Although they were aware that professional school counselors were available to assist with these problems, over half of the students indicated that they were highly unlikely to take advantage of this resource. One explanation for the students' unwillingness to address personal issues may signal cultural mistrust between professional school counselors and their African-American clients (Esquilin, M Thompson, Neville, Weathers, Poston, & Atkinson, 1990; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & 2007; Sue & Sue, 2008). Research links mistrust toward counselors, particularly White counselors, to discrimination against African Americans in the larger society (Sue, 2003; Thompson, Worthington, & Atkinson, 1994). In addition, persons within the African-American community seeking professional services for emotional distress may face stigmatization (Jones & Shorter, 2003; Sue, 2003).

Female African-American high school adolescents may still see school counselors as a part of the larger, potentially hostile society and thus be unwilling to expose their vulnerabilities by sharing personal problems. When counseling African-American females, school counselors must have an awareness of the racism and discrimination that these students face and grow to expect from society, and develop strategies to challenge that preconception in the counseling relationship.

Professional school counselors can demonstrate their commitment to supporting the mental health needs of African-American female adolescents by reaching out to

these students, assisting them with personal issues, and fostering their positive self-concepts (Ford & Moore, 2006). In general, African-American students with a high self-concept are more likely to achieve than those with a low self-concept (Ford & Moore, 2006, Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005). It is the responsibility of professional school counselors to take the necessary first steps on behalf of their students and focus their efforts on identifying ways to help them succeed academically and socially (Butler, 2003). To meet their students' needs fully, professional school counselors *must* be culturally competent and cognizant of the different ways diverse students express emotions. Further, professional school counselors must adapt their counseling outreach efforts to mirror diverse students' help-seeking behaviors (Constantine & Gainor, 2001).

Our findings also revealed that participants somewhat understood school counselors' roles and functions but hesitant to seek these services. Hence, school counselors must take an active role in reaching out to the African American female adolescents that they serve. Through programming, school counselors can facilitate these adolescents' full awareness of the school counselor duties and responsibilities and highlight the advantages of accepting counseling support.

Using a national sample, Flowers, Milner, & Moore (2003), found that teachers' expectations had a significant impact on African American students' educational aspirations. A large number of our study's participants reported teachers as the most influential persons in their high school careers. Thus, it is important that professional school counselors develop effective and positive working relationships with teachers so that they can collaborate to effectively engage and assist African American female students.

The majority of the students interviewed ( $n = 9$ ) gave suggestions on how school counseling services might be improved for the benefit of African American female adolescents. Students indicated that they would like to see more programming geared specifically to their needs and interests, including programs meant to foster healthy peer and romantic relationships. They also indicated that they hoped professional school counselors would abandon preconceived notions of African-American females before getting to know them.

Considering these results, the authors offer a few crucial steps that school counselors can take to prepare African-American female students academically. (1) Professional school counselors can consult with teachers and other school officials to help identify interventions and curricula that are likely to support the success of African-American students. (2) Professional school counselors must be willing to assist African-American female students with exploring the effects of racism on their lives. School counselors must also know how to teach these students coping mechanisms to deal with racist attitudes and discrimination. (3) School counselors must serve as advocates and agents of change within their school settings. They must be willing to address discriminatory practices and behaviors exhibited by teachers and the larger academic system.

### Limitations

The authors urge caution in generalizing our findings to all African-American female adolescents. Our study only included 10 self-identified African-American female students at one Midwestern public school in an urban setting. It is unclear if African-American female adolescents from different geographic locations or backgrounds that are more affluent would have similar experiences.

Another possible limitation to note is that historically African Americans do not typically seek or find value in counseling. Traditional views of counseling hold that it is an outlet for White middle class individuals. Many people of color, specifically African Americans, associate seeing a counselor with being crazy. Today, many African Americans still see counseling as a forced means of conforming to a White system that has historically excluded African Americans. However, either negative views learned from adult influences or the mass media about counseling could have affected participants' perceptions.

In any qualitative study, the importance of data integrity and triangulation remain critical aspects of data analysis. The researchers' took steps to preserve the veracity of the data by using an outside reviewer and coder.

### Implications and Conclusion

In general, the results of this study indicate that African-American female adolescents understand the roles and functions of professional school counselors to some extent. In particular, students understood that counselors

were available to assist them with personal problems and career preparation. However, participants' understanding of professional school counselor roles seemed to focus on stereotypical guidance functions such as scheduling classes or planning schedules. Scheduling classes is far outside counselors' primary mission as defined by the American School Counselor Association [ASCA]. ASCA defines a school counseling program as:

One that is comprehensive, preventive in nature, developmental and central to the primary mission of the school. It has prescribed delivery systems, is implemented collaboratively by credentialed professional school counselors and others, and is data driven. Data driven programs identify students' needs using disaggregated data and evaluate the impact of the program on the students' needs, student competencies, and associated outcomes. Results or outcome data improve the program (Brown & Trusty, 2005, p. 2).

This study highlights the need to clarify the roles and functions of professional school counselors. Similar to its usage in the present study, such findings can offer state department supervisors, principals and district coordinators the opportunity to inform students of the roles and functions of professional school counselors. School counselors should make an effort to introduce students to the existence, purpose, and advantages of professional school counseling early in their academic careers. The study also points to a need for school counselors to understand and support the personal/social needs of African-American female adolescents. Professional school counselors must be knowledgeable about the populations that they service and become agents of systemic change.

Two issues warrant further study. First, African American female adolescents in this study report reluctance to discuss personal/social concerns with professional school counselors. Second, the participants report frustration that they do not receive counseling services upon request. As we consider our professional charge to meet the needs of all students, professional school counselors must demonstrate skills that meet the personal/social needs of African-American female adolescents in a timely and responsive manner.

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## **Creative Approaches to School Counseling: Using the Visual Expressive Arts as an Intervention**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the use of creative arts in school counseling. There is a specific focus on the use of visual arts, particularly such methods as drawing and painting. Existing literature, which supports the use of art in school counseling, provides the paper's rationale. In addition, the paper explores different art techniques that school counselors can utilize.

*Keywords:* creative arts in school counseling, school counseling and art

The use of expressive arts in counseling has changed since its roots in psychoanalytic theory prominent during the 1940's (Kahn, 1999). Initially, therapists used art therapy as a psychoanalytic tool to analyze and interpret the meanings of client art. The focus was on the unconscious and free association. Since the 1940's, both goals and focus of art in counseling has changed from a psychoanalytic stance to one which supports the ego, fosters the development of identity, and promotes maturation. School counselors may feel less inhibited using art as an intervention in counseling as they discover that there is not a need for in depth interpretation of a student's work.

Sketching, drawing, and painting can be used as a tool for counselors as it allows students to visually express and release their emotions as well as enhance overall health and well-being (Malchiodi, 1998). Students who have difficulty talking about embarrassing or traumatic life events such as family violence and abuse can express

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themselves through an artistic medium (Trowbridge, 1995). Art allows for the visual representation of thoughts, which may be difficult to express. For example, a child may have difficulty finding the words to express anger, yet by drawing a volcano and identifying with the “explosion,” the child releases anger. Counselors can use art to help clients resolve emotional issues, foster self-awareness, develop social skills, manage behavior, reduce anxiety, solve problems, and increase self-esteem. The creation of art serves to organize thoughts and feelings into something visual (Malchiodi, 2005).

Because various cultures express creativity differently, school counselors may find the use of creative arts appropriate with multicultural students (Gladding, 1992). According to Molina, Monteiro-Leitner, Garrett, and Gladding (2008), creativity and the creative arts are important across cultures and assist in discovery of meaning and connection. The use of art in counseling usually promotes communication, which may lead to an increase in the counselor’s effectiveness (Arnheim, 1990).

School counselors may find the use of art particularly helpful because it is both a verbal and nonverbal technique (Malchiodi, 2005). Younger children may not be able to verbalize their concerns and may use art as a method of nonverbal communication (Orton, 1997). Some counselors believe that the use of expressive therapeutic techniques offers as much value as verbal reflection about an experience. Landreth (2002), a well-known play therapist pioneer, states that this is particularly true for young children who do not have the verbal capabilities of reflection through language. Because it is easier for some children to express themselves visually rather than verbally, the use of art seems to help children improve both their cognitive abilities and social skills (International Art Therapy Organization, 2010). Counselors may find the use of art as a nonverbal technique particularly useful with children who lack the ability to express their emotional selves verbally (Landreth).

School counselors may also find the use of expressive arts helpful with informal assessment of students. Specialized training is necessary for formal interpretation of assessments (Carmichael, 2006) such as the *House-Tree-Person*, *Kinetic Family Drawing*, and *Human Figure Drawing*. The use of projective drawing techniques

in mental health assessment is recent (Burns, 1987). Although not expected to be experts in interpretations of such drawing assessments, counselors can have skill in providing enough interpretation to know when students need outside services (Oster & Gould, 1987). For example, if a student’s perception of relationships and proportions, lights, shadows, and edges is grossly exaggerated and the counselor is aware of extreme familial or personal issues that the student is experiencing, the counselor may feel the need to refer that student for outside services (Gladding, 2006).

Art is an ideal intervention in school counseling because materials are so readily available. Basic supplies such as paper to draw on and crayons or markers are easy to get for even the most budget-restricted counselor. Though an extensive supply of art materials would certainly be great to have, it is not necessary for the use of art in counseling to be effective. A school counselor’s set-up could consist of as little as sheets of printer paper (even the backs of old handouts if paper is rationed), and a few markers or crayons. The use of art in school counseling is appropriate for any developmental age. If a child is able to grip a crayon or smear finger paint, they would be able to benefit from art in counseling. School counselors could use art with students who have a variety of needs such as learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), and behavioral and emotional disorders. Not only is art in counseling applicable to a wide range of students, most any theoretical perspective provides opportunities to adapt art as a tool. Client-centered, behavioral, cognitive, and solution focused counseling styles can all be enhanced using art (Kahn, 1999).

In addition to accessibility and ease in setup, school counselors can use art at various stages in the counseling process. Kahn (1999) suggests how to incorporate art into a three-stage model of counseling. For example, in the entry stage of counseling, counselors may encourage the student to make collages to describe feelings. In the exploration stage, the student may present an area of difficulty that is more important than those presented in the entry stage of counseling. At this stage, a student might create a collage that depicts an understanding of why he/she is coming to counseling. Finally, in the action stage, the task would be to draw a scene five years from now and identify the goals needed to reach this scene. These are

just a few examples of art techniques that counseling can incorporate.

According to the National Coalition of Creative Arts Associations (2004), expressive therapies include art, music, dance/movement, drama, and poetry/creative writing. Through art, children are better able to communicate with adults, express strong feelings and externalize problems, and develop solutions (Mooney, 2000). Many school counselors may need additional tools to deal with the emotional and behavioral issues of children. Finn (2003) stated that children are able to exert some control over their lives with art and drawing and are better able to cope with daily stressors.

Incorporating art into counseling is another tool for professional school counselors to use to enhance a child's life. Using art can promote children's growth and development of self- understanding; these steps may improve in children's overall quality of life (Gladding, 2006). Creativity in counseling has the potential to influence students' lives in ways that traditional therapies do not (Malchiodi, 2005). With expressive arts, students can use their imaginations in productive and corrective ways; expressive arts provide students with another outlet to express themselves and facilitate self-discovery, change, and healing (Gladding, 1992).

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## African American Women Counselors, Wellness, and Spirituality

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### Abstract

Given their tremendous professional responsibilities, professional counselors face daunting challenges to remaining healthy and avoiding role stress and overload. This article explores the intersection of race, gender, wellness, and spirituality in the self-care of African American women counselors. The authors give particular attention to culture, imbedded societal images of African American women, and the affirming role of spirituality.

*Keywords:* counselors, wellness, self-care, spirituality, and African American women

Counseling professionals—as reflective helping practitioners—have a tremendous impact on those they serve. Undisputedly, the profession places great demands on its practitioners. Although demanding, the rewards of establishing a helping relationship and effectively using helping skills can motivate counselors to stay in the profession. Appropriate application of theoretical frameworks has helped counselees cope, achieve goals, change behaviors, and in some cases, choose life. With so much hinging on the helping relationship, it is important that professional school counselors do what is possible to protect and nourish their lives. Self-care, then, remains critical to the effectiveness of professional counselors.

The potential for stressors to negatively affect the counseling relationship and undermine the work of counselors always looms. For African American female counselors, the cultural ethos of caring can add weight to professional responsibilities of empathy and compassion. The literature documents the need for self-care planning among counselors in general. However, the intersection between counselor preparation, health, wellness, and

spirituality seems to be a critical aspect of self-care for African American women. Knowles and Bryant (2011) found preliminary data that African American women counselors seem particularly susceptible to role overload and role stress. This paper explores issues of health, wellness, self-care, and spirituality among African American women helpers. The authors give particular attention to the implications of integrating spirituality to expand counselor competency related to self-care.

What is the role of spirituality and wellness in the self-care planning of African American female counselors? Drawing upon research from a number of disciplines including medicine, mental health, nursing, psychology, education, and counseling, the literature frames the answers to this question within the theoretical frameworks of constructivism, self-actualization, and self-efficacy and offers that wellness seems interrelated with spirituality, influencing total health, wellness, and self-care planning.

## Background

Helping professions, particularly school counseling, have historically been dominated by women. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the majority of teachers are female. In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 97.8% of preschool and kindergarten teachers are women. The total US population is comprised of more than 300 million persons. In estimated figures, this means that teachers comprise about 2% of the total US population. While the US is becoming increasingly a nation of people of color, the challenge remains in finding enough education professionals from diverse race and ethnic backgrounds so students will have positive racial and ethnic role models. In some states, teaching experience is required (or at least tacitly preferred) as a counseling credential, so this statistic seems particularly germane to discussions of self-care planning and African American school counseling professionals.

Concern for lack of adequate cultural representation is especially problematic in our public schools. African American school counselors may face or feel obliged to take on duties to counsel students of color in addition to their other responsibilities. Bryant et al. (2003) discussed the influence of professional expectations on African American women counselors and the implications for self-care planning.

## Race, Gender, and Helping

### Society's Colonizing Images

Pack-Brown, Whittington-Clark, and Parker (2002) note that there is a confluence between race, ethnicity, and helping for African American women and teasing out the most powerful influence remains difficult at best. However, for African American women in general, American society has deeply embedded colonizing images that are consistent with images of African American women since their forced removal from Africa in the 1600's (Bryant, et. al., 2003). These images can distort expectations of African American women helpers and lead to the assignment of or taking on too many roles or responsibilities.

One such colonizing image, rooted in American folklore, is the Matriarch (historically called "Mammy"). Early professional literature also referred to this image as the Black Matriarch. This stereotypical character lived to serve others who expected the Black Matriarch to place their well-being to over her personal health, strength, and being. Moynihan's 1965 study of the Black community reinforced this stereotype and codified America's pervasive image of Black families as a having "tangle of pathology." Greatly influential, Moynihan's work shaped federal and state policies on poverty, welfare, and education for decades. Later scholarship by noted scholars such as Ladson-Billings, Edelman, and hooks debunked this myth of the inherently pathological African American family and took a strengths-based approach to understanding the African American community, family structure, and children; the term "at-risk" does not characterize the focus of this later research.

Another colonizing image rooted in American folklore is Sapphire. Sapphire was an African American female character from the 1940's Amos'n Andy show. Known for her loud brash manner, Sapphire's strong will trumped everyone around her and reinforced the stereotype of African American women as "strong" and fiercely independent. Not easily challenged or overcome, Sapphire demonstrated a tenacious will and fearlessness in her approach to dealing with others. While tenacity and independence are cultural values in the African American community, the stereotypical character presented by Sapphire does not demonstrate vulnerability, sensitivity towards others, and insight into self.

## Meaning and Significance

While many members of this generation and even the previous one may not have conscious memories of Mammy' and Sapphire', the authors posit that African American women counselors do well to consider how these images may shape personal and cultural expectations, given their status as helpers. How do these expectations shape African American women's personal and professional lives given their responsibilities as professional school counselors? How do they negotiate personal cultural expectations in communities characterized by within and between group racial differences? Moreover, how do these counselors negotiate professional promotions in school environments they may perceive as sexist, racist, or non-affirming of cultural heritage? The authors note that these challenges may occur in schools and communities that are predominately African American; the struggle for healthy racial identity can be a lifelong developmental task for African Americans.

## Spirituality and Wellness

Issues of health, wellness, and the role of spirituality in the self-care planning of African American women counselors seem to be of utmost importance for several reasons. The changing racial and ethnic complexity of the nation necessitates that counselors receive training that support health and wellness not only for clients in their care but also themselves. An important, if not primary reason this topic has such relevance to the counseling profession is a new call for integrating spirituality into professional practice and improving counselor competence in spiritual assessment (Oakes, K. E., & Raphel, M. M., 2008). While women can face health challenges such as breast cancer and high blood pressure, medical literature is clear that African American women with these conditions face higher mortality rates and tougher roads to recovery and wellness than other groups. Personal and cultural expectations that demand displays of strength and little to no demonstration of emotion can lead to role overload, unresolved stress, and physical illness.

## Spirituality as Self-Care

Spirituality has long characterized African American women's lived experiences. For example, among the findings in a qualitative study, Mattis (2002) found that

spirituality helped African American women interrogate and accept reality of their life circumstances (p. 309) and find existential meaning during difficult times. Roseboro and Ross (2009) and hooks (1994) noted that African American women who commit their careers and professional activities to the reduction of societal inequities and the mitigation of social injustices benefit from spirituality that facilitates an integrated life. African American cultural ethos values spirituality and recent cultural shifts distinguish this construct from religiosity evinced by church affiliation, attendance, or membership.

Sagely, Carl Rogers (1961) asserted that congruence and authenticity are necessary elements of counseling and noted that effective counselors have insight regarding their feelings, accept them, and can express them in constructive ways. Although Rogers did not frame his discussion on African American women per se, his perspectives support the premise of this paper, which offers spirituality as a culturally relevant support tool for African American women who may receive dissonant messages about their roles and responsibilities along the intersections of gender, race, and professional helper.

## Conclusions

Cultural values can hold spirituality as essential to wellness. The authors do not suggest that other racial groups do not value spirituality and that this construct is limited to African American women. Rather, the authors suggest that because of the societal challenges African American women professional counselors can face, spirituality can be a culturally affirming tool that helps them manage the complexities of caring for others and navigate personal intersections of race and gender. Apparent gaps in the literature on this topic seem related to small samplings of African American women and limited inclusion of diverse populations of women who are counseling professionals. Further discussion on this topic raises implications of the integration of spirituality into counselor preparation programs. Kelly (1995) observed that wellness occurs because of the healing power associated with the interconnectedness of the human experience. Thus, the authors suggest that African American women counselors and their colleagues, who share this interconnectedness, benefit from critical thought and analysis of the intersection of gender, race, and spirituality in maintaining wellness.

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## Improving High School Transition with CAT Camp

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### Abstract

Transition to a new school for adolescent students can be challenging. Students who have difficulty navigating the transition to ninth grade are at an increased disadvantage academically and personally. Even students who approach the move with excitement often have unrealistic expectations of what is necessary for success. Overall, those who do well freshmen year are more likely to graduate from high school and contribute positively to their communities. This article outlines a program designed to promote high school transition success through a summer day camp program called CAT Camp named for the school mascot, the Wildcat. Students who attended CAT Camp demonstrated more success in their first year in high school with higher GPAs, better attendance, less course failures, and fewer discipline referrals when compared to those who did not attend the summer program. Implications for practice are included.

*Keywords:* high school transition; school counselors and transition; school counseling and transition

The transition to high school can be quite challenging for many students (Akos, 2004; Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Not only do ninth-graders need to fit into a new school culture, they must understand the credit system for courses, graduation requirements, different student groupings, and changing relationships with teachers. Students who have

difficulty navigating the transition to ninth grade are at an increased disadvantage academically and personally, showing increased depressive symptoms and a decline in grades (Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Connor, & Spas, 2007). Furthermore, "researchers target ninth grade as the make or break year for completing high school" (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 447). Students given specific assistance with the transition seem more likely to find the process less daunting. A summer camp transition program for incoming ninth-graders described in this article helped one southeastern high school improve the students' educational performance gap while raising the school's overall promotion and graduation. In addition, students who participated in the program had fewer discipline referrals and better attendance than those who did not participate.

The National Center for Education Statistics estimates approximately 500,000 high school students per year leave school before graduation (Seastrom, Hoffman, Chapman, & Stillwell, 2005). There is a correlation between high school dropout rate and ninth grade failure (Neild, 2009). When examining ninth-graders specifically, 22% of students repeat ninth grade and only 10-15% of those repeaters ever graduate (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Forty percent of ninth-graders struggle with the transition to high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Neild (2009) suggested, students who fall off track during freshman year have very low odds of earning a high school diploma (p. 55). Because ninth grade has the highest enrollment rate in high schools, intervention at this point is crucial to avoid potential school failure.

### Student Perceptions

The research on transitions suggests, students approach normative school transitions with both concern and excitement (Akos & Galassi, 2004, p. 213). There is an optimistic anticipation of the next step into high school but unrealistic expectations of skills necessary for student success often characterize the transition, too. Research investigating student transition needs indicate that students want information about academics, procedures and the social structure (Akos & Galassi, 2004). The level and difficulty of high school courses shape academic concerns. Procedural concerns are associated with how to navigate a larger building as well as general procedures in a more complex environment; how to navigate a crowded hallway

and get to class on time, for example (Cushman, 2006). High school students are also aware of the larger impact high school success or failure can have long-term. This may add an additional level of anxiety to a stressful situation. In several studies surveying freshman before and after the transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Letrello & Miles, 2003), students requested information from older peers, students already successful in the high school to help ease the transition. Incoming ninth-graders also hoped for meaningful connections with teachers whom they can go to for assistance (Cushman, 2006). Students want a bridge to success in high school (Neild, 2009). Providing transition activities has proved to decrease anxiety for students as they move on to high school.

### **A High School Counselor's Role in Transition**

School counselors, who focus on comprehensive school counseling programs, including individual planning, can assist in the high school transition process (Akos, 2004; Cooper & Liou, 2007). The American School Counselor Association National Model (2005) outlines specific actions a school counselor may take to support students in transition (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). Through the school guidance curriculum and individual student planning, school counselors can anticipate and address a variety of issues with ninth grade students. In each community, the transition response should address changes for those specific students. However, it can be difficult to identify what might work in each community. Regrettably, traditional approaches such as parent night or open house cannot address all transition issues. It would also be impossible for the school counselor to address all these issues in the classrooms in the first few days of school. Attention to these issues prior to the beginning of the school year could put students at ease before they even step into school for their ninth grade year.

School systems have attempted to address and ease ninth grade transition with many creative approaches. Further, schools have used parent-only tours, transition teams, first day of school barbecues, and shadowing programs pairing high school students with incoming freshmen (Hertzog & Morgan, 1997; Lindsay, 1998). For example, some approaches included incoming students making field trips to the high school and one school included teachers in the transition process by creating Teacher Swap-a-Day. High

school teachers teach an eighth grade class for one day. Another plan scheduled several meetings with ninth grade students and advisors during the first few days of school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1997). Cushman (2006) mentioned the need for providing a bridge experience during the summer for incoming freshmen, but without specific recommendations. Neild (2009) also mentioned that many school districts offer summer bridge programs or one-day orientation programs but with no specific approach proven effective or recommended.

Students who perform well academically in the freshman year seem more likely to graduate from high school. With full credits for the ninth grade year, students graduate in four years, as expected by the district. Taking steps to create a more successful transition to ninth grade enhances the chances of academic success. Anticipatory steps set the stage for success prior to the beginning of the school year (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007; Turner, 2007). After eighth grade graduation, but before these students enter the high school building, one school counselor (second author) bridged the gap with CAT Camp. This transition program offered a responsive service to address the needs of the transition needs of students in one southeastern Georgia school district.

### **CAT Camp**

A school counselor and administrator created the CAT Camp (named for the school mascot, the Wildcat) to address local ninth grade transition needs. Knowing students in this particular community could use stimulation in the summer months and needed to become familiar with the school, CAT Camp was a practical option. Additionally, because students who remain in school programs during summer breaks tend to do better academically (Borman, Rachuba, Hewes, Bouley, & Kaplan, 2001) and preparation of at-risk students can help them adjust better to new schools (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996), this school district hoped this new summer program would bring the participating students and the school success.

CAT Camp program is a collaborative effort aimed at addressing all three areas outlined in the ASCA National Model (2005): academic, career and personal/social domains. School counselor and teachers deliver developmental guidance information in small and large groups.

Given that data indicate Georgia has significant problems with retention of ninth graders and in this community in particular, all incoming ninth grade students are invited to attend a week-long camp at the high school in their assigned Freshman Academy from 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. The goals for the ninth grade counseling program were twofold. First, the program facilitates adjustment and transition issues for attendees. Second, the program created a sense of belonging and outlined expectations for success in all three areas: academic, personal/social, and career. The focus of these activities sought to meet students' immediate needs and concerns (ASCA, 2005, p. 42), a responsive service which has developed into a regular element of the school counseling program. This program is included in the overall school improvement plan with its aim to increase the graduation rate of the high school. The camp supported school goals, which in turn brought staunch support from the school administration for CAT Camp.

There were three main feeder schools for this particular high school and the Freshman Academy welcomes nearly 600 students each fall. Housed in a low income, high minority community, this urban school system has more than 7,000 students enrolled from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. All incoming ninth-graders received an invitation to CAT Camp in the spring of eighth grade. Students could choose a participation date from several possible weeks throughout the summer and counselors place students on a first-come, first-serve basis. Since the inception of the program, every student expressing interest in the camp received placement.

Throughout the week, incoming freshman were exposed to fundamental information for high school academic success while also interacting with future classmates and enjoying fun orientation activities. The program addresses nearly all standards from the ASCA National Model (2005) throughout the week. Counselors encouraged student participation with instruction in practical academic skills, engagement in computer-assisted career exploratory activities, and learning about goal-setting and interpersonal skills that will facilitate success in high school. The week begins with icebreakers, a tour of the high school and team building tasks. Included within each day are preplanned lessons created by the school counselor to address high school transition issues such as: *High School Vocabulary*

and *High School: So, What's the Difference?* As the week progresses, students are exposed to more specific lessons about high school such as: *Graduation Requirements and Understanding Classes*, *Understanding Your Academic Record: GPA, Class Rank and Transcripts*, *If Success is Meant 2 B, It is Up 2 Me*, and *How to Study at the Secondary Level: Time Management, Study Skills, Organizational Techniques*. These lessons orient students to this particular school system. Moreover, the lessons provide ways to address issues that had caused students concern, difficulty, or confusion in prior transitions. Other activities throughout the week include meeting the principal, online career-related assessments, a scavenger hunt to further familiarize students with the building layout, and designing the class t-shirt. Team building activities continue throughout the week as students become more familiar with the social and academic aspects of high school. One of the primary goals of the program seeks to help students know and feel kinship with the school. On the final day, the program invites parents to a closing celebration where participants recap key program topics and program staff present students with a certificate of attendance.

## Data Collection and Results

CAT Camp had short-term and long-goals. Program staff collected data during the week of camp to measure immediate knowledge, and, then measured students' academic performance and progress throughout the ninth grade year. On the first day of CAT Camp, staff administered students a 24-item pretest measure, the *Freshman Knowledge Quiz*. The test items use true/false and multiple-choice items that measured knowledge about the school. Questions included simple informational items such as the number of credits needed to graduate to how often one could take physical fitness. The school counselor created this quiz and students took the quiz again on the final day of camp as a posttest measure. Over the three years of camp offerings, each student, on average, students scored 95% on a post-camp measure. This suggested that the vast majority of ninth graders understood the curriculum taught during these summer camp experiences.

As part of the posttest, students commented on their experiences at CAT Camp. Students have reported feeling connected to the school, the staff, and other students by the end of CAT Camp and overall found it to be an informative and enjoyable experience. One student wrote, One of my biggest fears was just not knowing what to expect or what

to do on my first day. It is still a fear because camp is different from a normal school day but the fear has gone down. I feel like I know somewhat what the first day will be like and what I should do. I know the school better now. I definitely learned more than just one thing! I learned where some classrooms are and how to get there. I learned some high school vocab like credits and different names for classes. I have enjoyed getting to meet some new people. So, overall I've learned a lot." This comment and the following are representative of what campers wrote on the posttest measure qualitative comments." This camp has allowed me to learn my way around the school, which is a big task. I have also enjoyed meeting new friends from other schools that will be with me during my freshman year. Getting to know the CAT Camp counselor and my school counselor really let me know that if I have a question when school starts that someone will help me. I am not afraid of high school anymore. I can't wait to be a freshman!" As is evident, students reported an increased sense of comfort with the transition mirroring what are recommend topics to address in transition program planning (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

After school began, the school counselor tracked freshmen who participated in the summer camp program to examine the impact of the program. School records log data on student GPA, promotion rate, attendance, and discipline referrals. Table 1 summarizes this information by year. Of the students who participated in the camp over three years, 97% passed the ninth grade while more than 25% percent of the general ninth grade student population of this school did not. Students that attended CAT Camp had a 94% attendance rate while the school population had an attendance rate of less than 80%. The average freshman GPA of students who attended CAT Camp was 84.7%, far exceeding the overall school average. (The school reports student grade point averages as percentiles rather than on a 4.0 scale.)

Table 1

CAT Camp variables by year

Variable	Year 1 n=57	Year 2 n=66	Year 3 n=69
GPA	85.2%	83.4%	85.4%
Promotion rate	100%	100%	93%
Attendance	93	94	96
No discipline referrals	90%	90%	86%

Overall, students who participated in CAT Camp had a higher promotion rate, fewer course failures, fewer discipline referrals, better attendance, and a higher GPA as compared to students in the ninth grade who did not attend the orientation camp. From the first year of CAT Camp to the third, the retention rate for all ninth graders decreased from 29.3 to 19.0. Although roughly eleven percent of incoming ninth graders chose to attend CAT Camp, it had a significant impact on the ninth grade promotion rate as a whole. The CAT Camp student groups overwhelmingly found success in ninth grade at this high school.

### Implications for School Counselors

School counselors have the unique opportunity to offer students support for the transition from middle to high school. Although the traditional open house and school tour can be helpful for students, going a step further can assist students in new ways to alleviate anxiety and uncertainty about high school. The transition plan for this school included the CAT Camp program, a school based orientation night for eighth grade parents (conducted in February) and a freshman orientation night (done in April). The winter and spring orientation meetings were ideal opportunities to invite students to participate in CAT Camp.

Any school in the country can create a summer experience to support and orient new students. School counselors and other school staff and personnel should advocate for a transition plan for students, such as CAT Camp (Akos, 2004). Each community can tailor the program to suit the needs of that school and neighborhood. A beginning step is to survey current ninth grade students and parents, teachers and staff, to determine the information needed in an orientation program. Those who have been in the school system for several years and have an understanding of the community are most likely to know what information might be helpful for incoming ninth graders. There is no specific list for every school. On the contrary, school information differs from place to place, which is what makes this orientation so important and informative for new students. Helping students understand how rules differ from the middle school to the high school also facilitates smooth transitions. This approach can simplify the process for parents and students putting guidelines in simple and understandable terms.

Additionally, students should visit the school on several occasions, perhaps over a week similar to CAT Camp, and have repeated opportunities to familiarize themselves with the building and classrooms. Students reported an increased sense of comfort simply from knowing their way around the physical space of a larger building (Cushman, 2006). These tours provide the opportunity for school counselors to use high school peer mentors capitalizing on freshmen interest in peers to provide information about high school (Akos, 2004).

### Limitations

Certain limitations exist regarding generalization of this freshman orientation program. This specific school funds the program through a grant designed to support small learning communities. The money from this grant pays for camp necessities such as personnel, supplies, class t-shirts, and writing tools. Unfortunately, this grant does cover not transportation costs. Therefore, students with reliable transportation seem most likely to attend CAT Camp. In addition, students or parents must take the initiative to sign up for the camp and be willing to attend. The camp does have significantly fewer students who attend as compared to the incoming number of freshman. Although each incoming freshman is invited, only about 11% attend. Certainly, some students cannot attend without transportation provided. These systemic barriers certainly may make the option of attending CAT Camp for some impossible. A possible solution may be to invite students to participate in non-school settings such as local churches or community centers that families can readily access. Reducing systemic barriers such as lack of transportation and unfamiliar school environments can help families fully consider the program and its benefits. Developing community support for the program may increase participation.

Additionally, students who have significant family responsibilities or those who have informal jobs may not be able to attend CAT Camp. Moreover, students with physical challenges who need medical support cannot attend the program because the aides and nurses may be on break. The students who chose to attend CAT Camp may be different from those who did not attend in terms of access to transportation, physical ability, and family responsibilities. Researchers did not collect demographic

data so gains made in subgroups based on gender, racial, and socioeconomic variables remain unknown for this data set. However, although researchers did not collect participants' demographic information, the participants seem generally representative of the diverse school population.

### Conclusion

Georgia leads the nation with the highest dropout rate of 22.1% (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009). Furthermore, inner city and at-risk students have an increased opportunity for success in adapting to high school if their high schools provide structured opportunities that demystify the high school experience (Turner, 2007). CAT Camp is a responsive service designed to help students with high school transition through intensive orientation to school environment, culture, and expectations. During CAT Camp, students built relationships with caring adults and peers, explored career pathways, and received orientation to challenges of high school studies and peer groups.

As part of the leadership and advocacy role, school counselors are in an ideal position to support and influence high school transition programming with programs like CAT Camp. Whether directly, or through a collaboration or consultation role, school counselors can plan activities before students enter high school to promote student success in academic, personal/social and career realms. As each community has different needs, school counselors can proactively support success for new high school students.

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## **Here! But What About Those Who are Not? Reinforcement among Chronically Absent Elementary Students, Its Effectiveness, and the Why Behind the Absences**

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### **Author Note:**

Thank you to Dr. Boes of the University of West Georgia for your guidance, motivation, and help throughout this process, project, and course work.

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a description of an action research (AR) study done with chronically absent elementary school students. The AR sought to answer these questions: 1) do reinforcement and daily check-ins increase attendance and 2) why are some students absent? Related literature regarding attendance and the methods used for the study are described and addressed. Results of the study demonstrated that school counselor daily check-ins and reinforcement increased the attendance of these students. Reasons for absences during the AR study include illness and attending medical appointments.

*Keywords:* action research and school counselor, attendance interventions and school counselors, school counseling and parental interventions

Today's educational climate necessitates that professional school counselors (PSCs) measure and document the impact of their school counseling program. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2005) suggests that PSCs measure the impact of their program practices. A method often used to measure this impact is action research (AR). AR is information gathered and analyzed, by school stakeholders, to understand an identified area.

This information is then used to improve student learning (Mills, 2011). AR measures the effectiveness of

educational practices, and allows educators analyze and improve current practices. The negative impact of chronic absenteeism is far-reaching and well documented (Ford & Sutphen, 1996). Learning cannot occur if children are absent and the importance of attendance is clear (Sheldon, 2007). Finding ways to combat absenteeism, especially at the primary grades, is of the upmost importance (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). Therefore, a review of school attendance data by the PSC and administrators indicated that a large number of students had 15 or more unexcused absences; this problem signaled the need for an AR study of attendance at the school. A review of the literature frames understanding of absenteeism and effective interventions.

### **Literature Review**

The relationship between attendance and student achievement is well documented (Sheldon, 2007). Ford and Sutphen (1996) found that students with poor attendance struggle with academic and social tasks, and can ultimately become involved with the justice system. In addition, as adults, these students have higher rates of unemployment and live in poverty. Offering primary prevention efforts to improve attendance can avert these problems in school age children and adults.

A further motivation to improve attendance is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) component which requires students to attend a minimum number of days of the school year. Schools whose students meet this requisite number of days meet one benchmark of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status and ensure funding for the next academic year. Thus, attendance not only affects student learning outcomes but also the viability of the school's human and educational resources. These factors necessitate that PSC's find ways to ensure students attend school regularly. Robbins and Ratcliff (as cited in Best of ERIC, 1979) state that chronic absenteeism as early as kindergarten can lead to students not finishing high school and lower financial earnings in adulthood. They propose that if schools develop early interventions when truancy patterns emerge, they reduce the continuation of these negative outcomes. Furthermore, Loeber & Farrington (2000) reported that students may exhibit delinquent behaviors associated with chronic absenteeism at 12 years old or younger.

## Effective Attendance Programs

Commonly, schools implement programs that reinforce students with excellent attendance and use numerous incentive programs to accomplish this goal. Such reinforcement varies from certificates, pizza parties, lunch, or outside time with community helpers, to grade bonus percentages (De Leonibus as cited in Best of ERIC, 1978). These programs may reinforce high attendance rates for students with acceptable attendance records. However, schools must find ways to reach chronically absent students who have fallen behind academically and socially. The literature notes that positive reinforcement, small groups, counselor or social worker check-ins, as well as student and parent contracts (De Leonibus as cited in Best of ERIC, 1979) improve student attendance. Other strategies for reducing absenteeism are (Ford & Sutphen, 1996):

- ✓ Developing incentives;
- ✓ Making school more interesting and rewarding;
- ✓ Increasing communication with parents; and
- ✓ Supporting families in changing behaviors that contribute to absenteeism.

According to Baker (2000), small groups were effective among elementary students with chronic absenteeism throughout the duration of the group but only for that time. A parent component seems to be a critical piece to improving the attendance of these students (Sheldon, 2007).

## Parent Involvement

Combating absenteeism necessitates a comprehensive approach that involves several school stakeholders (Jacobs & Kritsonis, 2007). Parent involvement is crucial, especially at the elementary level, when students are dependent upon their parents for getting to the bus stop or to school. Two beneficial interventions that promote parental involvement include informing parents of the district's attendance policy and holding school-wide communications or parent workshops, which discuss the importance of attendance (Peek, 2009). Therefore, communication between the school and parents supports parental involvement.

## Causes of Absenteeism

The literature has explored the underlying causes of absenteeism. Dube and Orpinas (2009) found that students miss school to avoid schoolwork or undesirable social situations or to gain reinforcement such as parental attention. Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent (2001) categorized four areas of chronic absenteeism: family factors, school factors, economic influences, and student variables. The literature suggests that parents of chronically absent students experienced chronic absenteeism during their school years (Robins & Ratcliff as cited in BEST of ERIC, 1979). Furthermore, Sheldon (2007) found parental beliefs, experiences and family financial status contribute to student absenteeism.

When families lack basic resources, have transient housing, lack reliable transportation, or work multiple jobs, they may have difficulty getting their students to school regularly (Baker, et al., 2001). The literature offers conflicting findings on the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and absenteeism. Dessoff (2009) reported that data from The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) suggested a correlation between chronic absenteeism in kindergarten and lower performance in first grade, even when the researchers accounted for variances in gender, ethnicity, or SES. Therefore, the literature does not offer definitive conclusions about the correlation between SES and chronic absenteeism.

## Methodology

### Participants

Eight first grade students (two girls and six boys) enrolled in a primary school in suburban Atlanta comprised the study's initial participants; two participants moved during the AR thus reducing the number of participants to six. The school has a large number of students receiving free and reduced lunch and holds Title I status. Seven of the students identified as Caucasian and one as Pakistani. The school's population is .4% American Indian or Alaskan Native; 4.4% Asian; 4.5% Multiracial; 15% Hispanic; 20% Black; and 54% Caucasian. The PI selected students based on their number of unexcused absences in the 2009-2010 school year. Each of these students had 10 or more unexcused absences according to the county's student information software. If the student demonstrated a similar pattern of

attendance for this school year (five or more absences by December), the PI contacted parents requesting permission for the students to participate in the AR; the PI included only students whose parents gave permission. The PI used a parent survey (see Appendix A) at the end of the intervention to ascertain reasons for absences, and attitudes toward school and attendance. The PI administered the survey over the phone with five of the six participant's parents. Because of language differences, the school's International Welcome Center provided a translator for the family which spoke Urdu.

### **Intervention Procedures**

The procedures for this AR study consisted of reinforcement, daily check-ins with students, and weekly small group meetings for eight weeks. The PI conducted check-ins daily to confirm the participant's presents and to learn about home and school morning routines. Each student placed a sticker on his or her calendar for that day to reinforce attendance. On Friday of each week, the students and PI met during a small group to go over calendars and to discuss attendance. Small group discussions and topics included 1) the number of days attended for the week; 2) strategies to improve morning routines; 3) strategies that promoted student healthiness and physical well-being; and 4) the benefits of school attendance.

Students with perfect attendance for the week chose a prize from the PI's treasure box. The treasure box included small trinkets such as key chains, bracelets, rubber balls, and other small items. At the end of the group intervention, students with no unexcused absences during the eight-week group had a celebration.

### **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

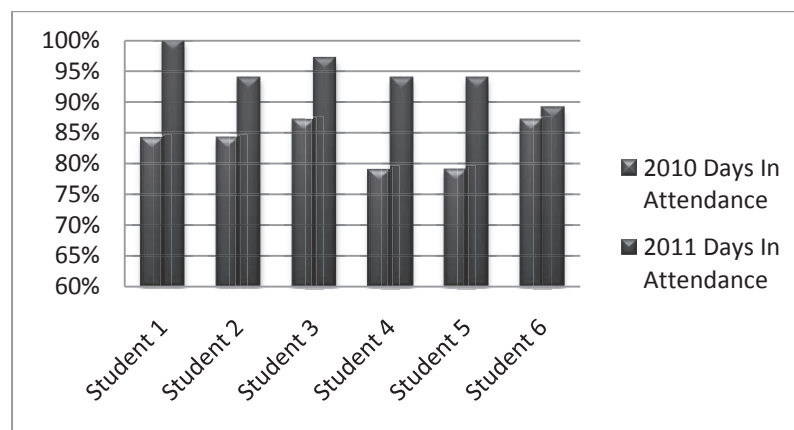
The researcher collected data regarding the intervention's impact on student's attendance from the county student information system. By comparing attendance data for the duration of the intervention (mid-January to mid-March 2011) to the same 39-day period for the 2009-2010 school year, the PI answered the first research question. The PI generated descriptive statistics in the form of percentages to describe changes in student attendance. Finally, the PI tallied frequency counts of student responses to group questions, parent survey responses, and reasons for student absences. The PI developed the parent survey

and there is no demonstrated reliability or validity data demonstrated. The PI kept qualitative data in the form of anecdotal notes on student and parent comments as well. The principal investigator (PI), who was also the school counselor in charge of the intervention, called each parent at the end of the intervention and asked survey questions over the phone.

## Results

Results indicate the effectiveness of reinforcement and daily check-ins in increasing the attendance of the six students who participated in the entire eight-week intervention. Overall, attendance improved with 82% of participants present at school to 94% of participants present. This represents a 12% increase in participant attendance. No students missed more than 4 days and one student missed zero days. The average increase in student attendance from the same period last year to this year was 11%. One student's attendance increased 16%; two students' attendance increased 15%; two students' attendance increased 10%; and one student's attendance increased 2% (see Figure 1). Collectively, the group had three unexcused absences during the intervention. All excused absences included doctors, dentist, or illness notes submitted by the parent. The group had 10 total absences, with three unexcused and seven excused.

Figure 1. Change in attendance after intervention (2010-2011)

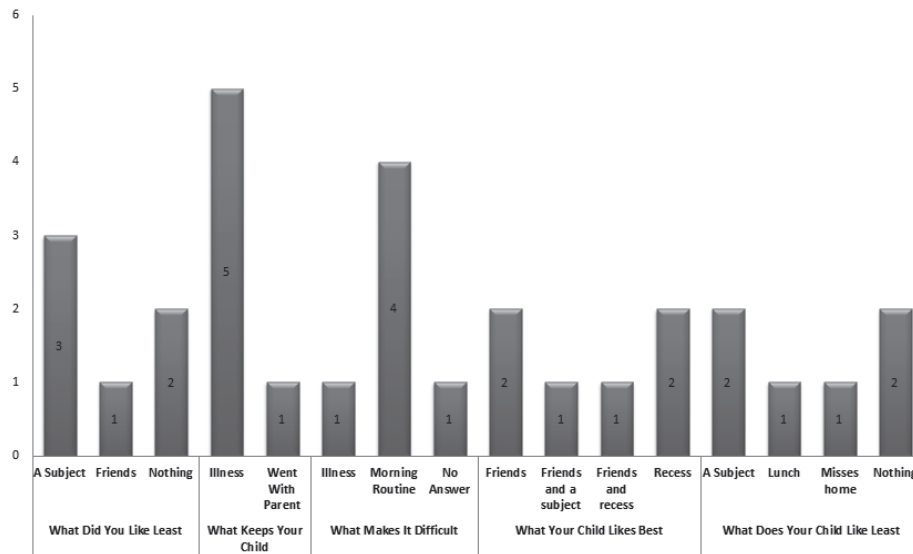


*Note:* This chart reflects total days in attendance percentages for the same eight-week periods in 2010 and 2011. Attendance rates increased for all students and the group increased an average of 11%.

## Survey Results

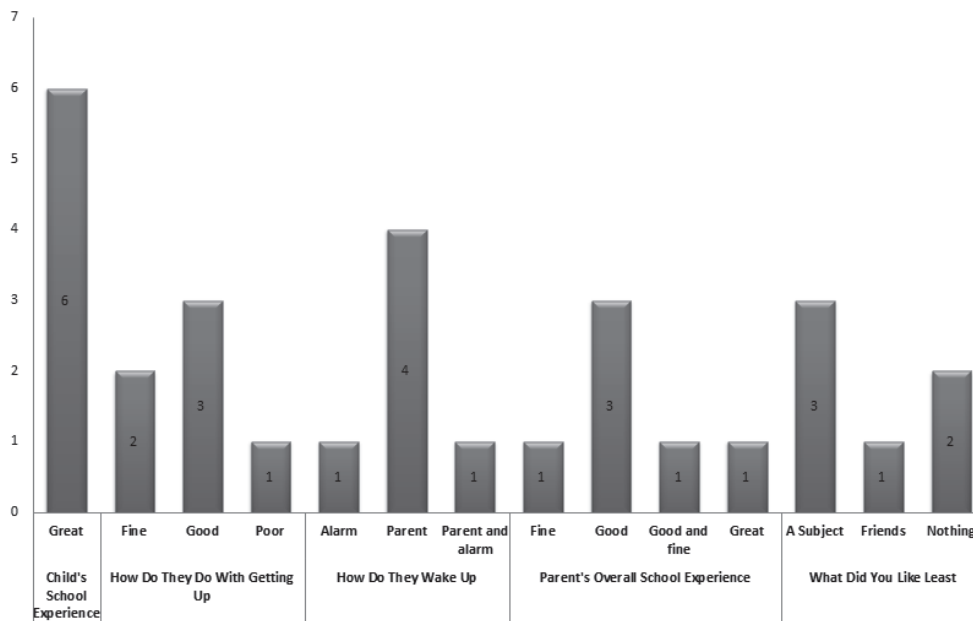
Parent survey responses indicated that their students miss school because of illness and difficult morning routines. One parent reported that his or her child missed school due to a non-school related event. Two reported that their children avoided school to miss class in certain subject. Parents also reported that their children liked recess, friends, and a teacher one reported the teacher as their child's favorite thing about school and that these factors encouraged the children to attend school. Four parents reported that their favorite thing about school was their friends, one said a particular subject, and one said the teacher (see Figure 2). Three students do good with getting up in the morning; two do fine; and one does poorly. All parents agreed that their child's school experience has been great so far (see Figure 3). The parents' least favorite things about school included a particular subject; two parents reporting nothing; and one reported that his or her child's friends are mean. Four parents rated their overall school experience as good; one ranked it fair; while another ranked it great. All parents and children had alarm clocks. An alarm wakes one child wakes and other parents report waking their children. Three parents reported that their children sometimes mention needing or wanting to be at school. One child often mentions it, one always mentions the need to attend school and one never mentions this (see Figure 4).

Figure 2. Survey responses questions 1 through 5



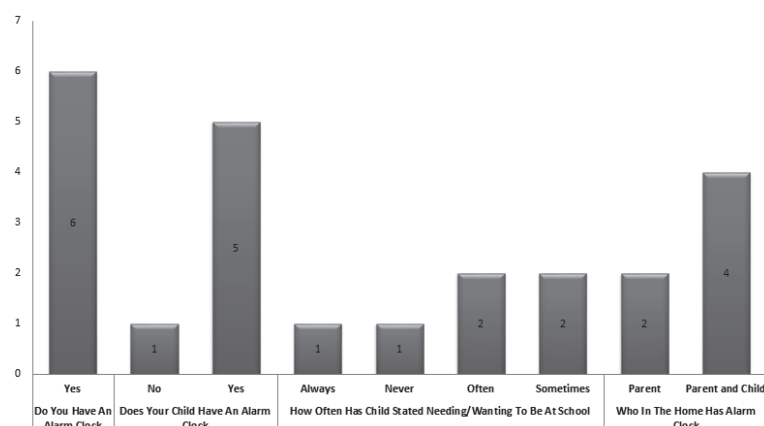
*Note:* Illness and difficult morning routines seemed to keep these students from attending school. Participants reported friendship as the best aspect of school.

Figure 3. Survey responses questions 6 through 10



*Note:* All parents stated their children's school experience has been great and most rated the overall school experience as good.

Figure 4. Survey responses questions 11 through 14



*Note:* All parents report having an alarm clock; five students have alarm clocks but report that parents awaken them.

During Friday groups, students shared ideas about the importance of attending school and strategies to stay healthy and attend school. Their answers regarding how to stay healthy included drinking water, exercising, playing, running, eating right, stretching, drinking milk, going to the doctor, brushing their teeth and playing baseball.

## Discussion

The effectiveness of the intervention may be attributable to many factors. First, the students enjoyed the daily check-ins, stickers, and the prizes. During the AR, parents seemed to communicate more frequently regarding absences and used a variety of methods to communicate with the school such as emails, notes, and visiting the school in person. The AR allowed the PSc to establish a stronger rapport with each of the students and their families. While the PI noticed closer relationships with most students and families, one family demonstrated more absences and early check-outs than other participants. The PI did not speak with this family prior to the AR and cultural and language differences exist between the PI and the family.

## Limitations

A greater number of participants would make the results more generalizable. Language barriers presented challenges getting one survey answered because the parents spoke Urdu and needed a translator. Indeed,

language barriers and student mobility are limitations that future investigators may encounter. The intervention and daily check-ins were time consuming and some school counselors might have a difficult time accomplishing this task. Administering the survey took much time because of difficulties reaching parents by phone and some families may not have phone access. Nevertheless, administering the survey via phone addressed concerns about lost or incomplete surveys students take home. One unexpected result included parental enthusiasm for the project and completing the survey on the phone.

## Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers can repeat this project with multiple grade levels to add significantly to the study's utility. Moreover, the PI can shorten the survey and ask only a few questions about reasons for absences, changes in student motivation, and understanding of the school's attendance policy. Preparing for language barriers that might hinder parent communication or survey responses by working with translators could broaden the number of English Language Learners represented in the study. Finally, checking in with participants a couple of days a week, and offering reinforcement, would support students' school attendance. Weekly group meetings and incentives remain essential components of the plan.

## Summary and Conclusions

Chronic absenteeism has numerous negative implications. Far reaching, these implications touch everyone and include academic and social difficulties, dropping out of school, delinquency leading to justice system involvement, and lower financial earnings in adulthood.

The role of PSC provides unique opportunities to implement AR and programs that can improve student attendance. The field could benefit from additional research concerning SES as a contributor to absenteeism and effective interventions among chronically absent elementary students. The parental component and positive reinforcement seemed especially effective in this AR study. Causes and factors contributing to chronic absenteeism seem varied although in this study, parents commonly reported student illness as the reason for absences. Just as schools differentiate instruction for students, school could differentiate attendance programs in order to address diverse factors contributing to absenteeism.

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## Appendix A

### Parent Survey

Directions: Parents please select the one best answer to the following questions that most closely relates to your child and yourself.

1. What sometimes keeps your child from making it to school?
  - A. Child was ill
  - B. Child didn't feel like coming
  - C. Transportation issues – car or missed bus
  - D. Sibling or someone else in the family was sick
  - E. You took them with you somewhere.
2. What makes it difficult to get your child to school sometimes?
  - A. Morning routine
  - B. Child didn't feel like coming
  - C. Transportation issues
  - D. Sibling or someone else in the family was sick
  - E. Tiredness/oversleeping
3. What does your child like best about school?
  - A. Lunch
  - B. Friends
  - C. Recess/outside/free time
  - D. Teacher
  - E. A particular subject
4. What did you like best about your school or educational experience?
  - A. Lunch
  - B. Friends
  - C. Recess/outside/free time
  - D. Teacher
  - E. A particular subject
5. What does your child like least about school?
  - A. Lunch
  - B. Friends
  - C. Recess/outside/free time
  - D. Teacher
  - E. A particular subject
6. What did you like least about your school or educational experience?
  - A. Lunch
  - B. Friends
  - C. Recess/outside/freetime
  - D. Teacher
  - E. A particular subject
7. How would you describe your overall school experience?
  - A. Great
  - B. Good
  - C. Fine
  - D. Poor
  - E. Terrible
8. How would you describe your child's overall school experience at this point?
  - A. Great
  - B. Good C. Fine D. Poor
  - E. Terrible
9. How does your child do with getting up in the mornings?
  - A. Good
  - B. Fine
  - C. Poor
  - D. Terrible
10. How is your child awakened for school?
  - A. By you
  - B. By a sibling
  - C. By their alarm clock
  - D. Wakes on his/her own
11. Do you have an alarm clock?    Yes        No
12. Does your child have an alarm clock?    Yes        No
13. Who in the home uses an alarm clock each morning?
  - A. Parent
  - B. Child
  - C. Sibling
  - D. Grandparent
  - E. Other
14. How often has your child mentioned needing to be at school or getting up for school?
  - A. Never
  - B. Seldom
  - C. Sometimes
  - D. Often

## Interventions to Combat the Many Facets of Absenteeism: Action Research

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### Author Note

The author offers special thanks to Dr. Susan Boes for her continued support and valuable feedback throughout the action research process. Please send correspondence concerning this article to [jill.cole1@yahoo.com](mailto:jill.cole1@yahoo.com).

### Abstract

This paper operationalizes the definition of action research (AR) and the importance of conducting such studies to improve the lives of students and professionals. This paper provides an overview of literature regarding variables related to truancy and absenteeism. The paper discusses the importance of students being present and engaged, negative implications associated with poor attendance and dropping out of school, and reviews the effectiveness of Check & Connect and other multimodal approaches used to increase attendance. Evidence presented in the paper supports the usefulness of having a check-in and reward system for students with frequent absences reduces truancy. Lastly, the paper presents study results and implications. *Keywords: absenteeism, truancy and school counselors, school refusal interventions*

Mills (2011) defines action research (AR) as a systematic inquiry conducted by the principal investigator (PI) to gather information regarding their environment. AR is a great tool to examine programs already in place and evaluate new approaches being implemented. One goal of AR is to enhance the lives of students; however, it can also improve the lives of professionals.

The purpose of this action research is to give insight on ways to improve student attendance. The need to keep students in school and off the streets is imperative. Studies have suggested that individuals who drop out of school tend to have a higher rate of incarceration and other difficulties financially (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004); hence,

finding ways to keep students in school is vitally important to students and the community.

After reviewing literature on absenteeism, the PI, who is also one of the school counselors, decided to administer a dual method approach to combat the problem of absenteeism. The Check and Connect model and incentives were two promising methods used in similar school settings to decrease student absences. Elementary school is the time when students learn the core curriculum and develop attitudes and habits regarding formal education. Therefore, attendance is vital. Making students active members in the school community should help them learn and grow in all aspects of life. The literature is replete with studies that point out students who are truant feel disengaged (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008). This AR created a safe and nurturing atmosphere conducive for students who could benefit from extra support in making the transition to high school. The program emphasized the importance of attendance, fostered a sense of belonging, and increased academic performance.

### Review of Literature

This literature review reports and assesses interventions that implemented to increase student attendance and various reasons why students are not present and engaged. After reviewing the literature concerning student absenteeism, it seemed essential to conduct an AR project to gain insight and evaluate the current programs in place to combat the problem of student attendance.

With guidelines set forth by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and the need to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), student attendance has become a main focus. Elementary school provides the foundation for learning and is a time when students learn basic skills they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. Therefore, early interventions with students who are at risk for dropping out of school will have a positive impact on student attendance. Chang and Romero (2008) stated students who do not obtain these basic social and academic skills by third grade require extra assistance and are in great danger for eventually dropping out of school.

Low graduation rates have plagued public schools since their inception. Rush and Vitale (1994) reported that the

first public high school opened in 1821, but only two years after opening, 76 of the original 176 students had dropped out. Graduation rates continued to increase and by the 1950's the graduation rate climbed 50%. By the 1960's, 70-75% of students graduated from high school. The number of students dropping out of school in urban areas is on the rise. Since the 1970's, 60% of students in urban centers fail to graduate.

Absent students may have difficulty meeting the graduation requirements. As educators strive to increase academics, the more important attendance becomes. Cunningham (2010) notes that in today's classroom the shift is to use hands-on activities and actively engage students; however, when students have poor attendance, it can be detrimental to their education. With increased emphasis on higher order thinking and scaffold learning, students' attendance and engagement becomes even more important. Every school day has formal and informal learning opportunities that students cannot capture if they do not attend school. Students who have difficulty engaging in the school environment may choose unproductive activities that lead to delinquency and problems in later life (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 2001). Moreover, problems associated with truancy affect the individual and the community at large (Baker et al., 2001; Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004). Schools that do not engage elementary students who struggle with consistent attendance, full participation in academic and peer interactions, and low academic achievement set the stage for high school dropouts (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, as cited in Spencer, 2009). Therefore, attendance is a critical issue and as a nation it is imperative to improve attendance in our schools. How can educators and other stakeholders help these at risk students?

### **Factors that Contribute to Absenteeism**

There are many different reasons students do not make it to school each day. Most research emphasizes four main circumstances for poor attendance. The main components are family factors, school factors, economic influences, and student variables (Baker et al., 2001; Peek, 2009; Wall, 2003). Chang and Romero (2008) add community related issues to this list. Family factors include lack of supervision, drug and alcohol abuse, the lack of knowledge regarding the laws of attendance, and differing attitudes toward

education. Chang and Romero (2008) note that families may be unaware of the importance of kindergarten, and many families struggle with basic necessities which hinder their ability to ensure their children attend school on a consistent basis. Homelessness, turmoil in the home, neglect, and over-protectiveness also play a role in students' absenteeism (Baker et al., 2001; Peek, 2009; Wall, 2003). Chang & Romero (2008) reported that the absentee rate for kindergarten and first grade students was about four times higher for those living in poverty; the researchers postulate that this result may stem from lack of stable, affordable housing, parents working multiple jobs, transportation issues, and inability to access medication or have limited health care.

In addition to home factors, school factors can also influence student absenteeism. These school factors consist of poor rapport between teachers, students and their families. Climate issues including the size of the school, attitudes of the teachers, administration, and other students play a major role in the high rate of truancy (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008; Lehr et al., 2004). Many schools have a difficult time reaching the various learning styles of the students and meeting the diverse cultural backgrounds of the individuals (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008). Schools lack consistent attendance policies and meaningful consequences; they fail to report the importance of attendance especially in the lower grades. Effective communication is imperative to ensure students attend school on a regular basis especially with the Latino population (Chang & Romero 2008). Having Spanish-speaking facilitators is a key component to engage these families. Chang & Romero (2008) discuss poor placement and the lack of skills and knowledge as a factor pertaining to attendance.

Lack of familial economic stability influences school attendance. For example, single parents working multiple jobs, lack of transportation, and inadequate childcare can contribute to truancy and absenteeism (Baker et al., 2001). Further, some students lack appropriate clothing to wear or their homes might not have alarm clocks (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008). Logsdon, Burrell, Monroe, & Boes (2004) noted that students living in poverty with inadequate nutrition might have hindered concentration and cognitive development. Children who transfer from school-to-school face many difficult challenges ranging

from finding new friends to following to different methods of teaching.

Besides school and familial factors, student factors that shape absenteeism can include drug and alcohol abuse, poor health, behavior problems, and the lack of social skills. Students who are frequently truant often feel disengaged or incompetent when it comes to skills and knowledge of the material (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008). Community factors incorporate the way different cultures view education and the resources and opportunities available in the various communities. Children growing up in communities where violence is prevalent may have a difficult time finding positive role models who view education as important and have a hard time trusting others (Chang & Romero, 2008). Having effective programs for students at risk will improve attendance and help them academically and socially.

### **Attendance Intervention Programs**

There is a need for intervention programs especially in the early grades when habits, values, and attitudes are formed (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008; Lehr et al., 2004; Rush & Vitale, 1994). Research suggests several different strategies available to tackle the problem of student attendance (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008; Lehr et al., 2004; Logsdon et al., 2004; Sheldon, 2007). For example, Lehr et al. (2004) reported that the Check and Connect model is a program originally designed to increase graduation rates and assist middle school students with learning and emotional/behavioral concerns by engaging students in school and learning. The goal of this approach is to increase student attendance. Key features of the program include relationship building, routine monitoring of alterable indicators, individualized and timely interventions, long-term commitment, motivation and continuity regarding education, problem solving, and affiliation with school and learning (Lehr et al., 2004). This intervention provides opportunities for students to check in with an adult mentor on a regular basis. Students were able to discuss school work, personal problems, social skills and any other issues that may arise (Lehr, et al., 2004). Martin, Tobin, & Sugai (2002) reported a 50% reduction in dropout rate using this model. Lehr et al. (2004) conducted a study with several elementary schools in an urban area in the midwestern United States. The mean age for the 147 participants was 8 years and 11 months. Absences declined from 83% to

60% for those involved in the program for at least 2 years. About 48% of the students remaining in elementary school were engaged and present. This model allows the students to make those important connections in school and within the community. Creating student advisory teams employs a similar strategy in which school staff assign to a mentor (Martin et al., 2002). This method did not directly report effects on dropout rates but did indicate students were better equipped to handle problems and take responsibility for school and personal accomplishments as well as maintain positive adult relationships in the school setting.

Incentives and rewards seem to be another effective means of increasing attendance. Peek (2009) reported that "Perfect Pals Program"s was the most effective means for modifying student attendance at her school. Perfect Pals was an incentive program used for students who had perfect attendance and no tardies. These students earned lunch in the lobby, small treats, and had their picture on a bulletin board. Fifty seven percent of the teachers strongly agreed that the incentive program was effective for increasing student's desire to attend school regularly and 36% agreed that the Perfect Pals was a good idea, while seven percent strongly disagreed that the program was useful. Barber and Kagey (1977) conducted a school wide incentive program to improve student attendance; they designed the program for students to reach goals that would entitle them to all or part of a monthly party depending on their attendance. Each class had a sticker chart as well that provided immediate feedback and kept a visible record for each student. This program reported a four to six percent increase in student attendance. The literature suggests rewards and incentives appear to be effective methods for improving attendance.

Another successful intervention creates partnerships between schools, families, social workers, outside organizations, the community and sometimes law enforcement (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008; Martin et al., 2002; Sheldon, 2007; Walls, 2003). Baker et al.'s (2001) evaluation of the multimodal approach showed a dramatic decrease in the number of trancies between two school years, ranging from four percent to 64% depending on the size of the district. According to Sheldon (2007), a collaborative approach in Ohio showed a significant increase in attendance as well. Chang & Romero (2008) reported Project GRAD a community based

approach in Atlanta, Georgia was a success by improving students' attendance for those who were absent 15 or more days. Project GRAD offered guidance, counseling, outside resources from the community, and family aid for those students or families experiencing difficulties. Truancy dropped from 18% to nine percent for students involved in the program for two or more years. The study encompassed 18 elementary schools, 6 middle schools and 3 high schools.

The PI sought to conduct an AR project on absenteeism to support the students in her school. The PI also wanted to examine if students' attendance would improve if they felt engaged in the school community.

## Method

Prior to collecting data, the PI wrote and distributed a research request to the Institutional Review Board of a local university, local school administration, and county requesting approval. The program design included a daily check-in system with a student advisory team (SAT) member; school counselors, administration, and office staff comprised the SAT. The AR provided participants the opportunity to earn rewards throughout the AR based on their attendance. The students used a punch card system for the daily check-in with a member of the SAT, and were eligible for a reward if they were at school all week. Once authorization was granted, the PI began looking at data for students who had more than seven absences in the first semester.

## Participants

This PI conducted the AR at a suburban elementary school in the metro Atlanta area, which is culturally diverse. The school is a distinguished Title 1 school for 9 years in a row and has about 900 students. The participants for this AR were students in kindergarten and second grade who had between seven to fourteen absences in the first semester of the 2010-2011 school year. This PI collected attendance data from the computer program used by the county school system. After reviewing the data, the PI spoke with individual teachers to determine the benefits of the attendance intervention. Ten students participated in the AR with five kindergarteners (two Latina females; one Caucasian female; one Latino male; and one Caucasian male) and five second graders (one Latina female; one

Caucasian female; one African-American female; one Caucasian male; and one African-American male). The six-week program began in early February and concluded in March.

## Interventions to Improve Student Attendance

After reviewing the attendance data, the PI chose ten participants who had numerous absences and sent a letter and brochure home informing parents/guardians of this special program to track attendance (Appendix A). At the onset of this AR, the kindergarten and second grade teachers were informed regarding the purpose and goal of this program and asked to touch base with parents/guardians if a student was absent more than 2 days in a row. The participants met in the school's cafeteria for an overview of the program where they learned about the daily check-in and rewards. The incentives included pens, pencils, penguin puffers, sharpeners, and other items in a large treasure box. If students missed 2 days or less over the duration of the program, they earned a pizza lunch with the PI/school counselor.

During the intervention, the PI collected data using the punch card system and monitored the attendance program. Each participant received a card used to check-in with a member of the student advisory team. The team consisted of two counselors, principal, two assistant principals, and the office staff. The intervention sought to build positive relationships and increase attendance with these students with numerous absences. Having such a program in place established a school culture of caring and concern among students and parents.

## Data Collection and Analysis

For this AR, the PI collected data using the computer attendance program used by the local county, informal survey, field notes, and observations compiled by the PI. At the conclusion of the study, the PI then compared the data from the first semester to the end of the program to examine the percentage of change in individual student attendance and attendance change for the group. The PI also looked at the informal survey given to the homeroom teachers that had students participating in the AR and the members of the SAT. The PI looked for themes while taking field notes and informal observations. The PI coded data using an identification system that captured no student names or information.

## Results

At the initial meeting, the participants and the PI discussed the importance of school and the students. At the end of the program, the students still responded that the incentives were their favorite part. Most of the students stated the incentives motivated them to come to school. Moreover, two students told how their behavior also improved and expressed a new enjoyment for school. The students also discussed how the check-in made them feel special and proud. At our final meeting, the students noted they felt like the program had a positive effect on their academics; furthermore, most of the students were able to state specific skills or subjects they improved in because they were present.

Baseline data indicated that group attendees had an average of 8.8 absences. However, after the six-week intervention, the attendees had an average of 1.7 absences. Seventy percent of the students increased attendance during the AR. Program data also indicate that the majority of teachers and SAT members found the program extremely effective (60% of the teachers and the members of the SAT); 30% found the program highly effective; and 10% found the program effective. Survey results indicated 80% believed the incentives were extremely effective for increasing attendance, whereas 10% felt it was moderately effective, and 10% gave no response. When asking the teachers and the SAT team if the interventions increased academics, 60% responded with extremely effective, 10% felt it was highly effective, and 30% said it was effective. Based on survey results, 70% of the teachers and SAT members found the check-in cards beneficial, while 10% found the cards effective. Ten percent found the cards moderately effective, and ten percent had no response (Appendix A). These findings support the PI's hypotheses that check-ins and incentive programs would increase student attendance, foster students' feelings of belonging in the school community, and improve students' grades.

Figure 1

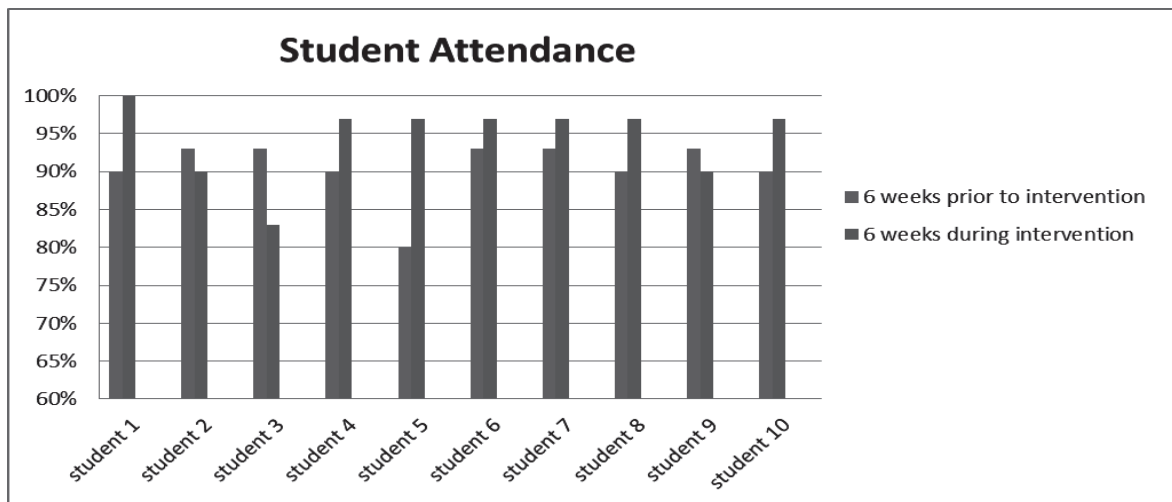


Figure 2

Questions	Extremely Effective	Highly Effective	Effective	Moderately Effective	Not At All Effective	No Answer
1. Rate the effectiveness of the program.	60%	30%	0.0%	10%	0.0%	0.0%
2. Do you think the incentives were effective in increasing attendance?	80%	0.0%	0.0%	10%	0.0%	10%
3. Do you think the attendance program increased academics?	60%	10%	20%	0.0%	0.0%	20%
4. Do you think having the check-in card was beneficial?	70%	0.0%	10.0%	10.0%	0.0%	10.0%

Figure two shows that respondents viewed both interventions as effective. Respondents indicated that the check-in system helped create positive connections with other adults in the building; they also noted that students seemed excited about having the cards signed by members of the SAT. Data also indicated that teachers believed attending school allowed the students to complete work, tests, and obtain the information given during class time. One teacher respondent noticed a decrease in student tardies as well. One teacher felt the program would be most effective with students in second grade or higher.

## Discussion

The results of the interventions enhanced student attendance and demonstrated the effectiveness of a reward system and student check-ins. Data demonstrated 70% of the students increased attendance during the program. All participants stated they enjoyed the program and wanted the program to continue. Most of the participants stated the incentives were the part of the AR they enjoyed most, but they also enjoyed checking in with a member of the SAT.

Most teachers reported finding the program beneficial; however, two teachers maintained that attendance is parental responsibility and doubted the effectiveness of the interventions. The survey findings indicated that 60% of the teachers and the SAT members found this AR to be extremely effective for increasing attendance, and the majority (80%) also found the incentives effective. Not only did the interventions improve attendance, but also 90% of the teachers and SAT believed the interventions were effective for improving students' academics. Program feedback indicated the usefulness of the program and expressed hope that the program would continue.

## Limitations

Small sample size and the short duration of the AR limit findings. Also, the PI developed a survey that had no reliability or validity data. Limited time on campus restricted opportunities for the PI to collect field notes and student observations. Finally, when teachers failed to send check-in results to the SAT members, the PI could not always follow-up with students because of other counseling responsibilities.

## Future Recommendations

Future recommendations include making parents aware of the attendance policy from the beginning of school and reiterate the importance of kindergarten and the early grades as they relate to academics and basic skills. Actively involving parents in the AR would clarify other reasons for student absences not considered by the PI's knowledge regarding absences and assist in future modifications for attendance programs. Collaboration with other educators and student service professionals could be helpful when

devising a plan to use with students that are frequently truant. Another recommendation would include adding tardies or creating an additional program concentrating on arriving at school on time.

## Summary and Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrated that using a dual approach to increase student attendance was effective in reducing the number of absences for the members of the group. The study found that using incentives and a daily check-in system increased attendance, improved academics, and created a sense of belonging. The students were motivated using this approach.

The review of literature indicates there are many facets of student absenteeism with many different strategies used to combat the problem. The literature shows that factors contributing to truancy falls along a continuum of student, family, economic, community, and school environment variables. Understanding the root problems and creating effective programs in the early grades will help remedy the problem of truancy. Recognizing patterns of early absenteeism will provide valuable information concerning challenges these students face and allow the schools to take action. Early intervention with social, emotional, cognitive, and familial issues will give these students a chance to have a successful career in school and keep them from falling behind academically (Chang & Romero, 2008). Jacobson (2008) reported that children who were frequently absent in kindergarten had the lowest scores in reading, math, and general knowledge in first grade. Therefore, it is imperative to reach these at risk students early; using productive methods to ensure students attend school on a regular basis is necessary for them to reach their full potential.

## School Counseling Implications

Ample research indicated students who lacked consistent attendance demonstrated signs of anxiety, depression and risky behaviors along with other problems later in life (Chou, Ho, Chen, & Chen; Dewey; Hallfors, Cho, Brodish, Flewelling, & Khatapoush; Hallfors et al.; Kearney; Roebuck, French, & Dennis, as cited in Dube and Orpinas, 2009). School counselors promote and help students improve academic achievement and reach their full potential socially and

emotionally. Evidence supports implementing programs using incentives, Check and Connect, and multimodal approaches. This study found that attendance interventions such as a check-in and reward system proved beneficial to participants. Program participants and stakeholders found the program valuable and hoped the program would continue.

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## Appendix A

Program Announcement  
OPERATION SCATT  
(School Counts All The Time)

What: An attendance tracking and incentive program for students with 7 or more total absences.

Why: To ensure academic success through attendance. We want to improve student's attendance and keep as many students as possible under the 15 days absent mark for AYP.

When: January 4, 2011 at 9:00 am

Who: Kindergarten and second grade students who have 7 or more absences after the first semester.

Where: \_\_\_\_\_ Cafeteria

How: Students will attend an introductory briefing on Operation SCATT rules. During the briefing students will learn why school attendance is important and how it effects overall academic performance. At the close of the briefing, students will receive an Operation SCATT tracking card. The students will stop by the counselor or administrator's office at some point in the day to receive a stamp for being present. If the student is present for the entire week, he/she will receive a reward for that week (i.e. sticker, treasure box, or pencil). If the students have been present for four weeks in a row, they will earn a "bigger" prize like a popcorn dessert. At the end of the project if the student has remained stable at the entry level number of absences (plus 1 or 2) they will be eligible to participate in a pizza party.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact \_\_\_\_\_ or at \_\_\_\_\_

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