Rural and Small Town School Counselors

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This study was designed to examine the role and practice of school counselors working in small town and rural school settings. Counselors were able to give voice to their experiences and views, focusing on such issues as organizational smallness, role generalization, and professional autonomy. Implications for practice and further research were addressed through a series of questions relating to counselor role, function, and inservice training.

Rural and small town schools comprise 37.8% of the total number of schools, and serve 25.4% of the total number of enrolled students. In comparison, 37.2% of all schools, enrolling 33.5% of all students, are found in areas defined as "large city" or "medium city" (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Schools located in rural and small town settings in the United States clearly are an important facet of the educational scene.

Beyond the matter of numbers, some researchers and commentators have expressed the view that small schools have positive possibilities which, if recognized and developed, can result in a rich personal, social, and academic experience for their students (Barker & Gump, 1964; Dunne, 1977; Gregory & Smith, 1987). The U.S Department of Education identifies "small" schools as those enrolling fewer than 25 students per grade at the elementary level, and/or 100 students per grade at the secondary level. In the school year 1993-1994, 60% of all rural districts were classified as small (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

Thus, both in terms of the number of students educated in small town and rural environments, and with regard to the promise of a quality educational experience, schools in these settings may validly receive the attention and concern of stakeholders in American education. More specific to the present research, a central element of our interest in examining the role and activities of counselors in small town and rural schools springs from practical concerns associated with our work as counselor educators. Many of our past and current students work as counselors and counseling interns in such schools. For a number of years, we have made field visits to these settings, interacting with counselors and supervising interns placed there. We have had a direct interest in understanding how these schools operate, and in identifying the opportunities for, and barriers to, effective functioning of the counselors who work there.

Our review of the professional literature regarding the impact of the rural setting on the role and activities of school counselors suggests that this literature is of two types. First, we found a number of opinion-based articles that examined program development or procedural issues (Allen & James, 1990; Braucht & Weime, 1990; McLaughlan 1990, Rose-Gold, 1991). We also found several opinion-based articles that considered the unique challenges and opportunities in rural school counseling (Dinkmeyer, & Carlson, 1990; Hawes, Benton, & Bradley, 1990; Lund, 1990; Matthes, 1992; McIntire, Marion, & Quaglia, 1990; Saba, 1991; Worzbyt & Zook, 1992). Second, we found a few data-based studies, like those of Baldo, Quinn, and Halloran, (1996) and Matthes (1992), which describe various facets of counselor functioning in small town and rural schools.

We found little in the literature that reflected the richness and depth of the phenomena we witnessed in our contacts and conversations with small town and rural school counselors (cf. Gothberg, 1990; Lund, 1990). Given our interest in, and access to, these schools and their counselors, we judged that a qualitative study would provide small town and rural school counselors the opportunity to tell their own stories about their day-to-day work. Such a study also would generate the sort of "dense data" (Banyard & Miller, 1998) that would be useful for both practice and research.

Method

Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) have noted that although qualitative research strategies vary in their specifics, they share several features: (a) an emphasis on description rather than explanation, (b) a focus on understanding of phenomena from the perspectives of the people who are a part of those phenomena, and (c) an emphasis on the importance of examining the meaning of events and behavior in context. Consistent with these observations, our research strategy centered on in-depth, semistructured small-group and individual interviews as the primary data source. Our intent was to create a situation that encouraged our infor-

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mants to communicate their own perspectives on what it means to be a counselor in a small town or rural school. Our interviewing technique centered on open-ended questions (e.g., "So tell me about your work."), requests for clarification (e.g., "Could you explain that for me?"), reflection of content/feeling (e.g., "It sounds as if you really miss not having another counselor in the building"), and both nonverbal nods, smiles, and verbal (e.g., "I see") encouragers.

Additionally, field and process notes, including comments, speculations, and impressions, were written after group meetings and individual interviews, as well as during the data analysis process. These notes depict the ongoing process through which a framework was developed for organizing and deriving understanding of the counselors' statements. These notes also reflect the dialogue between the authors during which our separate understanding of the data, and our conceptualizations of the developing structure of our analytical structure, were compared and modified to represent a shared view. As such, these notes depict the process of "investigator triangulation" described by Hepner, Kivlighan, and Wampold (1999) through which "multiple views of a problem provide both a better description and some indication of the veracity of the description" (p. 250).

Sample

Roughly 100 counselors, self-identified as working in small town and rural schools, participated in the group sessions that dominated our early inquiry. These group sessions were organized for rural and small town counselors at regional, state, and national conferences, and were offered as an opportunity for such counselors to share work-related experiences, issues, and understandings. Two of these exchanges, involving a total of about 30 participants, took place in upstate New York. One, with about 15 participants, was carried out in Maine. Two, each attended by approximately 50 participants, were carried out at national conferences.

Subsequently, we moved on to conduct individual interviews. We did so in the belief that individual interviews would allow deeper, richer data to emerge than was possible in the group context. We located our initial individual interviewees by contacting school counselors in Upstate New York and Maine. We judged those counselors to be working in areas that meet the U.S. Census definition of "small town" or "rural." To meet the small town definition requires that the location not be located in a metropolitan statistical area, or a consolidated metropolitan statistical area, and have a population between 2,500 and 24,999. To meet the rural definition requires that it be an incorporated place, Census-designated place, or non-place territory designated as rural by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. We lo-

cated additional informants by asking these counselors to identify other school counselors working in similar settings who might be interested in participating in our research. In addition, we examined listings of school districts put out by the State Departments of Education in New York and Maine to find additional sites and informants that were relevant to the focus of our study.

From the pool of counselors so identified, we contacted those in schools that were within convenient travel distance, inviting them to participate in our research. This resulted in a total of 19 individual interviews (12 women, 7 men) from 18 school districts. The mean age of these interviewees was 37.5, ranging from 23 to 61 (male mean = 43.4, female mean = 34.1). Years of school counseling experience averaged 13.4, ranging from 6 months to 33 years (male mean = 17.4, female mean = 11.1). Enrollment (K-12) of the school districts in which these counselors worked varied from 283 to 1,255. Eight of our informants were the only school counselor in their district. For the other 11 counselors, the number of coworkers ranged from 1 to 4. All of our informants had the secondary grades as their primary responsibility. However, a few counselors in single-counselor districts reported having varying levels of contact with elementary and middle school students (e.g., crisis intervention; helping eighth graders select high school courses).

Analysis

As previously noted, our inquiry began with relatively unstructured small group discussions in which counselors were invited to talk about their experience working in small town and rural schools. Consistent with the "constant comparative" method we followed, data collection and data analysis proceeded in an intertwined fashion in which, as described by Bogdan and Bicklin (1992), "analysis keeps doubling back to more data collection and coding (p. 74)."

Our data consisted of individual counselor statements from transcripts of tape recordings of the group sessions. Our analysis focused on those statements that directly related to the nature and influences of the organizational context of rural and small town schools upon counselor role and activity.

We came out of our analysis of the group data with a broad framework that would be elaborated and shaped by the individual interviews that we subsequently conducted. Individual interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. As we moved from interview to interview, transcripts were examined to check on the persistence and comprehensiveness of the coding categories and subcategories that had been identified from the group interviews. Figure 1 presents the final coding categories and subcategories.

As our framework of categories and subcategories was modified and sharpened, and their utility for organizing incoming data established, we used the framework they pro-

Organizational Smallness	Advantages:	Ease of Access
	Disadvantages:	Lack of Privacy
		Limited Resources
Role Generalization	Advantages:	Variety
		Power
	Disadvantages:	Burnout
		Role Confusion
Autonomy	Advantages:	Freedom
		Professional Self-determination
	Disadvantages:	Accountability
		Lack of Diversity
		Professional Isolation

Figure 1. Data analysis categories.

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vided as a background for our discussion in subsequent interviews (Patton, 1990). Open-ended questions, clarification, reflection, and verbal and nonverbal encouragers continued to dominate our interviewing approach. When it seemed the informants had "had their say" we would invite their comment on dimensions of the data analysis framework upon which they might not have previously spoken (e.g., "Does the fact that this is a small building have any impact on your work as a counselor?"). Thus we attempted to allow our informants to put their own individual stamp on the data. Our individual interviews continued until it was clear to us that we had reached the point of "data saturation," when interviews have begun to yield no distinctly new data, and the researcher judges that additional interviews would only provide redundant information (Bogdan & Bicklin, 1992). At that point, we discontinued data collection.

Findings

The three categories that will be discussed are (a) organizational smallness, (b) role generalization, and (c) professional autonomy. Each will be examined in terms of its positive and negative influence on counselor role and practice.

Organizational Smallness

One of the most immediately apparent features of the schools in which our informants work is their physical smallness. The prototype, perhaps, is the district we visited whose entire physical plant consisted of one building, housing 350 K-12 students, with a professional staff of 47. Even the consolidated school in which one of our informants worked, enrolling approximately 400 students in grades 9-12, is relatively small by urban and suburban standards.

The physical smallness of these schools is paralleled by their organizational smallness. They have relatively few layers of administrative hierarchy. Sometimes, positions that are separate and distinct in larger settings (e.g., district superintendent and building principal) are collapsed and carried out by one person. Narrow role specialization is not possible, so there are fewer positions than is typically true in districts with more differentiated staffing patterns. For example, none of the districts in which our informants worked had a director of guidance. There is less distance from the top to the bottom of these hierarchies, both in terms of organizational and physical distance. As we will see, our informants identified the physical smallness of their organizational context as having important implications for day-to-day practice. They noted that there were both advantages and disadvantages to that smallness.

Advantages of Smallness

The scale of rural and small town schools makes it possible to get from one end of the physical plant to the other quickly. This facilitates direct contact among staff. As one of the counselors we interviewed said:

I prefer to go right to [the teachers] rather than sending a note. It's small enough here so I can do that easily. Also, my office is in a good location. I'm in the middle of everything, so that I just have to stand at my door and sooner or later everyone comes by. I can stand right out in the hall, and before too much time goes by I'll see any teacher or student I want to talk to.

The smaller number of classes and academic options also makes it possible to keep track of individuals.

You know every student's schedule in your head—what his subject, teacher, and room is at any given time. When I worked in L (suburb of a city about 100 miles distant), it was hard for me to keep straight even what end of the building someone was in.

Such ease of access to others has the advantage of making it possible for counselors to initiate communication informally. One can wait until a student comes by in the course of her normal routine, speak briefly with her, or ask her to stop by after school, rather than having to call attention to her by airing a message over the intercom, or calling her out of class when some issue arises,.

Also, administrators are close by in these schools, both physically and organizationally. Many of our informants identified principals as their most important professional support persons.

Clearly, my principal is my boss, but this is a small school, so she's also my colleague. Officially we meet once a week; informally, we see each other all the time. Our relationship is collegial rather than hierarchical. We can bounce ideas off each other, and even if we disagree about something, we can usually find some common ground to operate on.

Superintendents, often distant, seldom-seen figures in larger districts, are persons to whom many of these counselors had easy access.

When I finish talking with a student and walk out of my office, it's not unusual for me to find [the superintendent] out there talking to the secretary, waiting to see me. If I can't talk to him about my issues when he's over here, all I have to do is pick up the phone and say that I'm coming over.

That same ease of access can extend to school board members.

One of my student's parents is on the school board. There are a couple more who are often in the building during the daytime and will look in the office to ask a question, give me a compliment about something I've done, or express some concern they have. I'm always real careful to go through channels, but if I need to find out about the board's thinking, or to get some information into their discussions, it's fairly easy for me to get somebody's ear.

In sum, the physical and organizational smallness of the counselor's setting made access to significant individuals relatively easy, and surfaced often in our conversations. Of course, such access was not universal, and varied as a function of the persons and organization involved. In the best of circumstances, ease of contact brought a positive dimension of informality and collegiality to the counselors' relationships with students, teachers, administrators, and school board members. The reality of such person-to-person contact was often viewed as one of the most positive aspects of their work.

Disadvantages of Smallness

While closeness and ease of access opened up the possibility of positive interaction and relationships, it also had its negative consequences in the experience of many of our informants. If familiarity can foster cohesiveness, popular wisdom tells us that it can also breed contempt. The disadvantages they discussed centered on two issues: lack of privacy, and a restricted range of resources and perspectives.

Lack of privacy. There are few places to escape notice in a small school. The physical space is usually small and, in the words of one counselor, "everyone knows everyone's business." For example, it is difficult for students to escape the attention of others when they seek the counselor's help.

I talked with a student in the morning about some troubles at home. By afternoon his aunt, who is one of the cafeteria workers, looked in my office and asked what was going on with him. Her concern was genuine, and I had no trouble maintaining confidentiality. But still, it shows how word gets around about who's coming down to see me. Everyone's related to everyone around here.

A number of our informants believed that this lack of privacy discourages some students from bringing their concerns to the counseling office. Having a secretary who is a "local" can provide the counselor with valuable insights into the backgrounds and family ties of their clients. On the other hand, several counselors mentioned either concerns about, or instances of, a student's privacy being compromised by a secretary who communicated information to relatives or friends.

Easy accessibility also affects the counselor. Administrators and teachers who have an agenda find it easy to locate the counselor to push their views, or gather information to support their judgments. The reverse side of being able to get to the superintendent or principal easily is that it's not difficult for them to look over the counselor's shoulder. Whether such monitoring constitutes meddling or sup-

port, of course, depends on the specific actions and intentions of those involved.

> I definitely can't turn to administration for support, and that's a real sore spot with me. I've worked with a lot of them over the years and there are few that I've had any real confidence in. Most of them seem more interested in using the guidance program for their own self-promotion and agendas than for the kind of education and guidance goals that are important to me.

Limited perspectives and resources. The smallness of these schools can also serve to restrict the range of perspectives and resources that may be important to the work of the counselor. For example, virtually all the schools we visited were characterized by lack of ethnic diversity. That circumstance complicated efforts to work with students concerning diversity issues through such activities as implementing an experience-based examination of ethnic prejudice. Also, consider the difficulty of setting up a comprehensive career day when the pool of occupations represented locally is limited, as it is in most small communities. Finally, rural and small school counselors often find it difficult to assemble a critical mass of students for program purposes.

> I came out of [graduate school] with a real interest in group work. I'd love to run more small groups, but the main problem is finding enough kids at any one time who are available, who share similar concerns, and would be fairly compatible with each other.

Rural and small school counselors often are in the position of trying to do all the things that counselors in more differentiated settings do, with fewer resources for doing so. The issue is not just having to do too many things, a matter we will discuss in connection with the autonomy subcategory; rather, it is trying to do those things without the maneuvering room that a more extensive, differentiated organizational setting and physical plant would permit.

Role Generalization

Rural and small town schools are examples of what Barker (1968) labeled "undermanned settings" (for which we substitute the gender-neutral term "understaffed"). In such settings, there are relatively few people to carry out what is essentially the same number of functions as performed in settings that are more richly staffed. Therefore, if the enterprise is to succeed, each person must make more extensive and diversified contributions than required in situ-

ations where human resources are more plentiful. Barker observed that in understaffed settings, the role of generalist is not only more functional than that of specialist, it is more necessary, as well.

> Well, it's sure not boring. You do the whole nine yards—testing, social work-type things, lunchroom duty, college applications, home visits, kindergarten screening, and sometimes even counseling.

In their comments that touched upon the issue of role generalization, our informants again pointed to both positive and negative consequences.

Advantages of Role Generalization

The positive aspect of "having to do the whole nine yards" involves two areas: variety and power.

Variety. The opportunity to carry out a variety of activities, often with a broad range of students, was experienced by many of the counselors with whom we spoke as a stimulating aspect of their work. A counselor in a one-counselor school had this to say about the variety of her role:

> I'm all over this school. The great thing is that I have a chance to do everything that counselors do. One period I may be working with fourth graders on a self-esteem unit; the next I'll be with the juniors getting them ready to take the PSAT. It's great not being limited to one age group. Every day I come in, I can count on there being some challenge waiting for me, whether it's a homesick first grader or a pregnant high school girl.

In a small group discussion with her regional colleagues, one counselor spoke enthusiastically about the variety that characterized her work.

> I love it, but never expected the intensity of working in a small school. You seldom do anything for more than 30 seconds. If you can get 10 minutes for a counseling session, you're doing well. You're probably the most mobile person in the building— a blur. That's what makes it so great. That's why none of us would do anything different—that intensity, that mobility, that ability to do so many different things, with no two days the same.

The words "exciting," "interesting," and "challenging" occurred frequently as our informants discussed their role as a generalist. The varied possibilities and demands stretched them to work with populations with whom they might not otherwise have much contact, build skills that

were previously undeveloped, and be involved in aspects of running a school that ordinarily lie far outside a counselor's role.

Power. One of the specific consequences of working in understaffed settings is that counselors are often pushed in the direction of assuming administrative and quasi-administrative responsibilities that are ordinarily considered to be unrelated, perhaps even antagonistic, to the counseling function.

> I know that a lot of counselors worry about being identified too closely with administration, but I've found that there can actually be advantages. When the principal and assistant principal are out of the building and I'm left in charge, my authority is boosted. A few days later when I go to a teacher and say "can I borrow your English class for a little group work on Thursday?" I'm apt to be taken more seriously than if I were just the counselor doing my own little thing down in my office.

In these small schools, formal features of power structures are relatively obvious simply because there are fewer players on the field. It appears that some counselors, rather than viewing involvement in administrative activities as a threat to their professional effectiveness, took a different tack. They believed they could claim, and use, the power and influence that potentially flows from such identification to further the impact of the counseling function. While they often recognized there were tradeoffs (e.g., becoming identified by teachers as "one of them" in teacher/administration skirmishes), these counselors believed they were able to turn possible conflicts to their advantage, using informal influence to further the impact of their program.

Disadvantages of Role Generalization

As we have seen, many of our informants drew energy and enjoyment from the variety that is a typical consequence of working in an understaffed setting; however, more often they voiced the disadvantages. Indeed, both directly and by implication, many communicated their experience of having variety and challenge deteriorate into scatter and stress. The specific issues upon which the negative consequences of role generalization focused were burnout, loss of morale, and role confusion. All of these lead to feelings of loss of power and self-determination.

Burnout. If variety can be exciting, it also can be stressful. One counselor spoke to the issue of stress and scatter in this way:

> What's the bad news? Well, constantly changing gears is very tiring. I sometimes get overwhelmed by seeing all the needs of kids, and feeling that

even though I'm the only one I have to meet all of them.

Another informant's experience with being what he called a "lone ranger," the only counselor in a K-12 school, led him to observe:

> The main problem is you have to do so many things. I have to be familiar with everything, and somehow I find myself getting involved with things that someone else would do in a larger district, like Boy's and Girl's State, or summer school, or gathering figures for the BEDS (data) forms for State Ed. I can't concentrate on just a few areas because if I don't do it, it won't get done. The problem is, once you take something on, or it gets dumped on you, it's hard to get rid of it.

One of the most common consequences of trying to do everything was a feeling of being overwhelmed by the enormity of the demands.

> The down side is that it can be very draining. It's difficult to constantly feel that you have more jobs than you have time to do; or, that you're leaving somebody out who really needed some help and you weren't able to get to it. That can be a real downer.

Role confusion. In small town and rural schools the school counselor is often the only full-time, nonclassroom based professional other than administrators. Because often they are not tightly tied to serving a particular group of students in a specific place, at a given time, the tendency for counselors to be called in to assist with a variety of noncounseling functions seems nearly unavoidable. During one of our interviews, the counselor was called out to quell a fight that had broken out in a study hall. Returning, he explained that the principal and vice-principal were both out of the building and that left him the next person in the line of responsibility for such occurrences.

> If one of them had been in the building, they wouldn't have come to get me—but there was no-one else to handle it. I've drawn the line on some things. The counselor before me used to cover classes when they had trouble finding a substitute, but I've been able to make the case that that's inconsistent with my role.

Many of our informants believed that being asked to cover administrative and quasi-administrative tasks had the unfortunate effect of blurring their distinct professional identity.

Sometimes there is role confusion. On the one hand, I'm considered to be a member of the faculty, but I'm also seen as part of the administration. My office is right next door to the principal/superintendent, which makes a statement.

As previously noted, a few of our informants considered identification with administration to have positive possibilities; however, most believed any possible advantages were outweighed by negatives. For example, being viewed as an administrator tended to reinforce teachers' expectations that counselors would side with administration and would be involved in assigning sanctions in disciplinary situations. In addition, counselors believed that being viewed as part of the administrative team tended to decrease the likelihood that students would be willing to bring their personal concerns to the counseling office. Given these fears, many of our informants spoke of efforts to avoid, or manage, their identification with either administration or faculty.

I'm in charge when the administrators are out of the building, but I don't do discipline, and faculty and students know that. When I am involved in disciplinary situations, I do so as a counselor, not as an administrator. I've been very clear with teachers and kids about that. I've worked very hard to establish my role as a counselor. I'm part of the administrative team, but I also belong to the teachers' union. I don't want either group to view me as "theirs."

Autonomy

Shertzer and Stone's (1980) discussion of "role determiners" (p. 121) highlighted the reality that any social role has a number of influences impinging upon it. These influences shape expectations for persons holding the role, and direct the specific activities through which the role is implemented. Shertzer and Stone cited colleagues, parents, the public, administrators, teachers, professional associations, and state departments of education as a few of the determiners of the school counselor's role. While rural and small town school counseling shares many of the role determiners of larger, more complex educational settings, the absolute number and differentiation of such influences tends to be fewer. For example, for good or ill the "lone ranger" in a single-counselor district does not have colleagues with whom to negotiate, collaborate, or contend concerning what the role is and is not. Even the counselor in a centralized, multitown school district often has fewer colleagues with whom to deal than is true in suburban and urban settings. Also, in these schools one rarely finds a director of guidance, or even a guidance advisory group, to exert influence

on what the counseling program should or should not be. Many of our informants recognized that they had fewer people telling them what to do than was true for their urban and suburban counterparts.

Of course, there are disadvantages to being the only counselor, but there are advantages, too. I've had a lot of freedom in setting my role. There's very little red tape to deal with, and almost no hierarchy dictating what I have to do.

While having fewer role determiners does not necessarily mean more space to shape one's role, such freedom was often cited by our informants as one of the most striking facets of their work. As with the other categories we've discussed, there were both advantages and disadvantages to the relative autonomy they experienced as they went about their work.

Advantages of Autonomy

Our informants disclosed two beneficial aspects of autonomy: freedom and professional self-determination.

Freedom. These counselors often told of the satisfaction they derived from not having to deal with what one of these informants called the multilayered "people hassles" that inevitably arise in large, multifaceted organizational situations. Not that our informants were without such difficulties, but they recognized that their organizational worlds were less complicated than would typically be the case in, say, a large city school district.

In the rural and small town school context, counselors often found that they had more room to do what they wanted professionally.

I like being on my own, deciding when I'm going to do something, having the leeway to decide what I'm going to do today.

Given a supportive, encouraging administrator these counselors often had enormous discretion in determining the structure and implementation of the counseling program.

We have a really good working relationship with our administration. They trust our judgment about the program and usually let us call the shots. Personally, that gives me a lot of satisfaction because I can use my creativity and emphasize the things I do well, and like to do.

A few of our informants made a connection between the freedom that their small school allowed them and the simplicity and space that living in a rural setting provided.

Of course, there are times when I get impatient with the limitations; there's not enough of me to go around, and I have to scratch for materials. And like everywhere, we have our share of duds to deal with. But then I remember why I came here in the first place—to get back to a place where I could be a part of a real community, where I wouldn't just be a face in the crowd. There are always tradeoffs I guess, but overall the frustrations are more than offset by the professional and personal space that working and living here give me.

Professional self-determination. Many of our informants recognized that the autonomy they enjoyed also opened up opportunities for them to exert real influence in moving the counseling role toward values and activities they considered to be important. These counselors realized the understaffed situation in which they practiced presented many opportunities for making, or at least influencing, decisions having important implications for the structure and implementation of the counseling program.

It's not just autonomy, it's power, and that's because I talk to parents, I talk to kids, and I know what they need. I can go to administration and say, "We have to spend $1,000 on early pregnancy tests." And because I can justify they're needed, [the administrator will] do it. I know that a lot of that's because they trust me, but they also need me, my information, and my influence with parents and kids.

Disadvantages of Autonomy

While freedom and professional self-determination represent the positive side of the autonomy that they experienced in their understaffed settings, many of our informants were also acutely aware of the negative side, which included (a) accountability, (b) lack of diversity, (c) professional isolation.

Accountability. We've already noted that, in a physical sense, there are few places to hide in a small school. This lack of anonymity also has an organizational aspect to it. If one is the only counselor in a district, or is one of a staff of two or three, the burden of representing the counseling program is more heavily borne than is true in a situation where the counseling staff is larger or where there is a layer of administration to share responsibility.

As the old saying goes, "the buck stops here." There's no director of guidance, there aren't 20 other counselors, there are only the two of us. If something blows up, like a parent thinks we're running brainwashing groups or is unhappy that

the kid didn't get into a "good" college, it's no secret who they point the finger at.

On the one hand, the rural and small town school counselor may be able to exercise considerable personal initiative in shaping and directing the program. On the other hand, if there are problems, the repercussions are the counselor's to bear.

You are the program. It's yours to build, and that's both scary and satisfying because you're out there by yourself. It can be really scary when the principal says it's your call, because you know you'll be out there twisting in the breeze if it falls flat.

Again, administrative support seemed to be an important factor affecting the degree to which the accountability aspect of autonomy was experienced as an overwhelming, fearful reality, or one that was an unavoidable but manageable aspect of an otherwise positive side of the role.

Lack of diversity. While it is often true that having fewer personalities and points of view can simplify the tasks of planning and implementing a counseling program, that same simplicity has the disadvantage of limiting the range of resources, background, perspectives, and talents represented in the counseling program.

Another disadvantage to just having two of us in the district is that you don't get the infusion of perspectives and alternatives that can come from a larger, more varied staff. We get along really well, but sometimes I think we get too comfortable, and that it would be good if we had someone really different to shake us up and make us look at things from a different point of view.

Sometimes this disadvantage pertained to gender issues, as when a female counselor bemoaned her lack of credibility with adolescent males. In other instances, age was an important consideration, as when young counselors experienced difficulty being taken seriously by older staff or the parents of students.

Professional isolation. Even if the rural or small town school counselor works in a multi-counselor district, those counselors are apt to be scattered around in several locations. This means that they practice without immediate access to colleagues.

Not having a colleague in the building is hard because there are some things I can't really talk about with the administrators or faculty. It would be great to have a colleague to sit down with and say, "This is the situation—what do you think about it?" It's easy for me to start doubting myself even when

I'm doing alright. It would help to have someone
else to affirm that what I'm doing is therapeuti-
cally good, or okay.

Perhaps the most severe impact of the lack of collegial
support is seen in the instance of novice "lone rangers."
However comprehensive their training might have been,
they inevitably seemed to have encountered gaps in their
skill or knowledge base (Matthes, 1992). Without easy ac-
cess to a colleague, these isolated counselors either had to
resort to what one of our informants called "winging it," or
to reaching out to administrators, or to counselors in nearby
districts. These counselors were using coping strategies
similar to those used by the isolated elementary and middle
school counselors described by Peace (1995), who also
faced a "trial by fire" (p. 177) in trying to make the adjust-
ment to the realities of day-to-day school counseling prac-
tice.

It's difficult in this rural area. I'm the only coun-
selor in the school system. We do have a monthly
meeting of area guidance counselors, which is
good—we share problems and frustrations. I also
call friends on the phone, and have a few faculty
members that I can turn to, but it's not the same as
turning to another counselor. The school psycholo-
gist is here one day a week, and if she has time, I
can talk things over with her.

As the preceding quote illustrates, our informants of-
ten cited regional meetings of counselors as an important
source of professional support and exchange for new and
experienced counselors. In this, the counselors echoed rec-
ommendations found in the literature citing the utility of
peer counseling for beginning and isolated school counse-
lors (Borders, 1991; Peace, 1995; Remley, Benshoff &
Mowbray, 1987). However, to the extent that a particular
counselor does not have the opportunity and/or inclination
to participate in such local groups, the task of developing
and maintaining effective response to the wide ranging role
of the rural and small town counselor can be daunting.

Discussion

Tesch (1990, pp. 55-73) observed that the results of
qualitative analysis can take a variety of forms. Those forms
range along a continuum: (a) unedited, direct presentation
of the words of informants; (b) identification of themes and
patterns found in the data; and (c) presentation of theoreti-
cal frameworks or models. We approached our research
with the goal of developing an in-depth understanding of
the experience of counselors in small town and rural schools
that might inform our work with students and counselors
working in such schools. Therefore, we have chosen to

extend our findings to a product that falls closer to the de-
scription end of the continuum described by Tesch, rather
than the theory-building end. We also believe that these
rich descriptions should serve as a point-of-departure for
further inquiry (Banyard & Miller, 1998; Lincoln & Guba,
1985), whether of a qualitative or quantitative nature.

The specific vehicle we have chosen for examining
our findings is to present a series of questions to which the
data reasonably lead. We believe that these questions point
to important issues relating to the organizational role of
rural and small town school counselors.

Given that each of the categories we identified had both
positive and negative facets, we believe that the broadest
question that can be raised is this: How can the beneficial
aspects of counselor practice in these settings be retained
and enhanced, while minimizing the negative?

The Structure of Counselor Role and Function

More specifically, we believe the following questions
would, if pursued with a focus on rural and small town
schools, yield understandings and guidelines that could
enhance the effectiveness of counseling practice in those
settings.

- Is a counselor's ability to capitalize on the
  positive aspects of rural and small town school
  practice, and/or cope effectively with the
  negative dimensions, significantly associated
  with such considerations as age, gender, be-
  ing raised in a rural area, prior experience, or
  personality traits?

- Do lack of anonymity, and difficulty escap-
  ing the scrutiny of others in small schools,
  affect students' willingness to use counsel-
  ing services generally, or to seek out such spe-
  cific services as personal counseling? If so,
  what modifications of physical location or
  procedures would reduce barriers to students'
  use of those services?

- Considering the understaffed nature of most
  of these counseling programs, what would be
  the effect of explicitly conceptualizing the
  counselor's role as a that of a generalist upon
  the design and implementation of the coun-
  seling program in these settings? Would there
  be benefits in moving toward models of
  school counseling services that variously
  emphasized such activities as (a) consultation
  with teachers, (b) use of carefully selected and
  trained volunteers, or (c) implementation of
  case management approaches that stress col-

laboration with local and regional social services (Hargrove, 1982)?

° What adaptation of existing administrative models and procedures would most contribute to the effective functioning of counseling programs in these schools? For example, lacking a director of guidance, what general strategies and specific practices can be used to provide counselors with appropriate supervision, and adequate buffering from debilitating accountability and accessibility?

Inservice Training

Given the general lack of relevant inservice training and support that our informants said was available to them, pursuit of the following questions should be fruitful.

° Are there existing models for inservice training and support that could effectively respond to the unique needs and circumstances of rural and small school counselors? Might models that have been developed for other professional groups, such as psychologists or public health nurses, be effectively adapted to the needs of counselors (Heyman & VandenBos, 1989; Higgins, 1982)?

° What strategies can these counselors use to build administrative and community support for their ongoing continuing professional development and support? For example, several writers (Borders, 1991; Peace, 1995; Remley et al., 1987) have examined the use of peer-based approaches as a means of providing relevant supervision and support to beginning counselors, as well as elementary school and other counselors isolated by administrative structures. How might peer-based approaches be designed, perhaps by using distance learning approaches, to cope with the specific situation of rural and small town counselors who are separated by great distances, and who lack anyone else to cover for them while they are out of their buildings?

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, we began this research with the conviction that whatever their limitations, rural and small town schools have enormous potential contributing to the positive personal and intellectual growth of their students. As counselors in those schools who were our informants shared the good news/bad news about their work, that initial conviction was reinforced. The organizational realities that blunt their effectiveness and drain their energies are sometimes balanced by opportunities for personal and professional expression. It is our belief that an understanding of the clear, consistent perspectives the counselors voiced in their conversations with us can serve as a point-of-departure for those who would strengthen the positive, and ameliorate the negative realities of counseling in rural and small town schools.

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