

A New Perspective: School Counselors with Disabilities and Non-Disabled School Counselor
Views of Counselors with Disabilities Effectiveness

Desiree Abreu, M.Ed.

Hawai'i Department of Education

Abstract: A literature review about the effectiveness of counselors with disabilities was conducted. Interviews were also held with two graduate students in a Master's level graduate School Counseling and Guidance program and two school counselors currently employed by a public school to obtain anecdotal evidence in support or negation of the literature. One graduate student has a disability, the other does not; one employed school counselor has a disability, the other does not. Most interviewee responses imply school counselors with disabilities might be more effective than school counselors without disabilities because of probable higher levels of empathy due to difficult challenging life experiences.

Key Words: school, counseling, disability

Introduction

Although information about counseling individuals with disabilities is commonplace, data about counselors with disabilities is scarce. It is important to discuss how school counselors, both with and without disabilities, view school counselors with disabilities effectiveness as counselors in a school system. It is also necessary to discuss what accommodations and/or modifications can be provided and what service agencies can support school counselors in a public school system. Looking more closely at these issues will help ensure individuals responsible for school counseling programs scrutinize their systems to be sure that schools, a microcosm of society, represent the diversity of the community as a whole. This will support students to embrace all the diversity within themselves and surrounding them.

Current information about counselors *with* disabilities is scarce. There seem to be two reasons for the absence of information. First, search engines often do not differentiate between counselors with disabilities and counselors working with individuals with disabilities. The most accurate key word search involved using the term "counselors with disabilities" and then weeding out extraneous information. The second most accurate key word search was using the term "disabled counselors". Second, recent research on this topic does not exist. Some studies date back 30 years, concurrent with the beginning of the Disability Rights Movement and the return of Vietnam War veterans with disabilities in need of counseling services. More recent articles date only to the 1990s. Therefore, it is important to note the uniqueness of this article and how its message is important in the 21st century.

Overview of Literature

In an overview of the literature available regarding counselors with disabilities, little data is available specifically regarding school counselors. Much information about counselors with disabilities discusses rehabilitation counselors and post-secondary

education counselors. The reviewed literature has been generalized to include school counselors.

Counselees appear to share two general thoughts about counselor effectiveness regarding counselors with disabilities: the additive point of view and the subtractive point of view (Miller, 1991). All literature will be prescribed to that of either Miller's additive or subtractive perspectives.

In the additive point of view, counselors with disabilities have an advantage in a counseling situation due to having a disability. This perspective is supported by several research studies dating back to 1973. In 1991, Nosek, Fuhrer & Hughes, of the Baylor College of Medicine, note, "Counselors with disabilities were rated more favorably overall than counselors without disabilities, particularly when the counseling content was disability-related and when counselors were depicted as nonprofessional." (p.153). They also note that, "When the topic involved requesting personal assistance, a pronounced concern for some persons with disabilities, disabled subjects attributed substantially greater credibility to a disabled counselor" (p. 160). The theory that people with disabilities prefer to work with counselors with disabilities is part of the peer counseling philosophy of some schools of independent living (Nosek, Fuhrer & Hughes, 1991; Strohmer & Leierer, 1996).

The additive point of view is further supported by research conducted by Brabham and Thoreson (1973) in which both students with and without disabilities prefer to discuss personal problems with counselors with disabilities. Using the Barrett-Leonard Relationship Inventory, which measures patient-perceived empathy, Mitchell and Allen (1975) conclude counselors with disabilities are rated significantly more positively on all therapeutic values: empathic understanding, positive regard, unconditionality of regard and congruence. Mitchell and Frederickson also note significant counselor preferences exists for physically disabled counselors over counselors without physical disabilities due to a perceived improved ability to understand and empathize. In a study on self-disclosure, Mallinckrodt and Helms (1986) note that "counselors in several of the disability conditions were rated as being significantly more expert and attractive than able-bodied counselors" (p. 343). Finally, in a study conducted by Toner and Johnson (1979) of sixth and tenth grade students using a person perception instrument, "The disabled counselor was preferred to the nondisabled counselor, regardless of the sex of the counselor or the sex and grade level of the student" (p. 402).

In the subtractive point of view, counselors with disabilities are seen as disadvantaged due to having a disability. This perspective is also supported by several research studies. At the forefront, researcher Douglas Strohmer conducted several studies that supported this perspective, although the strongest evidence is noted in older studies. The most recent of Strohmer's research endeavors is presented in an article, *The Effects of Counselor Disability Status and Reputation on Perceptions of Counselor Expertness, Attractiveness, and Trustworthiness* (Leierer & Strohmer, 1998). In this article, Leierer & Strohmer present their "Implications for Theory," which states: "A counselor's disability will not necessarily guarantee higher ratings on attractiveness, expertness, and trustworthiness; in fact, a client can be influenced negatively by a counselor's disability" (p. 284). In another study conducted by Strohmer, *The Effect of Counselor Disability, Attending Behavior, and Client Problem on Counseling* (Leierer & Strohmer, 1996), the authors note that "disability status may exacerbate the client's perception of the counselor's skill. However, when counselors with a disability use poor attending skills, they are seen as

being less attractive than other counselors. Therefore, by having proficient counseling skills, counselors with disabilities can dramatically augment their social influence as a therapist” (p. 92). In a 1996 study, *The Importance of Counselor Disability Status: What We Know and What We Need to Know*, Strohmer and Leierer note: “There is some evidence that counselor disability status is important when the problem being discussed in counseling is directly related to the counselor and the clients’ shared disability status” (p. 108). Finally, in the oldest of Strohmer’s studies, *Effects of Counselor Disability Status on Disabled Subjects’ Perceptions of Counselor Attractiveness and Expertness* (Strohmer & Biggs, 1983), ratings of physically disabled subjects of counselor expertise are lower when the counselor is shown as having a disability than when not having a disability (Nosek, Fuhrer & Hughes, 1991; Miller, 1991). “These results raise some doubts about the validity of the argument that disability condition is a salient group membership characteristic directly related to more favorable counselor ratings by disabled clients” (Strohmer & Biggs, 1983, p. 206).

The subtractive point of view is further supported by research conducted by Allen and Cohen (1980) in which non-disabled counselors are preferred by non-disabled persons. In a study conducted by Cash and Kehr (1978), counselors were individually judged as either physically attractive or physically unattractive by female subjects. Although physical disability was not equated to physical unattractiveness, researchers have used the study to support the subtractive point of view by citing the conclusion: “Unattractive counselors were judged to reflect less desirable traits and engendered weaker commitment and less expectations than did identical behaviors attributed to physically attractive or anonymous counselors” (Cash & Kehr, 1978, p. 336). Finally, Miller (1991) also notes, “Stereotyped prejudice against persons exists and that obviously disabled persons evaluate themselves and are evaluated by others more negatively than are able-bodied persons” (p. 348).

Personal Communications: Anecdotal Data Received Via Interviews

The purpose of this research is (a) to determine how school counselors, both with and without disabilities, view the effectiveness of school counselors with disabilities, (b) to discuss what accommodations and/or modifications can be provided and, (c) to explore what service agencies are available to support school counselors in a public school system. Anecdotal data was collected to achieve these goals. To attain this data, eight separate interviews were conducted with four school counselors. Two of the school counselors have disabilities. Pamela Brown, a 34 year old female graduate school counseling student attending the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa on Oahu, the state’s most populated island, is of Caucasian decent and medically diagnosed with severe Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI). Mark Ting is a 34 year old male school counselor from the island of Maui, of mixed Asian (Chinese and Japanese) and Pacific Islander (Hawaiian) descent, who is Quadriplegic. The other two interviewees are non-disabled. The first is Joshua Kimura, a 35 year old male school counselor of Japanese descent, also from Maui, and the second is Sharon Soares, a 27 year old female University of Hawai‘i graduate school counseling student who self identifies as Mixed-Caucasian (Chinese and Portuguese). The participants’ names have been changed. They have been given a last name of the same ethnicity as their real last names. The first set of interview questions does not ask respondents about disability, while the second is specific to issues about counselors with disabilities. Interviewees were not

privity to the second set of questions previous to responding to the first. The first set of questions included the following:

1. What expectations do you have of being a school counselor?
2. What made you decide that this is a profession you wanted to pursue?
3. What traits do you have that would/does make you an effective school counselor?
4. What do you think some of the challenges might be/are to being a school counselor?
5. Do you feel that you possess traits that other people don't that would/does make you a more effective school counselor? If yes, what are those traits?
6. How could a public school system, such as the Department of Education as a whole and individual schools, help school counselors to reach their best potentials as effective helpers?
7. What other resources/agencies are available to assist school counselors to be able to perform their job duties in the most effective manner possible?
8. What kind of tools/resources *should* be available for school counselors so that they may do their jobs to the best of their abilities?

The second set of questions included the following:

1. What is your definition of disability?
2. What is your definition of diversity?
3. Do you identify with the disability culture? If yes, do you feel that the disability culture is also a diversity culture?
4. Do you prefer people-first language or disability-first language?
5. What is the name of the disability that you have? What is the definition of that disability? What is the nature of that disability?
6. Does the disability limit your life activities? If yes, in what way?
7. Do you feel that a person with a disability may possess traits that a person without a disability may not possess that would make them a more effective school counselor? If yes, what are those traits?
8. What parts of a disability may be a challenge to being a school counselor?
9. Do you think there are any differences between a school counselor with a disability versus a non-disabled school counselor?
10. Do you feel a school counselor with a disability, would be better able to counsel students with disabilities than a non-disabled school counselor?
11. How could a public school system, such as the Department of Education as a whole and individual schools, help a person with a disability to reach their best potential as a school counselor?
12. What other resources/agencies are available to people with disabilities to be able to perform their job duties in the most effective manner possible?
13. What kind of tools/resources should be available for school counselors with disabilities so that they may do their jobs to the best of their abilities?

Both counselors with disabilities and non-disabled counselors appear to have the same expectations of the types of counseling skills they are able to contribute to their

chosen profession. All school counselors interviewed said they expect to advocate for their students by working with students, teachers, administrators, parents, families and the community at large. Interviewees also conduct individual and group counseling sessions and prevention and intervention programs (P. Brown, personal communication, March 2, 2003; M. Ting, personal communication, March 4, 2003; J. Kimura, personal communication, March 7, 2003; S. Soares, personal communication, March 11, 2003).

There is a marked difference in the way school counselors with disabilities reply to the question, "What made you decide that this is a profession you wanted to pursue?" Both counselors with disabilities, Brown and Ting, note becoming disabled had some effect on their choice to become school counselors. Brown notes that after the final stages of her injury, she "couldn't do anything except talk and listen." She felt that "school counseling seemed like it clicked." Ting notes, "It was actually because of my accident that I became a school counselor. After [the] accident [I] had to kind of regroup and figure out what I could still do." Brown and Ting each had different careers previous to the injuries that led to their becoming permanently disabled.

All interviewed school counselors mention similar traits they possess to be effective counselors, such as compassion, empathy and understanding, a love of working with children/students, being good listeners, being analytical, and being outgoing. The school counselors with disabilities also add their life experiences of having and living with a disability as positively contributing to effective school counselor traits. Ting feels "overcom[ing] the challenges of having a disability help[ed] to build character." Brown notes her life experience, as a whole, put her "head and shoulders" above a lot of other school counselors.

Responses to the question, "What do you think some of the challenges might be/are to being a school counselor" varies. Three school counselors mention not being able to help clients as much as they would like. Ting seems to focus more on the aspects of his disability regarding challenges. He notes issues of accessibility and possible negative peer relationships could impede school counselor success.

When asked the question, "How could a public school system, such as the Hawai'i Department of Education, as a whole, and individual schools, help school counselors to reach their best potentials as effective helpers?" all respondents note concerns unrelated to disability issues. These include the following: allowing for both creative differences and autonomy, treating counselors as professionals, providing funding for better student to counselor ratios, higher pay, practical and useful trainings, sufficient workspace, clerical assistance, and appropriate materials and curriculum. Both graduate student school counselors note professional associations, such as the American School Counselors Association, the Hawai'i School Counselors Association, the American Psychological Association and the Play Therapy Association, as possible resources and agencies that can provide counselor assistance, whereas both school counselors note more community-based organizations for support such as Maui Youth and Family, Upward Bound, Pacific Resources for Education and Learning, and professional peers.

Interviewees were asked the question, "Do you feel that a person with a disability may possess traits that a person without a disability may not possess that would make them a more effective school counselor? If yes, what are those traits?" Three respondents imply that people with disabilities have traits non-disabled people do not possess that would make them more effective school counselors. These traits revolved around the ability to

empathize more easily due to having a disability themselves, especially when counseling students with disabilities. However, both Brown and Ting also mention they believe a non-disabled counselor could reach the level of counseling skills and effectiveness as a counselor with a disability without becoming disabled themselves. It appears that both counselors with disabilities feel life experiences as a whole are what makes a person a more effective counselor.

When interviewees were questioned about what types of challenges there might be for a school counselor with a disability, both counselors with disabilities seem concerned about being physically able to restrain a student that may need to be restrained for the safety of both his or herself and others. Ting notes that “being able to restrain a student [that] tells you they are going to kill themselves or a violent student” may be difficult. Brown says, “I feel physically vulnerable [if] a kid needs physical restraint.”

In response to the question, “Do you feel a school counselor with a disability would be better able to counsel students with disabilities than a non-disabled school counselor?” three individuals imply that there could be some advantage for school counselors with disabilities. Responses range from having a mild advantage, “Someone with a disability [could] break the ice [better] than someone without [a disability],” to emphatic responses from both disabled and non-disabled respondents, “Yes, definitely. I would have the perception that I could identify better and I could create the perception that I could identify better,” and, “Yes. They could share some things that they have done to help them through. [They] can offer real, practical [counseling advice]. They’ve been there and done that.” The aforementioned responses seem to support Mallinckrodt and Helms’ additive point of view of self-disclosure (1986). However, the non-disabled school counseling graduate student feels, “It would be like saying that a non-disabled counselor would be able to counsel non-disabled clients better than a disabled counselor can.”

In response to a question about employer support of people with disabilities, all respondents mention some accessibility concerns. ADA compliance, architecturally accessible schools, barrier-free environments and assistive technology, are some specific items mentioned. Note that an online article by Pennington (2003) notes the American Counseling Association can help to provide assistance for “counselors with disabilities who are seeking ways to accommodate their disabilities in the field” via the ACA Careers hotline at 317.403.0269 or via the website at <http://aca.convio.net/site/PageServer?pagename=career>.

Finally, when asked what types of tools or resources are available for counselors with disabilities, both non-disabled school counselors are unsure, while both counselors with disabilities could mention only a few, including Vocational Rehabilitation and the ADA. Although the interviewees seem to lack more in-depth knowledge about resources available to individuals with disabilities, Pennington’s article, “Resources for Counselors with Disabilities” (2003), outlines several online resources that may provide useful information for people with disabilities (See table 1).

Table 1

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| National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research | http://www.ncddr.org/ |
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| The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services | http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/index.html?src=mr |
| Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic | http://www.rfbd.org/ |
| U.S. Department of Justice, Americans with Disabilities Act | http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm |
| Talking Books Program, National Library Services for Blind and Physically Handicapped | http://www.loc.gov/nls |
| Associates for World Action in Rehabilitation and Education | http://www.awareusa.org/ |
| American Foundation for the Blind | http://www.afb.org/ |
| National Federation of the Blind | http://www.nfb.org/ |
| American Council of the Blind | http://acb.org/ |
| Web Accessibility Initiative | http://www.w3.org/WAI |
| The Access Board | http://www.access-board.gov/ |
| IBM Accessibility Center | http://www-306.ibm.com/able/guidelines/web/accessweb.html |

Source: Pennington, D.A. (2003). Resources for counselors with disabilities. *Counseling Today Online*, 45(8). Retrieved March 22, 2003, from <http://www.counseling.org/ctonline/Resources0203.htm>

Conclusion

In support of the additive point of view, both school counselors with disabilities feel they possess traits other people may not necessarily have that would make them more effective school counselors. Although one of the counselors with a disability is concerned about appearing arrogant, she feels that her life experiences enhanced her school counselor

traits: “Having a major disability and recovering from it, having panic attacks and anxiety attacks, [having] been through the therapy process, gives you an advantage, [a] better vision of what counseling is” (P. Brown, personal communication, March 2, 2003). The other counselor with a disability has a similar response, “Coming from a position where I have been prejudiced against, labeled and misunderstood, I can relate to [students] better” (M. Ting, personal communication, March 4, 2003).

Literature can be found both in support of disability status adding to counselor effectiveness and in support of disability status subtracting from counselor effectiveness. However, all interviewed school counselors seem to feel counselors with disabilities may have traits more effective in counseling both students with and without disabilities. The interviewees seem to ascertain those traits, which include empathy and self-disclosure skills, as having been acquired from overcoming new obstacles and life experiences related to a disability.

Miller (1991) notes both additive and subtractive points of view can be seen from the perspectives of both school counselors with disabilities and non-disabled school counselors. However, recent studies, such as that conducted by Nosek, Fuhrer and Hughes (1991), supporting the additive point of view, may be closer to the truth. It appears that both disabled and non-disabled real-world school counselors do indeed feel having a disability does add to counselor effectiveness.

The views of both school counselors with and without disabilities are necessary to create a successful counseling program that utilizes the strengths of all of its individuals. Identifying what accommodations and/or modifications can be provided and what service agencies are available to support counselors in schools will help build on these strengths, thereby fortifying the system of support for all students. Finally, this support will aid in the promotion and acceptance of diversity by students within educational systems, as well as the communities of which they are a part.

Desiree Abreu is a Student Services Coordinator for the Department of Education in Hawai‘i. She has a background in Counseling and Guidance in the public school system, as well as experience in Special Education and Information Technology. She has also received an Interdisciplinary Certificate in Disability Studies from the Center on Disability Studies at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa.

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