School Counselor and School Psychologist Perceptions of Accountability Policy: Lessons from Virginia

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the professional efficacy of school counselors and school psychologists that operate under the umbrella of accountability reforms. Research questions addressed counselor and psychologist job roles and responsibilities, as well as their personal perspectives on the impact of accountability reforms on both the classroom context and student socio-emotional development. Interviews were conducted with counselors and psychologists of varying professional experience and school level, with analysis following analytic induction. Results indicate that the efficacy of student support personnel has been negatively impacted by accountability reforms, but schools that maintain a positive culture dedicated to excellence minimize that effect. Additionally, results highlight the unanticipated consequences of accountability on the teacher, student, and counselor/psychologist relationship and emphasize the need to cultivate a nurturing socio-emotional environment for students.

Keywords

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What happens when schools are the incubators of anxiety, insecurity, and maltreatment? The social contract changes, our relationship with one another changes. School psychologists, school counselors, and other student support personnel are asked to fix individuals who are removed from the system, but the system continues to chum out social casualties. Therefore, successful, sustained, high-quality implementation of innovations related to socio-emotional development of children is a high priority of education and those who work in schools. (Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003, p. 305)

Over the past three decades the nation's schools have been engaged in a massive policy initiative to increase academic standards and improve student achievement. In response to *A Nation at Risk,* states and the federal government initiated policies focused on standards and accountability. These initiatives have been reflected in Public Law 103-227, commonly referred to as Goals 2000, Public Law 89-10, 79 Stat. 27, 20 U.S.C. ch. 70, known as ESEA Title I, and Public Law 107-110 (NCLB; Public Law 107-110). The collision of policies with divergent values, goals, and intentions is an interesting subset of policy research. This study seeks to understand the impact of national and state accountability policy on the educational context from the perspectives of school counselors and school psychologists. These actors are uniquely placed to serve the social and emotional needs of elementary, middle, and high school students.

Accountability policies and their associated values appear to conflict with research that demonstrates the importance of social and emotional factors in fostering healthy development and academic achievement (Nugent, 2006; Crockett, 2004; Lazarus & Del Valle, 2002). Especially in a world dominated by accountability, the question is begged of how schools, from the eyes of the psychologist and counselor, are faring in the work to balance these conflicting contexts? Are the educational reform efforts over the past ten years only serving to exacerbate the socio-emotional issues of students in American education, or have they had a more positive impact over time? The notion of poor socio-emotional conditioning influencing academic performance is not new, but how are the major school personnel responsible for monitoring such emotional concerns coping with change in the context of major educational reform?

Research that integrates accountability policy study with the job roles of educational professionals outside of the traditional teacher-student relationship, particularly the school counselor and school psychologist, is helpful to see how modern reform policies affect the interactive and experiential capabilities of those professions. Coupling accountability with the continued rise of student mental health issues means that school counselors and psychologists will be continually faced with a battle on two fronts, working towards ensuring both student academic and socio-emotional success.

Framed in the perspective of school support personnel, this study investigates the impacts of modern accountability reform on school counselors and school psychologists and their perceptions of school culture. Counselor and psychologist efficacy in traditional and valued job responsibilities, combined with the ability to interact with students, teachers, and other school staff are important considerations for the socio-emotional health of students. It is a concern that modern accountability reform, even if designed with the best of intentions, results in considerable consequences for the state of student social and emotional well-being. Thus, how reforms have influenced counselor and psychologist professional efficacy and the socio-emotional health of students are central goals of this investigation.

Review of the Literature

Counselors and Psychologist Roles

The American School Counselors Association (ASCA; 2004) officially states that counselor roles are to provide services to educators, students, and the community to create effective schools. Eighty percent of counselor professional time is to be directly related to student services, and counselors' main goal is to maximize student achievement through promoting student equity, educational opportunities, and ensuring safe and healthy learning environments. Counseling serves to bridge the gap between students, parents, and educational professionals (ASCA, 2003).

Appropriate counseling duties include tailoring student academic programs, assessing student performance, collaborating with teachers, and general counseling. Inappropriate duties include record keeping, hall monitoring, and test administration (ASCA, 2003). Counselors demonstrate higher satisfaction and job commitment by having duties aligning with personal and professional expectations (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006). Counselors act as leaders in schools and work best when integrated in and

functioning with the general school population (De Barona & Barona, 2006). From this, there is an interest in the changing roles through accountability reforms, particularly if counselors become the primary administrators of tests related to accountability.

The professional responsibilities of school psychologists are diverse. Psychologists implement strategies to attend to student needs and increase the overall effectiveness of schools. They evaluate school programs, link mental health with learning, and interact with teachers and students to improve student performance. Psychologists often focus on behavioral management and advocate to teachers and parents for effective learning strategies (Ehrhardt-Padgett, Hatzichristou, Kitson, & Meyers, 2004; National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2003).

School psychologists often find themselves in a difficult position with professional identity. Decades ago, Fairchild (1975) noted a relationship between increases in educational accountability and psychologist job efficacy, concluding psychologists must justify their place in American schools and demonstrate their efficacy through an increase in service provision. There are occasional discrepancies between what school psychologists perceive the role of the psychologist to be when compared to other school staffers (Gilman & Gabriel, 2004; Watkins, Crosby & Pearson, 2001; Widerstrom, Mowder, & Willis 1989). Psychologists would prefer to reduce their role in various assessment activities and focus on other service delivery models, but this is constrained by requests from teachers and administrators to increase assessment activities that are typically conducted by school psychologists.

The ability of school psychologists to serve as intervention or even prevention agents is threatened by the time and work requirements associated with high-stakes testing and in the psychologist shortage created by discrepancies between psychologists leaving and entering the work force (Ehrhardt-Padgett et al., 2004). Positively, the switch from professional isolationism to a more collaborative and cooperative model in school psychology is partially a result of the implementation of accountability policies (Simcox, Nuijens, & Lee, 2006).

In essence, the combination of added expectations from teachers and the time commitments of test administration and related student assessment might be severely detrimental to the typical responsibilities of the school psychologist, which may have unforeseen negative impacts on students. There is thus the need to test this hypothesis with psychologists in a natural school setting.

Socio-Emotional and Psychological Health

School counselors and psychologists must consider an increasing portfolio of socio-emotional and psychological concerns that impact students in American schools. New economic realities have resulted in a greater percentage of both parents being actively employed (65%), leading to the increased necessity for external parenting sources (Stearns, 2005; Crockett, 2004). In contrast, more children are finding themselves the product of a single-parent home, which contributes to increases in psychological and socio-emotional problems (Wallace, 2005). School psychologists have noted that poverty, child abuse, bullying, and violence in schools have all been on the rise. When these problematic emotional and behavioral issues are coupled with high-stakes testing, there

can be serious implications for students that require the professional abilities of school counselors and psychologists (Crockett).

Over the past forty years, anxiety has increased by nearly one full standard deviation, and a threatening school environment (such as high-stakes testing) has been linked to increases in child anxiety. Schools must therefore connect with students and make them feel safe (Lazarus & Del Valle, 2002). Often times, students can be successful if they are given the necessary emotional support to overcome their health problems, as mental health is linked to learning. The role of psychologists in this scenario is to work with teachers and parents to give students that support. The American Psychological Association believes that school psychologists are able to handle any behavioral or emotional issue that students encounter in school (De Barona & Barona, 2006). However, in a survey by Repie (2005) it was found that only counselors feel their program services are effective, while school psychologists do not. Now operating under modern accountability reforms such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB; Public Law 107-110), the continued ability of psychologists and counselors to offer socio-emotional and psychological support to at-risk students may be in jeopardy.

High-Stakes Testing

Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004) have shown that when schools dedicate reform efforts specifically to increase test scores at the expense of student socio-emotional concerns, there is little actual benefit to children. The implementation of high-quality reforms that incorporate student socio-emotional development should be a high priority in American education so support personnel such as school psychologists can attend to individual socio-psychological concerns (McLaughlin, Leone, Meisel, & Henderson, 1997).

As a direct result of the increased importance of No Child Left Behind (NCLB; Public Law 107-110), counselors have found themselves dedicating considerably more professional time to testing programs, ignoring other educational programs and student needs. Counselors are often called upon to be test facilitators (Brown, Galassi, & Akos, 2004), usually because they have significant experience in quantitative methodology (Thorn & Mulvenon, 2002). Counselors hold there is too much emphasis on standardized tests, with too much class time being dedicated to them and greater stresses on students and teachers. High-stakes testing detract from counselor professional effectiveness, impacts their ability to work with students and teachers, and increases student fears and pressures (Brown et al.,; Thorn & Mulvenon).

As much as 80% of counselors can act as testing coordinators and 17 out of 41 percent of counselors spend between 31 and 50 percent of their time on test administration (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Brown et al., 2004). This violates the recommended 80% of time dedicated to student engagement (ASCA, 2003). Thorn and Mulvenon (2002) report that only eight percent of sampled counselors have no role in testing, and that testing inhibits counselors from attending to student social, personal, and educational needs. Considering that studies show counselors are already ill-equipped to align with ASCA requirements for special education and counseling (Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006) and also lack the time to focus on these special education needs (Monteiro-Leitner et al.,; Deck, Scarborough, Sferrazza, & Estill,

1999; Bowen & Glenn, 1998; Fox, Wandry, Pruitt, & Anderson, 1998; Isaacs, Greene, & Valesky, 1998; Scarborough & Deck, 1998), the additional burden of accountability tests can exacerbate this situation.

Similarly, school psychologists spend 40 to 60 percent of their professional time engaged in assessment activities (Davidow, 1996). Research shows that psychologists have low job satisfaction when policies run contrary to what they view as sound educational practice (Worrell, Skaggs, & Brown, 2006; VanVoorhis, 2006; M. Brown, Hohenshil, & Brown 1998; Benson & Hughes, 1985; Anderson, Hohenshil, & Brown, 1984).

Further study of the prevalence and permeation of identified counselor and psychologist professional concerns in Virginia school contexts is important. It may be the case that counselors and psychologists demonstrate permanence of these opinions and act consistently as testing coordinators or administrators, or it may be less of an issue in Virginia.

This study thus intends to contribute to recent scholarship on the impacts of high-stakes testing and accountability reform, more generally for school counselors and school psychologists. Particular issues of note from the literature, such as traditional professional responsibilities, the ability to attend to student socio-emotional and psychological needs, and the perceived relationship with teachers and school culture were used to drive the research questions in attempt to refine the issues highlighted in the literature within the context of Virginia schools.

Researcher Context

The researcher conducting this study is a former public school teacher in Northern Virginia who used the state accountability tests in accordance with federal No Child Left Behind mandate (NCLB; Public Law 107-110). Interest in this topic grew from personal experiences with high-stakes testing environments, particularly the perceived negative impacts on student psychological health. The researcher did not have a high level of personal interaction with the school counselors and school psychologists, but did note that their traditional job responsibilities were threatened (or reduced) due to the assignment of typical test administrative duties when testing periods would begin. Researcher interest is purely personal and this research was not conducted for any organization or funding body. Researcher intentions are to give voice to Virginia school counselors and psychologists, whereas much of the previous research is focused specifically on impacts on teachers and students.

Methodology

Research Design

This study follows the framework of ontological constructivism. The author believes that in any given environment, the social context is shaped by the individual experiences of each actor, leading to collective interactions that create the observable world. Individuals interpret the events and circumstances surrounding their existence, which in turn inform them about the nature of their world. Accordingly, the constructivist

extensions into epistemology, methodology, and inquiry criteria for worth and authenticity of results are retained. The subjects in this study are investigated thus to discover contextual definitions of meaning in a post-educational reform era.

The focus of the study is to address the impacts on the professional world of counselors and psychologists that are associated with modern accountability reform. Two main research questions guide this study. First, how do counselors and psychologists operate professionally in an educational context dominated by accountability reform? Second, what impacts on students, teachers, and school culture do those school professionals attribute to accountability reform and high-stakes testing?

Inquiry Process

The process selected for this study was qualitative interviewing, as this was considered to be the best approach to generate richly descriptive information aligned with research questions. The interview was a 20-question protocol with questions specifically tailored to directly answer the proposed research questions. Particular research focus included issues of professional efficacy, student mental health, perceptions of self and others, and reactions to school reforms occurring over the past decade. The protocol included demographic information and responses were assigned particular codes to classify data by psychologist or counselor groups. The confidentiality of responses was maintained.

Participants

Participants for this study include school counselors and school psychologists from multiple counties in Virginia. Nineteen total participants were purposefully sampled for the study, comprised of ten counselors and nine school psychologists. In order to generate the sample, requests for participation were posted on the Virginia School Counselor Association and Virginia Academy of School Psychologists websites. Additionally, every counselor in select Virginia school districts were called and asked to participate. This was done to get a comparative description of counselor and psychologist responses aligned with proposed research questions.

Before beginning the study, IRB approval was received from the University of Virginia Institutional Review Board for Social and Behavioral Sciences (IRB-SBS). All participants signed informed consent agreements (or gave recorded, vocal informed consent if interviews were conducted over the phone). Participants varied considerably in their total years of occupation, ranging from two years to over 20 years. This was done to allow for potential comparative analyses on reactions towards school reforms. Of the 19 participants, six worked in a high school, five in elementary, three in middle school, one in K-8, one in K-12, and one in elementary/high school. Two respondents did not reveal their school level. There were three men, and 16 women. Table 1 summarizes these participant descriptions.

Table 1. *Summary descriptions of study participants[1]*

Level	Profession	Years in profession
Undisclosed	Psychologist	2
Middle School	Counselor	4
Elementary	Counselor	5
Elementary	Counselor	5
High School	Counselor	5
High School	Psychologist	6
Middle School	Counselor	6
Elementary, HS	Psychologist	8
High School	Counselor	8
K-8	Psychologist	12
Undisclosed	Psychologist	13
Elementary	Psychologist	14
High School	Counselor	15
Middle School	Counselor	16
High School	Counselor	18
High School	Counselor	18
Elementary	Psychologist	20
Elementary	Psychologist	21
K-12	Psychologist	32

Data Collection

The data collection procedure was a straightforward process. All data was generated through the interviews with school counselors and school psychologists. As noted, demographic data was included in the interview protocol. Interviews were conducted in person and over the telephone, with all responses audiotaped for later transcription. Anything spoken by the counselors and psychologists over the course of the interview was considered data and relevant for coding, classification, and analysis at later stages of the study.

Data Analysis

The researcher incorporated consistent reflexivity to demonstrate trustworthiness of analysis, exploring potential bias that extends from the researcher position. Additionally, participants were given identical interview protocols. While every participant was given ample time to respond to each question, the research asked each question the same way to each participant. Immediately following interviews, the researcher constructed analytic memos to aid in eventual coding and analysis and to

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[1] Total N = 19, Average years in profession = 12

maintain researcher familiarity with available data. Through this process, the researcher highlighted prior hypotheses and initial ideas regarding participant data contributions. The researcher used memos to guide the initial coding and classification process.

The researcher transcribed all collected data from interviews and imported all transcriptions into N'vivo for coding and classification (QSR International, 2008). Data analysis followed the procedure of analytic induction. Under analytic induction, initial theories are generated and then subsequently modified upon researcher immersion into new data. This process allows for the creation of counter-factual theories that run contrary to significant main themes. Evidence is collected for both theories and counter-factual theories until dominant themes emerge.

As an example of the analysis process, after reading through available analytic memos and corresponding interviews, the researcher generated initial theories regarding counselor and psychologist professional efficacy, e.g. "accountability tests limit the abilities of counselors and psychologists to interact with teachers and students". Additional evidence from more critical readings then required the modification of initial theories and the creation of counterfactual theories. Suppose new evidence demonstrated that the original theory is true, but only during the actual implementation of the state-wide accountability tests (in its original form, the theory can imply that accountability reforms result in permanent, fundamental shifts in professional efficacy). The theory now becomes "accountability tests limit the abilities of counselors and psychologists to interact with teachers and students during test administration periods". Additionally, new evidence demonstrated occasional cases where tests have not impacted their professional efficacy. This caused the creation of the counterfactual theory, "accountability tests do not impact ability to interact with teachers and students when administrators support their traditional responsibilities". This process continued, refining original theories or creating new counterfactuals, until all evidence that is appropriate is attached to each theory. The more dominant theory is the one with the most evidence, and counterfactual theories are presented as special cases when supported by data.

After the researcher generated all appropriate theories and linked theories to corresponding evidence, the researcher organized theories according to central themes. The researcher provided a discussion for each theme and presented them with all available evidence. The next section presents the results generated from a comprehensive analysis of interview data. The researcher organized evidence in support of generated theories using four central categories: job functions and interactions; professional efficacy; perceptions of learning and socio-emotional development; and impacts on school and classroom contexts.

Results

Job Functions and Interactions

The ability of counselors and psychologists to interact with and impact the lives of students in American schools is considered to be extremely important. Counselors quite naturally believe their primary responsibilities are to adhere to student success, both academically and socio-emotionally. Student growth is paramount, requiring direct interaction and relationship building with students. Counselor participants noted that:

A lot of it is getting them to being proactive socially, emotionally and academically. Teachers are always in my office and I work very closely with them. Being in the classroom I also get a good feel with working with their students.

"My purpose is to remove any obstacles and help students reach their potential."

Psychologists also consider their relationships with students to be very important, particularly because the assessments conducted by school psychologist interventions follow children throughout their educational careers. For both counselors and psychologists, the importance of their professions to student academic work was consistently reinforced. Counselors must have the ability to be proactive, acting as guides and decision makers through academic excellence and character building. They work as liaisons between teachers, students, and families, assuming the role of information disseminators, and enjoy the triangular relationship between teachers, students, and counselors. One response highlighted these links between psychologists and student success, with a participating psychologist stating:

I am responsible for the academic success of students in a general way, and [for] the at-risk students I'm responsible for trying to improve their academic and socio-personal decisions and goals. I spend a lot of time working with kids with low grades. I also do one-on-one organizational skills, which has a big impact in middle school. I have a lot of contact with teachers; I have conversations with them about students and their performance every day. I try to talk to them as much as possible. No matter the situation I want to find out what the teacher thinks, all the time.

School psychologists, like counselors, become heavily involved in the daily lives of students when their academic performance is threatened. Psychologists have considerable interactions with teachers, informing them of student academic or emotional issues, responding to teacher concerns, and participating in student child-study meetings. One psychologist commented,

More related to when students are having difficulty from being at risk for retention or have been retained and still not meeting success with the general education curriculum. We look at special education options to increase their academic success. [There is] a lot of contact with teachers through meetings but also with individual consultations. Teachers ask me for assistance with observing the student or data collection for behavior plans or curriculum modifications.

Reinforcing the responsibilities of counselors, psychologists investigate potential barriers that limit student success, particularly related to special education or students at risk for retention. Furthermore, psychologists act in the interest of student social and

emotional success, creating links between the emotional state of the student and the experiences inherent in the classroom. Psychologists reported,

> Usually as it relates to emotional issues…if a child is experiencing situational and chronic emotional turmoil, it affects their concentration and ability to perform in the classroom. Students come to me personally all the time. Contact with teachers…I have child study meetings, go into classrooms for evaluations, teachers will come ask me about particular students and ask for suggestions.

> I think different facets of it relate in different ways. The assessment portion of our work relates primarily to special education. The academic issues are very much related to behavioral issues…so often getting children to perform better behaviorally indirectly increase academic work.

Professional Efficacy

Perhaps unsurprisingly, counselors associate most challenges to their professional efficacy as coming from the accountability movement. Unfortunately the roles considered most important from the perspective of counselors are threatened by testing, with 78% of counselor respondents listing testing as the primary (or solitary) reason for unanticipated or unwanted changes in job responsibilities. Despite having the added burden of accountability reform, counselors must still grapple with their traditional job responsibilities, and they are unable to properly attend to either. One counselor reported,

> It really drives the schedule when you're in a testing mode. At the same time, your regular day does not stop. Parents continue to call, students continue to have issues, you still have to meet with faculty…daily responsibilities continue, you just have additional ones. The energy is diverted to testing. From a counseling standpoint it really takes a lot away from your available time.

Counselors are required to attend to the increasing number of students needing accommodations or services for special needs, help with testing and administration, and participate in remediation for under-performing students. They also dedicate substantial time to data tracking. These are all reasons counselors cited to explain their changing job roles in response to accountability reform. However, some counselors in certain districts now have the benefit of a school staffer whose primary responsibility is accountability testing. Those counselors that have experienced the introduction of dedicated testing coordinators have been able to reacquaint themselves with traditional roles of counselor professionalism. Unfortunately most others still act as testing coordinators, facilitators, or disseminators. These counselors report decreases in time available to spend with students, which in turn negatively impacts student development. With little variation, counselors are experiencing substantial shifts in responsibility. Select reports from counselors include,

"As the idea of education has changed, so has my responsibilities. More paperwork, and No Child Left Behind and the advent of SOL testing. They have impacted my responsibilities tremendously. It is an endless cycle of testing that has completely taken over our lives. We get mountains of data and we have to look at the data. We finally get test coordinators here, and that helps, but not as much as it needs to."

The testing has certainly been a big shift here. I've been known more as a testing coordinator than a counselor. This past year has been great since I could reinvent myself as the original job I came here to do. The paperwork also bogs you down, but you're gonna get that no matter where you are. There is this great sense of accountability taking place.

I think testing right now is the big issue for counselors in my county. It takes an enormous amount of hours to do that. They have made some changes at the high school level, hiring testing coordinators, to free up counselors. This will trickle down eventually to elementary. Some counselors, that's all they do is testing.

Other participants address the disparities in professional responsibility between schools with dedicated testing coordinators and those without, finding that counselors working with testing coordinators are freed from many inappropriate time and responsibility commitments. Participants reported,

"We do not have a test coordinator so testing responsibility [the SOLs, OTIS, and Stanford] goes to the counselor staff."

As far as testing goes we have been relieved of the major responsibility of standardized testing this year. We still supervise the tests. This is the first year they have hired a test coordinator outside of the school. When SOL started the testing responsibilities from guidance were tremendous. These responsibilities grew each year. We had to start tracking kids, whether you were in charge of implementing the tests was irrelevant because of the sheer time constraints of tracking.

School psychologists, for their part, are split on perceptions to changes in job responsibility. Some respondents indicated testing related to NCLB has had little impact on their professional roles, while others believe accountability reform to be negatively influential (particularly with the culture change within schools towards administration), moving away from psychological services in counseling, behavior management, mental health services, and socio-emotional concerns. One psychologist noted,

The staff in general has had to learn how to deal with all types of children in the classroom. I think it's been positive but it hasn't been easy. For SOLs, I think it's added to the stress from both the kids and the staff, and it's taken away some of the flexibility, the hands on learning,

opportunities for students. And from my standpoint it's made it extremely hard to work with children outside of their lunch time to work on social emotional components.

School psychologists interviewed for this study suggest that either the current accountability model is wrong, or the school psychologist work force is unable to keep up with the constantly changing expectations for student performance. More and more students fall behind, and psychologists feel pressured to push students into special education to answer the problem of poor student performance.

The entire school is becoming the intended focus for school psychologists, no longer just individual or groups of at-risk children. To combat these changes, psychologists even admit seeking out school districts that emphasized counseling and mental health over testing and accountability. Interviews with psychologists revealed,

> I find now it's more that we have more schools and more emphasis on the administration part [of the job] instead of actual counseling and helping in behavior management. Earlier days I felt like I had more time to do those things. In terms of mental health services, that is minimized more in education. It used to be that we were more directly involved in seeking assistance for students [in need]. Because all the expectations of testing and SOLs we tend to push that onto mental health. Because of the accountability movement, the socio-emotional concerns of students are being pushed aside. It's growing; the system changes and mental health services are cut. Education is not just an academic area but a social area of learning and we seem to be missing that boat a lot.

> I have moved from one school system to another. I left the last one because all we did was test, and the numbers were very high. [It's] excessive. I wanted to move to a system that encouraged more use of our counseling skills and so I did that. Since I've changed systems I've been able to do much more individual and group counseling, as well as outreach programs like parent education.

Schools that encourage traditional psychologist services and emphasize the socio-emotional concerns of students offer more of what is considered effective professional practice in school psychology. To psychologists, this work experience in a supportive school setting, when the original school system was mainly focused on high-stakes testing, is highly appealing. Participant reports indicate that the culture of the school and the school district matters. A move to a more social and emotionally-centered school culture enables psychologists to be more engaged in the actual counseling side of their jobs. In this sense the relationship between school reform and school psychologist efficacy seems to be partially mediated by the perception of school culture. If said school culture is predicated towards student socio-emotional well-being, then school support staff may view traditional educational reforms such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB; Public Law 107-110) in a different light, as a complementary educational policy meant to benefit the school as a whole.

The reasons for these changes most often align with the current model of education. Continually increasing expectations on students and the growth of schools as an entity place more demand for psychologist services, but the current school psychologist work force is struggling to compensate. School psychologists admitted to a feeling of "helplessness", finding the concept of judging schools by student performance to be "laughable", and do not think the expectations associated with accountability always make sense.

Perceptions of Learning and Socio-Emotional Development

Because of their professional roles, school counselors and psychologists are able to offer a new perspective on the primary issues facing students in an accountability-minded world. Expectedly, counselors and psychologists equate accountability tests to creating stronger barriers to student achievement and to the development and maintenance of health socio-emotional development. Participants state,

> "It's only gotten worse with all the changes within the school division. I don't think there is enough time to relax and have fun at school; it's all academic and driven by standards and accountability testing."

> "There are more kids under stress, kids fearing failure on these tests and what it might mean to them personally to not have a diploma."

Counselors and psychologists also indicate that student variation in resiliency may be important, as this places at-risk students in a particularly vulnerable position to increases in stress and anxiety. Participants report,

> "It goes back to the resiliency of the students. Some students get completely stressed out by the standards and the pace of the class. It's not all fun and games anymore; even in kindergarten it starts early."

> "It's just adding to stress them out. It's very depressing, especially as they get to the middle and high school levels. They are like little prisoners."

> "Students are pretty anxious and pretty stressed, especially at the higher levels. All this testing has increased their anxiety and I don't know how much they actually learn, actually retain."

> "The SOLs make children more anxious, even those without educational problems."

> "The increased stress from teachers are communicated to students either directly or indirectly. The children feel the mood of the school."

> "There's a sense of anxiety, a sense of failure. There's also a labeling piece that can be misleading and students are grappling with it."

In addition to influences on "regular" students, the overall survival of at-risk students is a serious issue. For students of considerable risk, achievement in schools is a low priority, especially when negative influences at home consistently place undue burdens on them. When many at-risk students face these difficulties, it may be unfair to expect equal performance on standardized measures. Participants addressed a number of the academic and socio-emotional problems for students, which range from typical stress related to college preparation to environments outside of school influencing classroom performance. Counselors feel students are lacking in confidence, while teachers are finding decreases in instructional creativity. More specifically, testing and test pressure has had substantial impact. Counselors highlight,

> "Critical thinking. We are so stuck on learn and regurgitate that when they are asked to think for themselves, they don't know what to do. This is where testing has led students to become."

> The stakes keep getting bigger for them. It's a tight rope that schools walk, meeting special education, gifted, and the average students' needs and doing it in such a way that they all feel important, addressed, and attended. The competition that parents put on their kid to just be identified as gifted, or get into a special program is huge. They feel it [the pressure] and they know it. The stakes all around are getting higher for students. They are planning in 6th grade for graduation…trying to get into specialty centers, good colleges, it's all about stakes.

These academic stresses then filter down into psychological issues, and when combined with the typical interpersonal and intrapersonal development issues that every child and adolescent encounters, students face what is essentially a war on two fronts.

Psychologists echo many of these same concerns. Perceiving a culture shift in American schools, psychologists find that students are facing disadvantages in academic success as a result of testing. Stress and anxiety from testing is one factor impacting socio-emotional development, with psychologists perceiving a negative relationship between the two. Psychologists report,

> They keep setting the bar higher and higher…we are pushing students at a much younger age, the pressure that is put on kids to pass SOLs is very high. It's not healthy, and for a very large group of kids it's a real struggle for them to meet these standards. They get real frustrated. Some schools are doing a good job at providing intervention and additional support, and some aren't. Those that aren't are seeing higher discipline problems and dropout rates.

> I think the primary achievement problem [is that] that we have stopped valuing things. We've come to the philosophy that we are just trying to get high test scores. Smart kids know this and get discouraged in that they know the tests are worthless. We've stopped teaching things that are

important, and just start teaching things that are on the test. Our instruction is a lot less rich.

"Teachers are forced to teach to the SOL requirements, and students that may come in behind, although they are growing, are expected to meet the grade level [requirements]."

Participant reports of school culture, professionalism, and high-stakes testing show no substantial variation when analyzed by experience (qualified as professional time as a counselor or psychologist). The data indicates that the perception of impact on students is no different between those counselors and psychologists that have worked before and after the reform movement and those that are more recent.

Impacts on the School and Classroom Contexts

Counselors and psychologists frame the impacts of modern accountability reform within the classroom and school contexts for students and teachers. Participant responses link testing to increases in improper focus on best practices in education, as accountability causes schools to emphasize success in the wrong areas. Testing reforms have resulted in limited creativity and a lack of differentiated instruction from teachers, and also place substantial stress and risk of burnout upon them. Time considerations have become big-time players in schools, as teachers now face increased specificity in content to cover with a decreasing amount of available time to cover it. Teachers feel the push to seek out students for special education programs, putting undue burden onto special education teachers and mislabeling underperforming students Select statements from interviews include,

I think the SOLs have forced the teachers to teach to a very prescribed knowledge base, moving away from a higher-order lesson base. They are very focused on that test, and it limits quality of instruction and differentiating instruction that students might need. This has also influenced their psychological condition; there is a lot of stress about how these students might do on their tests.

A lot of the good ones [teachers] have left because of accountability, it's so political. Those that stay are limited to what they can teach; they can't teach things of interest or things that need to be known. They have to teach what they expect to be on the test. And then they go over it again, and again and again.

"There are [sic] a lot of burnout, particularly with special education teachers. They have a lot of kids they shouldn't have. You also have a lot of creative teachers that can't be creative."

"They feel the pressure, that's the negative side of it [the accountability movement]. The stakes are high. They get nervous about testing Special Ed and ESL students, fearing they will bring down the scores."

However, perceptions of reform impacts on teachers are not entirely negative. Some counselors and psychologists believe that teachers are up to the extra challenges placed upon them by accountability, and the refocusing of attention on critical content strengthens teaching by establishing achievable goals and increasing teacher instructional discipline. Participants note that schools have occasionally responded to increases in stress upon teachers by fostering a collaborative environment, helping teachers cope with the changes associated with accountability reform. The infusion of accountability has been exceptional in planning and coordinating for instruction, and has increased materials sharing and cooperative development among teachers. Finally, results from standardized tests were reported to be helpful in providing information to schools regarding critical needs, identifying knowledge areas requiring greater focus or which students need remediation.

Other strengths identified as emerging from accountability reform include identification. Students in need of inclusion assistance, special education provisions, or counseling and psychological services are having their needs met. These students may not have been able to receive the assistance they needed without accountability. Other counselors commend accountability for increasing awareness and focus on what is important, causing students to be more serious about their learning and performance in schools.

However, counselors and psychologists feel the importance attached to tests has increased stress surrounding performance, leading to confusion as students focus solely on tests and scores and forget about other requirements in school. For some, No Child Left Behind (NCLB; Public Law 107-110) is responsible for "dumbing down" learning for students. No longer being taught to think or be creative, students simply become more efficient in test taking. Although students understand the seriousness of tests and honestly want to perform well on them, tests are merely "a matter of course" and "they don't know anything else" Participants note,

> There are good things and bad things. With NCLB it's put a lot more pressure on the teachers and you can sense it, especially as you get closer to the testing date. The kids feel that pressure as well; there is anxiety and stress about it. We try to make it fun here. Positive side, it's teaching them responsibility and getting them involved, teaching them lifelong skills.

> I think they've learned helplessness. I mean some kids benefit from it, the ones the tests are designed for, they succeed. Then you have the average or below-average student that struggles and they become helpless. I'm sure there is a tendency if you can't meet criteria [to drop out]. And pressure, when you see little kids worrying about the SOLs and stressing about being tested, it's sad.

What may also be important is the varying impact of testing. For students that are already high-performers or are otherwise uninfluenced by high-stakes testing environments, testing is a non-issue. Students love the opportunity to score highly on tests. However, for students at-risk or those that do not test very well, testing is a much more complicated issue. These are the students that are more susceptible to increases in stress and anxiety.

Overall, school culture has shifted in response to accountability reform. What was traditionally aligned with total student development has generally morphed into scores. Participant responses hint at tests robbing students of their individualization, locking them into repetitive tasks in the classroom with only performance on tests being prized. Interviewees reported,

> It really depends on the school; if the school does things well it will benefit the child. It's the school culture, from administrators on down. If it's a cookie cutter school, and you don't fit the mold, then they won't do well.

> I think the accountability process has been very dehumanizing for kids, because it's created a whole culture everyone being forced into this testing model. I think it stresses them out, and the school unintentionally makes it high-stress because [the tests] are high stakes. It has turned schools into work camps.

> I think they have become more test-centered than child centered. It's more SOL centered, the culture of the school is more tested. It's become "how do we get the kid tested" instead of "how do we get this kid to learn.

Because of the critical educational decisions made in response to standardized test scores, teachers and administrators are forced into an increased emphasis on test performance. This results in a drastic change in school culture which then filters down into teacher and student performance.

Discussion

Within the context of Virginia schools, personal experiences from school counselors and psychologists in response to modern educational reforms are diverse, but not particularly positive. Every counselor in this study reported that No Child Left Behind (NCLB; Public Law 107-110) or state-level high-stakes tests were the most significant educational reforms occurring over the past decade. These tests have carried with them anxiety and stress, with extra pushes for uniformity and reductions in instructional creativity. Counselors and psychologists have found themselves in a Catch-22, facing a need for more counseling and remediation as a result of accountability policy implementation, the very things they are unable to give in the first place as a result of changing job responsibility because of accountability policy.

Accountability test implementation has been described by counselors and psychologists as "horrible" and "overwhelming". In some cases accountability is a good thing, very important to ensure adequate educational experiences for students, but

improperly designed and ineffectively implemented. The unintended consequences have not justified the results. The deleterious impacts on student success and mental health, when combined with the increasing inability of counselors to address student academic, social, and emotional concerns, have resulted in a school environment where counselors and psychologists, on average, perceive their efficacy to be limited.

Counselors now educate parents on the nature and intention of accountability exams and dedicate considerable professional time towards test data dissection and interpretation. They also disseminate data for parents, teachers, and child-study participants, and ensure the school as a whole meets accountability requirements. Psychologists feel pressure to push more students into special education and are drifting away from best practices in school psychological services.

Inevitably with policy implementation, the personal interests and ideologies of particular policy actors change how policies are viewed within the context of the school district (Yin, 1989). If administrators implement accountability policies while simultaneously cultivating a nurturing socio-emotional atmosphere within the school for students, the typical unintended consequences from accountability programs may not be regarded as having such a substantial impact on student socio-emotional health, at least from the perspective of school counselors and school psychologists. It may even allow counselors and psychologists to be more effective in their work with student mental health.

The way school reforms, particularly the accountability policies born from No Child Left Behind (NCLB; Public Law 107-110), seem to have an impact on school psychologist and counselor efficacy applies to the triangular relationship between teachers, students, and the counselor/psychologist. The effect on this relationship was reflected in interview reports of perceptions of job satisfaction, job responsibility alignment with expectations, and perceptions of teacher or student change in response to accountability reforms. If a counselor or psychologist notices a change in teacher stress or creativity, these changes filter down to the student in the form of learning to the test, a lack of educational resources like experiential learning, or excessive concerns over grades. Additional stress or anxiety on already demanding academic and social situations for students can be extremely detrimental to learning and socio-emotional health. These issues remain and manifest within students and teachers. Counselor and psychologists must then attend to student and teacher issues of college admission, test performance, and anxiety. These added burdens upon the shoulders of school psychologists and counselors are difficult to alleviate, as their job responsibilities are already compromised by the unintended consequences of modern accountability tests. The question is open as to how much of a positive impact counselors and psychologists could have on student's socio-emotional well-being if their professional time was not preoccupied by testing.

Further Research

The extension of this research into a more general, rigorous study would supplement the richly descriptive data presented here and provide helpful, inferential data on the impacts of accountability on school support personnel. Additionally, further research that investigates teacher and student perceptions of counselor and psychologist efficacy would do well to demonstrate the impact of accountability on the triangular

relationship between school support staff, teachers, and parents. Similar questions centered on accountability reform and counselors and psychologists, presented to teachers and students, would show any alignment or discrepancy from the counselor and psychologist personal perceptions.

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Article Citation