How Important is Personal/ Social Development to Academic Achievement? The Elementary School Counselor's Perspective

This study explored elementary school counselors' perceptions of importance and implementation for state standards in support of academic achievement. Results indicate that Academic and Personal/Social standards are important to achievement with no statistical difference between the standards. Further, counselors implement Personal/Social standards at slightly higher levels in their programs compared to Academic standards. Counselors consistently rated principles of character and qualities of effort, hard work, and persistence as most important and of highest implementation. This article also discusses implications for elementary school counseling practice.

Important trends in educational reform are challenging school counselors to demonstrate a measurable contribution in the area of student academic achievement. The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) calls for educators, including school counselors, to be involved in efforts to close the achievement gap through increased accountability (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Leaders in the school counseling profession continue to write extensively on the importance of school counselors utilizing data to clearly demonstrate how their programs promote and enhance academic achievement (Dahir & Stone, 2003; Gysbers, 2004; Isaacs, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Lapan, 2001; Paisley & Hayes, 2003).

A full appreciation of the contributions school counseling programs make to student academic achievement proves difficult for several reasons. First, outcome research directly linking school counseling programs to academic achievement is limited. Only one recent program, the Student Success Skills (SSS) model, has been researched repeatedly and has shown promise in improving standardized test scores for elementary and middle school students (Brigman, Webb, & Campbell, 2007; Campbell & Brigman, 2005; Webb, Brigman, & Campbell, 2005). Second, school counseling programs comprise much more than just academic interventions, making it difficult to determine which specific components contribute to student achievement (Brown & Trusty, 2005). Third, the responsibility of shaping student academic achievement is the primary goal of the classroom teacher, leaving school counselors underrepresented in important conversations regarding education reform. Fourth, confusion continues to surround the role of the school counselor, leading to a perception that school counseling programs are not viable resources for supporting academic achievement (Lieberman, 2004; Zalaquett, 2005). Finally, pressure from high-stakes testing has created an overemphasis on interventions that exclusively focus on improving students' academic competence (e.g., test scores, grades, graduation rates), resulting in a failure to appreciate programs and services that strengthen areas of academic success for all students.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that school counselors make contributions to the academic achievement agenda by supporting the development of students. Test scores, grades, and graduation rates as discrete outcome measures do not predict how emotionally well adjusted or successful students will become in the future. Students need to possess motivation, purposefulness, intentionality, and self-efficacy in order to achieve academically (Scheel & Gonzalez, 2007). Likewise, research links problem behaviors such as aggression (Williams & McGee, 1994), anxiety (Stevens & Pihl, 1987), hyperactivity (Saudino & Plomin, 2007), and inattention (Barriga et al., 2002) with decreases in academic achievement.

This growing body of evidence reinforces a positive link between students' academic achievement and personal/social development in such areas as

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emotional intelligence (EI), social competence, academic enablers, and behavior. Individuals with trait EI have the behavioral dispositions and self-perceptions to recognize, process, and utilize emotion-laden information. EI appears to act as a moderator between cognitive ability and academic performance as assessed by IQ and grades (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004). When EI is identified as interpersonal skills, adaptability, and stress management, its presence has a positive impact on the academic achievement of students as measured by overall grade point average (Parker et al., 2004).

Further, Wentzel (1991) demonstrated that socially responsible behavior almost entirely mediated the relationship between grades and other aspects of social competence (i.e., sociometric status, self-regulatory processes). Researchers have found that student attention, commitment to school, and social and problem solving skills are strongly associated with academic achievement as evidenced by standardized tests and grades (Fleming et al., 2005). Researchers also found that 85% of elementary and middle school students who participated in a structured group counseling program led by a school counselor aimed at improving the students' academic, school, and social competence (e.g., social skills, self management) improved their math scores on a state standardized test by an average of 27 points (Webb et al., 2005).

Further evidence that supports the importance of personal and social development in students can be found in the area of *academic enablers*, the attitudes and behaviors that allow students to be successful in the classroom (DiPerna & Elliot, 2002). Academic enablers are categorized as interpersonal skills, motivation, study skills, and engagement. A study conducted by DiPerna, Volpe, and Elliot (2001) explored the combined effect of academic enablers on student achievement by proposing a model connecting classroom instruction, academic enablers, and academic skills to elementary students' language arts grades. The researchers found that prior achievement and interpersonal skills had a direct influence on motivation, which in turn affects achievement as evidenced by improved language arts grades.

School counselors contribute to student academic achievement through school counseling programs that address the personal/social, career, and academic development of all students. *The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2005) sets out the standards in these developmental areas with specific student behavioral indicators. Some states have taken this a step further by adopting their own school counseling program standards that follow the developmental areas of the

ASCA National Model. Although studies have demonstrated the link between students' academic achievement and personal/social development, the perception of the importance and level of implementation of specific school counseling program standards needs to be explored more fully. Therefore, the authors undertook this study to explore elementary school counselors' perceptions (i.e., importance, implementation) of personal/social development as a strategy to support student academic achievement.

The authors selected one mid-Atlantic state for this exploratory study based on the State School Board adopted standards for school counseling programs (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2004) and a commitment by the professional state leadership in school counseling, which has written a Professional School Counseling Manual (Virginia School Counselor Association [VSCA], 2008). The state standards are organized by grade groupings (K-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-12) and are reflective of developmental domains (academic, career, personal/social). Given this level of commitment to school counseling and the articulated standards, the elementary school counselors in this state provide a unique situational perspective for understanding the perceived importance and implementation levels of personal/social development to support student academic achievement.

METHOD

Participants

The target population for this study was elementary school counselors practicing in public school settings from the identified mid-Atlantic state. According to the most recent demographic data available, this target population of elementary school counselors was 92% female and 70% White; 60% were less than 50 years old (personal communication B. Mason, October 23, 2008).

A total of 212 elementary school counselors completed the questionnaire with the demographics closely resembling the target population. Of respondents, 95% were female and 84% were White; ages ranged from 24-64 years ($M = 43$, $SD = 11.7$), with the majority (63%) of participants less than 50 years old. The average number of years employed as a school counselor was 10 years. Almost all of the participants (95%) were employed full time. Most of the participants (79%) were employed by schools that achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the most recent school year. The average student caseload for participants was 467. Using self-report data, 79% have adopted the state Standards for School Counseling (VDOE, 2004), and 82% have adopted school division standards for school counseling.

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Instruments

Demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire asked participants to identify their gender, age, employment status, and ethnicity/race. It also requested information about years employed as a school counselor, student/counselor ratio, whether the school achieved AYP in the previous year, and whether the school had adopted standards (national, state, or local) for school counseling programs.

Academic and Personal/Social Development standards. The authors obtained the 26 survey items directly from the *Virginia Standards for School Counseling Programs* (VDOE, 2004). These standards were chosen because they are adapted from the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2005), consistent with the Virginia Board of Education regulations, and serve as a foundation for the implementation of Virginia elementary school counseling programs. The 26 items included 14 Academic standards and 12 Personal/Social standards. For each item, the survey asked participants to indicate (a) how important (*importance*) the item is for supporting academic achievement of elementary students and (b) the extent of implementation (*implementation*) for the item into the school counseling program. Ratings ranged from 0 = *not important* to 3 = *critical*. Following the ratings of the 26 standards as to *importance* and *implementation*, an open-ended question asked participants to indicate by item number which of the listed 26 standards was most important for supporting academic achievement.

The authors computed internal reliability measures for importance and implementation of the two types of standards (Academic, Personal/Social; see Table 1). Cronbach's alphas were strong for both importance (.88 Academic standards, .87 Personal/Social standards) and implementation (.89 Academic standards, .82 Personal/Social standards). Evidence of criterion-related validity is based on the items being taken directly from state approved standards.

Procedure

The state supervisor of School Counseling and Guidance provided a list of all school counseling supervisors in the state that included the name, school district, e-mail address, and school address. Of the 135 school districts in the state, 96% identified a supervisor of school counseling (VDOE, 2008). The authors contacted all of the supervisors via e-mail with a request for elementary school counselors to participate in the study. Of those, 41 supervisors indicated that they would forward a recruitment e-mail containing a link to the online questionnaire to the elementary school counselors in their respective districts. The authors sent two follow-up e-mails encouraging participation.

The online version of the questionnaire was administered using Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com), a secure Web site for instrument creation and data collection. The authors transferred the collected data to an Excel® spreadsheet stored on a secure computer. They performed data analyses using JMP 7 for Windows (SAS Institute, 2007). As mentioned earlier, they computed Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each of the four scale scores (i.e., Academic Importance, Academic Implementation, Personal/Social Importance, Personal/Social Implementation). Subscale scores were computed as average responses on importance and implementation for each of the two types of standards.

RESULTS

Based on participant ratings, the same seven items received the highest rankings for both importance and implementation. The Personal/Social standard *exhibit the principles of character* was selected overall as the most important item to support student academic achievement. A distant second as most important was the Academic standard *understand the importance of individual effort, hard work, and persistence.*

Importance of Standards for Supporting Student Academic Achievement

Participants indicated that they considered all 26 standards important in supporting student academic achievement (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). The researchers recoded participant ratings of 0 to 3 to a 1 to 4 scale with higher scores representing greater perceptions of importance. Rating means ranged from 3.20 to 3.82 for Academic standards and 3.24 to 3.92 for Personal/Social standards. The mean across the 14 Academic standards was 3.54 (SD = .37); mean across the 12 Personal/Social standards was 3.55 (SD = .39). A t test revealed no statistically significant difference for importance between Academic and Personal/Social standards (p = .92). A Pearson product moment correlation indicated a moderately strong relationship (r = .74; ES = .03) for importance between the Academic and Personal/Social standards (see Table 2).

More specifically, the three most important standards for supporting student academic achievement based on simple mean comparisons were (a) *exhibit the principles of character* (Personal/Social; M = 3.92, SD = .29); (b) *understand the expectations of the educational environment* (Academic; M = 3.82, SD = .42); and (c) *understand the importance of individual effort, hard work, and persistence* (Academic; M = 3.79, SD = .43). The Personal/Social standard *exhibit the principles of character* was selected by 31% of the participants as

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Importance and Implementation of Standards

Standards	Importance M	SD	% Rated Most Important	Implementation M	SD
Academic	**3.54**	**.37**	—	**3.26**	**.46**
Understand the importance of individual effort, hard work, and persistence.	*3.79*	*.43*	18.8%	*3.57*	*.57*
Recognize personal strengths and weaknesses related to learning.	3.57	.57	6.8%	3.24	.71
Understand the relationship of academic achievement to current and future success in school.	3.59	.58	6.8%	3.29	.69
Demonstrate individual initiative and a positive interest in learning.	3.34	.66	6.3%	2.95	.75
Understand the expectations of the educational environment.	*3.82*	*.42*	4.4%	*3.55*	*.63*
Apply study skills necessary for academic achievement.	3.64	.56	3.9%	3.34	.73
Use study skills and test-taking strategies.	3.58	.62	3.9%	3.37	.73
Demonstrate time management and organizational skills.	3.53	.59	1.9%	3.19	.72
Use critical thinking skills and test-taking strategies.	3.53	.58	1.9%	3.24	.77
Understand that mistakes are part of the learning process.	3.50	.60	0.5%	3.28	.72
Use appropriate communication skills to ask for help when needed.	3.57	.60	0.5%	3.40	.68
Understand the choices, options, and requirements of the middle school environment.	3.20	.76	0	2.87	.94
Work independently to achieve academic success.	3.30	.69	0	2.97	.77
Work cooperatively in small and large groups towards a common goal.	3.45	.65	0	3.30	.68
Personal/Social	**3.55**	**.39**	—	**3.36**	**.39**
Exhibit the principles of character, including honesty, trustworthiness, respect for the rights and properties of others, respect for rules and laws, taking responsibility for one's own actions, fairness, caring, and citizenship.	*3.92*	*.29*	31.4%	*3.86*	*.42*
Understand decision making and problem solving strategies.	*3.75*	*.49*	6.3%	*3.55*	*.59*
Demonstrate self-discipline and self-reliance.	3.57	.57	3.9%	3.31	.70
Identify resource people in the school and community and understand how to seek their help.	3.31	.70	1.4%	3.18	.76
Use strategies for handling conflict in a peaceful way.	*3.76*	*.48*	1.0%	*3.73*	*.48*
Understand how to make and keep friends and work cooperatively with others.	*3.78*	*.48*	0.5%	*3.77*	*.43*
Understand change as a part of growth.	3.26	.70	0	3.06	.72
Understand that Americans are one people of many diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and national origins who are united as Americans by common customs and traditions.	3.29	.72	0	3.02	.82
Identify the emotional and physical dangers of substance use and abuse.	3.27	.78	0	2.75	.95
Demonstrate good manners and respectful behavior towards others.	*3.71*	*.49*	0	*3.74*	*.47*
Use strategies for managing peer pressure.	3.56	.59	0	3.37	.71
Understand the importance of short- and long-term goals.	3.24	.69	0	3.02	.72

Note. Numbers in **bold** indicate the overall *M* and *SD* for each of the two Standards (i.e., Academic, Personal/Social); numbers in ***bold italic*** indicate the items receiving the highest ratings for *importance* and *implementation* for specific items.

Results suggest that elementary school counselors implement Personal/Social standards at a slightly higher level in their school counseling programs compared to Academic standards.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix: Importance and Implementation Subscales

Subscale	M	SD	1	2	3	4
Importance						
1. Academic	3.53	0.36	(.88)			
2. Personal/Social	3.51	0.38	0.74	(.87)		
Implementation						
3. Academic	3.25	0.45	0.67	0.46	(.89)	
4. Personal/Social	3.33	0.40	0.50	0.63	0.76	(.82)

Note. All correlations are statistically significant at $p < .05$; Values in the diagonal are reported Cronbach's alpha reliabilities.

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the most important standard for supporting student academic achievement.

Implementation of Standards in Supporting Student Academic Achievement

Results suggest that elementary school counselors implement Personal/Social standards at a slightly higher level in their school counseling programs compared to Academic standards. Table 1 presents the mean implementation ratings for Academic standards. The ratings ranged from 2.87 to 3.57 ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .46$); means for Personal/Social standards ranged from 2.75 to 3.86 ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .39$). Although the t test determined that the difference between the implementation means for Academic standards and Personal/Social standards was statistically significant ($p = .0001$), the finding probably was not practically significant. Pearson product moment correlation revealed a moderately strong relationship ($r = .76$; $ES = .23$) between the implementation of Academic and Personal/Social standards (see Table 2).

Standards rated highest for implementation included five items from Personal/Social and two items from Academic. The highest rated items included (a) *exhibit the principles of character* (Personal/Social; $M = 3.86$, $SD = .42$); (b) *understand how to make and keep friends and work cooperatively with others* (Personal/Social; $M = 3.77$, $SD = .43$); (c) *demonstrate good manners and respectful behavior towards others* (Person/Social; $M = 3.74$, $SD = .47$); (d) *use strategies for handling conflict in a peaceful way* (Personal/Social; $M = 3.73$, $SD = .48$); (e) *understand the importance of individual effort, hard work, and persistence* (Academic; $M = 3.57$, $SD = .57$); (f) *understand decision making and problem solving strategies* (Personal/Social; $M = 3.55$, $SD = .59$); and (g) *understand the expectations of the educational environment* (Academic; $M = 3.55$, $SD = .63$).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that elementary school counselors perceive no difference in importance between Academic and Personal/Social standards as a strategy for supporting student academic achievement. Although Academic standards were chosen more often than Personal/Social standards as most important, the largest percent of participants (31%) felt the Personal/Social standard *exhibit the principles of character* was the most important for supporting academic achievement. For these elementary school counselors, the best approach is to incorporate both academic and personal/social development interventions into their programs.

Participants' ratings indicate that Personal/Social standards were implemented at slightly higher levels than Academic standards, and a moderately high correlation existed for the implementation ratings between the two types of standards. These elementary school counselors not only perceive both types of standards to be important, they also put these beliefs into actual practice. Specifically, this study provides tentative empirical support for the comprehensiveness of topics currently addressed by elementary school counseling programs, topics that include character education, social skills, manners, conflict resolution, academic motivation, and school rules. These conclusions are similar to findings in research on school counselors' work activities that suggests they value and regularly implement comprehensive programs (Foster, Young, & Hermann, 2005).

With this exploratory study, the authors made no effort to generalize the results beyond what is reported based on participant responses. However, the authors did make several attempts to persuade school counseling supervisors to forward the study information to all elementary counselors in their school district. A number of school counselors either did not receive the e-mail or chose not to partici-

pate. Although the majority of participants reported adopting standards to guide their programs, this study's findings may not represent school counselors who work within the confines of different environments and expectations. Further, all responses were based on self-report. The inherent subjectivity and high ego-involvement when participants rate each item could be affected by social desirability (Paulhus & Reid, 1991). How counselors interpret, apply, and share the results of interventions addressing Academic and Personal/Social standards may differ among school counselors.

Implications for Elementary School Counselors and Future Research

Participants' high importance and implementation ratings for both types of standards provide empirical evidence that elementary school counselors recognize their contributions in supporting student academic achievement through comprehensive service delivery. Therefore, counselors must be prepared to advocate for this type of broad program focus. One practical advocacy technique is to engage in active collaboration with principals, teachers, and parents/caregivers. In fact, research on school counselor collaboration efforts suggests that a team approach to increasing academic achievement ensures programs and services are tailored and systematically delivered to meet the individual needs of all students (Baker et al., 2009; Bemak, 2000; Sink & Stroh, 2003). Failure to collaborate could result in a lack of understanding of the central role school counselors and their programs play in ensuring student success (Lieberman, 2004). Taking a leadership role in discussions is imperative for counselors to ensure that the larger school community recognizes the benefits of a comprehensive school counseling program. Presentations at staff, PTA, and school board meetings to highlight responsive services being delivered and to report effectiveness through accountability will keep all stakeholders informed of the school counselor's contributions to student academic achievement.

Furthermore, collecting data is important for school counselors to determine the impact of the programs they implement (Carey & Dimmitt, 2008; Dahir & Stone, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Lapan, 2001; Paisley & Hayes, 2003). Systematically connecting student learning outcomes from academic and personal/social development interventions to improvements in achievement data (e.g., grades, test scores, attendance, discipline referrals) will demonstrate how school counseling programs align with the academic mission of the school. Armed with the results from reader-friendly accountability tools (e.g., Brott, 2006; Kaffenberger & Young, 2007), school counselors can be sure the

school community understands the necessity of maintaining a comprehensive school counseling program.

Finally, continuing professional development is critical for all school counselors. Attending workshops, conferences, and presentations will make certain that school counselors are well informed about current research and innovative practices that link personal/social development (e.g., emotional intelligence, social competence, academic enablers) to academic achievement. Building knowledge and skills in this area is essential for designing interventions that integrate the school counselor's belief in the importance of personal/social development with programs that are connected to achievement outcomes.

The results of this study provide support for further investigations in several areas. First, the focus of a school counseling program can be shaped by the school's administrative team. Zalaquett's (2005) study on principals' perceptions of elementary school counselors' roles suggested that principals believe the work of counselors does contribute meaningfully to student achievement. A replication study could determine if principals' perceptions of the importance of academic and personal/social development are similar to those of elementary school counselors.

The current study lends some credence to the assertion that both academic and personal/social development standards are valued and implemented by elementary school counselors. Dahir, Burnham, and Stone (2009) examined school counselors' perceptions of the program components outlined in the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2005) and found that middle school counselors obtained the highest mean scores on the personal/social development subscale, suggesting a higher involvement with social and emotional concerns than their elementary counterparts. But questions remain about high school counselors' perceptions. Future quantitative and qualitative research could focus within a school district and across elementary, middle, and high school levels. Researchers could gather perceptions from school counselors, parents, teachers, and administrators for a comparison of the importance and implementation of personal/social development supporting student academic achievement.

CONCLUSION

School counselors are student advocates who work with other educators to promote the development of all students and to provide access to educational programs that facilitate school success for every student (ASCA, 1999). In school counseling, themes for academic, career, and personal/social develop-

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ment are articulated through national standards (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). The benefits of including personal/social development as part of a comprehensive school counseling program are twofold: (a) improving academic achievement and (b) supporting the development of emotionally healthy, socially competent, and goal-driven young people (ASCA, 2005; Webb et al., 2005).

This exploratory study was one step in determining elementary school counselors' perceptions about supporting student academic achievement through the school counseling program standards, particularly personal/social development. Not only do elementary school counselors perceive Academic and Personal/Social standards to be important, they report their implementation with a high degree of frequency. ∎

> **Systematically connecting student learning outcomes from academic and personal/social development interventions to improvements in achievement data will demonstrate how school counseling programs align with the academic mission of the school.**

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