

School Counselors' Beliefs about Accountability

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect training in accountability had on school counselors' beliefs. The researcher surveyed 100 school counselors in a Southeastern county of the United States. The survey looked at school counselor's professional practices in regard to accountability. The results showed a significant positive improvement in all survey items with the exception of one.

Professional school counselors must regularly evaluate their programs and their effectiveness to assist in student achievement (ASCA, 2012). Educators, including school counselors, share accountability for student achievement (Stone & Dahir, 2010). Accountability in education entails collecting and analyzing data to confirm progress, reveal areas of concern, and determine if there is a need for change. Professional school counselors are now feeling the pressure to show that the outcomes of their programs and services make a positive impact on student achievement (Astramovich & Coker, 2007). School counselors and school administrators are being increasingly challenged to demonstrate the effectiveness of their school counseling program in measurable terms. To evaluate their programs, school counselors must collect and use data that tie their program to student achievement. By using an accountability measure, professional school counselors will be able to accomplish that goal. Some of the typical programs with which a school counselor could use accountability measures include student success skills programs, social skills programs, career decision-making programs, and behavior management programs. Accountability cannot be demonstrated without data and many school counselors feel at a loss as to how to collect these data (Bauman, Siegel, & Davis, 2002).

There have been many reasons supporting why professional school counselors have not conducted these types of program evaluations in the past. In early school counselor accountability research the main reasons were that counselors typically receive little training to prepare them for demonstrating accountability outcomes (Whiston, 1996), counselors were not seeing the connection between their skills and research (Whiston, 1996), school counselors were not being held to the same accountability standards as other fields (Dahir & Stone, 2003), counselors feared their services may be ineffective (Lusky & Hayes, 2001), and counselors placed minimal value on evaluation activities (Loesch, 2001). Counselors seem to have lacked the knowledge and confidence to effectively collect and analyze outcome data. If school counselors are given training in accountability measures will their confidence increase and will they then begin to use these types of evaluations?

Holcomb-McCoy, Gonzalez, and Johnston (2009) investigated school counselor dispositions that would predict data usage. They found that 25% of the variance related to school counselor data usage was due to self-efficacy. One's self-efficacy beliefs impact one's cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes (Bandura, 1992). People tend to avoid activities

that they believe exceed their abilities (Bandura). Therefore, if counselors are trained in data analysis as part of an accountability measure training, will their self-efficacy increase and then will they feel more comfortable and show an increase in using accountability measures?

In the state of Florida, counties' school counseling departments vary in the degree to which they implement accountability projects. Some counties require school counselors to implement a yearly accountability project. Other counties are in the process of training counselors in accountability measures and others have not begun to implement accountability measures for their school counselors.

It is seen as a positive step for counties to require that school counselors implement some type of accountability measure in their programs (Stone & Dahir, 2010; Sink, 2009). Because of budget cuts, legislators and other school administrators may not see the work of school counselors as an effective utilization of financial resources in regard to student achievement. By analyzing their programs, school counselors can communicate how they contribute to student success (Stone & Dahir, 2010).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Accountability. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) has made closing the achievement gap for disadvantaged and minority students a priority. This Act requires strong measures of accountability (Dahir & Stone, 2003). Progress and achievement levels are typically made available to the public. Accountability is the result of efforts to meet the school's goals.

The American School Counselor Association's National Standards for School Counseling Programs and The ASCA National Model (2012) both emphasize the importance of school counselors delivering school counseling programs that are effective. Both of these guidelines support professional school counselors to be able to "show" the effect of the school counseling program on students.

Accountability, in school counseling, is the ability to demonstrate the effectiveness of the school counseling program in measurable terms (ASCA, 2012). Professional school counselors use data to show the impact of the school counseling program on school improvement and student achievement and to guide future action and improve future results for all students. The performance of the professional school counselor is evaluated on basic standards of practice expected of professional school counselors implementing a school counseling program (Dahir & Stone, 2003).

School counselors' role and practices.

Today's school counselors are an important part of the education team. They help all students in the areas of academic achievement, personal/social development and career development. School counselor's roles vary based on their level, county and school demographics; but they all try to implement a comprehensive school counseling program. This program typically consists of preventative programs (classroom guidance lessons), intervention services (crisis, group, and individual counseling), and services to parents, teachers, and the community (Florida Department of Education, 2010). The amount or percentage of time spent in

each varies from school to school and county to county. A few prevention programs that could be used in an accountability measure are student success skills programs, social skills programs, character education programs, or drug awareness or prevention programs.

Review of the Literature

Lack of accountability measure use

Much of the literature relating to school counseling accountability has cited the lack of school counselors' ability and interest to evaluate their counseling services (Whiston, 1996). Several reasons have been suggested as to why school counselors do not implement accountability measures. One reason that has been discussed in the literature is that implementing accountability measures requires expertise in research methods, collecting relevant data, and selecting appropriate analyses. School counselors typically receive inadequate training to prepare them for facilitating such research and analysis (Hosie, 1994). Counselor education programs have been criticized for inadequately training school counselors in accountability measures.

Another reason given in the literature for school counselors not using accountability measures is their lack of confidence. Isaacs (2003) found that school counselors lack the confidence in their ability to collect, analyze, and apply findings to their professional practices. This researcher also found that school counselors with accountability skills are often hesitant to use accountability measures because of a fear of finding that their program/s may be ineffective. Fall and Van Zandt (1997) found that research "typically evokes emotional reactions of fear, anxiety, and even disdain" (p. 2) for school counselors. This is another explanation for the lack of emphasis on research and accountability.

Accountability and program evaluation

Program evaluation has been discussed in the school counseling literature for many years; but few studies have been conducted examining the use of program evaluation (Astramovich & Coker, 2007). Sink (2009) and Isaacs (2003) discussed program evaluation as a form of accountability. The terms program evaluation and accountability are often used interchangeably in the research because a program evaluation can provide the necessary data to support accountability that a school counseling program is effective.

Program evaluation in school counseling is discussed in depth by Astramovich and Coker (2007). They stated:

We believe that a key shift in the profession would be to have counselors continually evaluate their programs and outcomes not because of external pressures, but from a desire to enhance client services and to advocate for clients and the counseling profession (p. 165).

Their statement motivated this research question: Do school counselor's professional practices change as a result of having to implement accountability measures? Research has supported that that this may in fact be the case (Topdemir, 2010, Paolini, 2012). Astramovich and Coker also stated that a new perspective on the role of evaluation might help program evaluation become a standard of practice in school counseling.

For more than 50 years, researchers have worked on methods to study the effectiveness of counseling programs. The inaugural issue of *Professional School Counseling* began with an article pushing school counselors to “see research as an ally” (Fall & VanZandt, 1997, p. 2). Counselors not only need to collect and analyze data; but also need to disseminate it as a way to advocate for the profession. If school counselors could demonstrate that their research has found them to be effective in students’ success, they would be in a better position to justify their practices (Bauman, Siegel, & Davis, 2002).

In addition to justifying the profession, sharing accountability for school improvement with stakeholders is a driving force in transforming the work of school counselors in our nation’s schools (Stone & Dahir, 2010). School counselors should not view research and practice as mutually exclusive activities. They compliment each other and are both necessary for growth in the field of school counseling. The results of merging research and practice can provide important data to the stakeholders although counselors have often felt uncomfortable with research because they viewed it as involving statistical analysis (Whiston, 1996).

Accountability measures within program evaluations could answer questions about the effectiveness of school counseling programs such as:

- Are the program objectives being met?
- What programs are most effective?
- What impact does the school counseling program have on student success?

Purpose

The literature has shown that implementing an accountability measure is a “best practice” for school counselors (Fall & Van Zandt, 1997) and that it impacts student achievement; but how does the school counselor change as a result of implementing an accountability project? To date, there has been little research to investigate whether these changes occur with school counselors. The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a difference in school counselors’ professional practices, attitudes, comfort-level, knowledge, and skills after they were required to implement accountability measures/projects.

It was hypothesized that school counselors after implementing accountability measures would demonstrate:

- A higher level of knowledge of accountability measures
- A higher level of comfort in conducting data analyses
- A higher level of perceived skills in implementing accountability measures

This study is important to the field of school counseling because of the school counselor’s changing role over time. Until recent times school counselors did not see the connection between improving their clinical skills and becoming involved in conducting a research study (Whiston, 1996). Accountability measures will enable school counselors to show that they are key players in the academic success of students (Dahir & Stone, 2003). Before the accountability movement, the only type of data analysis most counselors conducted was time on-task/off-task observations (Dahir & Stone, 2003). Now school counselors are being asked to conduct accountability measures or “action research”. Is it really making a difference in their

professional practices, attitudes, and comfort level in analyzing data, knowledge, and skills? This study attempted to answer the question of whether implementing accountability measures makes a difference in school counselor's professional practices, attitudes, comfort level in analyzing data, knowledge, and skills in a local school district. If it does, then other counties should be strongly encouraged to implement this practice.

Method

Participants and procedures

Participants were 100 school counselors, who worked in a Southeastern county of the United States. The breakdown by school level consisted of 44 elementary school counselors, 29 middle school counselors, and 27 high school counselors. Approximately 86% of the school counselors in this county participated in the voluntary and anonymous pre-survey. Eighty-four percent were female and 16% were male. Forty percent had worked as a school counselor for 13 or more years, 16% for 4-7 years, 14% for 8-12 years, and 30% for 3 years or less. Questions regarding ethnicity were not asked due to the lack of diversity in this county. School counselors in this county are predominately of Caucasian descent.

The school counselors were asked by their district supervisor to complete the online survey in reference to accountability measures and data analysis. The participants were informed that they would be part of a research study and that the results would be used additionally to guide the training that would occur on accountability measures. The title of the survey was Data Analysis Survey for Guidance Counselors (D.A.S.G.C.). This topic was most likely an appealing one to most school counselors in the county due to the fact that it was common knowledge that they would be trained in the fall in how to implement an accountability measure. They were asked to complete the "pre-survey" in June and were going to be trained on and required to implement an accountability measure the following school year.

The D.A.S.G.C. was created by the researcher based on a review of the current literature in school counseling and accountability. The Director of Research and Evaluation of the county in the study gave support and feedback in its development.

The survey consisted of basic demographic information- school level, number of years as a counselor, gender, and type of graduate degree. Participants were asked how many professional journals they read on a regular basis. The choices were zero, 1-2, or 3 or more. Eight questions were then asked about their knowledge, comfort, and involvement in data analysis. On these questions the participants rated their present beliefs as either "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree", or "strongly disagree". Because this survey was created for this study, no prior information regarding its validity or reliability is available.

Four months after the initial survey, the school counselors in this county were trained in accountability measures during a training that fall. This training was the foundation for them to be able to implement an accountability measure and attendance was mandatory. One accountability measure per school was required that school year. District supervisors required a draft of the counselors' measures mid school year so that they could assist guidance departments who were having difficulty with their measure.

That June, school counselors in this county were asked to complete a post-survey on accountability measure use and data analysis. It was the same survey as was taken previously. The participants were asked to respond only if they had participated in the first survey sent 1 year prior. Eighty-four of the original 100 participants completed the survey. This was a high response rate considering a significant percentage of the 16 that did not complete the survey were possibly no longer working as a school counselor in this county. The demographic percentages (school level, years in the field, and gender) were similar to the results of the pre-survey.

Results

Participants were asked how many professional journals they read on a regular basis on both the pre and post test to gauge their comfort in reading research. The choices were zero, 1-2, or 3+. There was a decrease in the percentage that read zero (35.7% to 27.2%) and an increase in the number reading 1-2 (50% to 59.3%). The percentage of participants reading 3 or more remained at 14%. Although the pre and post surveys were not matched by participant, it was encouraging that fewer participants were not reading professional journals after the study and more were now in the 1-2 range. The mean pre-test score for the number of journals read was 0.778 ($SD=0.6708$). The mean post-test score was 0.8642 ($SD=0.6276$). The dependent t -test did show a significant change at the .05 level, $t(80) = -2.75, p=0.0074$.

Question number one asked, "I have the knowledge to conduct a data driven accountability project". On this question there was an increase in the number of participants rating it as either "agree" (from 52.5% to 72.3%) or "strongly agree" (from 12.1% to 16.9%). The "disagree" (from 29.3% to 7.2%) and "strongly disagree" (from 6.1% to 3.6%) responses decreased. The mean on the pre-test was 1.7108 ($SD=0.7576$) and on the post-test 2.0241 ($SD=0.6242$). The dependent t -test did show a significant change at the .05 level, $t(82) = -6.12, p<.001$.

Question number two asked, "I am comfortable in analyzing data". Examples were given as to what types of data. These included this state's achievement test and their county's database (exact names are not being provided to allow the county to remain anonymous). On this question there was an increase in the number of participants rating it as either "agree" (47% to 61.4%) or "strongly agree" (21.0% to 21.7%). There was a decrease in the "disagree" (28.0% to 15.7%) and "strongly disagree" (4.0% to 1.2%) responses. The mean on the pre-test was 1.8554 ($SD=0.7829$) and on the post-test 2.0361 ($SD=0.6523$). The dependent t -test did show a significant change at the .05 level, $t(82) = -4.25, p<.001$.

Question number three asked, "Data from my school was used when writing the 2007-2008 annual guidance plan" on the pre-test and "Data from my school was used when writing the 2008-2009 annual guidance plan" on the post-test. On this question there was an increase in the number of participants rating it as either "agree" (49.0% to 56.8%) or "strongly agree" (10.4% to 18.5%). There was a decrease in the "disagree" (34.4% to 24.7%) and "strongly disagree" (6.3% to 0%) responses. The mean on the pre-test was 1.6296 ($SD=0.7491$) and on the post-test 1.9383

($SD=0.6585$). The dependent t -test did show a significant change at the .05 level, $t(80) = -5.98$, $p < .001$.

Question number four asked, "I feel confident in my ability to analyze data that identify patterns of student behavior that contribute to school achievement". On this question there was an increase in the number of participants rating it as either "agree" (57.0% to 67.1%) or "strongly agree" (13.0% to 17.1%). There was a decrease in the "disagree" (25.0% to 14.6%) and "strongly disagree" (5.0% to 1.2%) responses. The mean on the pre-test was 1.7683 ($SD=0.7252$) and on the post-test 2.0 ($SD=0.6086$). The dependent t -test did show a significant change at the .05 level, $t(81) = -4.94$, $p < .001$.

Question number five asked, "I feel confident in my ability to analyze data that identify patterns of student behavior that contribute to school success". On this question there was an increase in the number of participants rating it as either "agree" (59.0 to 71.1%) or "strongly agree" (14.0% to 15.7%). There was a decrease in the "disagree" (22.0% to 12.0%) and "strongly disagree" (5.0% to 1.2%) responses. The mean on the pre-test was 1.8313 ($SD=0.7295$) and on the post-test 2.1325 ($SD=0.6584$). The dependent t -test did show a significant change at the .05 level, $t(82) = -5.95$, $p < .001$.

Question number six asked, "I am able to define a measureable objective". On this question there was an increase in the number of participants rating it as either "agree" (64.3% to 66.3%) or "strongly agree" (23.5% to 26.5%). There was a decrease in the "disagree" (11.2% to 7.2%) and "strongly disagree" (1.0% to 0%) responses. The mean on the pre-test was 2.1084 ($SD=0.6249$) and on the post-test 2.1928 ($SD=0.5512$). The dependent t -test did show a significant change at the .05 level, $t(82) = -2.75$, $p = .0074$.

Question number seven asked, "I know how to use technology designed to support student success". Specific examples were provided of the types of programs used by this county. On this question there was an increase in the number of participants rating it as either "agree" (58.0% to 61.0%) or "strongly agree" (14.0% to 17.1%). There was a decrease in the "disagree" (25.0% to 20.7%) and "strongly disagree" (3.0% to 1.2%) responses. The mean on the pre-test was 1.8415 ($SD=0.6933$) and on the post-test 1.939 ($SD=0.6545$). The dependent t -test did show a significant change at the .05 level, $t(81) = -2.96$, $p = .0040$.

Question number eight asked, "I am involved in developing school improvement plans based on interpreting school-wide assessment results". On this question there was an increase in the participants who chose "strongly agree" (10.2% to 12.3%), a decrease in those that chose "agree" (39.8% to 38.3%), a decrease in those that chose "disagree" (44.9% to 43.2%), and an increase in those that chose "strongly disagree" (5.1% to 6.2%). The mean on the pre-test was 1.5556 ($SD=0.7416$) and on the post-test 1.5679 ($SD=0.7896$). The dependent t -test did not show a significant change at the .05 level, $t(80) = -0.57$, $p = .5684$.

Table 1: Results

Survey Questions		SA	A	D	SD
I have the knowledge to conduct a data driven accountability project.	Pre	12.1%	52.5%	29.3%	6.1%
	Post	16.9%	72.3%	7.2%	3.6%
I am comfortable in analyzing data (FCAT scores, Pasco Star, etc...)	Pre	21.0%	47.0%	28.0%	4.0%
	Post	21.7%	61.4%	15.7%	1.2%
Data from my school was used when writing the 2007-2008 annual guidance plan.	Pre	10.4%	49.0%	34.4%	6.3%
	Post	18.5%	56.8%	24.7%	0.0%
I feel confident in my abilities to analyze data that identify patterns of student achievement.	Pre	13.0%	57.0%	25.0%	5.0%
	Post	17.1%	67.1%	14.6%	1.2%
I feel confident in my ability to analyze data that identify patterns of student behavior.	Pre	14.0%	59.0%	22.0%	5.0%
	Post	15.7%	71.1%	12.0%	1.2%
I am able to define a measureable objective.	Pre	23.5%	64.3%	11.2%	1.0%
	Post	26.5%	66.3%	7.2%	0.0%
I know how to use technology designed to support student success (TERMS, Pasco Star, etc...).	Pre	14.0%	58.0%	25.0%	3.0%
	Post	17.1%	61.0%	20.7%	1.2%
I am involved in developing school improvement plans based on interpreting school-wide data.	Pre	10.2%	39.8%	44.9%	5.1%
	Post	12.3%	38.3%	43.2%	6.2%
Number of professional journals read regularly	Pre	14.3% (3+)	50.0% (1-2)	35.7% (0)	
	Post	13.6% (3+)	59.3% (1-2)	27.2% (0)	

Discussion

The significant increase in the number of professional journals read is positive for the field of school counseling. Bauman, Siegel, and Davis (2002) found that 22% of school counselors in their study did not read or consult any school counseling literature on a regular basis. This county had an even higher percentage not reading professional literature at the pre and post survey periods (35.7% to 27.2%); but the decrease in the amount is encouraging due to a movement in the right direction. These results may be due to the fact that using research-based practices was stressed during the training or due to the increase in their self-efficacy beliefs regarding their ability to analyze data. Additional research in this area is needed to see if either of these factors is related to the increase in reading professional journals.

Clearly the school counselors in this county did increase in their knowledge of conducting an accountability project or at least their perception of having the knowledge to implement one. The largest shift in groups for this question was between those that disagreed to those that then agreed. In the pre-test 29.3% disagreed with the statement of having the knowledge and only 52.5% agreed. In the post-test only 7.2% disagreed and 72.3% agreed. It would have been interesting to include a follow-up question here for those that disagreed. Did they not attend the entire training? Were they not involved with their schools' accountability measure? Or did they feel that they needed additional supervision or support while attempting to conduct their accountability measure? This would have been an interesting follow-up to see what the reason was for the "disagreement".

Questions 2, 4, and 5 asked about the participants' comfort/confidence in analyzing data. All three questions showed a significant increase in their comfort or confidence level in

analyzing data. One interesting pattern that was shown in the data was the trend that the participants felt more comfortable and confident analyzing data that identified patterns of student behavior that contribute to school success vs. data that analyzed patterns of student achievement that contributed to school success. This may be because school counselors often see themselves as the school's "expert" with behavior and behavioral data; but not typically with academic data.

The question that asked if their school data was used in writing their annual plan had surprising results. The pre-survey was given in June 2008. The yearly annual plans for the 2008-2009 school year were due to their supervisor the first week of October 2008. The "intervention" part of this study, the accountability training and the implementation of a measure, were not implemented until after the annual plans were due. Was it purely knowing that there would be a training and an accountability measure due later in the year that caused the school counselors in this county to increase in their data usage in their annual guidance plans? There may have been an even larger increase in the percentage of school counselors that used data from their school when writing their annual guidance plans the following school after the training and implementation of a measure. This would be an interesting follow-up study.

The number of participants that knew how to use technology designed to support student success significantly increased ($p = .0040$). This county's specific programs and databases were listed as examples next to this question. Trainings on these programs were offered throughout the year but were not specifically included in their accountability measure training. A possible reason for these results was that only the school counselors who had completed the pre-survey were asked to complete the post-survey, resulting in fewer school counselors in the 0-3 years of experience category on the post-survey and thus fewer school counselors who had not had an opportunity to attend a technology training.

The last question, "I am involved in developing school improvement plans based on interpreting school-wide assessment results", was the only question that did not show a significant increase ($p = .5683$). There was no significant difference from the pre to post survey. The reason this question was included was to determine if the participants would take a more active role in their school improvement teams because of their possible gains in comfort and knowledge with data analysis. This had been suggested by their guidance supervisor as an important group to try to be a part of in their schools. Unfortunately, more participants were not involved with these groups. As a follow up study it would be interesting to see whether school counselors in this county are now more involved with developing school improvement plans, given that accountability measures have now been required for a longer period of time.

All three of the researcher's hypotheses were confirmed. School counselors in this county did increase in their knowledge and perceived skills in implementing an accountability measure. Their comfort level with using data also increased as hypothesized.

Limitations

The results of this study provide valuable information to the field of school counseling. A main limitation, however, is that this study involved a convenient sample representing only one county. Findings would be more generalizable had they included data from several counties and

regions of the country. Further research including diverse counties across the nation is needed to see if these results are generalizable.

A limitation regarding the question asking how many professional journals were read on a regular basis is in how the categories were grouped. Although there was a significant increase in the number read, the choices, (0, 1-2, 3+), did not account for changes in reading 1 to 2 professional journals nor do the findings account for whether there was a greater understanding of the articles read. The results may have been even more significant had the group of 1-2 been broken down to a choice of 1 or 2 and if the question asked about their understanding of the articles.

Another limitation of this study was that the researcher was employed by this county during the research period. Because of this fact, several of the participants knew the researcher and there could have been a possibility of the Hawthorne effect. Hopefully this was not the case; but additional research in this area where the researcher does not know the participants would be beneficial.

The psychometric properties of the measure created for this study is a final limitation. A pilot study with this measure was not done nor had it been used in previous research. Its use in future studies will establish its reliability and validity.

Implications

This study supports the importance of school counselors implementing accountability measures. The results show counselors in this county did positively change their professional practices, attitudes, beliefs, comfort level, and knowledge in regard to accountability measures. This study should encourage district school counseling/guidance supervisors to mandate their school counselors implement an accountability measure. By using data and accountability measures school counselors can now not only advocate for their positions and programs (Stone & Dahir, 2010, Topdemir, 2010); but also gain skills in their professional development.

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