

# The School Counselor and Special Education: Aligning Training With Practice



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**The intent of this article is to discuss the importance of training school counselors in providing adequate services to students with special needs, as mandated by special education law and supported by school counseling standards created by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). In addition, the lack of adequate and unified training for school counselors in this area will be explored. This article suggests implementing a more consistent school counselor education program across institutions that would include coursework and experiences in special education that are in alignment with the standards of ASCA, legal obligations, and daily counselor roles. Examples of ways to incorporate such experiences and assignments into courses across counselor training programs are provided.**

**Keywords:** counselor education, school counselor, special education, counselor training, American School Counselor Association

The enactment of special education laws and mandates such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94–142) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which require schools to provide free appropriate public education to all students within the regular education setting, have immensely impacted the school counseling profession (Bowen & Glenn, 1998; Dunn & Baker, 2002; Milsom, 2002; Owens, Thomas, & Strong, 2011). The number of students identified as appropriate to receive special education services is growing (Dunn & Baker, 2002; McEachern, 2003; Owens et al., 2011). Therefore, school counselors are now required to provide equal services to more students with special needs within the regular education setting. Similarly, school counselors are required to take a more active role in the Individual Education Program (IEP) process, from identification to implementation, than what was previously expected in the past (Dunn & Baker, 2002; Milsom, Goodnough, & Akos, 2007; Owens et al., 2011). School counselors' involvement in special education is not only required by specific legislation, but also poses ethical considerations regarding to direct and indirect services for students with special needs. In response to legislation, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has advocated for school counselor involvement in special education and published guidelines for servicing students with special needs (Isaacs, Greene & Valesky, 1998; Myers, 2005; Studer & Quigney, 2005).

Despite a study conducted by Studer and Quigney (2003) which showed that school counselors are becoming more involved with special education by serving on teams that assist with disability identification and implementation of services, counselor education programs are not adequately training future school counselors to deal with changing roles and responsibilities included in servicing students with special needs (McEachern, 2003; Milsom & Akos, 2003; Romano, Paradise, & Green, 2009; Studer & Quigney, 2005). Additionally, there is a dearth of recent research in the literature addressing concerns that special education is not being adequately addressed in school counselor preparation programs. Although there is an increasing trend in school counselor training programs to include some instruction about special education (Studer & Quigney, 2005), no specific suggestions for implementing such content into the curriculum have been published to date. In response, this

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article provides ideas and recommendations for infusing special education content throughout the school counseling curriculum required by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Counselor education programs must recognize the importance of the school counselor in the lives of students with disabilities, and adequate training should become a priority.

## **Students with Special Needs, the School Counselor and the Law**

Since the enactment of special education laws and mandates such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142) and IDEA, the role of the school counselor has continued to evolve (Bowen & Glenn, 1998; Dunn & Baker, 2002; Milsom, 2002; Owens et al., 2011). The aforementioned laws require school counselors to provide services to students with disabilities and their parents, thus increasing the need for school counselor involvement with students who have been labeled as having special needs (Dunn & Baker, 2002; Owens et al., 2011). Findings by Studer and Quigney (2003) indicated that legal and ethical issues, participation in multidisciplinary pre-referral teams, and IEP development and review were among the top 10 activities involving school counselors. With the passage of IDEA, schools are now required to include students with disabilities within the school in the least restrictive environment through mainstreaming and inclusion. A greater population of students with disabilities within the regular education setting increases the likelihood of school counselor contact. An additional aspect of IDEA is that it requires transition planning for students in secondary schools. Therefore, it is logical for special educators to collaborate with school counselors when making such plans, as school counselors are trained in career and lifespan development (Milsom et al., 2007).

Students identified as needing special education services are estimated to account for 10–18% of the school population and are expected to increase (Dunn & Baker, 2002; McEachern, 2003). Schools are required to write IEPs for these students and implement appropriate supports and accommodations outlined in IEPs. School counselors are increasingly taking a greater role in the process of identifying students and developing IEPs, as well as implementing aspects of IEPs (Milsom et al., 2007; Owens et al., 2011). School counselors bring invaluable skills and knowledge such as understanding of group dynamics, facilitation of communication, awareness of community resources, and collaboration to IEP and pre-referral multidisciplinary teams (Milsom et al., 2007). School personnel roles and responsibilities within the team should be shared, in that the special educator should be viewed as the expert in content, while the school counselor should be viewed as the expert in process and transition services. School counselors also are equipped to make connections between student personal and social factors in relation to academic performance, which may come up in IEP meetings. Additionally, school counselors are viewed as leaders in the school and act as advocates for students, both directly and indirectly, and are therefore a notable asset to students and multidisciplinary teams (Owens et al., 2011).

In addition to legal responsibilities, school counselors also have a professional and ethical obligation to provide adequate direct and indirect services to students with special needs. Dunn and Baker (2002) stated that as members of multidisciplinary teams, school counselors are called upon to “engage in advocacy, consultation, diagnosis, assessment, development of delivery system, and provision of support services for students, parents and teachers” (p. 227). Therefore, it is clear that advocating and supporting students of all abilities in personal, social, academic and career domains are requirements for professional school counselors. Similarly, ASCA also supports professional and ethical guidelines concerning students with special needs.

## **ASCA Guidelines for Servicing Students with Special Needs**

ASCA has delineated specific roles and responsibilities of school counselors regarding involvement with students identified as having special needs (Isaacs et al., 1998; Myers, 2005; Studer & Quigney, 2005). Roles

may include many tasks, from serving on multidisciplinary teams to providing direct counseling services to students. School counselors are required to participate in the identification of students with disabilities by serving on screening teams and assisting in evaluation where appropriate. By serving as a member of the multidisciplinary team, the school counselor is able to provide input on planning and placement for identified students. For example, school counselors may assist with the preparation of IEPs by discussing student levels of functioning in academic, personal or social domains. The school counselor also may provide services such as consulting with outside agencies to coordinate supportive services for families and students. Additionally, for students identified within the school, school counselors may provide direct services such as individual and group counseling. These services must be consistent with services provided for all students, regardless of ability. Indirect services include consulting with personnel about identified students' educational and affective needs as well as developing and implementing professional trainings for staff working with exceptional students. Moreover, ASCA encourages school counselors to advocate for students with special needs in the school and community.

Changing school counselor roles and responsibilities are evident in the literature. Studer and Quigney (2003) examined professional school counselors' time regarding students with special needs. Among the top five activities performed were the following: (a) providing individual counseling, (b) meeting with administrators or supervisors about students with special needs, (c) utilizing problem-solving and conflict resolution techniques regarding students with special needs, (d) scheduling classes, programs and services, and (e) providing career counseling and education. The role of advocate is infused into many of these activities, which is viewed by both professionals in the field and ASCA as an essential function of school counselors (Milsom, 2006; Myers, 2005; Owens et al., 2011).

School counselors are in a position to advocate for students with special needs in a variety of ways, both directly and indirectly. Through active involvement in the appropriateness of educational planning during the IEP process, school counselors give these students a voice and work to facilitate an understanding of students with special needs among school personnel. Raising awareness and understanding about disabilities among professionals in the school as well as among parents and students is another imperative role, since students with special needs are often stigmatized, which can create negative experiences and barriers for them (Milsom, 2006; Scarborough & Deck, 1998). Through activities such as assessment of systems, programs, policies and attitudes, school counselors can better support students with special needs academically, personally and socially by working to shift negative school climates and perceptions (Bowen & Glenn, 1998; Milsom, 2006; Quigney & Studer, 1998; Scarborough & Deck, 1998). Implementation of programs for both school personnel and students aimed at examining self-awareness of bias, increasing sensitivity towards differences, accepting others, and positively supporting students with special needs can assist in adjusting attitudes as well as school climates (Milsom, 2006; Quigney & Studer, 1998; Scarborough & Deck, 1998).

Additionally, school counselors can directly support and advocate for students with special needs through providing individual and group counseling, as well as classroom-based lessons and interventions. Such initiatives should focus on the areas of development in tolerance and respect, empathy, self-esteem, anger management, diversity, cooperation, as well as other anti-bullying and character education themes such as citizenship, fairness and caring (Milsom, 2006; Milsom et al., 2007; Myers, 2005). School counselors also should begin to help students with special needs develop skills that encourage them to eventually become self-advocates (Owens et al., 2011). Progress monitoring, as outlined in the ASCA Model's management and accountability sections, should entail collecting and measuring data for the interventions previously mentioned in order to assess areas of effectiveness, need and improvement (Myers, 2005). Along with these emerging roles and shifts in school counselor responsibilities, there is added responsibility for counselor educators and counselor education programs to adjust accordingly.

## School Counselor Education Programs and Students with Special Needs

Although involvement of school counselors in the special education process and interactions with students who have special needs is increasing, there are findings suggesting that counselor education programs are not adequately training future school counselors to deal with these changes (McEachern, 2003; Milsom & Akos, 2003; Nichter & Edmonson, 2005; Romano et al., 2009; Studer & Quigney, 2005). McEachern (2003) found that less than 40% of school counselor preparation programs required students to take coursework that included special education topics and subjects related to students with special needs. In other studies, results indicated that school counseling programs are inconsistent regarding coursework pertaining to special education and that more programs are infusing such content into already required classes instead of creating additional required special education classes (Milsom, 2002; Milsom & Akos, 2003; Studer & Quigney, 2005). However, the types of content, how it is infused, and to what extent have not been revealed or regulated. Despite the increase in coursework pertaining to special education from 28% to 40% and the infusion of special education content into coursework, training programs for school counselors continue to fail to address the needs of today's students (Korinek & Prillaman, 1992; Nichter & Edmonson, 2005; Studer & Quigney, 2005).

Coursework and experiences related to working with students with disabilities have been shown to correlate with school counselors' perceptions of their readiness to work with this population (Isaacs et al., 1998; Milsom, 2002; Milsom & Akos, 2003; Nichter & Edmonson, 2005). Several studies have indicated that school counseling programs are not thorough enough in providing training regarding special education issues and students with special needs (Dunn & Baker, 2002; Milsom, 2002; Nichter & Edmonson, 2005; Studer & Quigney, 2005). School counselors have indicated a desire for more training in supporting students with disabilities from programs before graduation. A study conducted by Studer and Quigney (2005) revealed that only 5.9% of ASCA members surveyed had completed one or more courses about special education in their graduate programs and that 59% had never completed a course or taken a workshop about special education. Participants indicated that they did not feel prepared to support students with special needs. Areas that were viewed as receiving little attention in training included the following: (a) participation in development and review of IEPs, (b) collaboration with special education and general education teachers, and (c) consultation with outside agencies or professionals. These areas are all integral in educational programming and the success of students with special needs, and therefore should be addressed in school counselor preparation programs. A study conducted by Nichter and Edmonson (2005) produced similar results, indicating that 89% of counselors surveyed in Texas felt that more training in special education would help them feel more competent and prepared to work with this population. Topics reported as potentially helpful in additional training included the following: (a) special education law and legal issues, (b) disability characteristics, (c) techniques for working with students in special education, and (d) information about medication and side effects. Additionally, 82% of participants indicated that counselor education programs should require special education instruction. Counselor preparation programs appear to have similar concerns. Over 60% of counselor education programs, when surveyed by Korinek and Prillaman (1992), indicated needing adjustment in school counselor training requirements for their programs in order to increase student capability in working with special education requirements. Similarly, McEachern (2003) surveyed counselor educators at various universities and colleges across the country and 55% stated that their coursework needed improvements regarding providing special education curricula.

Several recommendations have been made to address the lack of special education coursework for school counselors. Studer and Quigney (2005) suggested that it may be advantageous for school counselors to enroll in a class designed for special education teachers in which essential information is taught about this population and the areas discussed above. Additionally, enrollment in a course with pre-service special education teachers

would provide school counselors the opportunity to practice collaborating with teachers. Recommendations also have been made for school counseling programs to increase coursework covering the ASCA Model and strategies related to students with special needs (Isaacs et al., 1998; Milsom & Akos, 2003; Studer & Quigney, 2005). Similarly, it is recommended that school counselor preparation programs require experiences with exceptional students to increase competency and positive attitudes (Milsom & Akos, 2003; Studer & Quigney, 2005).

## **Recommendations: Infusing Special Education into the School Counseling Curriculum**

Students being trained in counseling programs to become school counselors can build their knowledge and experience related to special education throughout their counselor education coursework. An integrative approach may be provided in which material about special education is infused into required studies (Studer & Quigney, 2005). However, coursework must be organized and comprehensive across all courses in the program, including core courses and those specifically designed for school counseling students. Courses that lend themselves to infusion of special education activities and assignments include the following: learning and development, career, group, ethics, theories, multiculturalism, techniques, assessment, practicum and internship, as well as courses specifically designed for school counselors like introduction to school counseling or a leadership and advocacy course. Infusing activities will be discussed in depth below, and requires creativity and flexibility on the part of counselor educators in the field. Assignments and teaching styles may need to be adjusted to incorporate special education material into the standard counseling curriculum. It should be noted that when training school counselors in special education concerns, a combination of requiring specific disability coursework in conjunction with infusing such information into existing coursework is more effective (Milsom & Akos, 2003). Designing such a course is beyond the scope of this article; therefore, suggestions for infusing special education material into existing courses required by CACREP will be discussed.

### **Course Assignments Related to Special Education**

Counselor educators can adjust class requirements for assignments to include aspects of special education. For example, students could compare and contrast typical child development and its implications regarding specific disability categories for children. School counseling students also could locate a specific student with special needs and formulate a case study about that child in which various aspects of developmental and learning theory would be identified. Assignments for a career course could require students to identify considerations for children with special needs when applying career theories and engaging in career planning (e.g., closely analyzing strengths and needs to align with viable career options when applying Holland's approach). Students would then design a career exploration activity with these considerations for a student with special needs in mind. When completing an assignment such as group counseling planning, students could design a group for children with special needs. The group would address specific issues that these children face and for which they may need support (e.g., self-esteem), and include appropriate activities that would be accessible for the children involved (e.g., for activities that require reading or writing, replace the language with pictures, or create activities based on reading ability). Additionally, school counseling students could design a group and discuss how they would make accommodations for students with special needs in a group consisting of regular and special education students (e.g., pairing students for activities or reading content aloud to the group). Likewise, when completing an assignment for a school counselor course, such as developing a classroom guidance lesson, school counseling students could learn about accommodations similar to those discussed above that would ensure that all students could fully participate to their ability level.

Laws and ethical issues surrounding special education can be addressed in a professional issues class, ethics course or course specific to school counselors through the discussion of case studies and scenarios. The cases used should depict various school counseling ethical and legal dilemmas involving students with special needs

(e.g., teacher is not following accommodations outlined in the IEP). Students would then apply ASCA special education guidelines and special education laws to issues presented, in order to illustrate how those involved are or are not acting in accordance with established professional mandates and what action should be taken. Additionally, students would then describe what the person in the scenario could have done differently and how the school counselor should intervene. In a theories class, school counseling students could critique the effectiveness of various theories for students who are identified as having special needs, through applying theoretical concepts, reviewing research, and considering qualities associated with different disability diagnoses that could impact treatment. A case study could also be developed, to which school counseling students would apply various theories to address issues faced by students with special needs (e.g., anxiety, depression). Similarly, in a techniques class, school counseling students could identify techniques that they found to be the most effective with special-needs students and practice applying them in class role-plays. Linking strategies to specific theories and disabilities may help school counselors feel more prepared and confident (Myers, 2005). Moreover, to increase competence and confidence, school counseling students should be exposed to assessments routinely used in the school setting with students identified as having special needs. During an assessment course students could practice utilizing and interpreting tools such as the Child Behavior Checklist (CBC), Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC) and Connors Rating Scale through role-plays in pairs or small groups. School counseling students enrolled in the assessment course also could be required to look at mock IEPs and evaluation reports and discuss how accommodations and findings outlined in the documents would impact their services with the students.

The assignments described in this section can be used as in-class activities or outside assignments and also may utilize technology (e.g., slide shows, discussion boards). Requiring assignments such as those discussed above provides a foundation for infusing more experiential activities into other courses as well.

### **Exposure Activities to Enhance Student Learning About Special Education**

Direct experiences with students who have special needs have been recommended in past research and is thought to increase school counselor competence, understanding and positive attitudes in working with this population (Bowen & Glenn, 1998; Isaacs et al., 1998; Milsom & Akos, 2003). Various interactive experiences with students with disabilities could be a required part of many courses throughout the school counseling program. Students could participate in interactive experiences both in schools and in community settings.

For example, students could be assigned to participate in an immersion experience for a multicultural class that would require students to spend an established amount of time with children who have been identified as having special needs (in schools or advocacy group settings). Students would then be required to reflect upon their experience, examine their own biases and stereotypes, and consider how their interactions had impacted their multicultural development. This assignment could be done through journaling (written or video), arts projects (e.g., collages, drawings, poems) or through a research paper tied to counselor professional development. Additionally, students could interview parents of these children or older children with special needs to gain insight into the barriers and discrimination that these individuals face because of their disabilities. School counseling students could volunteer at a local community agency such as a center for individuals who are deaf, blind, or developmentally disabled that offers services for teens with disabilities. Students would then use the information from their visit to outline and develop a specific program they could implement in the school to better support special-needs students and their families (e.g. partner with the special education teacher and provide a parent support night in which parents are able to discuss issues they are facing or provide representatives from various community agencies that support different needs for people with disabilities). Students also could visit a college campus center for student disability services and support. During the visit they could interview a staff member as well as a student seeking services in order to help develop a perspective on how to better serve individuals with special needs during high school and transition planning.

The experiences outlined above might help school counseling students become more sensitive to the needs and issues faced by individuals with special needs and might reinforce the need for advocacy in school counseling. Advocacy for students with special needs could be explored by requiring counseling students to take part in activities run by community groups for special populations, or to design a workshop presentation for school staff that raises awareness about disabilities, discrimination and attitudes. School counseling students also could work with a school counselor to develop a disability awareness week for the school that included activities such as a pep rally, guest speakers and classroom guidance lessons. Additionally, students could observe a school counselor during the transition planning process, attend a transition meeting and develop a transition plan as part of career course requirements. During this process they would be required to reflect upon how the school counselor acted as an advocate for the student.

Specific school counseling coursework and practicum and internship experiences also provide many opportunities for infusing the activities described above as well as others that will be discussed. Students involved in courses specific to school counseling could be required to observe a school counselor for a day and interview him or her about daily requirements involving special education, experiences with special education and suggestions for working with this population. Students should be required to attend a multidisciplinary team meeting and discuss the IEP process with a special educator or job shadow various special educators who serve students with different disability levels and categories. Requiring school counseling students to gain experiences during their practicum and internship with special-needs students should be a priority in school counselor training. These experiences provide an opportunity for school counseling students to interact with children in special education, while supervision is provided to effectively address issues that may be faced by this population (Milsom & Akos, 2003). Students should be required to log an established number of direct and indirect hours in which they are involved in the special education services that have been discussed throughout this article. Completion of a log, along with journal entries in which students reflect upon their experiences, could be used as a portfolio assessment upon graduation. Similarly, this documentation might be used for gatekeeping purposes or to measure student development in competency with special education and as a future school counselor.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Lack of coursework and experiences in special education can result in school counselors' limited self-efficacy, feelings of frustration and anxiety, erosion in morale, and interference with other counseling duties (Romano et al., 2009). Therefore, in an effort to unify the field and produce more confident and competent school counselors, it is imperative that school counselor education programs collaboratively reexamine, regulate, and redefine program requirements. Today, school counselors not only need a solid knowledge base, but also need to be given opportunities to develop skills involved in collaboration, referral, advocacy, problem-solving, team-building, leadership and working directly with students who have been identified as having special needs (Bowen & Glenn, 1998; Dunn & Baker, 2002).

As suggested by Milsom and Akos (2003), providing a combination of practical experience with coursework related to special education appears to be the most effective way to prepare future school counselors. It is in the best interest of future school counselors, as well as the students they will serve, to offer support and supervision during such experiences as they complete their programs (Korinek & Prillaman, 1992). If the professionals in school counseling would like to grow and develop in a way that is consistent with the state of the educational system today and beyond, then it is clear that changes in training at the counselor education level must be made. Additionally, more research must be done to assess present trends in school counselor education programs and preparedness of practicing school counselors regarding special education. Research in this area would be useful in examining what improvements have been made, if any, and where adjustments need to be made in school

counseling coursework. This article sought to provide specific recommendations to support change by outlining ways that counselor educators can incorporate special education training throughout their curricula. Including special education in counselor education programs must become a priority that is consistent across training institutions. This shift in counseling program requirements not only works to ensure adequate training for future school counselors, but also to provide exceptional services and support that special-needs children need and deserve.

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