

1984

A study of support groups among Iowa school counselors

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A study of support groups among Iowa school counselors

Abstract

Among the helping professions a common concept is the support group. "The social-professional support system (group) affords members ... opportunities for analyzing problems they encounter and discussing how they feel about these problems. It provides a structure for support and rewards" (Moracco and McFadden, 1980, p. 63). From a review of the literature it is apparent that many support groups both inside and outside the helping professions have been created and utilized. For instance, outside the school counselor's domain, groups such as the Compassionate Friends, Families Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Smokenders, and Widowed Persons have all served as support groups for people in need. (McCormack, 1981, p. 2)

A STUDY OF SUPPORT GROUPS AMONG
IOWA SCHOOL COUNSELORS

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Robert Laurence Huber

July 1984

This Research Paper by: Robert Laurence Huber

Entitled: A Study of Support Groups Among Iowa School Counselors

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Among the helping professions a common concept is the support group. "The social-professional support system (group) affords members . . . opportunities for analyzing problems they encounter and discussing how they feel about these problems. It provides a structure for support and rewards" (Moracco and McFadden, 1980, p. 63).

From a review of the literature it is apparent that many support groups both inside and outside the helping professions have been created and utilized. For instance, outside the school counselor's domain, groups such as the Compassionate Friends, Families Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Smokenders, and Widowed Persons have all served as support groups for people in need. (McCormack, 1981, p. 2)

An example of how a support group might enter the school counselor's field of work can be seen through referral of a teenage alcoholic. Immediately after the teenager has undergone therapy the counselor could identify other teenagers with similar problems. The counselor would bring the teenage alcoholics together and discuss the promote ways of dealing with their drinking problems. Therefore, this group could be defined as a support group due to the similar needs the teenagers experience. The group would discuss individual problems and use the group for support and rewards.

There is some question as to whether school counselors who would suggest support groups for their clients would also utilize support groups to aid themselves. It is important that school counselors utilize all possible available resources to most effectively perform in

their jobs. In Iowa the role of "counselor" may be becoming more difficult as a result of changes that are being made in counselors' job descriptions. In part, due to a steady decline in student enrollment, counselors are being asked to assume more duties than in the past. It is not uncommon to read advertised job openings for counselors with requests for teaching duties and extra-curricular assignments listed as a part of the counselor's position.

In assessing the difficult job counselors face, logic seems to dictate that support from other counselors could be critical in at least two areas: (a) providing professional assistance for the counselor's job-related needs, and (b) providing a buffer for avoiding "burnout" or professional withdrawal. Thus, the question arises as to whether Iowa school counselors themselves utilize support groups for personal needs. Can the same benefits of support groups, which have been associated with numerous other professional and lay bodies, also assist counselors within their profession?

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to determine what support groups are available for Iowa school counselors, what support groups the counselors utilize, and whether counselors indicate greater satisfaction when they are able to have other counselors lending them support. The study is based on a survey of 200 Iowa school counselors on a statewide basis. The 176 respondents represent 16.5% of the counselors employed in Iowa private and public schools during the 1982-1983 school year.

Importance of the Study

The literature is filled with details describing stress and stressors on helping professionals. A number of professions have utilized support groups for combatting job frustration and "burnout". To combat counselor stress a support group might be one logical source for assistance. If, indeed, support groups can be shown to alleviate burnout, and to reduce job frustration, the application of support groups for counselors would be appropriate.

Before it is possible to test empirically whether professional counselor support groups are beneficial, determination must be made of what supportive resources are available to school counselors in Iowa and whether these resources are utilized by counselors. This paper will focus on school counselors and will assess the supportive resources these counselors seek out.

Assumptions

For the purpose of this study the following assumptions will apply:

1. School counselors need sources of support to assist them in maintaining and improving job performance.
2. Various forms of support sources are available for school counselors within the professional settings in which they work.
3. The numbers and forums of support sources available to school counselors can be determined.
4. The extent to which school counselors avail themselves of the support groups can be determined.

Limitations

Several limitations do threaten this study. First, the questionnaire used was not refined through pilot testing. The questionnaire was developed and directly sent to the sample of school counselors.

Second, the concept of support groups for school counselors is not universally recognized. As a result, it was necessary to arbitrarily define support groups as "counselors who are currently meeting with fellow counselors with the purpose being to fulfill professional and personal needs as school counselors." In actuality, individual counselors may not perceive these meetings as serving the function of a support group.

Finally, because it was impractical to survey all counselors in Iowa, a random sample of 200 K-12 school counselors from across Iowa was selected. Although the groups was discriminatively selected, over 1000 K-12 school counselors were not surveyed. Thus, the findings of this study are based on the 200 counselors used as a representative sample.

Definitions

Counselors: An individual identified by the Department of Public Instruction of Iowa (DPI), in the Spring of 1983, as being employed in any one of the K-12 counselor positions in the public and private schools within Iowa.

Support Groups: Counselors meeting together in forums held on a regular basis for the purpose of assisting each other professionally and personally. These counselor groups can be broken down into three

distinct groups: (a) American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD), and Iowa Association for Counseling and Development (IACD) meetings regularly held for professional purposes that include school counselors as members; (b) county meetings held for counselors by the Local Area Education Agency (LAEA) support staff; and (c) in-district meetings held by the local school districts for counselors.

Professionals: Persons within the school community who may provide support. These professionals would include teachers, administrators, and LAEA support staff.

Stress: Anxiety or frustration, which if too severe, may inhibit the counselor from being able to satisfactorily perform duties assigned by the school administrators and/or the desired goals personally set by the counselor.

Burnout: The situation in which the counselor either mentally or physically withdraws from the duties which the counselor is expected to perform in a satisfactory manner. Burnout results when the counselor cannot satisfactorily cope with the stress or stressors confronting him or her personally.

Chapter Two

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This study is based on the existence and utilization of school counselor support groups within Iowa. The use of support groups among counselors in Iowa schools is difficult to document in the literature. This chapter reviews the literature and documents the findings on stress and burnout among educators, notes counselor isolation, outlines the support group role, and establishes support group guidelines.

Stress and Burnout Among Educators

The literature is replete with reports of educator stress and burnout (Alschuler, 1980; Cristiani & Herring, 1981; Cummings & Nall, 1982; Day & Sparacio, 1980; Kirk & Walter, 1981; Maher, 1982; Pearson, 1983; Vestermark & Johnson, 1970; Walley & Stokes, 1981; and Watkins, 1983). Present literature relates that undue stress, leading to burnout, can destroy the effectiveness of the educators in dealing with students. In order to understand how the support group might be effective in alleviating these concerns, it is necessary to identify the problems which create stress and burnout.

It is difficult to find empirical data which gives the actual scope and magnitude of the problem among educators.

Unfortunately, the literature on the subject (stress and burnout), even some that involves empirical data, seems to lack a coherent theoretical basis. Although often couched in terms of causes and cure, these articles rarely leave the level of description, thus providing an inadequate foundation for research and treatment. (Maher, 1983, p. 390)

Even though the literature does not identify the magnitude of stress and burnout problems, the definitions of these phenomena are being refined. For the purpose of this study stress will be confined

to those factors which hinder the counselor's ability to perform satisfactorily in a professional manner. Sparks (1979) defines stress as characterized by exhaustion, tension, and physical ailments. Kirk and Walter (1981) write that stress has been defined as feelings of isolation, loneliness, and lack of support.

From the literature it is evident that job stress may result in personal complications including burnout. Romano (1984) has written about offering academic credit as a vehicle for stress management and wellness. One segment of the course is to study job stress and burnout. Job stress is defined by Romano as a cause of burnout. These causes of burnout have been categorized by the recent works of writers on stress to include:

1. Excessively large and/or difficult client load
2. Role expansion, role ambiguity
3. Lack of felt control over outcomes
4. Monotony
5. Isolation, poor work relationships
6. Lack of preparation for stress management
7. Long hours over long periods, without time off
8. Personality characteristics (Maher, 1983, p. 392)

The literature indicates that too much stress can lead to burnout. Therefore, it is necessary to understand burnout. What is burnout? A counselor who either mentally or physically withdraws from duties assigned would be characterized as suffering from burnout.

In the mid-seventies, Herbert Freudenberger (1974) and others, published articles on a phenomena they called "burnout." They described a problem that was at that time especially troublesome to professional and volunteers in "alternative institutions" . . .

Freudenberger, a psychoanalyst, was sensitized to the problem in part by his own experience of burnout while operating a clinic in New York. He found himself working 20 hours a day with grossly inadequate facilities and inexperienced volunteers, yet making hardly any impact on the intractable poverty, sickness, and addiction around him. He lost weight, developed a persistent cold, became irritable with co-workers and family, and finally crashed in total exhaustion - burned out. (Maher, 1983, p. 390)

Not only can stress and burnout be devastating to the individual but burnout can have organizational repercussions as well. Moracco and McFadden (1980) have investigated organization burnout. This is a syndrome characterized by low worker morale, low productivity rates, high levels of absenteeism, ineffective and infrequent communication between workers, and high rates of job turnover. In organizations experiencing high rates of employee burnout, there is little apparent direction and few goals--the organization and its workers function with no sense of mission.

Seemingly burnout is widespread in scope. "By 1982, hardly a professional journal had not in some way addressed the problem as it was manifested in the particular field in question" (Maher, 1983, p. 390).

Maher (1983) did emphasize the wide reports on burnout by stating that bibliographical research had yielded over 1000 entries on the subject. A portion of this same literature also reports that burnout can have a very detrimental effect on the educator and the school system.

Job burnout tends to involve a lack of energy and enthusiasm at both home and work and includes: (a) Depletion of physical and mental resources; (b) Personal expectation aimed far too high, and (c) Relationships with others (e.g., clients) that sap one's reserves. (Watkins, 1983, p. 305)

Thus, the definition of job burnout demonstrates the effects on individuals which may lead to detrimental personal consequences.

Although burnout is an occupational hazard that all teachers (and, in fact, all members of the helping professions) are exposed to sooner or later, its effect varies with the individual. Some teachers leave education altogether. Others burn out but stay on the job - counting the days until Friday, turning themselves off as they enter the school year, waiting for retirement. (Thompson and Jacques, 1980, p. 3)

Like the research on stress, the research on burnout still lacks enough empirical basis to report solutions for its consequences of counselor maladjustment. Watkins (1983) expressed the belief that counselors themselves need to do more research in the field.

Counselors who provide therapeutic services, for the most part have given inadequate attention to the experience of burnout and its consequences. Our colleagues in other helping disciplines (e.g. social work, psychoanalysis), however, have written about the many demands and difficulties that arise from the role of being a professional helper. The myriad of problems cited by these professionals would seem to be equally applicable to the practicing counselor. (Watkins, 1983, p. 306)

The implication is that there are both individual and organizational burnout possibilities for educators, and namely, for school counselors. Although the literature is sporadic in reporting the scope of burnout among counselors, there do appear to be dangers. None of these dangers is more graphic than the following:

Counselor burnout is an adverse response that is often associated with pathogenic physiological and biochemical changes that are a consequence of aspects of the counselor's work. The demands made upon the counselor present a threat to his/her self-worth. Current coping mechanisms are inadequate to diminish the perceived threat. (Moracco, 1981, p. 3)

Counselor Isolation

Regardless of the etiology of the emptiness, the feeling tends to be real and painful . . . the counselor can become characterized by eternal gloom and pessimism. It is no wonder, then, that many people in the helping professions choose later to renounce their roles and engage in other occupations. (Watkins, 1983, p. 306)

The literature suggests that counselors need support in order to avoid job stress and burnout. Moracco (1981) contends that the greatest deterrent to burnout in the counseling environment is an effective socio-professional support system for counselors. Counselors in the school have been recognized as being in special roles. Are they teachers? Are they administrators? Who are their peers? Often in their jobs as student advocates counselors are placed in isolated positions.

Counselors are often perceived by teachers and students as quasi-administrators, because their greatest visibility is associated with course assignments, scheduling, dealing with disciplinary referrals, and officiating at standardized testing rituals. Armor's report that counselors are perceived as essentially irrelevant by middle-class students making their decisions about the future suggests that counselors also lack referent influence (regardless of the accuracy of student perceptions). Administrators are likely to perceive counselors as quasi-teacher, rather than as aligned with themselves, because many counselors are former teachers. (Stulac and Stanwyck, 1980, p. 494)

Vestermark and Johnson (1970) echo the theme of counselor isolation by stating that the counselor has a special need for revitalizing friendships and satisfying interpersonal ties as a kind of psychic reservoir from which to draw. Should the counselor "play solitaire" too frequently he or she may come increasingly to feel depleted and this denies the counselor the ability of giving more of self to the students. Admittedly, it may not be easy, either practically (because of time boundaries) or psychologically (because of habit and temperament), to cultivate and restore satisfying relationships among professional peers. Recognition of this need, however, is the important first step to its resolution (Vestermark and Johnson, 1970, p. 107).

A philosophy built on concern and respect for the being of others, but minimizing attention to oneself, is extremely valuable, according to Day and Sparacio (1980). These authors affirm the idea that counselors need support by writing that the very nature and philosophy on which school counseling is based contributes to maintenance of barriers to the proper practice of the profession. Furthermore, school counselors often find themselves attempting to maintain their identity and to perform their role in a setting in which their colleagues (teachers) and supervisors (administrators) are of different philosophical and methodological persuasions.

Isolation from fellow workers, or self-inflicted isolation caused by the job is a very important factor in counselor burnout according to Watkins (1983).

The likelihood of developing professional and personal burnout is great for the counselor whose workday is invariably counseling individuals with concerns of primarily personal or emotional nature . . . The counselor may also experience a feeling of emptiness; emptiness that can permeate into both one's professional and personal life. (Watkins, 1983, p. 306)

Counselors as helping professionals are taught about empathy and the concern for others. Therefore, it seems logical that counselors would seek the same type of support for themselves, though, this does not always appear to be true.

It seems obvious that the counselor, of all persons, should understand how varied can be the psychological concerns traceable to faulty relationships. Yet, while able to recognize the cause and effect of such feeling as rejection, alienation, or hostility in his cases, he may be slow to recognize the significance of some of these feelings in his own life situation. All he may know is that he feels tired much of the time. (Vestermarck & Johnson, 1970, p. 106)

Because counselors constitute a small part of the school faculty, their role can place them in an isolated position. Without support an over-worked, over-stressed counselor can cease to help the client and possibly quit the job (See Watkins, 1983). One method that can be considered to assist the counselor avoid excess stress, burnout, and isolation is the support group.

The Support Group Role

The application of support groups to overcome isolation and stress is reported in the literature (Alschuler, 1980; Biegel, 1980; Cristiani and Herring, 1981; Kirk and Walter, 1981; Walley and Stokes, 1981; and Watkins, 1983). The literature lacks abundant information about counselor support groups, or for that matter, educator support groups. However, the education field is beginning to explore support groups, especially for teachers, as seen in the work done by Walley and Stokes (1981) on the Chicago Teacher's Union. It would seem to be the next natural step that administrators and school counselors would also be considered for support group categorization and study.

Previous to this time all support groups have been slow to be studied, as has been pointed out by Lieberman (1979), because Western Civilization attitudes place heavy emphasis on the individual. Furthermore, Wellman (1980) has concluded that it is empirically difficult to measure the ties of support (or the relationship between the peers) because researchers have been slow to develop criteria which measure and define the universal ties they seemingly are investigating. In other words, how can the research operationally define support?

In Pathfinders, Gail Sheehy (1981) asked two central questions about the effectiveness of support groups. First, will support groups tend to cause member to adopt the problem?" And secondly, do people transcend common frustrations or just express them? Sheehy answered her own questions by stating that by fortifying us in the continuing need to seek new openings in our paths, and to rebound from setbacks, friendships and inships and support systems are important aids to the pathfinding process.

If the support system is indeed viable, it must meet the needs of those people who participate in it. If indeed the participants adopt the "problem" the system of support is futile. Caplan (1974) views the support system in the same way as does Sheehy (1981), that is, as a benefit towards finding oneself:

The characteristics attribute of a support system is that they act as a buffer against disease and that in such a relationship the person is dealt with as a unique individual. The other people are interested in him in a personalized way. They speak his language. They tell him what is expected of him and guide him in what to do. They watch what he does and they judge his performance. They let him know how well he has done. They reward him for success and punish or support and comfort him if he fails. Above all, they are sensitive to his personal needs, which they deem worthy of respect and satisfaction. (Caplan, 1974, p. 89)

In order to assist in overcoming isolation within the profession and to alleviate stress among counselors, the support group is mentioned as a vehicle to be utilized. In speaking of the general workplace, Biegala (1980) concludes that lately there has been increased recognition of the importance of workplace as a social support system. Pearson (1983) has written that support groups will have two common features. The first is that there is a common problem or concern among

group members. Secondly, there is with the support groups an emphasis on peer help.

It does appear that professional peer relationships are crucial and can be a major influence in job satisfaction and/or job dissatisfaction. Teacher support groups optimize these potentially potent relationships then, to counteract feelings of isolation and lack of support that seem so prevalent in teacher burnout. (Kirk, 1981, p. 147)

Caplan (1974) cites the benefits of peer support as being twofold and such support can be summarized as follows:

1) It provides social-emotional supports of regular friendly interaction with those in similar situations who understand one's predicament and share one's concern and, 2) It offers help with current tasks provided by those who describe how they have handled situations and what the consequences were of different ways of dealing with them. (Caplan, 1974, p. 30)

Thus, not only does Caplan cite the emotional support needed to combat stress, but he also mentions how job performance can be improved.

Kirschenbaum and Glaser (1978) have focused on peer strategists, or professionals who are at the same plane as other counselors. Kirschenbaum and Glaser have concluded that through sharing, listening, and advising in an organized group, or support group, help in coping with stress and other concerns related to inhibiting professional growth can occur. The emphasis on peer help for professionals is increasingly being reported in the literature (Kirschenbaum and Glaser, 1978; Rawlins and Rawlins, 1983).

The literature is nearly silent on support groups involving school counselors but there are increasing indications that among these professionals, support groups can help prevent job stress and burnout. Peer help among counselors may be the greatest help in providing support.

Whether or not group members share a specific concern as the focus of their association, the support group as a mutual help group seems based on the assumption that help exchanged among persons who are peers with regard to background or level of formal training has greater effectiveness than that which comes from nonpeers. (Pearson, 1983, p. 361)

Support Group Guidelines

It is difficult to establish how a support group for counselors should function because counselor support groups are not frequently reported. Not only is there little information about support groups for counselors but the literature is also surprisingly silent about support groups for professional educators. One exception is the Chicago Teacher's Union and their attempt to build a professional self-help vehicle (Walley and Stokes, 1981). This example of a support group helps to express how Iowa counselor support groups might function. First, what is a support group brought together to achieve? From the Chicago example the participation of members resulted in the formulation of the following guidelines:

- 1) Members provide support for each other when solving problems
- 2) Sanctions and origins of the group exist among the members
- 3) Members rely on each other for skills and expertise rather than relying on outside professionals
- 4) Members share a common set of experiences or problems.
(Walley and Stokes, 1981, p. 4)

Furthermore, Kirk and Walter (1981) have outlined some suggestions for the most effective support groups. The authors suggest an optimal group size of 5 to 8 persons to stimulate a spontaneous and interesting discussion. The following guidelines may be of assistance in forming support groups:

Suggested Participant Guidelines

1. Share not only hardships but your moments of achievement and accomplishment. Try to focus on the specifics of how you overcame a problem

2. Be willing to share concerns and problems
3. Listen
4. Offer feedback but be supportive
5. Be on time
6. Let others know when you can't attend and why
7. Commit yourself
8. Agree to confidentiality
9. Avoid attempting to do therapy or promote significant behavior change. Members define their own problems. Group members can support
10. Avoid groups with a self-appointed leader
11. Set time limits and stick to them
12. Avoid using the group for self gain. (Kirk, 1981, pp. 149-150)

Although the literature does not contain specific guidelines for school counselors, Litvak (1980) writes of some general guidelines that could perhaps be useful for counselor support groups. They are summarized as follows:

- 1) Members are motivated by their interest in each other
- 2) Groups require no supervision
- 3) Members make long term commitment to the group
- 4) Members have a continuous close proximity and close contact
- 5) Support groups are small in numbers
- 6) Topics are not specialized or delimited.

Even though the literature is currently silent on counselor support groups, movement in the educational field in the area of support groups makes them a possibility for aid to counselors in the future. Why have not professional support meetings for counselors taken place and why are there not more guidelines?

It is my opinion that when our profession first began to emerge and grow in the early 60's, that generally speaking, our leadership either overlooked the need for counselor support groups or if they did see the need for them, did not act to develop them. In my reviews of the literature, I have found few articles which have spoken to this need and fewer attempts to address it. On the other hand, one can find a great number of workshops and

in-service programs which (1) address new theories, ideas, and approaches to counseling and guidance; and (2), provide current up-to-date information for counselors. On the other hand, very little is written about programs which provide counselors opportunities to share their concerns, problems, needs, etc.--to support each other. (John Thompson, Coordinator, Guidance & Testing, Heartland Area Education Agency, Ankeny, Iowa (see Appendix C

Thus, it can be concluded that guidelines for counselor support groups are very limited. However, it can safely be surmised that support groups in education are growing and more guidelines are likely to result. The expansion into education would naturally have profound implications for the counseling profession.

Summary of Review of Related Literature

The review done for this chapter established the following points:

1. There are many reports of educator stress and burnout in the literature. However, it is difficult to find empirical studies that provide a research basis to determine the scope and magnitude of the phenomena among counselors.

2. It is evident that counselors face isolation in their job role--thus exposing them to job stress and burnout.

3. The support group is one technique to stand as a buffer against counselor isolation. It provides a common forum for mutual concern and allows for peer help when assistance is requested and/or needed.

4. Support group guidelines are available to be tested and research can ultimately determine if indeed the support of other counselors can alleviate counselor concerns.

It is obvious through reviewing the literature that formal support groups for Iowa school counselors, and school counselors in general, are not prevalent or recognized. However, the recognition that support groups can provide an immediate aid to counselors facing job stress or burnout is growing in the literature reports.

Chapter Three

DESIGN OF THE INVESTIGATION

The major purpose of this study was to determine what support groups are available for Iowa school counselors, what support groups the counselors utilize, and whether counselors indicate greater satisfaction when they are able to have other counselors lending them support. Chapter Two presented a review of relevant literature. In this chapter information will be provided to identify how data were collected, how the research instrument was constructed, the procedures used, and how the data were analyzed.

Source of Data

This study is based on a survey of Iowa school counselors as identified by the Department of Public Instruction of Iowa (DPI) for the 1982-1983 school year. A list of 1069 school counselors was supplied by the DPI (1983) through their official listing of K-12 public and private school counselors. Upon request the listing of counselors was sent to the researcher on pre-printed labels which could be easily affixed to envelopes for mailing purposes. In April, 1983, 200 randomly selected counselors were drawn from the statewide DPI list. Of the 200 counselors to whom the instrument was mailed, 176 (88%) returned usable copies.

Instrument

In reviewing the literature for information regarding support groups for school counselors, little information could be found. Also, no instruments for evaluating counselor support groups were found. Therefore, a self-developed instrument was utilized by the researcher

to measure support through group participation by school counselors (see Appendix B).

The instrument was constructed to answer the basic questions of whether or not support groups are available for Iowa school counselors, what types of groups the counselors utilize, and the degree of satisfaction perceived by counselors who do use support groups. On post cards, six multiple-choice questions were presented to measure support group participation and also the counselors' perceptions of support. Respondents were asked to check the ONE most appropriate answer among five items. The one question which was the exception allowed respondents to indicate which counselor professional meetings they attended.

The instrument used for the study was used without prior pilot testing. In analyzing the results to the questions posed by the instrument it was determined that several of the questions should be expanded and collapsed (refer to Appendix B). The reasons for these revisions were: (a) The researcher sought to compensate for multiple answers created by unsolicited responses; (b) An effort was made to simplify questions A, B, and E, while maintaining the same aims of the questions; and (c) An attempt was made to limit and clarify question D in which "partnership" and "team approach" were not operationally defined.

From the original survey instrument, question B was collapsed to indicate (a) The counselor who worked with no other counselor on the job, and (b) The counselor who worked with one or more counselors on the job. Of the respondents, 102 (58%) indicated they worked with no

other counselors on the job and 74 (42%) indicated they worked with one or more counselors on the job.

Procedure

The study was conducted on a statewide basis. In April, 1983, copies of the 6-item instrument were sent, each with a cover letter (see Appendix A) to the selected counselors. Intentionally, no reference was made in the cover letter requesting the counselors to identify themselves. This was done to assure that respondents would remain anonymous.

The instrument's questions were presented on post cards which were pre-addressed to the researcher in order to encourage a high rate of return. The responses were all received by May 20, 1983.

Analysis of the Data

After the 176 cards were received they were numbered, giving an identity for analysis purposes. The data on the cards were then filed on a computer disc which allowed for cataloguing of all responses. To achieve possible relationships between questions, the responses were cross-tabulated. Tables were then formulated to display the results of the data received from the survey. The analysis of the data from the survey is contained in Chapter Four of this paper.

Chapter Four

FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

The major purpose of this study was to determine what support groups are available for Iowa school counselors, what support groups the counselors utilize, and whether counselors indicate greater satisfaction when they are able to have other counselors lending them support. The preceding chapter presented the design of the study and identified how support group data for Iowa school counselors were collected. This chapter will report the findings obtained by the use of the instrument described in Chapter Three and present a discussion of those findings.

Demographic Information

From information provided by the DPI for 1982-1983 on the official school counselor list, 1069 counselors were identified. In a random sampling of those counselors, 200 instruments were sent to those selected. From the initial mailing, 176 instruments were returned, for a return rate of 88%. The following demographic information summarizes the 176 surveys completed and returned, a sampling of 16.5% of the Iowa school counselors. The information is based on the support groups identified as providing service to Iowa school counselors.

Work Assignments of Counselors

Table 1 shows the work assignments of the counselor respondents. Of the respondents, 24 identified their job as a combined junior high/senior high position even though this information was not solicited by the survey. Therefore a fourth category was added, that of junior/senior high counselor.

Table 1

Work Assignments of Counselors Surveyed

Work Assignment	Number	Percent
1. S.H. Counselor	98	56
2. J.H./S.H. Counselor	24	14
3. Middle/J.H. Counselor	38	21
4. Elementary Counselor	<u>16</u>	<u>9</u>
	N = 176	100

Professional Support

Table 2 lists the professionals whom the respondents identified as providing support for them as counselors on the job. For the purpose of making the respondents' selections more significant, question B was collapsed into four categories including administrators, counselors within the district of the respondent, Area Education Agency (AEA) counselor support staff, and "other". This was done to clarify the reporting of this question's intent.

The survey was also designed to elicit the nature of the positions of counselors who were questioned. Of the counselor respondents, 51% worked with one or more counselors in their school building and 49% worked as the only counselor in their building.

Table 2

Professional Peers Who Provide Support for Counselors

Source of Support	Number	Percentage of Peer Support
1. Fellow Counselors	55	31
2. Administrators	38	22
3. AEA staff	34	19
4. Others	<u>49</u>	<u>28</u>
	N = 176	100

Professional Meetings

The survey asked which professional meetings the counselors attended. There were three counselor meetings defined: American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD) - Iowa Association for Counseling and Development (IACD) meetings; Area Education Agency (AEA) County Counselor Meetings; and In-District Counselor meetings. Of the 176 counselors surveyed 45% attended AACD-IACD meetings, 49% attended AEA County Counselor meetings, and 44% attended In-District Counselor meetings.

Counselor Perception of Frequency of Support

Table 3 reports counselors perceptions regarding the frequency with which they had someone to professionally "lean upon" and to provide them support.

Table 3

Counselor Perception of Frequency of Support

Frequency of Support	Number of Respondents	Percent of Total Respondents
1. Always someone	60	34
2. Almost always someone	57	32
3. Sometimes someone	45	26
4. Almost never someone	<u>14</u>	<u>8</u>
	N = 176	100

Counselors and Peer Support

One key question that arises in this study is to whom do counselors turn for support among the people with whom they work? To answer this question, a cross-tabulation of questions B and C was made with the use of a computer. Question B on the survey asks the respondent to answer the following "I work on an everyday basis with the following number of counselors." Answer for question B were collapsed in the following manner: (a) No other counselors, and (b) one or more other counselors.

Table 4

Number of Counselors in Work Settings Related to Support Source

No. of Couns.	Support Sources				Total
	Administrators	Counselors	AEA Staff	Other	
No other Counselor	25	17	26	33	102
1 or more other Counselors	13	38	8	15	74
Total	38	55	34	49	176

df = 7 Chi Square = 29.3 p < .05

Support From Professional Peers

Table 5 shows the cross-tabulation between the responses to question B and F. Question B asked the respondent to consider: "I work on an everyday basis with the following number of counselors." Answers for question B were collapsed to the responses of: (a) No other Counselors, and (b) One or more other Counselors. Question F asked the respondent to consider: "When I professionally need 'someone to lean on' I" The four responses were: (a) Always have someone, (b) Almost Always have someone, (c) Sometimes have someone, and (d) Almost Never have someone.

Table 5

Number of Counselors in the Work Setting Related to Frequency of Support

Number of Couns.	Degree of Support				Total
	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Almost Never	
No other Counselor	26	34	30	12	102
1 or more other Counselors	34	23	15	2	74
Total	60	57	45	14	176

df = 3 Chi square = 11.16 p < .05

Discussion

The research for counselor support groups was done on the basis that no "formal" known groups have been identified in the literature. This paper is based on the premise that support group functions can be, and are being, carried out in some professional groups. The three main groups investigated for counselor support functioning were AACD-IACD groups, AEA county groups, and in-district groups.

Therefore, this research was based on the investigation of professional groups in which school counselors are able to regularly share personal and professional concerns. Are these in fact support

groups? Pearson (1983) defined support groups as "having a common problem or concern among group members, and an emphasis upon peer help" (p. 361). It is from this definition that the categorization of support groups is drawn from AACD-IACD, AEA county, and in-district group dialogues.

The data compiled represented a cross-section of school counselors in public and private schools. Not surprisingly the population was dominated by secondary counselors as Iowa schools have been slow to employ elementary counselors (see Table I).

Of the counselor sample 58% perceive themselves as working alone. In this group it is obvious that peer counselor support is impossible within the school building.

The survey was designed to investigate to whom counselors turned for professional peer support. Since support was not operationally defined in the survey a general definition must apply. Pearson (1983) gives support to this broad definition of support in two distinct applications.

1) Support primarily serves a remedial function and seeks either to move dysfunctional persons to more effective levels of functioning or, at least, prevent their becoming more dysfunctional. 2) Support . . . is a continued interpersonal resource upon which persons depend for the development and maintenance of their effectiveness, rather than extraordinary intervention to remove deficiency. (p. 362)

The counselors identified four specific groups and a series of "other" on whom they could rely for support. "Others" included several different professionals that were grouped as one category. Support from other counselors was the largest category of professionals upon whom counselors relied. This is shown in Table 2, p. 24. This finding

seems to be consistent with the finding of Rawlins and Rawlins (1983) that peers at the same professional plane provide meaningful support.

The data compiled show a number of counselors are meeting in support groups--the AACD-IACD meetings, AEA meetings, and in-district counselor meetings. However, these forums do not have a majority of counselors surveyed in attendance. Recognition should be given to the idea put forward by Vestermark and Johnson (1970) that the counselor may not perceive problems and therefore not attend to corrective behaviors.

Realizing that no identified support group attracted a majority of the counselors questioned, the data do show that the majority of counselors surveyed responded that they have someone available for support (see Table 3, p. 25). Two-thirds of the counselors reported that "they almost always have someone for support; however, one-third responded that they never, or only sometimes, had someone for support." From these findings, conclusions and recommendations will be offered in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine what support groups for school counselors exist in Iowa, the degree of support counselors experience, and what support groups counselors utilize. In Chapter Four the findings, based on the survey of Iowa school counselors were reported. This chapter will summarize the study, present conclusions, and offer recommendations based on results from the study.

Summary

In reviewing the literature, support groups had not previously been identified formally among Iowa school counselors. Therefore, three important factors needed to be investigated. First, what support group could be formed in Iowa for counselors? Second, do counselors perceive that they have support among their professional peers? Third, do counselors perceive that they have support among their counseling peers?

For the study, counselors were identified by contacting the Department of Public Instruction (DPI, 1983) and requesting a list of K-12 public and private school counselors. A list of 1069 counselors was supplied by DPI, on mailing labels, for the 1982-1983 school year. A random sample of 200 counselors statewide was selected and the instrument was mailed in April, 1983.

The researcher prepared a 6-item survey instrument to identify the support groups present among the school counselors. This was done when no instrument for measurement could be identified in the literature. The survey was presented on post cards with a cover letter accompanying

the instruments. Of the 200 instruments mailed, 176 (88%) were returned, or 16.5% of Iowa school counselors. These respondents were then evaluated and summarized.

From the data gathered from the survey it is evident that the majority of counselors in the sample are employed at the secondary level, with only nine percent being elementary counselors. Furthermore, it is significant that 102 respondents (58%) work in a situation in which they are the only counselor at that particular level within their school system. If these counselors receive support this support must then be provided from sources other than counselors within the respective schools.

The survey information also indicates that a significant percentage ($N < 50\%$), although not a majority of the counselors, attend support groups as those defined. These groups and the percentage of counselor respondents attending group meetings are:

1. American Association for Counseling and Development and Iowa Association for Counseling and Development Meetings (45%).
2. Area Education Agency sponsored county meetings (49%).
3. In-district counselor meetings (44%).

The three main groups that counselors rely for support among professionals are fellow counselors (33%), administrators (22%), and AEA staff (19%). Most counselors did perceive they had support, with 66% of the respondents replying they almost always had someone to lean on.

The survey helps identify the types of meetings counselors attend. It also gives an indication that counselors tend to look to

other counselors for support but also do utilize other personnel in the profession, such as AEA support staff and administrators. Although there are indications of adequate support for most counselors, the identification of the single counselor per school, the few elementary counselors, and the lack of majority attendance at professional meetings gives indications of the need for support groups.

Conclusions

The support group is worthy of investigation, especially within the helping professions. The data compiled show a significant number of counselors are meeting in support groups--the AACD-IACD meetings, AEA meetings, and in-district counselor meetings. However, these forums do not have a majority of the counselors surveyed in attendance. Therefore, it is difficult to infer a direct correlation between counselor attendance and perceived support. Thus, the survey indicates that counselors presently have resources available for support groups through professional association with other counselors. It is possible these groups could more fully assist in professional growth and serve as buffers for preventing job stress.

In comparing the AEA county meetings with in-district meetings there was only a slight difference in percentage of counselor attendance: AEA (45%) vs. in-district (44%). It would appear that the AEA counselor meetings might provide the best support forum for the most counselors. County meetings can be all-inclusive, drawing all counselors, especially those from one-counselor schools. In a rural school an in-district meeting could not pool a group for support. Thus, county meetings would be geographically the most advantageous to counselors in rural areas as well as in urban school districts.

From the survey results it is evident that counselors sought support from fellow counselors, administrators, and AEA staff. It seems significant that teachers were not in the top three groups of support sources since they compose the largest number of professionals upon whom counselors could rely for support. It may be inferred, especially in the one-counselor setting, that building a support group among counselors and teachers is not adequate.

The vast majority of counselors did respond that they received adequate support from the professionals with whom they work on the job. However, among the 59 respondents who stated that they only sometimes or never had support, there were 42 counselors who worked on the job with no fellow counselors. For these counselors a support group of others with similar concerns would be most beneficial. Furthermore, based on the fact that there was such a significant number of counselors expressing no support in a singular counselor setting, it seems safe to assume that support groups are most productive when other counselors form the group.

Finally, the greatest number of counselors without availability of counselor support are in the rural school districts. This can be deduced from the sampling of districts receiving post cards and also from the high number of one-counselor schools. Although the survey did not identify the geographical location of these counselors, it seems likely that most of them were from districts having no other counselor. It appears that support groups for counselors would be the most beneficial in rural Iowa school districts. More studies certainly would help to investigate the problem.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations appear to be warranted:

1. Future research should focus on three support groups: (a) AACD-IACD group, (b) AEA county counselor group, and (c) In-district counselor group.

The research could make comparisons between the degree of satisfaction that participant counselors and non-participant counselors perceive. The groups themselves should be evaluated for the supportive functions which they actually service.

2. Guidelines for counselor support groups should be established which lend themselves to empirical measurement. For this study, support was based only on counselor perceptions. Criteria need to be established which measure support.

3. Support needs to be narrowly and operationally defined in order to facilitate accurate measurement.

4. Future research should investigate the support among groups composed of counselors only as compared to groups composed of counselors and other professional educators.

5. Further studies should focus on how the counselor and teacher interact and the reasons for the counselors' perceived lack of support from teachers.

6. Professional organizations might sponsor "cluster" support groups and measure their effectiveness in problem-solving and in attacking stress. As an example, counselors belonging to the IACD are currently in cluster groups. Groups could be designated as experimental and control and differences in support could be measured.

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Appendixes

Appendix A
Cover Letter

April 25, 1983

Dear Counselor,

I am attempting to complete my Master's Degree in Secondary Guidance and Counseling at the University of Northern Iowa. I would appreciate your time and help in completing this survey instrument. Please fill out the enclosed post card with the self-address and return it to me by May 15, 1983.

If you would wish to review my research findings on support groups for Iowa school counselors please feel free to contact me. I will be glad to send you my findings on completion of my paper. Your cooperation is very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Huber

Appendix B

Post Card Instrument

DIRECTIONS: Check the ONE most appropriate answer unless otherwise designated.*

A. I work at the following level.

1. Elem. 2. Middle-Jr. High 3. High School

B. I work on an everyday basis with the following number of counselors

1. (0) 2. (1) 3. (2) 4. (3 or more)

C. When I need the most professional support I consult with

- 1. a teacher
- 2. an administrator
- 3. a counselor within my district
- 4. a counselor outside my district
- 5. no one
- 6. Other (list) _____

D. I would characterize my professional work as

1. individual 2. a partnership 3. a team approach

*E. I regularly attend the following meetings for counselors

- 1. IPGA and-or APGA conventions
- 2. IPGA cluster meetings
- 3. County meetings sponsored by AEA
- 4. In-district counselor meetings
- 5. Other (list) _____

F. When I professionally need "someone to lean on" I

- 1. always have someone
- 2. most always have someone
- 3. sometimes have someone
- 4. almost never have someone
- 5. never have anyone

PLEASE RETURN BY MAY 15, 1983

Appendix C

Letter



EDUCATIONAL SERVICES
HEARTLAND AEA
 Joe Millard, Division Director

— serving the Heartland of Iowa —

June 27, 1983

Mr. Robert Huber
 Counselor
 Exira Community Schools
 Exira, IA 50076

Dear Bob:

It was good to hear from you recently. Sounds like you are going to have a busy summer as you work on your Masters paper.

Thank you for asking me to comment on counselor support groups. I hope what I have to say is helpful to you. As you read my remarks I want to caution you that I have a real strong bias about support for counselors and counselor renewals. I believe both are critical to the counselor and guidance programming. With that thought in mind let me proceed.

It is my opinion that when our profession first began to emerge and grow in the early '60's, that generally speaking, our leadership either overlooked the need for counselor support groups or if they did see the need for them, did not act to develop them. In my reviews of the literature, I have found few articles which have spoken to this need and fewer attempts to address it. On the one hand, one can find a great number of workshops and inservice programs which (1) address new theories, ideas, and approaches to counseling and guidance; and (2), provide current up-to-date information for counselors. On the other hand, very little is written about programs which provide counselors opportunities to share their concerns, problems, needs, etc.--to support each other.

Our Agency has recognized this need and has attempted to program for it. The Heartland Area Education Agency serves 11 counties and in these counties we have formed 10 county guidance organizations. Interestingly, Carroll and Audubon are the only two counties which have combined to form a two-county organization. Our intent with this arrangement is to (1) share current, up-to-date information with counselors and (2), enable counselors to gain support from each other. Approximately 70-75 percent of all the counselors in the area (this doesn't include Des Moines as it has its own organization) attend regularly. It is my opinion that most of these organizations address "1" above moreso than "2" above. I do believe however, that a fair amount of support for each results from these meetings.

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Mr. Robert Huber

Page 2


June 27, 1983

In your letter you also asked whether or not these meetings met counselor needs. I have never surveyed counselors to assess their perceptions regarding this point so I can only speak about this based on my observations. I believe the meetings do to an extent meet counselor's needs. First of all, we ask counselors to suggest meeting content. Very seldom have we provided programs without their input. Secondly, we have attempted to allow time during the meetings for counselors to bring up items of concern.

I hope the above has been helpful. I am enclosing copies of programs the county guidance organizations have had over the past several years. I hope you will find this list helpful. Please feel free to contact me if you have further questions.

Peace, happiness and success to you.

Sincerely,



John L. Thompson
Coordinator
Guidance & Testing

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