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The role of today's high school counselor in working with students with special needs

Abstract

This paper presents the rationale, history, and the legislation that has impacted school counselors' work with special needs students. This paper discusses the many roles a school counselor plays in working with this population. These roles include, but are not limited to, personal counseling, group counseling, classroom guidance, consulting with teachers, consulting with families, career and postsecondary plans, and the involvement of the counselor in the evaluation process. Concluding statements from the author will revisit the many roles of the counselor and implications for working with this population in the future.

THE ROLE OF TODAY'S HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELOR IN WORKING WITH
STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Abstract

This paper presents the rationale, history, and the legislation that has impacted school counselors' work with special needs students. This paper discusses the many roles a school counselor plays in working with this population. These roles include, but are not limited to, personal counseling, group counseling, classroom guidance, consulting with teachers, consulting with families, career and postsecondary plans, and the involvement of the counselor in the evaluation process. Concluding statements from the author will revisit the many roles of the counselor and implications for working with this population in the future.

The role of the school counselor has been ever-changing since its beginning in the early twentieth century. In particular, the school counselor's role with special needs students is one that has changed significantly and become more specific over the years. Glenn (1998) stated that approximately 10-12% (40-45million) of the student population today are students with disabilities. With the number of special needs students in schools, what is the role of a school counselor in working with special needs students at the high school level? Though we are now in the 21st century, the school counselors' role and involvement with special needs students in high school remains somewhat unclear.

Scarborough and Deck (1998) stated that during the past two decades there has been a significant increase in students who are identified as special needs students. As a result, it is imperative that school counselors tailor their programs to best meet the needs of these students.

The purpose of this paper is to describe legislation that has been passed and how that has affected the school counselors' roles in working with special needs students. Also, the paper will address the varying roles and responsibilities that a high school counselor has when working with special needs students.

Legislation

Legislation and its effects on schooling is not something new. In today's age of "No Child Left Behind," legislation has become more important than ever before. In the area of special education, legislation has had a greater push in the last 30 years, and that push has set the tone for accountability and equal rights of students and adults with special needs. The author's purpose of this section is to simplify recent legislation that has been passed and how it has

impacted students with special needs. Throughout this section the author will be discussing previous to recent legislation that has been passed. At the end of this section key terms in the special education field and how this affects high school counselors will be discussed.

Vocational Rehabilitation Act

Due to the discrimination that had been affecting people with disabilities, Congress began a trend of incorporating and passing legislation in the hopes of leveling out the playing field of life for people with disabilities. The first piece of legislation that has had a great impact was Section 504 Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The passage of this act guaranteed basic rights of persons with disabilities and it required that accommodations be made in school and in society for people with disabilities (Smith, 2004). This act also prohibited federally funded colleges and universities from discriminating against qualified persons with disabilities (Satcher, 1993). This has had an impact on high school counselors who prepare special needs students for post-secondary enrollment.

Education All Handicapped Children

In 1975 PL 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), was passed. This act guaranteed the right for free and appropriate education, otherwise known as FAPE, in the least restrictive environment (Smith, 2004). The passage of EAHCA impacted the overall school system in a multitude of ways because it resulted in a greater number of students receiving special education services and increased the overall involvement of school counselors' work with students who have disabilities (Milsom, 2002). In accordance with FAPE, services to special needs students are defined by the child's documented needs, not what is assumed by special needs workers (Smith). In addition, the passage of EAHCA ensured that there would be no delay in implementing a child's IEP once developed (Smith). In 1986, EAHCA was

reauthorized and it added that all educators share the responsibilities for services provided for all students with disabilities (Milsom).

Americans With Disabilities Act

The next piece of legislation which was significant to school counselors was PL 101-336, The Americans with Disabilities Act, otherwise known as ADA. The ADA banned the discrimination of persons with disabilities in areas of employment, transportation, and public accommodation (Smith, 2004). This act had an effect on high school counselors in working with students in the area of getting a job or career right after high school.

Individuals with Disabilities Act

In 1990, PL 101-476, Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), was passed. The passage of IDEA mandated that parents be contacted, involved, and included in their child's special education process (School & Cooper, 1992). Through IDEA, if a student is found to be an applicant for special education services, the special education team would write an IEP and put it into motion within 30 days, to be reviewed at least annually (Culatta, Thanking, & Werts, 2003). In 1997 the IDEA was reauthorized, mandating stronger parental rights, non-biased teaching, and disciplinary procedures for students whose misbehavior is a part of their disability. All of these changes affected high school counselors in working more with parents of children who have disabilities, being part of an IEP team, and working with students that have behavior related issues as a result of their disability.

Special Education Terminology

Some of the special education terminology that has had an effect on high school counselors includes least restrictive environment (LRE), mainstreaming, inclusion, and individualized education plan (IEP).

Least Restrictive Environment

The term least restrictive environment came about as part of the EAHCA act of 1975. The idea of least restrictive environment was to put students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment possible that could be conducive to learning (Smith, 2004). For example, a general education classroom in which the student receives no additional supports or services is the least restrictive environment, and at the opposite end of the spectrum, a student in a self-contained special education classroom is in the most restrictive environment. Smith stated that part of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act delegated that a child's least restrictive environment is the closest school to a child's home. This was proposed due to past endeavors where children with special needs would be sent to special schools outside of their school district. School and Cooper (1992) noted that accommodations must be made wherever possible and feasible in order to be congruent with least restrictive environment clauses. This has had an effect on school counselors in working with special needs students for the simple fact that counselors need to advocate and make sure that students with special needs are being placed in the least restrictive environments as possible.

Mainstreaming

Mainstreaming was a term delegated in the 1970's and it dealt with placing special education students in general education classrooms where special education students would do general education work (Tarver-Behring, Spanga, & Sullivan, 1998). Students with special needs could be placed in the classroom all or part of the day. This idea eventually was phased out because students with special needs were not getting the help or accommodations they needed to be successful. When mainstreaming began to fail, along came inclusion, which has been much more successful (Henely, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 2002).

Inclusion

Inclusion, which developed as mainstreaming failed, is the idea of and practice of educating students with special needs in the general education classroom (Quigney & Studer, 1998). This differed from mainstreaming in that inclusion would be done in the local school while making sure the necessary supports and accommodations were given to the student in the general education setting (Quigney & Studer). The idea of inclusion has been difficult to implement for most schools due to a multitude of reasons which range from time management, patience, and the idea of having to diversify one's teaching style. Research has proven the effectiveness of inclusion (Henely, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 2002). It just seems that all educators need to embrace it in order to make this practice work.

Individualized Education Program

The last term, individualized education plan (IEP), is part of the services that must be provided for a student with a documented disability. The plan is put together by an IEP team which may include the school counselor, among others. The IEP establishes a baseline of the student's strengths and documented deficits and then the team sets goals for the student to achieve over the next year. Parents work in conjunction with the school staff in order to ensure success.

The School Counselor and Special Needs Students

Why has it been difficult for school counselors to embrace and put into practice some of the aforementioned policies and concepts? According to Scarborough and Deck (1998), only six states require graduate training in the education of students with disabilities. With statistics like this, one can see how little training and experience that most school counselors have when it

comes to working with special needs students. But, how important are school counselors to students with special needs?

In 1996 the U.S. Department of Education reaffirmed that school counseling and guidance is one of the three related services most needed by students with special needs (Bowen & Glenn, 1998). Glenn (1998) stated:

When school counselors do not provide services or develop programs to accommodate the needs of children and adolescents with disabilities, they deny these students their expertise and themselves of enrichment that comes with working with children and adolescents with disabilities who are challenging, deserving, and responsive. (p. iii)

What are the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in working with special needs students? The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) suggested that, “school counselors advocate for students with disabilities in the school and in the community, assist students with disabilities in planning for transitions to careers or to post-secondary institutions, and counsel parents and families of students with disabilities” (Milsom, 2002, p.332). ASCA also suggested that school counselors should “provide activities to improve students self-esteem, provide individual and group counseling, provide social skills training, and serve as a consultant to parents and staff” (Milsom, 2002, p. 332).

Bowen and Glenn (1998) stated that school counselors are responsible for providing preventative and supportive services for students with disabilities as well. These suggestions for what school counselors today should be doing with special needs students can be quite overwhelming at first, but with practice and with patience most school counselors should be able to provide these services.

A School Counselor's Personal Awareness

In order to be effective in working with special needs students, counselors have to be aware of any possible unintentional discrimination. Scarborough and Deck (1998) suggested that school counselors should provide the same guidance and counseling services with special needs students as well as general education students. Parette and Hourcade (1995) stated, "To be able to work with these individuals most effectively, it is often useful for counselors to be aware of their own limitations, and thus shared experiences they have with people who have more significant disabilities" (p. 226). Parette and Hourcade also suggested some common courtesies when working with special needs students, such as talking at their level, shaking hands, making eye contact, and referring to them by person first language. The idea of knowing one's limitations and unintentional discrimination can be very helpful in turning these types of injustices around and creating the most effective program for special needs students. For the next part of this paper the author will be discussing the high school counselors' role in the various services provided to special needs students.

Roles of the School Counselor

Individual Counseling

Students with special needs require individual counseling for a variety of reasons. Milsom (2002) stated that the most common types of individual counseling issues dealt with self-concept, social skills, behavior, study skills, and career awareness. Quigney and Studer (1998) stated that students might have issues dealing with future goals, expectations, and educational planning. Bowen and Glenn (1998) described some psychosocial problems that may be displayed by special needs students. For instance, students may lack self-direction, and dependency may

become a significant problem. Also, students with special needs may lack adaptive social behaviors and display a variety of personality problems.

One of those areas of concern that is present in a multitude of educational resources is the need for school counselors to work with special needs students in the area of self-esteem.

Quigney and Studer (1998) stated that counselors should help special needs students feel positive and confident. Other areas of concern to be addressed in individual counseling are motivation and high dependency on others. Bowen and Glenn (1998) stated that some students with special needs in high school have an external locus of control and see that success and failures are viewed as luck rather than by ability or effort. Special needs students who experience frequent failure begin to expect it, according to Bowen and Glenn. Glenn (1998) stated that special needs students may experience chronic helplessness as a result of depression and anxiety, which might affect their willingness to ask questions or seek help. Bergin and Bergin (2004) indicated that students with special needs who experience this learned helplessness tend to shut down or refuse to try new strategies of learning.

Social skills training. When working with special needs students in a one-on-one setting this provides a perfect opportunity to work on social and life skills. These two areas are extremely important because these students will need to use these skills the rest of their lives. Examples of life skills would be being able to balance a checking account, being able to wash clothes, or knowing where they can go to mail a letter or a bill. Examples of social skills training would be working with students in order to help them develop positive relationships with peers and adults and also working with them in being able to control any types of unusual behaviors they may have, such as picking at their skin when they get nervous (Baumberger & Harper, 1999).

Students with disabilities will use these skills in school, the work place, in the community, and in daily social encounters for the rest of their lives.

Goal setting. Goal setting is another area to work on when meeting with special needs students individually. Some typical goals established with special needs students are social or emotional goals, behavioral goals, career-related goals, and life skills goals (Baumberger & Harper, 1999). Having goal setting procedures established with special needs students is very worthwhile and effective. Baumberger and Harper suggested making these goals achievable because if they are too far out of reach and are not attained, special needs students may become frustrated and lose motivation. If something like this were to occur, this could possibly result in feelings of failure or learned helplessness.

Academic strategies and self-advocacy. Other areas to work on with special needs students include academic strategies and self-advocacy. Students with special needs and their parents or teachers tend to be very receptive to any type of additional academic strategies the counselor can provide.

Academic strategies could consist of helping them use systematic webs, which are an educational tool to help organize notes, or referring them to a tutor or other educator for an area of documented concern or deficiency. Other tools that a school counselor can give to a student with special needs to help them academically are graphic organizers, highlighters, pre-typed notes or larger font, or lectures on tape.

The idea of self-advocacy takes place when the special needs student leaves high school for college or the career field. Helping students become self-advocates is important because they might not be able to receive the services in their post-secondary education or career. Counselors need to work with special needs students to explain their documented areas of deficiency and

what reasonable accommodations they need in order to be successful. Also, counselors can help these students by providing them or their parents with the information about outside agencies that provide training and education to students with documented disabilities.

Group Counseling

Group counseling is beneficial for students with special needs for a multitude of reasons. Helms and Katsiyannis (1992) stated, "group counseling has been found to be effective in helping students with disabilities understand themselves and learn to build relationships with other students (p. 39)." Bergin and Bergin (2004) described group counseling as a supportive peer environment which can help clarify self-identity issues and is a place where students can acquire coping strategies through role play and discussion.

In the group environment, a school counselor can discuss the concern of motivation and self-esteem with special needs students who can learn and listen to each other's experiences. The aspect that is most beneficial about group counseling is that one can take the same topics or concerns from the individual counseling process and put them to use in the group setting. Topics mentioned earlier in individual counseling that could be acknowledged would be communication or social skills, life skills, high dependency on others, goal setting, academic strategies, and self-advocacy.

A school counselor needs to take the time to set up groups cautiously and screen potential members. Group counseling can be an effective and beneficial experience if the counselor has taken the time to make sure all the correct procedures have been taken care of. These procedures would consist of screening potential group members to see if they want to be in a group, what they would like to get from the group, and how they would get along with other potential members in the group.

Classroom Guidance or School Awareness

Classroom guidance in the secondary setting is just another way a school counselor can advocate for special needs students publicly. Through classroom guidance, a school counselor can teach communications skills to help special needs students and their general education peers be successful in interpersonal interactions with teachers and each other (Bergin & Bergin, 2004). School counselors can also educate all students about the unique qualities of special needs students and their contributions to our society (Quigney & Studer, 1998).

Another advantage to advocating publicly for special needs students in the classroom is deciphering myth from fact. Over the years a vast amount of myths have been associated with special needs students. Therefore, presenting information on this in a classroom guidance forum could be beneficial in deciphering these facts. Also, using the classroom setting, school counselors can discuss common courtesies that all students should extend to special needs students, along with all persons having disabilities. By doing this, one is promoting positive interaction with persons with disabilities with the hope of having all students understand that having a disability does not mean that you are unable to live a highly productive and joyful life.

Family Consulting

Consulting with parents of special needs students is a major role of a high school counselor. A school counselor can help families adapt, set reasonable goals and find ways to balance needs of the entire family (Carpenter, King-Sears, & Keys, 1998). Baumberger and Harper (1999) stated that school counselors should make parents feel welcomed by acknowledging and addressing the legitimacy of a parent's concern. According to Baumberger and Harper, school counselors need to earn parents' trust and do this by treating parents of students with special needs as normal people with a full range of strengths and weaknesses. When working with

parents, one must be honest with them about their child's condition and give them realistic suggestions for all areas of life. A school counselor, along with special education teachers' should discuss with parents their child's assets and defaults and how these might apply to future endeavors.

Another responsibility that school counselors have when working with parents who have a special needs child or children is providing information on diagnosis and suggestive strategies to help support the educational process for their child (McEachern & Barnot, 2001).

Communication is also important when working with parents. Lombana (1992) suggested that a school counselor should involve parents in every day procedures, become informed about community resources, relay this information, and give copies of reports to parents. McEachern and Barnot stated that school counselors can inform parents about the process of evaluation and educational placement of their child, along with encouraging them to be active in the process.

School counselors can also provide support for a family who has special needs students in varying ways. School counselors can give support to the family emotionally, through informative material and through government or community resources (Henely, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 2002). School counselors can also provide support by suggesting parental support groups and becoming the facilitator if he or she chooses to exercise this role.

Consulting with Teachers

Consultation with teachers has to be one of the most utilized roles of the school counselor. School counselors as consultants to teachers provide knowledge regarding education, development, and social or emotional concerns of students with disabilities (Quigney & Studer, 1998). School counselors should assume responsibility for expanding and enhancing professional development in the area of special needs. Designing these staff development

programs or in-services, school counselors can enhance perceptions, attitudes, and understanding of special needs students as a whole (Scarborough & Deck, 1998). Staff development programs should include clarifying the meaning of certain disabilities, describing types of accommodations that may enhance academic success, providing information about college and universities equipped to serve students with disabilities, defining the role of school counselor in career development with students having disabilities, and sharing academic strategies with other teachers (McEachern & Barnot 2004; Dickey & Satcher, 1994).

An important role that school counselors have as a consultant to teachers is just reassuring them that they are there to help when and wherever possible, whether that means helping them with modification needs in the classroom, identifying ways of coping with stress from the job, or helping them work with parents (Lombana, 1992). When helping teachers work with parents, the idea of communication should be stressed (Tarver-Behring, Spanga, & Sullivan, 1998). Teachers can keep in contact with parents in various ways such as telephone, writing a letter, e-mail, or word of mouth to keep these lines of communication open.

School counselors should also review laws and legislation with teachers. They need to be aware that accommodations made for special needs students in class and on tests are a part of that student's IEP, which is a legal document that must be followed.

School counselors have been consulting for a number of years on a number of topics. But it is important that they follow the steps of consultation correctly in order to have the process be effective. The steps of consultation are: identify the problem, state clear objectives, implement a plan, and then evaluate that plan once put into action (Lombana, 1992).

Career and Post-Secondary Education

Career and post-secondary placement for students with special needs can be a very rewarding experience for both the student and the counselor if an effective program is developed and in place. It is estimated that the national unemployment rate is around 4% and that 40-70% of persons with disabilities have been unemployed, as well as 65-75% of persons with disabilities who have been unable to achieve independent living status (Fox, Wandry, Pruitt & Anderson, 1998).

Benner (1998) identified that secondary schooling for students with special needs can end in one of three ways: graduation, dropping out, or aging out. Dickey and Satcher (1994) noted that without appropriate career guidance, students with disabilities might believe that post-secondary education is out of their reach. From these statistics, one can see the importance of developing productive career and post-secondary placement programs.

Career related suggestions. Counselors do several things in order to make career and post-secondary placement for students with disabilities a success. In the area of career placement, school counselors can help students choose careers that match their strengths and limitations, implement interest inventories, set up job shadowing experiences, encourage self-introspection, assist in applications process, design and implement career exploration activities, develop and use community resources, consult with parents concerning career decision, develop a career portfolio, help individuals set career goals and make career plans, and provide assistance to students on how to look for jobs while discussing realistic job expectations (Bowen & Glenn, 1998; Lombana, 1992; Milsom 2002).

In the area of post-secondary placement, a school counselor can perform a number of options in preparing a special needs student for approval and probable success. Some of these options

include placing the students in achievable college prep classes, discussing two versus four-year colleges along with private and technical schools, helping students apply for financial assistance (grants, loans, and work study), locating and surfing post-secondary websites, setting up initial visits, assisting and monitoring the application process, attaining special considerations time such as extensions on entrance exams, helping students identify and receive the support services such as support aides examples of these would be academic advisors, tutors, peer support groups, diagnostic testing, counseling services, and campus orientation (Hildreth, Dixon, Frerichs, & Heflin 1994; Satcher, 1993; Schwallie-Giddis & West, 2004). . A school counselor can also help special needs students become self-advocates about what they will need to be successful in post-secondary placements (e.g., Hildreth et al., 1994; Satcher, 1993; Schwallie-Giddis & West, 2004).

Two things that are extremely important when preparing special needs students for career or post-secondary advancement are preparing them for transitions and becoming self-advocates. Getting students prepared for transitions from high school to either a career or college should begin when they first reach the high school. Transition strategies include student led IEP meetings; life skills training in the areas of daily living, personal-social adjustment, occupational skills; and providing an environment that adheres to “context teaching” (Schwallie-Giddis & West, 2004, p.33). Context teaching, connects the context and process of learning to the real world.

The other item mentioned was self-advocacy, which is so important due to the fact that a federally funded post-secondary school is federally mandated to make accommodations for special needs students with IEP’s or 504 plans if the student relays his or her needs to school officials. School counselors can help special needs students by assisting them in being able to

disclose information about themselves and the accommodations they need to be successful in a post-secondary institution.

Evaluation Process

The last role or responsibility deals with a school counselors' input in the evaluation process of special needs students. In 1994, ASCA identified functions of a school counselor, and assisting with the identifications of students with special needs was one of them (Milsom, 2002). The evaluation process consists of several components that schools counselors can be actively involved with. These components include setting up the initial screening, referring to area consultants or experts, receiving parental consent, initiating various assessments techniques, being apart of the IEP committee, getting the parents to agree to a course of action to be taken, developing IEPs, delivering services to the student (meaning that accommodations are put into place), and meeting at least annually afterward to monitor progress and produce new goals and accommodations if applicable (Baumberger & Harper, 1999).

Conclusion

Throughout this paper the author has highlighted the various roles and responsibilities of school counselors working with students having special needs. Over the years, by way of changes or updates in legislation and structural changes within the school environment, school counselors involvement with this population of students has dramatically increased. The responsibilities of school counselors such as individual counseling, group counseling, career and post-secondary placement, family consultation, and teacher consultation will continue to as important as they have ever been.

It is the author's suggestion that school counselors working with this population continue to instill these responsibilities into their counseling services. School counselors should realize their

importance with this select population and that their work with them is beneficial to all involved.

Scarborough and Deck (1998) stated that school counselors should not make excuses for not

knowing, but go in and make a difference. The future looks bright for students with special

needs when they are supported by those who care and are willing to help them succeed. And,

one of those major supporters is the school counselor.

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