School Resource Officers: Strategies for Reducing Role Identity and Role Ambiguity

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Abstract: In order to maximize their effectiveness, schools must maintain a positive learning environment unencumbered by violence. Uniformed and unprepared police officers have been incorporated into school systems in response to school violence. There are many types of programs that promote school resource officers. The school officer program that this research considered is based on a program from the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO). Police resources officers are caught in the middle of two contradictory groups: The schools and their police departments. Previous research has not considered how these opposing expectations have made it difficult for the Resource Officer (SRO) to operate effectively within the school structure. Literature review on police and school department perceptions, as well data analysis from teachers surveys, will offer an expanded perspective increase officer productivity. The result will be an integration of plan and action to direct the SRO and schools to move together toward a more developed structure capable to shaping today's youth.

Keywords: SRO, roles, violence, educators, teachers, police.

I. INTRODUCTION

School safety, and school preparedness, has become a hot button topic in recent years [7][16][20]. Fear for one's safety while at school can be attributed to acts of violence that are being perpetrated by a relatively small demographic of students and outsiders [12]. There are growing concerns that American schools are being turned into places that are not safe and that school violence will ruin the sanctity of the learning climate. Teachers and students have expressed a fear that they are not safe while attending school [32]. This fear of being victimized at school compromises the school's ability to maintain a healthy learning climate. The negative impact of school disruptions has impeded efforts to maintain a healthy learning environment at our nation's learning centers [7]. Common intervention has been for educational systems to suspend/expel disruptive students from their school campus [10].

Schools serve as an attractor that brings adolescents from all lifestyles together for the duration of the school day. Children who are normally separated by the confines of their neighborhoods are brought together when they attend school. While on the school campus, the natural buffer that normally separates these students is gone, and violence can occur [7]. When analyzing the school violence problem, it easy to focus on the school and the students since this where the violence is manifested. However, analyzing only on the acts of violence that occur on the school campus ignores contributing factors from outside the school, thus the need for a social systems or community-based solution [35].

As a part of the social system solution to this problem, uniformed police officers have been assigned to some schools within the educational system as their permanent work assignment. In the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) manual, these law enforcement agents have been labeled *School Resource Officers* (SROs) [23][25][34]. For purpose of continuity, the school officers will be referred to as SROs throughout the remainder of this

document. The insertion of SROs into the educational system represents a community-oriented response to appeals for a safe learning environment unencumbered by school violence [2]. Traditionally, problems have been solved within the educational system, and the infusion of agents from outside the educational system may not be universally endorsed by educators. Therefore, the practices and philosophy of the SROs may not be a welcomed addition to the school environment [29].

II. HISTORICAL FINDINGS

Research has indicated that high school principals and SROs tend have different opinions about the role of an SRO [33]. Their research also suggested that the SRO does not have enough time to complete all the tasks they are expected to conduct. These discrepancies have created the need to define the role SROs play inside the school system. Without clearly delineated and realistic role expectations, the SRO could suffer from the effects of role conflict. Role conflict can stimulate chaotic operating conditions that might prevent the SRO from achieving his or her objectives [24]. These SRO objectives have included reducing the negative effects of school violence and maintaining a healthy learning environment. A review of the literature has indicated that teachers' opinions about the role SROs should play in the school have not been addressed [28]. This information is essential to the clarification of the SRO role in the educational system. As a part of the educational system, teachers play a role in what the principal, and the school system, will do or not do.

Historically, the educational system has been considered as one of the premier tools utilized in the positive socialization of America's youth and ultimately preparing them to be productive members of society [22]. The ability of schools to accomplish this goal has been restricted by acts of school violence. The problem of school violence has been amplified by students that have been utilizing weapons such as firearms, ball bats, and knives either for protection or as a means of aggression. These types of weapons have the capacity to render injuries that are a threat to life and limb [15]. It has been postulated that acts of violence have reached the school campus because the traditional barriers protecting the educational system from the harsh realities of the community have eroded [1].

Educational systems have to respond by implementing programs that will augment the traditional insulators that in the past have maintained a safe learning environment where students and faculty were not afraid of becoming a victim of school violence [3]. There are officials that are attempting a quick fix by implementing a basic SRO program. They have made their decision to utilize the SRO solution based on the positive results being reported by other school systems and have not considered the unique personality of their school system. These decision makers may not have considered the compatibility of police agents and the empathetic nature of their school systems [7].

Despite the natural incompatibilities of the two systems, the ability of officers to intervene both in criminal and non-criminal matters makes them a valuable resource in decreasing disruptions occurring on the school campus. This was often the original motivation behind the decision to place police officers in the schools [6]. An additional benefit for the schools in SRO involvement is the fact that SROs were already working in the same communities from which the schools were acquiring their students. Police agents often have had opportunities to observe problem students away from the school. These observations by SROs provide an excellent source of information that school administrators may utilize to address the problems of disruptive behaviors at school [7]. Officers working in the school system need special training to help them successful operate in the educational environment. According to the National Association of School Resource Officers, an officer certified by NASRO has been trained to perform a triad of roles. NASRO is nationally recognized as the first and largest organization that specializes in SRO training. School resource officers have been trained to perform three basic functions: (a) they serve as a security force with official arrest powers when criminal laws have been violated by individuals within the school's jurisdiction (b) act as a consultant to school officials (i.e., faculty and administration personnel) when it came to law-related issues and those who may have violated them; and (c) present law related classroom presentations to students, parents, and teachers [6].

Weiler and Cray argued that the SRO cannot effectively perform all three basic functions at the same time, with proficiency, due to physical constraints and a limited amount of time that can be dedicated to each of the tasks [34]. As is, it appears that the SRO is expected to be all things, which leads to not being able to complete all tasks. For example, if the officer were taking legal action after drugs were located in a locker, then the officer would not be available to give a previously scheduled law enforcement related presentation. The SROs have to choose tasks based upon who they want to please, the school or their police supervisor. If both sides were to set realistic expectations, then all stakeholders should be

more satisfied with the SRO's job performance. Since teachers are the ones on the front line, their opinion should realistically be included. Knowing which SRO tasks are considered most important by educators could help SROs schedule their workday in a manner that would prioritize tasks more congruently with educator expectations. The result would be an SRO that felt they accomplished the goals set out for them that was more realistically aligned with the educators. Such an approach would allow SROs to less likely to be victimized by role conflict and role ambiguity [24][34].

Research conducted by Schlosser, indicated that officers assigned to the school campus experienced conflict between their role as a police officer and the role they executed at the school [24]. Officers have to make several adaptations in order to be effective SROs [34]. Role conflict and role ambiguity can cause problems for the employee and the organization. If not properly handled, these problems could decrease the efficiency of the system and the efficiency of the conflicted worker [24].

Research indicated that there is a gap between the school administration's expectations and the SRO's expectations about the role to be performed by SROs inside the educational jurisdiction [13]. The principal often perceived the SRO to be a tool for maintaining school safety, while the police officer pursued the community policing aspect of policing within the school setting. The SRO often believed that the counseling role was just as important to school safety, as was the law enforcement role. It was hinted that role expectations for SRO are not realistic. There is not enough time to satisfy everyone's expectations. If the conflicting role expectations between the school system and the SRO are left unresolved, the working relations between the school and the police officer could suffer. The goal of reducing the influence of violence on the school campus could end up being compromised.

It can be argued that the conflicting expectations have been perpetuated by a natural resentment by teachers to having SROs as part of the educational system. The presence of SROs can be interpreted by educators as a failure by the school system to correct their own problems [3]. This could have caused some educators to resent the presence of the SRO and cause the teachers to harbor negative opinions. It could be argued that if teachers were included in the decision process, which includes the development of clearly defined SRO role expectations, then resistance to SROs could be diminished [28][34].

III.   REVIEW OF THEORY IN SRO PROGRAMMING

Review of literature has indicated how the perceptions of high school teachers have been rarely included in previous studies, thus excluding a valuable piece of the educational system from the analysis [9][10][16][26]. A study that identifies the teaching staff's perceptions of the most important tasks performed by SROs could enhance the existing body of knowledge. Knowing what SRO tasks teachers consider important can allow the officer to tailor his or her production to fit the needs of the school. The result would be an SRO that is more efficient and enjoying a higher approval rating from the school and police administration.

A. *Developing Systems for Change:*

Making changes in the educational system that will improve the learning climate can generate positive outcomes for the larger social system [8]. Police officers who are assigned to educational campuses reflect this concept of making a positive change in the educational system. For example, an SRO who has gained a student's trust may be able to extract information from that student that might prevent negative behaviors. For example, the student can share information with the SRO about a youth gang who is disrupting a neighborhood and decreasing the quality of life for the residents. The SRO can work with the patrol officers and members of the neighborhood in an effort to identify the gang's members and the gang's criminal activities. The officers can design interventions that have the potential to disrupt the gang and improve the quality of life for the neighborhood residents. The placement of the SRO in the educational system created the opportunity to gather information that might not have been available otherwise. The opportunity to be in relationship increases synergy of the whole system.

B. *Social System Theory:*

Traditionally, problems within the educational system have been addressed by utilizing internal interventions. The violence manifested on the school campus is often generated by problems created in the community that encompasses the educational center. Higher levels of violence in the community equates to students and teachers that do not feel secure at

school. The communal nature of the violence problem has exceeded the resources of the educational system and has created the need for assistance from outside the school system [3]. A solution based on social systems theory has introduced uniformed police officers into the school as part of a community based intervention. Systems theory states that when a change occurs within an organization, the whole system can be influenced by the change. The opening of the school system boundary to outside assistance reflects such a change to the system. Members of the educational community may not feel comfortable with the change [5].

C. *Role Theory:*

Role theory explains how an individual, contained within a given social system, defines his or her role. The nature of a social system normally encourages each member to act according to a specific role established by the system to keep each of its members working in unity. Once an individual is conditioned to accept that role, adaptive behaviors tend to develop that are consistent with the parameters of the role. A person's interpretation of the expected role is influenced by factors such as the individual's worldview, socialization, ethnic background, personality, work ethic, and socioeconomic standing [12]. However, individual interpretation of the role can cause the person to perform the role in a manner that is not consistent with the organization's expectation. Therefore, role interpretations that are not consistent with the organization's expectation can influence the individual's working relationship with the system [12]. The action of blaming the attributes of the individual is a natural defensive posture for an organization, particularly when these individuals (the SROs) are considered outsiders. In the case of a school system, SROs cannot shed their outsider status because they can never be fully assimilated into the school system from the police system. The SRO represents a boundary position that is influenced by role expectations that are coming from the school system and from the police system.

D. *Rationale:*

It has been stated there are indications that there is not enough time for the officer to perform all the tasks the SRO is presently expected to perform [34]. The SRO actually has the responsibility to select which tasks will be completed. Ultimately, the tasks chosen by the SRO may not even satisfy the desires of the educational or police systems. The SRO's choices can create negative impressions about the SRO's job performance. Knowing which tasks are considered the most important can clarify the role the SRO should play, reduce conflicts between school and police expectations, and bring the job expectations within a more realistic frame. A review of the literature has indicated that the opinions of teachers about SRO performance have not been solicited. Therefore, this research has surveyed high school teachers for impressions about the tasks performed by SROs. The knowledge gained from the analysis of the data gathered during this research study can aid in the establishment of collaborative alliances among all the assorted stakeholders, help the SRO prioritize his or her workday, and help to reduce role stress.

Previous research about the roles of SROs has focused on the perceptions of police management, school administrators, and the officers assigned to the schools [3][6][9]. Each study as affirmed ambiguity in roles and perceptions of SRO responsibilities. Principals primarily saw the SROs role as police control tasks where SROs saw their tasks as counseling-and-teaching-task focused. Teachers rarely have had input into the formulation of the SRO role in the school. This study assessed information that was gathered from high school teachers, who represent the front lines of the educational system. Since teachers work directly with the student population and with the SROs, their opinions can provide decision makers with an additional interpretation about what SRO tasks, attributes, skills, and areas of knowledge are most important to maintaining a healthy learning environment.

Disagreement over the role to be played by the SRO can diminish the benefits that can be derived from the program. This study was significant because the information gathered filled a gap in the existing knowledge about the role of SROs in the educational system. The literature indicates that high school teachers have not been included in previous research studies that have examined the role of the SRO in the school environment [6][9][28]. The exclusion of teachers in the research process has ignored a valuable piece of information that can better inform police and education decision makers, as well as the SRO, as to what roles played by the SRO are most important. The teachers are in daily contact with students and are most likely to need the expertise the SRO brings to the educational forum. The information derived from the data analysis of this study can be utilized to better allocate SRO resources, improve SRO training, inform teachers about what SROs can do, and help retain SROs.

Recent accounts of shootings on school campuses often conjure the image of gun toting students who are terrorizing the educational system. Realistically, students are more threatened by common day-to-day confrontations. One intervention is to put uniformed police officers in schools as a social system solution to the problem. A review of the school violence problem can help explain why the SRO solution which is based on social system concepts was considered the best resolution [2].

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study explored what high school teachers perceived to be the most important SRO tasks, attributes, skills, and areas of knowledge. A review of the literature has indicated that there is a philosophical difference between the expectations of principals and SROs about what the role of the SRO should be [6]. The data was collected, in convenience sample over a two-week period, which in social research is considered a relatively short period of time. Research that collects data at one point in time is labeled as being cross-sectional. Cross-sectional studies, using MANOVA and correlation analysis are very common in social sciences and usually utilize a questionnaire to collect data. This means that the data collected in this study represented only opinions of teachers included in the research population at the time of the data collection [13]. The study was IRB-approved.

A. Population, Sample, and Inclusionary Data:

The researcher visited high schools that were within a 50-mile radius of Evansville, Indiana, that had an active SRO program. The selected population was the only school system that gave permission for the research to be conducted on their school campus. This sample is also large enough (113 teachers) to provide reliable and valid data, representing a diverse teaching and student population, with a well-established SRO program. Every teacher in the research population was invited to participate; therefore, a sample was not drawn. The school was host to students from the entire county that subsidized the high school. According to the 2000 census, the host county has a population of 45,666 people: 91.3% are white (White persons not Hispanic), 7.4% are African American, 1.4% are Hispanic or Latino origin, .4% are Asian, .1% are American Indian or Alaskan, and .8% reported two or more races. The host county is classified by the U.S. Census Bureau as an *Urban Fringe of Mid-Size City* [30]. According to the Common Core Data for public schools, during the 2004 – 2005 school year, the urban Kentucky high school had 2,182 students enrolled: 88.6% were Caucasian, 10.1% were African American, .9% were Hispanic or Latino, and .4% were American Indian or Asian [17].

According to the demographics provided by the high school, there were 113 teachers included in the research population and the entire population was surveyed. The teachers came from varied backgrounds and held either Bachelor's Degrees or Masters Degrees in education. For the 2006-2007 school year, teachers' average annual salary ranged from $30, 310 for a starting teacher with a Bachelor degree to $54,628 for teachers with a Master's degree and 27 years of seniority. The teacher roster indicated 58% of the teachers were female and 42% were male with an average age of 41 years old.

B. Instrumentation:

A three-part questionnaire entitled School Resource Officer Survey was developed to collect data for this research project. This survey instrument was adopted from a tested survey instrument called School Resource Officer Selection and Job Expectation Survey that was developed by Lambert and McGinty [14]. In the School Resource Officer Survey, three questions were added to the original scale to ascertain whether teachers think SROs should be part of the school system, and which of two primary roles (school-based or law-enforcer) should prevail. Lambert and McGinty developed the School Resource Officer Selection and Job Expectation Survey in 2000 as part their research that was conducted in North Carolina. The first section of the survey asked about characteristics and traits that would make a good SRO, the second section focused on the tasks performed by SROs, and the third section asked demographic questions [14].

V. DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, the data collected by sections one and two of the survey was analyzed using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 15.0 for Windows. This software package was utilized to perform mathematical analyses that convert raw data into meaningful numerical or graphic descriptions [24]. Sections one and two of the questionnaire asked the respondents to identify how important each listed SRO Vhe data collected from sections one and two of the questionnaire was analyzed using measures of central tendency which included the most common measures of mode, median, and the mean [24].

Each of these measures helped to allocate a value to each variable scrutinized. Central tendency analysis yields information about how the responses tend to cluster, allowing the researcher to develop a basic numeric description or graphic portrayal of the patterns and trends in a data set (2). Standard deviation will be calculated for each of the Likert scale statements. Standard deviation is a measure of dispersion that tells the researcher how much the scores deviate from the mean, or in other words, the average distance from the mean. A high standard deviation meant that there was a lot of variation in the responses. Responses that exhibited a variation were analyzed using the demographic information collected by section three. Section three of the survey asked the respondent to give his or her age, gender, marital status, and years of teaching experience. These variables were utilized to determine if the degree of consensus to a given item was influenced by one or more of the listed demographic variables [24]. The additional analysis was accomplished by utilizing the *crosstabs* and General Linear Model tools included in the SPSS package. In this research, the teachers' responses to the section one and two items will be analyzed to determine if there is a lack of consensus among the respondents.

A. The Results of the Survey of Teachers:

Adding the perspective of teachers to the data gleaned from previous research supports some role ambiguity on the part of teachers. While some teachers, who were married and with more teaching experience, tended to endorse SROs participating in counseling and teaching opportunities. There is more statistical significance that supports teachers wanting the SRO's primary focus to be about policing and disciplinary activities. These differing views may have more to do with trust in the police knowledge of counseling expectations. However, these conflicting views of what the role of the SRO is in the school environment can create stress and other complications brought forth by this role conflict for the officer. The job performance and mental health of the SRO can be affected by the role confusion. This can also create conflicts between the school personnel and the law enforcement officer.

B. Key Research Finding on Teaching Surveys:

Teachers found the skills of 'crisis intervention," "conflict resolutions," and "working with the school administrator" to be most important for the SRO. The teachers viewed the SRO "working with special needs students," "attending extra-curricular events" and "teaching in the classroom" as least significant. Analysis of standard deviations (with the highest deviation at 1.02) indicated that teachers view were all fairly homogenous as a group of teachers. Interestingly, the teachers' views were more aligned with SRO perceptions who viewed conflict resolution, providing students counsel as needed, and a cohesive relationship with school administrators as important. Principals saw the SRO role as primarily disciplinary. School principals; however, were not highly promoting arresting the students for acting-out behaviors. Principals wanted the control over which consequences resulted in arrest—in other words, the principals wanted to make decisions about the SRO's policing duties. That division of authority is not consistent with policing roles. Role conflicts have surfaced within the SRO/school settings.

VI.   IMPLICATIONS

The results of the teachers surveys added to previous survey studies seems to confirm the difference in role groups (administrators, educators, SRO's, and teachers) about the best use of SRO's within the school setting. Sociological understanding tells us that role ambiguity in job expectation can lead to decreased morale, questions of job identity, and feelings of frustration, burnout, malaise, and overall job dissatisfaction. For a professional, wages and benefits do not always determine job satisfaction and pride of service. SROs who experience the negative impact of inconsistent, or nonexistent job descriptions will not function at their highest level. In addition, the SRO is affected by two different management systems. The SRO works for the police administration but must be responsive to school administration demands. It is one thing to include policemen in the school system; it is quite another to exclude them from the social structure of the school system and operate from a biased, discounting, or exclusionary way. Part of the reason policemen go into law enforcement is for the feeling of being part of larger service to the community and to make a difference. Without protocols and strategies that support this concept, there is the potential to affect the performance of the SRO to fully assimilate their training to provide security, law related consulting, and law related education in the school environment. Environments that do not appear to be sensitive to the importance of recognition, respect, affinity, and collaboration that SROs have been lead to expect.

A. Working Solutions to SRO Role Identity and Role Ambiguity: Social Work:

Social work, in combination with police and education systems, can also help in translating difference and resolving conflict. The nature of social work is about process, relationship, and interpersonal experience. The expected traits in social work of genuine, positive regard would support positive outcome in policing programs. Some police departments have found the function of social work to be viable in resolving complaints, establishing conflict-resolutions strategies, and working within police departments on issues of gangs and truancy, violence, police-community public relations, grant and funding opportunities to resolve social issues, and arrests involving individuals with mental health issues. That combination of police and social work has been found in Wisconsin, New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois [18][27]. Police social work: A unique function arising from law enforcement function, NYNASW. Funding for pilot SRO programs have considered hiring a team of SROs, school psychologists, and social workers to provide comprehensive services of home visit, group programming, and case management experiences [16].

B. Working Solutions to SRO Role Identity and Role Ambiguity: Public Perception of SRO Programs:

The clue to program and role identity can be clarified in a study which assessed public perception of SRO programs [4]. In a assessment of 4,700 e-mail surveys to non-business and non-institutional e-mail addresses, the public responded with positive perception of SROs when they had had an opportunity for previous casual interaction with law enforcement in a supportive environments—such as collaborative experience with officers in a social experience, shared volunteering, or a joint charitable experience. If the public had not had a previous, positive collaborative experience, their perception of the benefits of SRO programming were not significant.

C. Working Solutions to SRO Role Identity and Role Ambiguity: Support from the Organizing Association:

Both institutions (education and law enforcement) rely on bureaucratic models that fail to recognize informal structures, fail to recognize friendly exchange, and promotes team allegiances [19][26]. As such, there is an inherent competition between organizations about whom will be in control of the function of SRO programs. It is important that before the SROs become an employee, that a memorandum of understanding makes sense in order to set the structures and responsibilities of the position before the program is executed. In setting up structures before SRO programs begin, there is time to negotiate for tasks and functions that can be mutually fulfilling, and satisfactorily meet program outcomes.

VII. CONCLUSION

The SRO program has potential to work synchronistically with educators, students, parents, and the public to additively improve quality of living for students. The quality would be anticipated to move beyond the structure of the school setting and move into the community, providing functioning and capable adults who can handle the rigors of community living and contribute fully, and competently, within community norms. The surveys completed with educators demonstrated perception that SRO function should be focused upon law and disciplinary student task. Student perception in surveys supports benefits of a mentoring and directive style from SROs to students as a part of school matriculation. Teachers' surveys reported SRO collaboration in specific behavioral counsel and directive conflict resolution. The public surveys supported mixed benefits from SRO programming. If the public had interactions with law enforcement (SROs) that were supporting and positive and philanthropic, then the public was more affirming about the benefits of SRO programming. This is where association and institution advocacy from law enforcement managements can be helpful. The bureaucracy of law enforcement and the bureaucracy of education administrators are similar. Communication between management groups to set the tone and structure of SRO tasks can help reinforce role identity and role resolution. Finally, the communication style of social work and help direct SRO personnel to speak with authenticity and empathy to help shape a vibrant SRO program. Many law enforcement systems are already successfully utilizing social function to support and elevate their department reputations.

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