SCHOOL COUNSELING IN THE 21ST CENTURY: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL REFLECTIONS

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I have two very vague memories of my high school guidance counselor, the only counselor I remember from my 12 years in public school. Both memories are from my senior year. One is related to paperwork regarding a scholarship nomination I received. The other memory is around subtle messages from her that I very clearly understood as discouraging me from applying to my top college choice. Whether this came from her concerns about my academic abilities or my family's ability to pay for a private university education, I do not know (she was probably right on both counts).

My son, now in the fourth grade, has had two elementary school counselors. (Somewhat remarkably, both are male.) Within his first week of kindergarten, Jacob knew who Mr. Wiles was and why students might want to go see him. He also was excited to know that Mr. Wiles would be coming to his classroom often, hopefully bringing those cool puppets!

These personal experiences came to my mind often as I read the four pieces in the December 2001 issue of this journal on the current status of the school counseling profession. The differences between the two experiences are clearly reflected in the historical overviews provided by two of the authors (Baker, 2001; Gysbers, 2001) and illustrate several of the critical challenges identified by all four. My newly integrated rural high school was hardly on the edge of beginning to understand that the new student population would require multicultural understanding and skills. My son's kindergarten class alone included Latino, African-American, biracial, White, Asian-American, and Eastern-European students as well as a student who lived with a same sex couple. Last year, he learned how to take multiple choice end-of-grade tests (to guess or not to guess, that is the question), practiced taking them often, and fretted and worried about his performance despite being on the honor roll all year. Now, I worry how the results of those tests will be used when he is placed, by the school counselor, in his middle school classes. Daily, Jacob uses technology at his school that simply did not exist during my high school years. Monthly, I find products of a developmental guidance lesson in his bookbag.

Some 30 years have elapsed between my two personal experiences with school counselors. In between, I have earned a master's degree in counseling and a Ph.D. in counselor education and supervision, taught and supervised counseling students (including school counselors) in two states, and have offered some observations of the profession in professional journals. Currently, I teach in a master's and doctoral program where we educate "professional counselors who work in a variety of settings." From our program's perspective, school counselors' identity as professional counselors is the underlying basis for how they approach all of their work. We acknowledge both that, given the context in which they work, (a) school counselors primarily use their counseling (and other) skills towards the goals of enhancing the academic success and life career planning of all of their students, and (b) they are the frontline mental health specialists in the schools, who thus must deal with the wide variety of societal issues confronting today's youth and their families.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to read, reflect on, and write about four perspectives on the current status of the school counseling profession, including accomplishments and challenges. As one of those who has lived

some of the history and development of the profession as a student client, a professional and a parent client, a step back from the day-to-day is a helpful exercise in gaining broader observations and perspectives.

In this reaction piece, I share my responses to several of the issues raised by Baker (2001), Green and Keys (2001), Gysbers (2001), and Paisley and McMahon (2001). I focus my remarks on those issues about which I feel most competent and/or passionate. This reaction article, then, focuses on the unending questions about the role of the school counselor, ongoing calls for program evaluation and accountability, increasingly complex diversity in the schools, and school counselors as advocates.

Who? What? When? Where? and How?

As I learned during my years as a high school newspaper advisor, these are the questions a journalist should address in an article. A journalist would have a difficult time, however, covering all of these questions in an article about school counselors. The "identity vs. role confusion" (Baker & Gerler, 2001, p. 289) debate not only is a theme across the four lead articles; as the authors of the four indicate, but also is a pervasive issue that has been and continues to be debated. Has any other profession had such an ongoing difficulty defining who they are and what they do?

Baker (2001) and Gysbers (2001) provided a historical perspective on these questions. In particular, they described the numerous external forces that influenced the evolution of the profession—including forces that have expanded and continue to expand the scope of the profession as well as those that have limited its ability to define itself. As Baker and Gerler (2001) stated elsewhere, "There was no master plan" (p. 289). Instead, the profession has sought to respond to—and keep up with—shifting educational philosophies, social movements, economic swings, and federal legislation that have driven the needs for and expectations of school counselors. As all the authors illustrate, this is not a dead—or resolved—issue. Of the four pieces, Gysbers (2001) and Green and Keys (2001) advocated for a particular role, function, and/or approach, while Baker (2001) and Paisley and McMahon (2001) provided more of an overview of various aspects of the debate. This debate includes polarized discussions such as mental health vs. educational goals and appropriate vs. inappropriate roles as well as questions such as What is "comprehensive"? and What is "developmental"?

Paisley and McMahon's (2001) list of "appropriate" roles and functions summarized both sides of the debate. In making such a list, and then describing their "ideal vision" of a school counselor, they also illustrated the futility of the debate. How can one argue with any item on the list? All are necessary, required, and critical Paisley and McMahon decided. Does this perpetuate the dilemma of asking school counselors to try "to be all things to all people" (Paisley & McMahon, 2001, p. 107) Certainly, at least to some extent. The authors, however, do provide some guidance in facing this dilemma.

Green and Keys (2001), for example, made clear that they are focused on, and responding to, the needs of urban youth. The components of their approach did not contradict any of the other authors' ideas, and they are not out of line with the National Standards for School Counseling Programs (Dahir, 2001). Rather, Green and Keys described the application of sound, widely accepted principles, roles, and functions of a school counselor in a particular context. Do they expand our understanding of "comprehensive," "developmental," and "systemic"? Absolutely. They spoke directly to the point when they called for school counselors to "adapt the practice model they choose to the social ecology of their school" (p. 92) and customize it for the specific needs of their particular school and community. Isn't this historically sound counseling practice? To identify and respect the uniqueness of a client-whether the client is a student, parent, teacher, or school environment—and adjust one's intervention to the client are hallmark principles of the profession. Today, particularly in school settings such as those described by Green and Keys, the applications of these principles necessarily look different and require new, additional skills.

In terms of the debate over who and what, it seems that there is no argument here (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). It also seems clear, however, that the when, where, and how will—must—vary (Green & Keys, 2001; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). What specific aspects of a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program will be emphasized? How much time will a particular school counselor devote to counseling vs. consulting vs.

coordinating? What percentage of direct vs. indirect services will be provided? What advocacy issues will be the priority? Answers to these questions will necessarily differ by school, by school year, by grade level, and, most likely, also by personality of the school counselor. Perhaps rather than continuing to try to debate who school counselors are and what they should be doing, the debate can be refocused on more of "how" school counseling is being done in a wide range of contexts, by a variety of practitioners. A recent in-depth look at the work of one school counselor (Littrell & Peterson, 2001) serves as an example. The approach taken by the school counselor as presented by Littrell and Peterson is a particular, contextual (and successful) application of the role and function of one school counselor rather than what the role and function of all school counselors can or should be.

Interestingly, it might be helpful to apply the paradigm promoted by Green and Keys (2001) to the school counseling profession. In some ways, for example, the debate over who and what presents school counselors with contradictions, and learning to deal with these contradictions—acquiring adaptability skills and learning how to negotiate needs in a particular school context—may be "a missing critical component" of school counselor education. It would be fascinating to learn Green and Keys' thoughts about this larger application of their paradigm.

A related, and unsettled, point raised by the authors is school counselors' freedom to determine the who, what, when, where, and how of their work in their schools. As Baker (2001) and Paisley and McMahon (2001) indicated, too many school administrators do not have an accurate view of the role, appropriate functions, and relevant skills of their school counselors, and too often these administrators have too much decision-making over school counselors' worklife. Clearly, as Paisley and McMahon (2001) asserted, reeducating school administrators, being proactive and intentional in program planning, and learning how to set clearer professional boundaries are critical efforts in claiming or reclaiming one's professional place and power. It also may be prudent, however, to be cautious and deliberate when we promote school counseling as an integral part of the educational system (Green & Keys, 2001; Gysbers, 2001).

There are advantages and disadvantages to aligning school counseling so closely with the educational enterprise. Given the current emphasis on school accountability and student performance, it is certainly prudent to note school counselors' many and unique contributions to student success (Green & Keys, 2001). In addition, collaboration with other school personnel is critical to a counselor's ability to function effectively within the school. Riding the wave of educational reform, however (whatever the reform movement focus of a particular time may be), does subject school counseling to the tides of public opinion and legislative decision making. It seems school counselors run the risk of losing at least some control over their professional work (thus perpetuating the very problem they are trying to solve) and may blur the distinct roles and functions the profession has worked so hard to define and proclaim. Gysbers (2001) noted that the emphasis on "education as guidance" in the 1930s made it almost impossible to distinguish the two.

The goals of educational reform, particularly in terms of addressing student achievement gaps, are not an issue here; the success of all students has long been a goal of school counseling programs. What may need attention, however, is how the profession talks about the school counselor's role and place in these efforts, so that the profession does not lose sight of the full role, unique skills, and varied contributions that school counselors bring to their schools. It is certainly appropriate, for example, for school counselors to pay attention to the impact of high-stakes testing on students, teachers, parents, administrators, and the school environment, and perhaps question whether some of the means toward the end are justified.

Program Evaluation and Accountability
To be able to speak to the viability of and necessity for school counseling programs requires some evidence of their impact. As Green and Keys (2001), Gysbers (2001), and Paisley and McMahon (2001) indicated, calls for program accountability are not new, but they seem never to have been so loud as they are today. School counselors today are fairly efficient in some means of accountability, particularly documentation of their time and services (Green & Keys, 2001). Outcome data, however, are more challenging to obtain and also

increasingly more critical to have. In addition, outcomes specific to a particular program (e.g., a counseling group or guidance unit) are not enough. Today, the calls from legislators and administrators are for data demonstrating how school counseling programs contribute to student achievement and positive school behaviors (Green & Keys, 2001; Paisley & McMahon, 2001), not only at the school level but also at the system and even state level (Gysbers, 2001).

Despite general agreement about the need for more program evaluation, the response of school counselors has been limited. Quite simply, school counselors seem to feel somewhat inadequate to design and conduct program evaluation (Green & Keys, 2001; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Their feelings likely are realistic. One 3-hour course in research and program evaluation, a typical counselor education program offering in line with accreditation standards (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2001), is not sufficient to prepare school counselors to conduct sophisticated evaluation studies, which necessarily have numerous confounding variables and "noise" in a school setting. The authors offer few suggestions to address this gap. The logic models cited by Green and Keys are certainly a promising approach, although there is still the question regarding what depth of preparation in any approach is possible in a master's program. Regrettably, I have little to offer myself. The realistic response may be that program evaluation on any large scale simply must be the responsibility of persons other than school-based school counselors—system-level or state-level educational evaluation personnel and counselor educators, as these persons have the requisite education and skills to design and conduct evaluation studies. Gysbers, Lapan, and their colleagues in Missouri certainly have provided excellent examples of such studies (e.g., Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001).

More Complex Diversity
Diversity is a fact of life today, and all authors spoke to the critical necessity of preparing school counselors to be able to work with an incredibly diverse student population such as that found at my son's school. As the authors implied, the definition and range of "diversity" today surely must be overwhelming for school personnel including school counselors as well as counselor educators. Exactly how does one prepare a school counselor to work in a school where the students speak 32 languages and live within 32 different cultures? I speak not of large metropolitan cities in the Northeast, but of several elementary, middle, and high schools in my mid-sized southern city. Heavily rural counties surrounding us report exponential increases in resources devoted to English as a second language classes. More sophisticated assessment procedures—and parents more savvy to their use—are identifying a wider range of learning styles, learning needs, and learning disabilities that demand accommodation if students are to achieve their potential. The range of family configurations represented in any one classroom likely includes not only two-parent and blended families, but also families with biracial and same sex parents, single parents by divorce or choice (e.g., single adoptive mothers), and stay-at-home dads.

How do school counselors help the students in these classrooms make sense of this new diversity? That is precisely the focus of Green and Keys (2001) in their emphasis on identity development and an understanding of self-in-context. As they explained, this approach goes beyond "different is wonderful" and "respect for each other" guidance lessons. Helping today's students achieve a deeper and positive understanding of self and self-in-relation to multiple environments is a high calling. It seems that a particular challenge will be allowing students to achieve identity development that is respectful of their culture(s) and their individual choices, especially when these run counter to the predominant school culture. An even more daunting task may be that of working toward a school environment that encourages and honors identity development in ways that enhance the academic success of all students (Lee, 2001; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Clearly, this cannot be the sole responsibility of the school counselor.

Over recent years, our understanding of multiculturalism has become more complex, requiring counselor preparation that is more complex. Green and Keys (2001) provided one theoretically based approach that expands our understanding in this critical area. Over the next few years, the profession will need much more creative thought in this area, including additional solid theory-based explanations as well as practical applications.

Advocacy

It seems somewhat contradictory to write about school counselor advocacy as a separate section. Much of this reaction piece as well as the four lead articles speak to areas demanding advocacy acts. In defining their appropriate roles, school counselors are advocating for the profession. In offering data in support of program efficacy, school counselors are being advocates for their work and perhaps for additional resources. One might go so far as to treat school counselor and advocate as synonymous. In describing the work of a school counselor operating in a development-in-context paradigm, Green and Keys (2001) essentially described a counselor's work as advocacy. This counselor is as much or more focused on creating change in the environment (e.g., classroom, school, family, neighborhood) as in the individual, believing that "change for an individual as contingent upon change within the system or systems surrounding that individual" (p. 89). Within the school, the counselor works toward helping students develop awareness and skills necessary to successful living in a complex, contradictory urban world.

Although the theoretical framework for this development-in-context paradigm for school counseling programs is new, the social advocacy stance is not. In fact, as Gysbers (2001) noted, social advocacy "is the heritage of the profession" (p. 103). In fact, references to school counselors as change agents and advocates have appeared in the professional literature across the decades (Borders & Shoffner, in press). The needs have always been present, and so have the constraints and distractions limiting school counselors' ability to respond.

Final Notes

One or more authors spoke to a number of other topics of importance to the school counseling profession of today, which I will not comment on in detail. In most cases, the authors spoke to these topics thoroughly and even eloquently. Technology (Paisley & McMahon, 2001) is clearly a fact of our lives that will influence the profession in many ways, likely including some ways that cannot be imagined today. The disconnect between professional scholars and practitioners (Baker, 2001) certainly is an issue for more fields than school counseling and is of concern; collaborative partnerships (Green & Keys, 2001; Paisley & McMahon, 2001) are one promising approach to bridging that gap. Greens and Keys (2001) and Paisley (2001) spoke eloquently to the need to update and reexamine, at greater depth, the developmental basis for the profession. It was, of course, a personal pleasure to note support for clinical supervision as a key method to enhance school counselors' professional development (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). School counselors are frontline mental health professionals for students and families, who present the gamut from normal developmental issues to serious dysfunctional problems, and often they are the only mental health professional these students and families will see. Many school counselors perform these services, and their many other tasks, in isolation. The need for clinical supervision, then, seems obvious.

Finally, it was particularly a pleasure to read the pieces by Baker (2001) and Gysbers (2001). Their involvement in the field over some time allows them a broader perspective that enlightens all of us, and provides an important record of people and events for those entering the profession. Their individual visions for the profession, and their many ongoing efforts toward achieving those visions, are a legacy that should not be taken for granted.

Conclusion

I have some years left until retirement, and I hope to teach and supervise a number of school counselors during those years as well as new school counselor educators. At the same time, I will have the opportunity to work with several more school counselors at the middle and high schools Jacob attends. I hope all of them reflect the ideal school counselor described by Paisley and McMahon (2001), so that my son's memories portray them as vital, active members of the school team who had a marked impact on his school environment in ways that enhanced his full development, and that of all of his classmates. I hope leaders such as Baker, Green, Keys, Gysbers, Paisley, McMahon, and others will continue their efforts to guide the profession's way toward that reality.

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