



2019 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES  
SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENGINEERING, ARTS, MATHEMATICS & EDUCATION JUNE 5 - 7, 2019  
HAWAII PRINCE HOTEL WAIKIKI, HONOLULU, HAWAII

# REFLECTIONS OF VETERAN SCHOOL COUNSELLORS: ENHANCING THE WORK ENVIRONMENT FOR PRE-SERVICE AND NOVICE SCHOOL COUNSELLORS



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## **Enhancing the Work Environment for Pre-Service and Novice School Counsellors**

### **Synopsis:**

This paper details an action research study conducted in our local school district. All of the participants were practicing school counsellors. The aim of the study was to identify the top job-related stressors for school counsellors so that ways to manage these are developed and included in pre-service school counsellor training programs.

### **Abstract**

This qualitative, participatory action research study was designed to examine the sources and effects of job-related stress for school counsellors and the strategies that may be used to minimize them. The goal of this research study was to collect data that would lead to discussions among school counsellors, school and district administrators, and those involved with counsellor training programmes that would improve the working environment for school counsellors and the preparedness of pre-service school counsellors. A review of the literature revealed limited data that described the strategies that school counsellors employed to deal with the negative effects of job-related stress. The findings from this study suggest that the participants experienced these job-related stressors: dealing with critical incidents, insufficient time to complete all required tasks, a lack of understanding of the role of the school counsellor by other stakeholders, work overload caused by staff reduction, and the inability to meet all of the needs of students. Peer support, positive self-care, and professional development opportunities related to job-related stress management were strategies that some school counsellors used to minimize the negative effects of job-related stress. The findings of this study may be of interest to all educational stakeholders.

## Reflections of Veteran School Counsellors: Enhancing the Work Environment for Pre-service and Novice School Counsellors

School counsellors are called to their job because they have a distinct desire to help students and encourage their academic and emotional growth (Bain, 2012). They are essential for the success of students. The British Columbia Ministry of Education Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines (2011) states that, “the purpose of school counselling services is to assist students, their families and educators with the focus upon empowering students toward positive change” (p. 27). To meet this purpose there is a need for school counsellors to be attuned to their students’ needs, as well as their own wellness, to reduce the effects of job-related stress (Galek, Flannelly, Green & Kudler, 2011). There is compelling evidence in the research to show that further study is required related to school counsellors’ perceptions of their role, the identification of their job-related stressors, strategies to cope with those stressors, and the role that educational leaders play in determining the training and work load for school counsellors.

This study which took place in Kamloops, British Columbia with participants employed with School District #73 (Kamloops/Thompson) makes a unique contribution to the literature because of its location. Additionally, this study responded to the lack of training to manage the negative effects of job-related stress for school counsellors, in school counsellor training programmes. This research study is of significance to practicing and pre-service school counsellors, and to those who employ school counsellors and develop school counsellor training programmes.

In a study of the population of school counsellors in northeastern United States, Wilkerson (2009) found that compared with school counsellors who are experiencing an

increased level of job-related stress, those who are comfortable in their role and are better able to complete their daily tasks report a higher level of job satisfaction. Clark and Amatea (2004) and Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson and Solomon (2005) researched strategies to manage job-related stress for school counsellors. They are in agreement that further research on the development of school counsellor training programmes, specifically examining how the management of job-related stressors is addressed, would be beneficial. This research study addressed these areas that were recommended for further study.

## **Literature Review**

“The enthusiasm and passion that school counsellors bring to the profession can be tested by the numerous challenges they face on the job” (Sumerlin & Littrell, 2011, p. 278). Given the significance of their work, their numerous responsibilities, their interactions with a variety of stakeholders (school administrators, teachers, parents, and students), and limited resources within which to operate, school counsellors are at risk of experiencing the negative effects of job-related stress. Following a review and critique of the existing literature these topics emerged as common themes in addressing the complicated job of school counsellors: defining the role of the school counsellor; identifying job-related stressors for school counsellors; examining strategies to reduce the negative effects of these stressors; and determining the role of educational leaders in the management of school counsellor stress.

While it has remained difficult to determine a clear definition of the role of school counsellors (which is a primary job-related stressor), other strategies to decrease the negative effects of job-related stress were identified and are within the control of school counsellors. Presently, the best strategies to minimize the negative effects of job-related stress for school counsellors are those that they initiate. Establishing a peer support network has been identified

as the key stress management strategy. Recommendations to extend this peer support network to include clinical supervision are found in the literature. Additionally, self-care that includes physical activity and a positive work-life balance, along with opportunities for professional development, are stress management strategies that practicing school counsellors have reported. Although school counsellors continue to find strategies to manage their job-related stress, there is a role for educational leaders in school, district, and training programme positions to respond to this issue.

School and district administrators are largely responsible for determining the role of school counsellors. A better understanding of the training and unique skill set that school counsellors have may result in a decrease in the assignment of inappropriate tasks and an increase in the amount of time that school counsellors have to meet the needs of all stakeholders. School counsellors who work with supportive and more aware school and district administrators report less job dissatisfaction (Culbreth et al., 2005).

Educational leaders who are responsible for the development of school counsellor training programmes need to respond to the ever-changing field of school counselling by keeping up-to-date with current issues, promoting wellness throughout the training programme, hiring effective and knowledgeable teachers, and helping to minimize the discrepancy between the training programme and actual practice in the field.

## **Methodology**

The principles of action research formed the overall research design for this study. Frost (2002) defined action research as, “a process of systematic reflection, enquiry, and action carried out by individuals about their own practice” (p. 25), with the goal of improving this practice. Hinchey’s (2008) definition of action research as, “a process of systematic inquiry conducted by

those inside a community, rather than by outside experts; to identify action that will generate some improvement” (p.4), aligns with Frost. These principles of enquiry, practical and problem-solving emphasis, and a systematic approach involving critical reflection contributed to a greater understanding of the research topic and will perhaps influence positive change in the work environment for all school counsellors.

An online questionnaire was the method of data collection for this research study. “Questionnaires offer an objective means of collecting information about people’s knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour” (Boynton & Greenhalgh, 2004, p. 1312). The questionnaire, prepared through and delivered by SurveyMonkey© (see Appendix A) was designed to help determine the job-related stressors and effects for school counsellors and the strategies used to manage them. SurveyMonkey© is an online service that offers the ability to design a questionnaire using a variety of question styles, send it to participants, receive and collect the responses, and analyze the data. Using a self-administered questionnaire for data collection for this research study allowed participants to respond at a time that was convenient for them. This method likely provided the highest level of participation.

As recommended by Hinchey (2008) the analysis of the data began as it was collected, rather than waiting until the close of the collection period. This preliminary analysis offered insight into emerging response patterns such as: words or phrases that participants used most frequently, repeatedly expressed concerns, and participant setting (for example, the difference in the responses between school counsellors in rural versus urban schools).

School counsellors in School District #73 (Kamloops/Thompson) were solicited for this study. This group was chosen because they were practicing school counsellors and they were able to provide insight into their current role and work environment. There are 32 school

counsellors in this school district who were invited to participate in this study and although it would have been difficult to establish a convenient time for individual interviews or focus group discussions, it was anticipated that most would be willing to complete the self-administered questionnaire. Of this group, 26 people indicated that they would like to participate and returned signed consent forms. All 26 people completed the questionnaire which equates to a participation rate of 81%.

Data analysis began when the first participant responses were received and continued until responses were received from all who consented to participate. Identified patterns and themes in the responses were explained in relation to the findings of previous studies to confirm their suitability and account for differences. The analysis of the collected data was provided to the participants and they were encouraged to provide feedback. Issues of trustworthiness including credibility, dependability, transferability, peer debriefing, and member checks were examined.

### **Report on the Findings**

Along with hosting the questionnaire, the SurveyMonkey© site generated response reports. The researcher was able to view participation rates and real-time results at any time throughout the duration of questionnaire availability to participants. These functions provided an efficient way to collect and report data (Hinchey, 2008). The SurveyMonkey© software programme that was used to distribute the questionnaires to the study participants also provided assistance with data collection in these ways: provided a summary of the results of closed and open-ended questions and individual responses and summarized data in chart and graph form. Although the programme assists in these areas, it didn't relieve the researcher from the tasks of describing, interpreting, and presenting the data.

The gender of the participants and responses to the demographic questions on the questionnaire are summarized in Table 1 below. Only full-time school counsellors were invited to participate in this study.

**Table 1. Responses to Demographic Questions 1 – 4**

<b>Respondent Characteristic</b>	<b>Response Summary</b>
Gender	19 females, 7 males
Education	19 Master degree in school counselling  3 Diploma in school counselling  4 no formal school counsellor training
Work experience as a school counsellor	Range is 3 months – 22 years  19 less than 10 years of experience  7 more than 10 years of experience
Work setting	21 urban, 5 rural

Ten of 26 participants indicated that curriculum related to managing the negative effects of job-related stress was included in their school counsellor training programme. This information was presented through lectures on the need and benefits of self-care. Sixteen participants indicated that this issue was not addressed in their training programme.

Participants were asked to briefly describe their perception of the role (not tasks) of a school counsellor. The top three responses were

- to provide social and emotional support for students,

- to assist students with academic/career goals, and
- to advocate for students.

Responses 7-9 were ranked on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree. (average rankings are shown)

7. I believe the role of school counsellor is valued by

- teachers – 2.28,
- parents – 2.13,
- administrators – 1.96, and
- students – 1.76.

8. I believe I can fulfill all of the requirements of my job every day – 3.48

9. I am completely happy with my career choice as a school counsellor – 1.96

Participants were asked to describe up to three job-related stressors they experience as a school counsellor, ranking one being the most stressful and three being the least stressful of their choices. The top three responses are

- dealing with critical incidents (self-harm, suicide),
- job overload – not enough time to complete all of the required tasks, and
- lack of school and community resources to help students.

Participants were asked to list the strategies they have used to help reduce the negative effects of job-related stressors. The top three responses were

- debrief with other counsellors and colleagues,
- positive self-care (physical activity, leisure time), and
- activities with family and friends.

The participants were asked to indicate how effective their strategies are in reducing the negative effects of these stressors. Fifty-two percent of the respondents indicated that their strategies were effective, 36% said somewhat effective, and 12% said not effective.

Participants were asked to list up to three recommendations to help reduce the negative effects of job-related stress. The top three responses were

- clinical supervision and collaboration,
- positive self-care, and
- increased staffing.

Participants were asked to list their level of job satisfaction on a scale of one to five, with one being the lowest and 5 being the highest, their level of job satisfaction as a school counsellor with and without consideration of the job-related stressors. The average rank of the responses considering the job-related stressors was 3.21 and 4.38 when not considering the job-related stressors.

Lastly, the participants were given the opportunity to provide any additional information. Ten participants provided responses and the top responses were related to these concerns

- reduce responsibility for paperwork, provide additional support to complete paperwork,
- counsellors should not be required to have teaching blocks,
- develop school wide academic intervention plans, and
- communicate needs to administrators.

## **Discussion**

There is a role for educational leaders to play in improving the work environment for practicing school counsellors and the training of pre-service school counsellors. The participants

for this research study believed that school and district educational leaders play a role in the provision of debriefing opportunities for school counsellors, the provision of support for school counsellors who are dealing with critical incidents, and a decrease in school counsellor work load. Additionally, educational leaders whose role includes the development and implementation of school counsellor training programmes may wish to consider curriculum focussed on the job-related stressors identified by veteran school counsellors who participated in this study, when developing or revising their programmes.

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## Appendix A: Questionnaire

### PRACTICING SCHOOL COUNSELLOR QUESTIONNAIRE 2014

Please respond to each question. Your responses will be kept anonymous and confidential.

#### 1. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to respond

#### 2. What setting is your school?

- a) urban
- b) rural

#### 3. How many years have you worked as a school counsellor?

#### 4. What school counsellor training have you completed?

#### 5. Did your counsellor training programme include curriculum on managing the negative effects of job-related stress?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please describe

## PRACTICING SCHOOL COUNSELLOR QUESTIONNAIRE 2014

**6. Briefly describe your perception of the role (not the tasks) of a school counsellor.**

Please answer the following statements using the scale from 1 to 5 where 1 is strongly agree and 5 is strongly disagree.

**7. I believe the role of school counsellor is valued by:**

	1 - Strongly Agree	2	3	4	5 - Strongly Disagree
my teacher colleagues	<input type="radio"/>				
my administrative colleagues	<input type="radio"/>				
my students	<input type="radio"/>				
my students' parents	<input type="radio"/>				

**8. I believe I can fulfill all of the requirements of my job as a school counsellor every day.**

	1 - Strongly Agree	2	3	4	5 - Strongly Disagree
	<input type="radio"/>				

**9. I am completely happy with my career choice as a school counsellor.**

	1 - Strongly Agree	2	3	4	5 - Strongly Disagree
	<input type="radio"/>				

**10. Please describe up to three job-related stressors you experience as a school counsellor. Rank these from 1 to 3 with 1 being the most stressful and 3 being the least stressful of your choices. (Your response may continue past the end of the response box. The entire response will be saved.)**

1	<input type="text"/>
2	<input type="text"/>
3	<input type="text"/>

**PRACTICING SCHOOL COUNSELLOR QUESTIONNAIRE 2014**

**11. What strategies have you used to help reduce the negative effects of these stressors? (Your response may continue past the end of the response box. The entire response will be saved.)**

1

2

3

**12. How effective are these strategies in reducing the negative effects of these stressors?**

**13. List up to three recommendations that you suggest to help reduce the negative effects of job-related stress that are different from the strategies listed above. (Your response may continue past the end of the response box. The entire response will be saved.)**

1

2

3

**14. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, please rank:**

	1 - Low	2	3	4	5 - High
1 Your level of job satisfaction as a school counsellor without consideration of the job-related stressors.	<input type="radio"/>				
Your level of job satisfaction with consideration of the job-related stressors.	<input type="radio"/>				

## PRACTICING SCHOOL COUNSELLOR QUESTIONNAIRE 2014

15. Please provide any additional comments, if any.



Thank you for completing this questionnaire. The results will be made available when the research study is completed.