

An Examination of Referrals to the School Counselor by Race, Gender, and Family Structure

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Abstract:

This article reports on a study addressing student referral differences based on family structure, gender, and race in teacher-initiated contact to school counselors. Researchers used secondary data from the National Education Longitudinal Study. They used logit log linear analyses in this data analysis. Significant differences existed for all three variables--race, gender, and family structure--with teachers more likely to contact the school counselor when the student was male, African American, or living in a non-intact family structure.

Article:

Students today face a myriad of issues that may interfere with learning. For example, school violence is a focus of national attention and concern. More recently, the issues of terrorism and war have come to the forefront of our national attention. Since September 11, 2001, we have lost the innocence and sense of security that we once had as U.S. citizens. Since the beginning of the War on Terror and Operation Iraqi Freedom, schools have seen more and more students with parents or other loved ones overseas in active military duty, thereby creating conditions that may interfere with learning (Davis & Robelen, 2003; Jerome, Lang, & Brass, 2005). Issues closer to home can affect student learning as well. Changes in family structure (Simons, 1996) and academic and behavior problems (Baker & Gerler, 2004) are areas where concerns may arise regardless of the world or national situation.

With the critical challenges that schools face today, it is important to examine school-based student support services and determine how schools make use of these services to provide needed support and assistance to students, parents, and school staff. School counselors provide services that are designed to ensure the overall functioning of the school and the well-being of those who both teach and learn there on a daily basis, and they are in a position to address many of the concerns schools face today (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2001; Davis, 1999; Myrick, 1993; Riley & McDaniel, 2000).

STANDARDIZATION OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR ROLE

Because job descriptions of school counselors often vary considerably from state to state with expectations of individual school counselors varying even from school to school (Sciarra, 2004), there has been a movement to standardize the role of the school counselor across the country (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Education Trust, 1997). However, debate over the most appropriate role for school counselors continues (Brown & Trusty, 2005; Campbell & Dahir; Carroll, 1996; Davis, 1999; Education Trust; Gysbers, 1990; Sink, 2005; Thompson, 1992). Along with the increased demand for accountability among teachers and administrators in schools, there has come an increased focus on school counselors as well. One problem related to this increased attention is that there has been little empirical research to support the efficacy of counselors in schools (Baker, 2000; Brown & Trusty; Sink). Coupled with this lack of data is the nationwide inconsistency of the role of school counselor. Historically, the role of the school counselor has been ambiguous, inconsistent from institution to institution and system to system (Gysbers, 2001), and even determined by the school administrator (Dahir, 2000).

Sensing the need for unification of the profession of school counseling, and in response to the movement for accountability of school counselors, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), in conjunction with the Education Trust, developed a set of national standards for school counseling programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). These National Standards, and the subsequent ASCA National Model®, were designed to provide a unified, professional role for school counselors that would be uniformly implemented across the nation.

According to these National Standards, the emphasis of school counseling programs is to promote and enhance student learning (Campbell & Dahir). In addition, authors have suggested that a collaborative model for helping students with academic, emotional, and behavioral problems, which includes key figures in students' lives (e.g., teachers, administrators, parents, counselors, family members, community members), is the most effective way to help these students (Adams & Juhnke, 2001; Baker & Gerler, 2004; Eber, Nelson, & Miles, 1997; Handron, Dossier, McCammon, & Powell, 1998; Rosenblatt, 1996; VanDenBerg & Grealish, 1996).

REFERRALS TO SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Within schools, teachers are the primary source by which students are referred to school counselors (Carlson, 1990). Students are referred to school counselors for a variety of reasons, including academic problems, behavior problems, attendance, class participation, and changes in family structure (Carlson; Persi, 1997). Little is known, however, about the frequency with which teachers refer students or the actual reasons that such referrals are made. In addition, assumptions that teachers make about students' problems and unrealistic expectations that teachers have for counselors to "fix" the child (Jackson, 2000) may hinder rather than advance comprehensive school counseling programs.

Because there has been such a push for accountability among professional educators in recent years, it has become more important than ever that school counselors are able to articulate what their role is (Dahir, 2000; Gysbers, 2001). In order to ensure that professional school counselors are meeting the guidelines set forth in the National Standards, it is important to understand how their services are used. Examining past and current usage of school counseling services will allow school counselors to understand how they have been previously and are currently meeting the needs represented in their schools and to make adjustments to programs to reflect the National Standards. Understanding of the usage of school counseling services also will enable school counselors to educate administrators, teachers, parents, and students regarding appropriate referrals to the school counselor, thereby ensuring that the functions they are performing are role-appropriate functions consistent with the National Standards for School Counseling Programs. It is therefore important to understand whom teachers are referring and for what reasons they are referring them.

FACTORS AFFECTING REFERRAL

When disruption occurs in their family, children are more likely to exhibit behaviors (e.g., academic and behavior problems) that lead teachers to refer them for services. Because changes in family structure often are accompanied by changes in school performance (Amato, 1993; Baruth & Burggraf, 1984; Elder & Russell, 1996; McCombs & Forehand, 1989; Neighbors, Forehand, & Armistead, 1992; Simons, 1996; Vosler & Proctor, 1991), those students experiencing family structural changes (e.g., divorce, remarriage) may be referred more frequently than students in structurally stable homes.

Gender has been listed as a factor that may impact referrals. Boys are referred more frequently and for different reasons than girls (Harris, Gray, Rees-McGee, Carroll, & Zaremba, 1987; Scarbrough & Hicks, 1998). Girls are more likely to be referred for social concerns than boys, who are referred more for academic and behavioral concerns (Harris et al.).

Ethnicity is another factor that may impact how students are perceived by teachers and whether they are referred for support services. In schools, teachers referred African American students for discipline problems significantly more often than European American students (McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1992), which is also consistent in settings outside of schools (Garland & Besinger, 1997).

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine how often and for what reasons teachers referred students in grades 10 and 12 who were participants in the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS:88). Following are key questions addressed in this study: (a) What is the frequency of teacher-initiated contact with the school counselor within each year? (b) What reasons are given for referral? (c) Does frequency of teacher-initiated contact with school counselors differ by family structure, gender, or race? (d) Do reasons for teacher-initiated contact with school counselors differ by family structure, gender, or race? This article reports the findings related to each of these research questions and discusses implications for school counselors.

METHOD

Sample

In the present study, data from the NELS:88 longitudinal study were examined to determine the frequency with which teachers contacted the school counselor regarding particular students. These data were examined based on several variables, including reasons for referrals, gender, family structure, and race. The NELS:88 study represented students who came of age (i.e., progressed through adolescence and into young adulthood) in the 1990s. This multiwave study included data collected in 1988, 1990, 1992, and 1994 and contains information about specific and distinct subgroups, such as family structure types, gender, and race (Carroll, 1996). Data were collected from a cohort of 26,000 eighth graders in 1988, 1,000 of whom attended private schools, through self-administered questionnaires on campus with students, teachers, and administrators. Parent data were collected via mailed questionnaires. Follow-up surveys were completed at 2-year intervals in 1990, 1992, and 1994.

The base-year survey used a two-stage stratified probability design to select a nationally representative sample of eighth-grade schools and students. Because a weighted sample approximates estimates from other national sources, thereby providing estimates for the occurrences of teacher-initiated contact with the school counselor in the general population, the data were weighted. The average weight given to students was 180.17 (Owings, 1996).

Participants

Participants were part of all four waves of NELS:88 data collection and were limited to those who reported living in intact families (with both parents residing in the home) in base-year 1988. Participants were further limited to those students who were continuously enrolled in school, in order to ensure comparability of subjects within the present study. Finally, analyses were restricted to the two largest racial groups, African American and European American. Populations within other sampled racial groups were determined to be too small to be able to draw meaningful conclusions. Use of a weighted sample allowed researchers to examine results as they would appear in the population represented by these students. The weighted sample yielded a total of 1,277,484 students represented who met the parameters of the study.

Participants were grouped according to their family structure. The first family structure consisted of those students who remained in "Intact" families ($N = 1,199,438$) throughout the data collection period. Intact families were defined as those in which the adolescent's biological parents were married to each other and the adolescent lived in the home with both parents. The second family structure, referred to as "Divorced 90," consisted of those students who were in intact families in 1988, whose parents divorced between 1988 and 1990, and who remained in a divorced family structure through the data collection period ($N = 18,952$). The third family structure, referred to as "Divorced 92," consisted of those students who were in intact families in 1988 and 1990 and whose parents divorced between 1990 and 1992 ($N = 43,798$). The fourth (and final) family structure, referred to as "Remarried," consisted of those students who were in intact families in 1988, whose parents divorced between 1988 and 1990, and who had at least one parent remarried between 1990 and 1992 ($N = 15,186$).

Survey Items

Researchers selected survey items from NELS:88 based on criteria relevant to the focus of the current study on referrals to the school counselor. By design, the basic unit of analysis for NELS:88 data is the student. The

survey items selected represent a combination of the demographic information provided by the student, concerns for which the teacher contacted the counselor regarding that student, and family structure information provided by a parent. Items included from the NELS:88 survey represent the endogenous variable teacher-initiated contact with the school counselor and the exogenous variables family structure, gender, and race. The first two research questions were examined for the total weighted sample. The remaining research questions were examined using only the referred population.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed via a general log-linear analysis (Feinberg, 1980). Logit log-linear analyses were used to examine relationships between family structure, gender, and race and whether a teacher contacts the school counselor regarding that student. Logits are the logarithms of the odds of a certain event. For example, where teachers are more likely to refer males to the counselor across all reasons (i.e., a main effect for sex), a significantly positive logit is associated with greater odds that male students will be referred for any reason than female students. The results of this study are presented in the form of the comparative odds of the dependent variable occurring in one independent variable group as compared to another.

The dependent variable was reason for referral; the independent variables were gender, race (African American and European American), and family structure (intact, divorced at 90, divorced at 92, and divorced and remarried) and are represented in a four-way ($2 \times 2 \times 4 \times 3$) factorial design.

RESULTS

Counts for the variables of interest in this study (i.e., teacher contact with the school counselor for student's academic performance, student's behavior in school, or both) were obtained using SPSS 8.0. These data then were weighted for analysis to reflect the national population estimate that is derived from the NELS:88 sample (Owings, 1996). Table 1 represents the weighted incidents of teacher-initiated contact with the school counselor within the 1990 and 1992 administration of the survey, as well as the percentages of referrals within family structure, gender, and race. Table 2 presents the logits (i.e., the logarithms of the odds ratios) for the various main effects and interaction effects of interest. Results will be discussed in terms of the actual comparative odds, rather than in terms of logits.

Percentages of Referrals to School Counselors

Actual counts for the variables of interest are presented in Table 1. Percentages of students within these groups referred to the school counselor are presented in the text. In the 6 months prior to survey completion in 1992, a teacher initiated contact with a school counselor regarding 13% of all students represented in the total population in the NELS data. Teachers initiated contact with the school counselor for 12% of students who were in continuously intact families through the duration of the study. Students in non-intact families generally were referred at a much higher rate than students in "Intact" families. Thirty-six percent of students whose parents divorced between their 8th- and 10th-grade years were referred; 20% of students whose parents divorced between their 10th- and 12th-grade years were referred; and 46% of students whose parents divorced by 1990 and remarried by 1992 were referred.

Gender and Race

Teachers initiated contact with the school counselor for 15% of male students. They initiated contact with the school counselor for 10% of female students. Teachers initiated contact with the school counselor for 18% of African American students, regardless of their family structure or gender. They initiated contact with the school counselor regarding 12% of European American students.

Odds of Teacher-Initiated Contact with School Counselor for Any Reason by Independent Variables

Comparative odds, or odds ratios (Table 2), of a teacher initiating contact with the school counselor for the independent variables of family structure, race, and gender were calculated from a table of observed counts and percentages (Table 1). Results from this study will be discussed in terms of these comparative odds rather than the absolute frequencies themselves.

Family structure. Teachers were almost twice as likely to refer students in any non-intact family structure than they were regarding students in intact families (Table 2). Among the non-intact family structures, teachers were more likely to initiate contact with the school counselor regarding students whose parents divorced when they were younger (Divorced 90) and who experienced rapid family structure transitions (Remarried) than students in other family structures (Table 2).

Gender and race. Teachers were more likely to contact school counselors about male students than female students and slightly more likely to refer African American students compared to European American students (Table 2).

Reasons for Referral to School Counselors

For this part of the analyses, comparisons were made only for that group of students whose teachers contacted the school counselor. Table 2 illustrates the likelihood of "referral" of a student from one family structure compared to a student from a different family structure. Reasons for teacher contact with the school counselor were examined in a limited manner because in the data-set response variables were restricted to teacher-initiated contact with the school counselor for the following three reasons: (a) academic concerns only, (b) behavior concerns only, and (c) academic and behavior concerns.

Academic concerns. While existing literature states that children may experience increased academic problems following parental divorce (Marsh, 1990; Montemayor, 1984; Wallerstein, 1983; Zimiles & Lee, 1991), we found teachers more likely to refer students from intact families for academic reasons.

Results from comparisons of academic concerns by family type indicated that teachers contacted school counselors about students in Divorced 90 families more than students in Divorced 92 families. Teachers were more likely to refer students in Divorced 90 families than students in Divorced 92 or Remarried families for academic concerns. Teachers were slightly more likely to contact school counselors about academic concerns for students in Remarried families than for students in Divorced 92 families (Table 2).

Classroom behavior problems. In all cases, teachers were more likely to contact the school counselor for behavior concerns about students in non-intact families than they were for students in Intact families. This was most pronounced in the Divorced 92 family structure.

Both academic concerns and classroom behavior problems. Teachers were slightly more likely to contact school counselors about both academic and behavior concerns for students in Remarried families than for students in Intact families (Table 2). Results further indicated that teachers contacted school counselors for both academic and behavior reasons approximately equally for children from both Intact and non-intact families, with differences more pronounced within the non-intact families. The odds of a teacher contacting the school counselor regarding students in Divorced 92 and Remarried families are very close to being equal.

Gender and race. When it came to gender, teachers in this study were more likely to contact school counselors about academic concerns for females than for males (Table 2). For behavior concerns, teachers were more likely to refer male students to school counselors than female students (Table 2). The difference in the odds is most dramatic in contact for both academic and behavior concerns. Teachers were much more likely to contact school counselors with both academic concerns and classroom behavior problems for male students than for female students.

Teachers were slightly more likely to contact school counselors about academic concerns for European American students than for African American students. However, they were slightly more likely to contact school counselors regarding behavior problems in the classroom for African American students than for European American students. Teachers were approximately equally as likely to contact the school counselor

with both academic concerns and behavior problems for African American students and European American students.

DISCUSSION

School counseling professionals have long recommended a comprehensive approach to school counseling programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Dahir, 2000; Gysbers, 2001; Jackson, 2000). In order to both develop and implement a comprehensive school counseling program, it is important for counselors to understand how and why teachers refer students for services. In this study, we examined the NELLS:88 database to determine frequency of referrals across three demographics--race, gender, and family structure--both overall and across reasons for referral. Findings both support and contradict previous research. A more complete discussion of the data analyses is available upon request.

Limitations

The NELLS:88 allowed teachers only to give forced-choice answers regarding whether they had contacted "guidance counselors" or "school services persons" regarding the reasons provided. Because teachers were not specifically asked whether they contacted the counselor or a "school services person," the ability to determine if and how teachers are making use of school counseling services is limited since other individuals may be included in school services person. In addition, reasons for referral were limited to those conceived by the original NELLS researchers and may not represent the broader spectrum of student issues that cause teachers to refer them to the school counselor. The NELLS:88 survey is a large, nationally representative data set that offers researchers a wealth of data that may outweigh potential limitations presented by the age of the data (data collected 1988-1994).

Because this was the first investigation into the nature and frequency of counselor referral data, a fully elaborated logit model was deemed premature. Once a mature research base for referral data has been established, more complicated models may be developed and investigated.

Implications for Future Research

Future research may begin by examining the main effects, two-way and three-way interactions of the variables in this study. Research then may progress to include all the reasons for teacher-initiated contact and the different combinations of these reasons. These reasons may be examined for main effects and interaction effects. These same analyses could be conducted with 1990 data, including separate analyses for teacher 1 and teacher 2. Comparisons then could be made based on the subject areas taught by each reporting teacher. These data next could be compared to the data from 1992. Using these comparisons across years, developmental trajectories involving academics and behavior in school could be developed regarding students for whom teachers contacted the school counselor. These trajectories then could be compared to developmental trajectories for students for whom teachers did not contact the school counselor.

Researchers have suggested that preexisting conditions and characteristics may lead to problems that children experience after their parents divorce (Morrison & Cherlin, 1995; Neighbors et al., 1992). Future research could address these preexisting conditions to determine whether teachers' likelihood to contact the school counselor regarding the individual student changed after the child experienced family disruption, or if the pattern for contacting the school counselor remained the same over time. Researchers could further examine other factors that are associated with the frequency of and reasons for teacher-initiated contact with the school counselor. To more thoroughly address the need for current research in the area of referrals to the school counselor, future studies need to include qualitative research that allows open-ended responses from teachers regarding their reasons for student referral. Future research also may address ways that schools make use of services provided by school counselors. Davis (1999) began this line of research by conducting a work behavior analysis of the counseling function of school counselors. There is a need for this line of research to be extended to include the ways school staff use these counseling services.

Implications for School Counselors

School counselors are responsible for designing programs that not just meet the needs of individual students within their schools, but also reach all students (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). ASCA (2005) recommended that data be disaggregated based on common fields, including each of the three categories we used as independent variables. By examining disaggregated data, counselors may be able to determine whether the needs of these groups are met through their counseling programs. We recommend that school counselors consider the results of this study to determine if they see similar trends within their schools. Because teacher referrals to school counselors build the client base that school counselors serve, understanding reasons for referrals and populations served is central to the school counselor's ability to account for time and services. Once counselors understand how and why teachers refer students, they will be able to document how the needs within their schools are met through their comprehensive school counseling programs, thereby addressing accountability and program evaluation as recommended by the ASCA National Model®.

Our results suggest that certain groups of students (e.g., African Americans, those from non-intact families) are referred more frequently than other groups. Researchers suggest that teachers may refer students for the wrong reasons (Persi, 1997), that they may refer without understanding what counseling is about (Carlson, 1990), or that they may have unrealistic expectations about counseling (Jackson, 2000). It is clear that not all teachers understand counseling. The results of this study indicate that teachers do refer students to the school counselor when they experience family transitions, which researchers within the field indicate as both appropriate and necessary for many (Amato, 1993; Galvin, 1985; Henning-Stout, 1993; McFadden et al., 1992; Persi; Simons, 1996; Wallerstein, 1983).

In this study, we examined counts of referrals and the reasons given for those referrals. We further disaggregated the data to determine if there were differences based on gender and/or race, as well as family structure. We found that changes in family structure increased the rate of referral to the school counselor. Timing of parental divorce has been found to affect the severity of effects on children (Baruth & Burggraf, 1984; Grych & Fincham, 1999; Smith, 1997). We found that more perceived problems resulted when students experienced a parental divorce at a younger age, as well as when students experienced rapid family transitions. Therefore, we recommend that counselors pay special attention to the needs of students who are experiencing changes in family structure and that they design programs to meet the needs of these students before problems become evident.

We found major differences in the rates of referrals for boys and girls. Teachers indicate that boys are in more urgent need of referral than girls (Henning-Stout, 1993). It is unclear whether the needs of these students are actually different (e.g., boys are truly in more urgent need of counseling services for a combination of reasons), or whether teachers simply perceive the needs of boys as more urgent (Harris et al., 1987; Henning-Stout; McFadden et al., 1992; Scarbrough & Hicks, 1998). We believe that school counselors may need to encourage teachers to examine their motives for referring students. Counselors should encourage teachers to ask themselves, "If this were a boy, would I refer Judy to the school counselor for this behavior?" or vice versa. By asking these questions, teachers may guarantee that they are referring a student based on the concerns they have, rather than making assumptions about the needs of the student based on his or her gender.

Summary

To date, there has been little empirical research to help understand reasons for and frequency of teacher referrals to school counselors. School counselors perform a critical function within schools, as they work to coordinate activities that complement the curriculum and strive to ensure the overall functioning of the school and the well-being of those who function there on a daily basis. As debate continues over the role of the school counselor (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Carroll, 1996; Davis, 1999; Education Trust, 1997), an important part of determining the role of school counselors in the 21st century will be establishing a clearer understanding of how their services currently are used. Because counselors will continue to provide critical support to students who face emotional and behavioral challenges in school (Eber et al., 1997; Handron et al., 1998; Rosenblatt, 1996; VanDenBerg & Grealish, 1996), further research into the use of counseling services in the schools is necessary to make informed decisions about the future of school counseling.

Table 1. Observed and Actual Frequencies of Teacher-Initiated Contact with the School Counselor

Factor	Observed Percent	Intact families
Male		
African American		
Academic	5,207	65.49
Behavior	401	5.04
Academic & behavior	2,343	29.47
European American		
Academic	47,019	61.80
Behavior	7,648	10.05
Academic & behavior	21,418	28.15
Female		
African American		
Academic	4,349	81.81
Behavior	458	7.91
Academic & behavior	608	10.28
European American		
Academic	39,404	80.32
Behavior	2,716	5.54
Academic & behavior	6,936	14.14
Divorced 90		
Male		
African American		
Academic	418	47.39
Behavior	232	26.30
Academic & behavior	232	26.30
European American		
Academic	2,860	76.27
Behavior	425	11.35
Academic & behavior	464	12.37
Female		
African American		

Academic	455	57.59
Behavior	166	21.01
Academic & behavior	169	21.39

European American

Academic	888	53.93
Behavior	266	19.15
Academic & behavior	235	16.92

Divorced 92

Male

African American

Academic	0	0.00
Behavior	692	72.46
Academic & behavior	263	27.54

European American

Academic	1,880	45.83
Behavior	733	17.87
Academic & behavior	1,489	36.30

Female

African American

Academic	246	37.10
Behavior	293	44.19
Academic & behavior	124	18.70

European American

Academic	1,984	70.13
Behavior	728	25.73
Academic & behavior	117	4.14

Remarried

Male

African American

Academic	138	15.33
Behavior	381	42.33
Academic & behavior	381	42.33

European American

Academic	2,032	71.02
Behavior	234	8.18
Academic & behavior	595	20.80

Female

African American

Academic	0	0.00
Behavior	195	100.00
Academic & behavior	0	0.00

European American

Academic	1,600	51.65
Behavior	669	21.59
Academic & behavior	829	26.76

Table 2. Logits for Teacher-Initiated Contact with the School Counselor

Ratio	Overall	Academic	Behavior	Academic & Behavior
Intact/Divorced 90	-0.631	0.033	-0.334	0.179
Intact/Divorced 92	-0.267	0.384	-0.659	-0.017
Intact/Remarried	-0.821	0.294	-0.480	-0.072
Divorced 90/ Divorced 92	0.364	0.352	-0.324	0.196
Divorced 90/ Remarried	-0.190	0.262	-0.146	-0.250
Divorced 92/ Remarried	-0.554	-0.086	0.176	-0.049
Male/Female	0.193	0.334	-0.121	0.971
African American/ European American	0.190	-0.121	0.185	0.004

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