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Abstract

In this quantitative study, the relationship between levels of empathy and perceptions of advocacy competencies among a national sample of professional school counselors are examined. Results of this study indicate there is a statistically significant relationship between school counselor's level of empathy according to the Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) and level of advocacy according to the Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment (ACSA). Professional implications as well as implications for training future school counselors are explored.

The counseling profession urges all counselors to engage in all forms of advocacy (CACREP, 2016; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011; Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002; Ratts & Hutchins, 2009; Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016), and school counselors are in an ideal setting to serve as advocates by using their position to effect change (McMahon, Mason, Daluga-Guenther, & Ruiz, 2014; Ratts & Hutchins, 2009). The 2016 CACREP standards indicate that school counselors should be prepared to implement “advocacy processes needed to address institutional and social barriers that impede access, equity, and success for clients” (p. 8). Furthermore, the American School Counselor Association (2019) prides itself on including advocacy as a constant thread throughout the ASCA National Model, a data-driven school counseling program geared toward eliminating obstacles and building opportunities for K-12 students. School counselors should be

equipped to engage in student advocacy in order to meet the needs of the diverse student body they serve.

The onus is on counselor education programs to train and produce professional school counselors who are competent to engage in advocacy efforts (Havlik, et al., 2020; Lee, et al., 2017; Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2011; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Counselor educators have the knowledge and skills to prepare future school counselors, however, additional awareness of specific factors that influence the furthering development of advocacy skills would aid counselor educators in their efforts. The current study

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examines the relationship between levels of empathy and perceptions of advocacy competencies among a national sample of professional school counselors. Professional implications as well as implications for training future school counselors are explored.

School Counselors and Advocacy

Freire (1970), a pioneer of the social justice movement, surmised privilege cannot exist without oppression, and oppression hurts everyone as it dehumanizes not only the oppressed, but also the privileged. In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire speculated that people live so deeply submerged in a world of privilege and oppression it becomes difficult to see. These toxic dynamics are seen as simply the way the world is. He suggested if one wants to change the injustices caused by privilege and oppression, then one must help change the system by joining with and fighting alongside the oppressed. He contended when joining the fight against social injustice, empowerment must be offered to the oppressed, rather than pity and charity. Freire's words still ring true in the context of social justice counseling.

According to Crethar and Winterowd (2012), social justice counseling has been defined as "both a goal and a process for counselors who believe in developing an increasingly socially just world, one in which all people receive equitable opportunities to access resources and participate in policy and law development that affect them, ultimately resulting in a society that embodies harmony between the needs of individuals and the needs of the whole" (p. 3). Many professionals believe counseling is lacking a crucial element of social justice (Chung & Bemak, 2012;

Crethar, Rivera, & Nash, 2008; Ratts, 2009). However, strides have been made to incorporate social justice elements into the counseling profession. Ratts et al. (2016) recently revised the ACA Multicultural Counseling Competencies to reflect an increasing awareness of social justice issues in counseling. These competencies were designed to inform advocacy work with clients. Furthermore, the ACA Advocacy Competencies outline the need for counselors to empower their clients through various levels of advocacy work (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002).

Advocacy in Schools

The counseling profession has a history of adapting its mission to the evolving needs of the public (Briddick, 2009; Gladding, 2012; Nassar-McMillan & Niles, 2011; O'Brien, 2001). Counseling initially emerged in response to the Industrial Revolution's impact on increased vocational opportunities. Counselors were able to meet the public's need for practical career guidance, largely in the context of school guidance counseling (Gladding, 2012; O'Brien, 2001; Olguin and Maple, 2014). Currently, the American School Counselor Association (2019) defines school counseling as a profession of prevention and development. If children are our future, then school counselors are on the frontline of creating a more socially just future.

However, McMahon, Mason, Daluga-Guenther, and Ruiz (2014) point out that schools have not evolved as fast as society has. They noted that the United States educational system was originally modeled based on the assembly line approach developed during the industrial revolution, and not much has changed. Consequently, one size does not fit all

anymore now that the country is ever increasing in diversity. The authors also highlighted that, while the U.S. school system has been sluggish to change, the school counselor's role is constantly evolving in order to meet the needs of an ever-changing social context (McMahon, Mason, Daluga-Guenther, and Ruiz, 2014). Today, school counselors are being asked to address inequities and close the achievement gap (ASCA, 2019; Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010; Feldwisch & Whiston, 2016; McMahon, Mason, Daluga-Guenther, and Ruiz, 2014). According to Ratts and Hutchins (2009), counseling was traditionally done within the four walls of the counselor's office, yet as society evolves and needs change, school counselors are called to advocate for students when outside forces may impede on a student's wellness and success.

School Counselors' Role

Until recently, social justice has been an abstract concept whereby counselors were unsure how to infuse this type of advocacy into practice. According to Ratts, DeKruyf, and Chen-Hayes (2007), "For professional school counselors, the advocacy competencies can help promote the academic, career, and personal/social needs of all students that are outlined in the ASCA National Model" (p. 93). The authors used the ACA Advocacy Competencies as the basis for a conceptual piece to discuss social justice advocacy in a school setting. Three levels of advocacy were examined: student, school, and public arena. The student level emphasized empowering the student by acting with and on behalf. Examples included implementing small groups to provide students with self-advocacy skills, such as effective communication and how to seek help to

have their needs met. This also includes teaching parents how to advocate for their children. Secondly, the school level calls for an awareness of student needs and the ability to provide resources and alleviate any obstacles in order to facilitate an equitable learning environment. Lastly, the public arena is largely influenced by the school counselor's work at the previous two levels.

A simple and effective strategy at this level is to join and remain active in professional school counseling organizations. The authors concluded that the ACA Advocacy Competencies promote the ASCA National Model. Ratts et al. (2010) also pointed out that school counselors will need to educate their administration on the importance and utilization of the competencies because many school counselors experience push-back when they disrupt the status quo. Therefore, it is important for counselor educators to teach the ACA advocacy competencies and provide practical strategies for implementation. In response, Ratts and Hutchins (2009) wrote an article to help counselors operationalize social justice advocacy at the student level. The authors noted that counselors are in an ideal position to serve as advocates, and thereby need to be able to use their position of influence effectively. In summary, the authors outlined many activities that school counselors are already doing when they implement data-driven school counseling programs, such as the ASCA National Model (ASCA 2019; Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010; Feldwisch & Whiston, 2016).

Challenges in Advocacy

Navigating one's own biases often challenges counselors, especially when engaging in social justice advocacy. For

example, personal and political values seem to have an impact on one's willingness and ability to engage in social justice advocacy. Parikh, Post, and Flowers (2011) examined the relationship between various personal characteristics and social justice advocacy attitudes of school counselors. Of the factors examined, only political ideology and the belief in a just world (BJW) were significant predictors of social justice attitudes. BJW assumes the world is fair and people get what they deserve. This belief rejects the concepts of privilege and oppression. The study's results indicated that a lower BJW yielded more positive attitudes about social justice advocacy. Additionally, those with a more conservative political ideology expressed negative attitudes toward social justice. The researchers concluded "personal belief systems and values of school counselors do, indeed, either promote or hinder social justice advocacy practice" (p. 69). A similar study by Steele, Bischof, and Craig (2014), found that overall, members of ACA have positive perceptions of social justice advocacy, but those with more conservative political beliefs were once again on the negative end while liberal-leaning members reported more positive perceptions. Personal values and beliefs have an impact, both positive and negative, on counselors' advocacy work.

Subsequently, counselor educators should attend to teaching social justice advocacy within their programs. Immersion experiences are encouraged as a strategy for increasing awareness and willingness to endorse social justice advocacy (Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2011; Steele, Bischof, & Craig, 2014). Several authors in the counseling literature iterated the use of ACA Advocacy Competencies as a framework for teaching advocacy skills to counseling students (Kerwin & Doughty, 2017; Lewis,

Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002; Parikh, Post, & Flowers, 2011; Ratts & Hutchins, 2009; Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016). Training programs are in a unique position to promote systemic change on the front end through the development of competent school counselors and advocates.

Empathy and Advocacy

Empathy is considered a key component in successful counseling skills; however, defining empathy can be complex due to the nature and understanding of relating to another person's emotions (Coutinol, Silva, & Decety, 2014). Some controversy surrounds the concept of teaching empathy regarding whether it is considered an affective or a cognitive process (Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). Regardless of the exact definition of empathy, programs aim to help students develop strong empathetic skills needed to be an effective counselor (Bohecker & Doughty Horn, 2016). Empathy is the crux of building a therapeutic relationship and plays a crucial role in counseling training programs (De Pue & Lambie, 2014). High counselor empathy is a predictor for therapeutic success (Moyers & Miller, 2013). Therefore, counseling students need to develop empathy skills in order to be effective (Bohecker & Doughty Horn, 2016, De Pue & Lambie, 2014). Deficient empathy skills challenge a school counselor's work when there is a lack of proper training related to empathy in counseling skills courses (Constantine, 2001).

Multi-cultural training in counselor education programs facilitates growth regarding empathy (Constantine, 2001). Within the counseling program, creating experiences to help school counselors

identify their personal experiences of discrimination and oppression leads to the development of empathy (Cole & Grothaus, 2014). Constantine (2001) suggested that having students participate in cultural experiences that are different from their own background could help enhance the counselor's empathy skills.

Bell (2018) found that counselors-in-training need to have specific skill training related to the development of empathy and offers a variety of suggestions for teaching it in counselor education programs. Some recommended strategies included experiential activities, such as perspective-taking activities such as using a wheelchair for a day, mindfulness, and the use of movies and literature. Bodenhorn & Starkey (2006) also recommended using theater and role play to practice empathy skills in the classroom. Clark (2010) defines the complexity of empathy training as an integral model in which counseling students need to be taught subjective, interpersonal, and objective empathy as it relates to work with clients. Examining both the type of empathy training that school counselors receive and the level of confidence related to his or her empathy skills could relate to the level of success of the school counseling program (Constantine, 2001).

Methods

Purpose of the Study

Student advocacy has long played a central role in school counselors and social justice leadership. As student advocates, a central focus of counselors is to reach out to students and help them reach their truest potential. According to Steele et al. (2014), additional research is needed that explores variables that may have an influence on

perceptions of social advocacy. This study will use two instruments to examine counselors' levels of empathy using the Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) and advocacy competencies using the Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment Survey (ACSA). The study will seek to better understand counselors' ability to serve as a student advocate and change agent within the K-12 setting examining levels of empathy and perceptions of social justice.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do school counselors perceive they are competent and effective in the following domains: empowering students, advocating for students, obtaining community collaboration, leading systems change, providing information to the public to advocate for students, and demonstrating social/political advocacy?
2. Is there a relationship between a school counselor's level of empathy according to the Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) and level of advocacy according to the Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment (ACSA)?
3. Is there a relationship between a school counselor's level of empathy according to the Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) and their work demographics such as years of service, grade level, and work setting?

Instruments

Demographic Questionnaire

Participants were asked to indicate their age, gender and ethnicity. They were also asked to provide information regarding their work setting, such as whether their school setting was public or private and whether they work in an urban, suburban or rural area. Participants were also asked

about the size of their school and how many counselors also worked within their building. These items are specified in Table 1.

Empathy Assessment Index

To determine levels of empathy, researchers utilized the Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) which derives from Segal's (2011) Social Empathy Model, specifically, we use a 17-item five-factor battery of questions from Lietz et al. (2011). The 17 questions are self-reported items measured on a six-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (6). The questions cover the factors of Affective Response, Emotion Regulation, Perspective Taking, Self-Other Awareness, and Empathic Attitudes. We use this measure due to its applicability to understanding an individual's views towards advocacy as it measures empathy and awareness on a societal level.

Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment (ACSA)

The ACSA is a 30 item measure based upon the American Counseling Association Advocacy Competencies (Ratts & Ford, 2010). The items were written to examine competency in three levels (student, community, and public) and six domains of advocacy: student empowerment, community collaboration, public information, student advocacy, and social/political advocacy (Lewis, et al., 2003; Ratts & Ford, 2010). Bvunzawabaya (2012) stated the reliability coefficient of the ACSA was found to be $\alpha = .93$. For the current study, Cronbach's alpha was found to be .91.

Participants rated themselves on items describing behaviors and advocacy attitudes on a scale that included almost never (0), sometimes (2), and almost always (4). For example, item fourteen states "I am able to identify barriers that impede the well-being of individuals and vulnerable groups" (Ratts & Ford, 2010 p. 2). The lowest score on the ACSA is zero and the highest possible score is 120. According to Ratts and Ford (2010), a score from 100-120 indicates a high level of social justice advocacy, a score from 70-99 indicates a moderate level of social justice advocacy, and a score of 69 or lower indicates a low level of social justice advocacy and the need for additional training is recommended.

Procedures

The authors created a survey using Qualtrics, an online survey software system. As a result of three solicitations to a national sample of professional school counselors, a total of 351 completed responses were received. Eleven percent ($n=38$) did not fully complete the instruments pertaining to advocacy and empathy and were not included in the data analysis, resulting in 351 responses eligible for analysis.

The sampling method was purposeful, in that only individuals with a master's degree or higher in counseling and those who were currently working as a school counselor were included. Individuals who did not have a degree in counseling and respondents who were not currently working as a school counselor were excluded from the study. The authors did not provide incentives for participation.

Participants

Three hundred and fifty one participants submitted a completed survey for a 30% response rate. However, not all of the participants answered each question. The typical respondent was female (84%), Caucasian (86%), and between the ages of 35 to 44 (39%). See Table 2 for further demographic information on participants.

Respondents were asked questions regarding their work experience and current place of employment. The majority of participants (68%) reported having 10 years or less of school counseling experience. Most (67%) identified as currently being employed as a secondary school counselor and 86% of participants indicated they work at a public (not private) school. Forty-four percent of participants stated they worked with 3 or more other counselors, while 20% stated they were the only counselor in their building. Complete work demographics are provided in Table 3.

Results

The first research question concerned the degree to which counselors perceive they are competent and effective in the following domains: empowering students, advocating for students, obtaining community collaboration, leading systems change, providing information to the public to advocate for students, and demonstrating social/political advocacy.

The mean score for school counselors participants on the ACSA was 77.56 (SD = 19.51), which, based on the information presented indicates a moderate level of advocacy competency among school counselors who responded to this survey. According to Ratts and Ford (2010),

individuals within this category demonstrate some level of competence but may need to further develop competence in other advocacy areas. These findings are representative of previous studies such as Bvunzawabaya (2012) found at mean of 79.21 and Feldwisch and Whiston (2015) mean of 74.42. Complete domain descriptions are provided in Table 4.

Empathy Assessment Index

The second research question examines the relationship between a school counselors' level of empathy according to the Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) and level of advocacy according to the Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment (ACSA). Our measure is a mean score across the 17 questions with a theoretical range of 1-6. In the sample, the mean score is 5.03 with a standard deviation of .575. The minimum score is 2.88 while the maximum is 5.71. The lack of scores on the low end of the spectrum (less than 2) is not surprising as most individuals possess some level of empathy as not having any is considered pathological (Lane 2001).

To examine the results further, we sought to understand the relationship between a school counselors' level of empathy according to the Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) as it correlated to their level of advocacy using the ACSA scales (student, community, and public). Using a Pearson's r correlation test to determine if there was a relationship between the two measures, researchers found that there was a significant relationship between empathy and student advocacy ($r=.14$), as well as empathy and community advocacy ($r=.11$). Complete results in Table 5.

The third research question sought to examine if there is a relationship between a school counselor's level of empathy according to the Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) and their work demographics such as education level, years of service, and work setting. To answer research question 3 a Pearson's *r* analysis was used. When comparing education level to the subscales of the Empathy Assessment Index no statistical significance was found. When comparing years of experience with the subscales no statistical significance was found. When comparing work settings (Public, Private, Other) with the subscales no statistical significance was found.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine levels of empathy and perceptions of advocacy using the Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) and the Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment Survey (ACSA). Research was aimed at gaining a better understanding of and identifying if empathy relates to school counselors perceptions of their role and actions as advocates based on results from the ACSA. In this section, the findings of the study in relation to the literature reviewed are discussed.

The mean score for school counselors participants on the ACSA was 77.56 (SD = 19.51), which, based on the information presented indicates a moderate level of advocacy competency among school counselors who responded to this survey. These findings are representative of previous studies such as Bvunzawabaya (2012) found a mean of 79.21 and Feldwisch and Whiston (2015) mean of 74.42. According to Ratts and Ford (2010), individuals within this category demonstrate

some level of competence but may need to further develop competence in other advocacy areas.

Data analysis for research question two focused on whether or not there is a relationship between a school counselors' level of empathy according to the Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) and level of advocacy according to the Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment (ACSA). According to the results of this study, there is a significant relationship between school counselor's level of empathy according to the Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) and level of advocacy according to the Advocacy Competencies Self-Assessment (ACSA) within two of the three sub categories (student advocacy and community advocacy). Therefore, a high level of empathy can be viewed as an indicator of school counselor advocacy for students on both the individual and group level as well as within the community. Researchers point out the need for school counselors to advocate for students in order to meet students' needs in areas of student, school, and public levels (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Our results indicate that school counselors possessing high levels of empathy would be better able to advocate effectively.

A notable finding within the analysis is that while empathy does positively correlate to two subcategories of advocacy competencies (Student and Community Advocacy), the third category of advocacy competencies (Public Advocacy) did not have a significant correlation to empathy. These findings suggest that while empathy does play a role with student and community advocacy it would not make a significant difference with social or political advocacy. Existing studies in the school counseling

literature have found that school counselors seldom engage in advocacy beyond the student level (Field & Baker, 2004; Holmberg-Abel, 2012). This reluctance as a profession to engage beyond the student level may explain why empathy no longer influences the third category of the ACSA (Public Advocacy-Social/Political Advocacy). Steele, Bischof, and Craig (2014) also point out a disconnect between theory and practice, so while the profession (ASCA) supports the role of school counselors within systems advocacy such as public/political advocacy there is a failure for professional school counselors to participate in actual advocacy practices.

Implications for Practitioners and School Counseling Educators

Since empathy is so closely related to advocacy, it is imperative that counselor educators facilitate the development of empathy through training of future school counselors. Researchers stress the effectiveness of empathy in therapeutic outcomes (Moyers & Miller, 2013) and emphasize the importance of the development of such skills in training programs (Bohecker & Doughty Horn, 2016; DePue & Lambie, 2014). This can be accomplished through various skill-building experiences within the counseling training program (Pederson, 2008; Constantine, 2001).

One way to facilitate empathy development is through the use of courses rich in multicultural competence. In fact, researchers found that such courses aid counselors in their ability to empathize with clients from a variety of different cultural backgrounds (Constantine, 2001) thus laying the foundation for school counselors to better advocate for such students. Counselor

educators are also encouraged to utilize creative means such as experiential activities, mindfulness, and media to further facilitate the development of empathy in counselors in training (Bell, 2017; Boheckler & Doughty Horn, 2016).

Counselor educators are also encouraged to facilitate the development of school counselors as advocates. Some suggestions include the addition of curriculum about data-informed practice, experiential learning, and research related to social justice advocacy (Dixon, Tucker, & Clark, 2010). Other suggestions include opportunities to advocate as well as the encouragement of self-exploration and risk taking (Beck, Rausch, & Wood, 2014). Regardless of the method, it is crucial that the development of empathy and advocacy competencies begins in the school counseling training program.

As previously stated, school counselors are being asked to address inequities and close the achievement gap (ASCA, 2012; Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010; Feldwisch & Whiston, 2016; McMahon, Mason, Daluga-Guenther, & Ruiz, 2014). Since we know these activities are encouraged within professional school counseling and included as one of the four themes in ASCA's National Model (2012), the increase in advocacy competencies and empathy levels will aid professional school counselors to serve as agents of change. By focusing on the development of both advocacy competencies and empathy within school counseling training programs, we are increasing the likelihood that future school counselors can serve as change agents in their future roles.

Limitations

The present study contains limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. While participants in this study were professional school counselors from a nationwide sample, the sample was predominantly White and female. As a result, statistical procedures could not be conducted to examine how demographic variables such as race or gender may have influenced the mean scores.

Other limitations include, a relatively small sample size in comparison to the number of individuals initially emailed. The low response rate (30%) may indicate that future studies include a greater variety of sampling methods and solicit participation from a larger more diverse sample of school counselors. Another noted limitation of this study is the self-report nature of the given survey and instruments.

Conclusion

The current study is an expansion of the conversation regarding advocacy of practicing school counselors. This study focused on the role of empathy and concluded that empathy positively relates to two out of three subscales of advocacy competencies. According to findings, increasing levels of empathy will influence advocacy competencies and ultimately enhance school counselor's ability to work within student populations. These findings suggest that counselor educators should focus on activities and content to further facilitate the development of empathy in school counselors in training. Furthermore, since there is existing evidence to show reluctance in engaging in social and political advocacy, special effort should be made in

the profession to enhance school counselors' knowledge, skills, and competency in the areas of public and systems advocacy.

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Table 1
Questionnaire Items Related to Demographics

Items
<u>Demographic Information</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gender ● Age ● Ethnicity
<u>Education and Credentials</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Highest level of education ● Current licenses and certifications
<u>Experience and Practice Settings</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Are you currently employed or working as a school counselor? ● Number of years working as a school counselor ● What type of community do you serve? ● Do you work at a public or private school setting? ● Please identify your current student population.

Table 2
Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Sex			Age			Race/Ethnicity		
Sex	n	%	Age	N	%	Race/ Ethnicity	N	%
Female	295	84	18—24	0	0	White/Caucasian	300	86
Male	56	15	25-34	52	15	Asian American	5	1
Total	351	100	35-44	137	39	African American	19	6
			45-54	77	22	Pacific Islander	2	1
			55-64	49	14	Hispanic/Latino	9	3
			65+	32	10	Native American	0	0
			Total	347	100	Other/No Response	10	3
						Total	348	100

Table 3
Experience and Work Settings

Experience			Grade Level			Work Setting		
Years	n	%	Level	n	%	Setting	n	%
0-5	142	40	Elementary	99	28	Public	301	86
6-10	99	28	Secondary	235	67	Private	40	11
11-15	78	23	Other	17	5	Other	10	3
16+	32	9	Total	351	100			
Total	351	100						
						Total	351	100

Table 4
Advocacy Competencies

Domain Type	Mean	SD
Empowerment Subscale	15.2	3.34
Advocacy Subscale	16.4	3.30
Community Subscale	14.8	2.42
Systems Subscale	13.8	3.28
Public Subscale	11.0	2.39
Social Subscale	10.8	1.47

Table 5
Correlation

Level	r
Student	.14*
Community	.11*
Public	.04

*p<0.05