Urban school counseling: implications for practice and training.

Print

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Geographic Code:	*1USA*
Date:	*Feb 1, 2005*
Words:	*4843*
Publication:	*Professional School Counseling*
ISSN:	*1096-2409*

The authors present two school counselors' case scenarios to illustrate training and the delivery of effective school counseling services in an urban society. Urban education is viewed here as being more than the teaching of low-status people and represents the opportunity to create awareness and promote change through such awareness. Developments in the literature related to the topic of urban school counseling are discussed. This article provides a glimpse at some of ways in which the profession can respond to the changing demographics of society and the demands for increased accountability in academic achievement for all students.

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The school counseling literature recently has reflected a commitment by some in the profession to better serve culturally diverse students through what has been referred to as urban school counseling programs and services (Green & Keys, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy, 1998, 2001; Lee, 2001). Expanding upon existing comprehensive developmental guidance counseling models (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000, 2001), urban school counseling focuses on students and schools that present challenges extending beyond traditional developmental perspectives (Green & Keys). Typically, the term urban is synonymous with the inner city and school counseling refers to addressing problems of violence, low achievement, and poverty. Although many challenges exist, the cultural richness of any urban environment creates opportunities for exchange through diversity that can promote healthy development for all students (Sink, 2002).

To provide effective programs, urban school counseling must be approached from a critical perspective of the urban environment as a whole. Urban school counseling is defined here as school counseling personnel and programmatic services that are specifically geared toward meeting the multiple and often complex needs of students living and attending school in culturally diverse environments. Because of the cultural richness in the urban setting, where values and perspectives are often in competition with one another, awareness of one's self and the developmental context is critical (Green & Keys, 2001).

As the profession makes strides toward better serving urban students, many suburban and even rural school systems across the country have faced a change in student and

community demographics that reflects challenges previously associated with the inner city. Disruptive students and poor academic achievement are no longer bound by the geographic boundaries of the city alone. Gordon (2003) reminds us that due to modern technology, particularly in the forms of communication and travel, we are living in an urban nation-state where throughout most of this society, culturally diverse people are increasingly living in close proximity of one another. As communities and their schools evolve to reflect the cultural diversity of our larger society, so too must our profession if it is to continue the tradition as an adaptable and viable program and service provider to public schools. Thus there is a need for school counselors, regardless of setting, to become knowledgeable about the principles and practices of urban school counseling.

Exactly what are the challenges faced by educators today in our society? What does this mean to the delivery of comprehensive developmental guidance services in our schools? How best can we continue the tradition of the profession by responding to the complex developmental needs of students and those who seek to educate them in an urban society? This article will address these specific questions as a contribution to the growing literature focusing on the topic of urban school counseling. Two counselors' case scenarios, which will be described below, represent the ever-changing reality of school counseling in our urban society. They are presented here to help articulate how the training and practice of school counselors can be more responsive.

URBAN STUDENT NEEDS

Typically, the term urban education denotes an implicit and oftentimes explicit reference to the teaching of low-status people (Gordon, 2003; Gordon & Armour-Thomas, 1992). This perspective fails to account for the social and ecological factors that over time have created a high concentration of crime, violence, and poverty, in many urban environments. A broader definition of the concept should not negate the importance of addressing the needs of poor and disenfranchised inner city groups, but rather should provide scholars and practitioners with a more useful conceptualization of the term. A more critical perspective allows us to tackle the deeper societal challenges associated with diversity and mobility that are inherent to the urban setting, and it prepares the way for more effective school counseling strategies.

Green and Keys (2001) provided the school counseling literature with guidelines for working with students in the 21st century. Using an ecological perspective (i.e., Bronfenbrenner, 1979), they suggested that, regardless of geographic location, the needs of urban students must be addressed through a perspective that accounts for the complex environments in which they live. As federal, state, and local demands for accountability increase, schools are finding it difficult to promote learning for all students. The persistent gap in learning, across contexts, suggests that low achievement and disruptive behaviors need to be viewed from a broader perspective.

According to Gordon (2003), "an urban environment is characterized by diversity, conflicting lifestyles, cultural richness, a high concentration of material resources, rapid communication and travel, and the coexistence of fluidity and rigidity in institutional and personal behavior" (p. 189). Due to the high concentration of different cultural practices

competing with one another in an urban society, some groups and practices become more acceptable than others. In addition to content knowledge, urban education must teach students about the dominant and accepted practices of society. Many of today's struggling students resist learning because of internalized failure, a byproduct of the disconnect between the student's learning style and needs and the preferred learning style and needs of the broader environment (Adelman, 2002). From an ecological perspective, contextual awareness becomes an important skill for students and those who work with them. The mission of the school counselor is to implement developmental programs for all students. In the urban environment, these programs should promote an understanding of dominant cultural practices and facilitate awareness of the relationship between one's own personal background and culture and the broader context.

For a better understanding of the context of urban schools and students, Holcomb-McCoy (1998) provided six factors that influence urban school counseling: (a) diversity of students, (b) lack of resources, (c) poverty, (d) family issues, (e) violence, and (f) high dropout rates. Given the expansion of the urban environment beyond traditional city limits, counselor educators and school counseling practitioners everywhere should partake in the delivery and consumption of such training. An ecological perspective allows for a better understanding of student needs and can lead to more effective school counseling programs and interventions.

URBAN SCHOOL COUNSELOR EDUCATION MODELS

Just as urbanization is occurring across multiple school and community, contexts, so too are opportunities to develop an urban perspective on school counseling. A Web-based search of the term urban school counseling produced several hits related to graduate-level training that specializes or offers course content on the topic. The findings suggest that a change in the profession is underway. Previously, counselor education programs have only incorporated issues of diversity, and multiculturalism into existing graduate course work as subcategories. The development of specialized programs in urban school counseling represents the growing commitment to transforming the profession.

In line with professional standards set forth by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2001), most urban school counseling education programs offer training in professional identity, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, helping relationships, group work, assessment, research, and program evaluation. Specialized programs incorporate an urban perspective for each of these courses, thereby allowing students to develop competences relevant to the urban environment. For example, coursework in professional identity must create a perspective among counseling students that reflects an understanding of the ecological and self-awareness foundations essential to any successful urban program (Day-Vines, Patton, & Baytops, 2003; Green & Keys, 2001). This perspective will be useful as urban school counselors consult with teachers, collect and analyze needs assessment data, and interact with parents.

Traditional graduate-level courses in group work address objectives that include understanding group types, leadership styles, theories, methods, dynamics, and the

evaluation of groups. A course specializing in urban group counseling will cover each of these topics plus focus on specific issues related to urban school environments. For example, group leadership course work will introduce strategies for facilitating critical awareness of the factors contributing to behavior among disruptive or challenging students (Carlson, 2003).

Specialized urban school counseling programs also offer required and elective course work for working with urban families and collaborating with teachers, special educators, and administrators. Course offerings in urban ethical and legal issues, applied behavioral interventions, and applied research supplement the curriculum. Practicum and internship opportunities in urban programs are coordinated with local school systems and can be linked with other professional development partnerships from other education disciplines. Supervision from practicing school counselors who have adopted critical perspectives in urban issues benefits young students and counselor trainees alike (Clark, 2003).

A transformation in the profession is required in order to better work with the needs of urban students. Green and Keys (2001) have offered seven guiding principles for counselor education and school counseling programs. They have recommended that programs (a) promote self and contextual awareness, (b) utilize an ecological framework for problem solving, (c) utilize indirect service models, (d) use collaboration to achieve comprehensive program objectives, (e) align school counseling goals with local reform and improvement strategies, (f) use evidence-based best practices, and (g) use outcome-based evaluation strategies. For a detailed review of the six influential factors of urban school counseling and of the seven guiding principles, see Holcomb-McCoy (1998) and Green and Keys, respectively.

CASE SCENARIOS

The remainder of this article will elaborate on two counselors' case scenarios to describe the influence of urban school counselor education programs on the practice of school counselors working in an urban setting. Based on actual experiences of practicing counselors in both contexts, these cases offer guidance on future steps for the profession.

Counselor Scenario 1

Mrs. Taylor is currently in her 5th year as the only school counselor at Tagor Elementary School located in a large, urban school district on the Eastern seaboard of the United States. Tagor Elementary recently has been recognized for its much improved academic performance and school climate over the past 3 years. This progress can be attributed to the dedication and hard work of the entire school family as well as the leadership of the principal. Serving more than 600 students, this counselor works closely with her principal and relies heavily on her master's degree training in urban school counseling to meet the diverse needs of students, staff; and parents affiliated with the school.

When Mrs. Taylor first arrived at Tagor Elementary 5 years ago, she recently had completed her graduate training in urban school counseling at a local university. Prior to that, she was a third-grade teacher in the same urban school district. What had bothered

Mrs. Taylor the most about her school was the negative attitudes other adults had toward students and their families. Every time she heard an adult solely blame a child for poor behavior or low academic performance, it bothered her. After attending an open house for graduate training in education at the local university, she became interested in the school because it offered special master's degree training in urban school counseling. She applied and was admitted.

Over the next 3 years, Mrs. Taylor was immersed in her counselor education program but felt particularly committed to better understanding how she could be effective working with urban students. In her courses, each of the core objectives was grounded in an ecological perspective of school counseling. Although she did not grow up in the inner city herself, Mrs. Taylor appreciated gaining a better perspective on cultural diversity, particularly awareness about the historical and sociopolitical background of diverse groups. "My training helped me gain the knowledge, skills, and awareness I needed to better understand myself, my students, and the urban setting," she stated.

In one particular course, Multicultural Counseling with Urban Youth and Families, Mrs. Taylor gained awareness about the ecological and historical antecedents that played a major role in the issues facing her school. From this course, she learned that many of the problems her students brought to school were less intimidating once she stopped judging students and their families by her middle-class values. She realized that most parents and teachers wanted their students to learn and be successful, but that oftentimes ecological factors from the past and present made education a secondary priority at best. Mrs. Taylor also realized that growing up in a Southern rural community imbedded in her a strong commitment to getting a college education and giving back to society. She also felt that her upbringing was filled with a stronger opportunity structure than many of her students, which helped her to pursue her goals in life.

After completing a family genogram for herself and her husband in the multicultural family counseling course, Mrs. Taylor began to better appreciate the struggles her husband's family had endured migrating from the South to a Northern industrial city. She learned about how, in order to take care of seven children, her mother-in-law had to find work as a maid and a dishwasher for pennies a day after the family's father was incarcerated for a crime he did not commit. Mrs. Taylor realized that her husband's mother had made tremendous sacrifices so he and his siblings could get an education. While processing her emotions associated with the genogram exercise, Mrs. Taylor realized how proud she was of her husband for overcoming those obstacles, and also how fortunate he was for having the benefit of a strong and hardworking mother and an extended family structure to see him through. She then began to reflect on the many children she had encountered as a teacher who had to face similar challenges but did not have the right combination of personal, social, and environmental support structures available to make it through. Rather than blaming those students, she felt a need to temporarily set aside her values and recognize their struggles and validate them for their efforts however self-defeating they may be. She learned that this was the most important part of any counseling relationship.

This fresh perspective did wonders for her ability to connect with troubled students. Mrs. Taylor realized that working successfully in the urban school setting was about helping

youth build awareness of themselves and their situations as a precursor to using established counseling strategies that lead to effective change. Mrs. Taylor also realized that success had to be defined by the student through awareness of self and not by a definition that was externally imposed upon the student. During the remainder of her graduate course work, Mrs. Taylor pursued a commitment to helping urban students and those who work with them through building awareness of self.

During her internship experience, Mrs. Taylor was placed in an urban elementary school and supervised by a counselor who, 5 years prior, had graduated from the same urban school counseling program. This experience taught her how to establish and maintain what was called a Comprehensive Development Urban School Counseling Program (CDUSCP), which based most of its effectiveness on a philosophy of respect and awareness. Mrs. Taylor's internship supervisor taught her how to address needs through direct and indirect services that were aligned to the school's overall mission and reform goals.

As a new counselor at Tagor, Mrs. Taylor first set out to implement her own CDUSCP by collecting needs assessment data to identify, which particular students were doing well socially and academically. After studying closely what was working well, she developed a plan to coordinate the delivery of contextually appropriate developmental guidance for the more successful students. This included classroom guidance lessons and school-wide activities that stimulated their interest in the local and global world around them, connecting it to their educational and personal goals both present and future. Mrs. Taylor then identified targeted students for more intense interventions based on office referrals, suspension data, and feedback from teachers and other staff. Focusing on the school's improvement goals of attendance, standardized testing, and climate, the counselor focused on students with severe attendance and behavioral problems. After separating students with health, transportation, and other functional issues from those who were dealing with serious personal and family issues, she developed specific strategies for each.

Students with personal and family issues were targeted for individual, group, and culturally and "urban" sensitive outside resources. At every step of the way, Mrs. Taylor was concerned with providing age-appropriate, social skill utilization strategies based on awareness and affective processing. She also worked with the teachers and, when possible, the parents of the targeted students. With teachers, she consulted with them on individual problems, serving as a resource provider, listener, and model regarding effective interactions with challenging students.

In one difficult situation, a fourth-grade teacher quit unexpectedly due to a particularly disruptive class. Mrs. Taylor was able to locate two qualified potential replacements from her university graduate program who had been exposed to a similar urban perspective as her own. Once a replacement was hired, they worked collaboratively to stimulate and engage all of the students in that class as well as provide targeted interventions when necessary. Their work paid off as evidenced by a moderate improvement in all measured outcomes, which surprisingly contributed significantly to the school's overall performance.

Counselor Scenario 2

For the past 15 years, Mr. Cox has been the school counselor at suburban Skeldon Elementary School located in the Midwestern part of the United States. During this time, Mr. Cox has seen his school's demographics change drastically due to a large influx of international students from abroad and urban students from a large nearby city. Historically, Skeldon Elementary has been among the top performing schools in its district, but 6 years ago, the school's test scores dropped dramatically and suspension and attendance rates skyrocketed. Two years ago, Mr. Cox convinced his principal to support the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program geared toward meeting the changing needs of the school's urbanized student population. The most recent school performance data reveal a turnaround at Skeldon, placing its nearly 550 students near the top of the district's performance list once again.

Mr. Cox completed his graduate training more than 16 years ago when he received a master's degree in school counseling at a local state university. Since then, he has always been engaged in professional development and continuing education through various local, state, and national professional associations. As a result, Skeldon Elementary benefited from a comprehensive developmental guidance program delivered and coordinated by Mr. Cox. Three years ago, he began focusing his continuing education and professional development around the changing demographics of Skeldon Elementary. Specifically, Mr. Cox sought to better serve his school by addressing the negative impact that disruptive students were having on achievement and climate. Most of the teachers, administrators, staff, and local parents readily attributed the school's recent problems to an influx of families, group homes, and foster kids from the nearby big city.

Many of the schools in this suburban/urban district also were facing increased problems with fighting in school, poor attendance, office referrals, and suspensions. Teacher morale was low, and the principal was struggling to respond to teachers' demands to remove disruptive students from the classroom. The principal went to Mr. Cox for help because there was also pressure from the district office and the state to respond to new federal regulations that require a reduction of school suspensions and increased academic performance. Up to that point, disruptive students typically were sent to the office for a "cooling-off period" and then sent back to class. More serious issues were reviewed by the principal, and suspension was used as a last resort after family conferences and individual and/or group counseling services were provided. Mr. Cox conducted classroom guidance lessons on bullying, anger management, and character development to no avail.

As the numbers of students being sent to the office increased, a spare classroom located next to Mr. Cox's office was designated as the in-school suspension room. Staffed by a parent volunteer at first, the suspension room became problematic because of behavioral problems. The principal was able to utilize a teacher's aid position to hire a behavior specialist to staff the room and work with the students, yet the problems continued to increase.

Because many of the disruptive students were initially coming from the local city's school system, Mr. Cox became interested in research and training offerings related to urban

school counseling. His interests led him to attend workshops and read professional literature about the ecology of urban schools and successful counseling practices. He also enrolled in a post-master's certificate in urban school counseling. As a result he realized that his school was in many ways dealing with the same urban issues occurring in the nearby city. Beyond the impact of the disruptive students, the counselor also realized that the school's diversity had changed in other ways. For example, there were now seven different foreign language groups of students attending Skeldon, when in years past there were only two. This increase in English as a Second Language students also was overwhelming the school's resources and impacting achievement.

Eager to address these issues, Mr. Cox sat down in the spring 3 years ago to develop a strategy to adapt his comprehensive guidance program to the urbanization occurring at Skeldon Elementary. Prior to the end of that school year, Mr. Cox conducted a needs assessment to identify and prioritize the challenges the school faced. With the approval of the principal, he gathered data about teachers' perceptions of disruptive students as well as their thoughts about other problems faced by the school. This assessment not only inquired about the amount and types of disruptions that were occurring in the classroom and cafeteria, but it also gauged teacher attitudes and beliefs about the causes of these problems.

The results of the needs assessment proved quite useful in that it shed light on some of the hostility that teachers and staff had about the changes that were occurring in their school and collective communities. Specifically, teachers and other adults, including parents who came from families who had been a part of the school and neighborhood for generations, felt hostility toward local political and economic trends that caused the city residents to move into their bedroom community. Teachers also blamed parents and other caregivers for the behavior problems students displayed at school. Some teachers felt that after meeting and attempting to work with some of the new parents, they were more discouraged. "Now I see where this student gets her temper from," a fifth-grade teacher stated.

After interpreting the data from the needs assessment, Mr. Cox felt a bit relieved to learn that out of 550 students, there were fewer than 50 students who were identified as being repeatedly or severely disruptive. He recalled how one of the local parents had made a comment during a PTA meeting that the school seemed like a wild animal park and that every child in the building was in crisis. He was glad to learn that this was not reality. The needs assessment also revealed that many of the students who were disruptive in class also were performing low academically. Contrary to the opinion of others, Mr. Cox also found that not all of the severely or continually disruptive students were new entrants from the city and that some of the traditionally local students were in need of intervention as well.

These results made sense to Mr. Cox, after having attended a summit at his state school counseling association conference the previous summer. He learned that many schools with disruptive students appear worse than they really are, and that schools that respond negatively to a few disruptive students usually can make things worse for everyone involved. He also learned from his training on urban school counseling that many of the

problems associated with disruptive students could be reduced if classroom teachers and school staff adopted better ways of relating to students by developing a positive and nonthreatening approach to addressing behavior problems. It was at that point that Mr. Cox decided to take action. He used the summer months to make a comprehensive plan for the upcoming year. He presented the plan to the principal who endorsed it right away.

During the summer months, Mr. Cox coordinated the upcoming school year's professional development opportunities being offered to Skeldon's teachers. Because he worked at a professional development school he was able to collaborate with other professionals and develop workshops around best practices for teaching in an urban environment. Mr. Cox made teacher interventions a top priority of his initiative because his data revealed that broader community issues and cultural contradictions heavily impacted the school's climate. Mindful of his inability to tackle these issues alone, he created ongoing opportunities for adults to dialogue about issues during lunch in breakout groups at the professional development workshops. He felt that by incorporating best practices training with opportunities to bring an ecological perspective to the challenges facing Skeldon Elementary, teachers would be less threatened.

In the fall Mr. Cox continued to coordinate his comprehensive developmental guidance activities as he did in the past. By partnering with teachers and staff, changing the school's climate was not as overwhelming as he once thought. Over the next 2 years, students, staff, and some parents worked on implementing the best practices in their respective fields. Although many challenges still remain, the school climate does reflect a new commitment for responding to changes and needs in ways that benefit all students.

FUTURE STEPS FOR URBAN SCHOOL COUNSELING

Governmental mandates such as No Child Left Behind and the changing demographics of public schools have compelled the profession to move forward in responding to student needs. Educators and practitioners alike are seeking effective ways of being more accountable. In the case scenario of Mrs. Taylor, connecting with students in a manner that promotes self-awareness was important. By establishing a grounded perspective of herself in the urban context, she was able to deliver a program that reflects the needs of Tagor Elementary School. For Mr. Cox, rethinking the way his guidance program impacts school climate was an effective strategy for initiating change. In his case, working closely with teacher perceptions of disruptive students had a significant impact on the school climate.

In the future, counselor educators can enhance their program offerings through standards-based specialized training that responds effectively to urban students. Practicing counselors in the field can equally benefit from adopting an expanded urban perspective toward their craft. For both educators and practitioners, the first step in this process is to develop an ecological perspective that reflects the dynamics of themselves and their students and the context within which schools and counseling programs are located.

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